

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a yellow dress with a black floral pattern, is lying on her back on a lush green lawn. She is wearing round sunglasses and has a red wristband on her left wrist. Her left hand is raised near her face, with fingers slightly curled. The image has a black banner across the upper middle with white text, and the word 'WANTED' is written in large teal letters across the center. The name 'Ana Huang' is at the bottom in white.

ALL I'VE NEVER

WANTED

Ana Huang

All I've Never Wanted

ANA HUANG

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For all of my Wattpad fans, followers, and readers.

I couldn't have done this without you.

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CHAPTER 1

"Sweetie, are you feeling ok?"

I poked at the pile of scrambled eggs on my plate, wondering if I could fake being sick to delay my first day of senior year a little longer.

Maybe I could claim food poisoning from the takeout I ordered yesterday?

Nah. My mom would never buy it, and even if she did, I really didn't want my favorite Chinese restaurant to be slapped with a lawsuit.

Hmm...what about the flu? Mono? Strep throat? Sudden amnesia? My mind raced through a million fake excuses as to why I wouldn't be able to go to school today, but I had a sinking feeling my mom would see through all of them in a minute, and I'd just earn myself a nice grounding instead.

"...Maya? Maya!"

I jumped, my fork clattering against the plate. "What did you say?" I asked, trying to regain my bearings after being lost in my thoughts for the past ten minutes.

"Are you feeling ok?" my mom repeated. "You've barely touched your food."

I looked down and realized she was right. The scrambled eggs and bacon—usually my favorite breakfast—were far from gone.

I took a deep breath, about to lie and say no, I didn't feel ok and I'm not up for classes today, but unfortunately, my conscience kicked in at the last minute.

"I'm fine," I said, pasting a smile on my face. "I'm just not really hungry."

My mom arched her eyebrows and took a sip of her coffee. She's like Lorelai from *Gilmore Girls*—a total coffee addict. She had at *least* eight cups a day, despite my insistence that so much caffeine was not good for anyone. You would think she'd know that, since she works in the health industry and all.

"Nervous?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

That's one way to put it, although “nervous” didn’t seem like an adequate description for the Texas-sized pit of anxiety in my stomach.

"You'll be fine, sweetie," Mom said soothingly. "You were fine last year. Straight A's! And you're not even new anymore."

That's precisely the problem. I'm not new, which means after a year at Valesca Academy, I know how it works. Trust me, it's not pretty. But more on that later.

"You're right," I agreed. I valiantly spooned some eggs into my mouth, my mom watching closely. They tasted like cardboard, which I knew was more me than her cooking. Nevertheless, I managed to eat about half before I couldn't take it anymore.

If I had to go to school, I might as well just hurry and try to finish this day up as quickly as possible.

"Ok, I'm heading out," I said, slinging my bag over my shoulder. "I'll see you later."

"Have a good day, honey. Love you."

"Love you too."

When I got outside, I was relieved to see that even though the sky was overcast, it wasn't raining—yet. Hopefully the rain won't start until I'm safe and warm inside Valesca's walls, with safe being a relative term.

I guess now is a good time to back up and explain everything to you. My name is Maya Lindberg, and up until a year ago, I was happily living in San Francisco with my parents, doing all the things a normal teenager does and attending a normal high school that, while it had its clique problems, was paradise compared to Valesca.

Then, at the end of my sophomore year, my dad got promoted to his company's headquarters in New York. By the time we found out, it was too late for me to apply for any of the good schools in the city. Unluckily for me, his new boss knew the headmaster of Valesca Academy, located two hours from New York. He pulled some strings so I could apply for late admission, and not only was I accepted, I also received a hefty scholarship, which was how my family uprooted itself to settle into one of the richest towns in the U.S. I mean, the only school there was private and cost \$100,000 a year to attend.

Objectively speaking, Valesca wasn't bad. In fact, it was considered the best school in the country, and boasted enough Nobel, Pulitzer, and Oscar-winning alumni to fill a ballroom (like the one on school grounds, which was usually used for dances).

Unfortunately, it was also filled with the snobbiest, most superficial, and most materialistic people I've ever met in my entire life. What makes it all the more worse is the way they all cower before the Scions, who are a whole other story unto themselves.

The Scions is the nickname given to the four hottest guys in school: Zack Perry, Carlo Tevasco, Parker Remington, and their leader, Roman Fiori. Their families, some of the wealthiest in the world, actually founded the town and the school, which means everyone is terrified of them. They usually keep to themselves, unless they are terrorizing some poor kid who looked at them the wrong way.

No, I'm not joking. One wrong look at any of the Scions and you might as well kiss your social, and sometimes academic, life goodbye. The abuse wrought by the rest of the students on the offender is so notoriously horrible most are forced to transfer schools.

As for me? Well, I've never had a direct run-in with the Scions. It took me all of one class period when I started here last year to realize how things worked, and I had gone out of my way to avoid them. Astonishingly, it had worked. I've never been closer than fifty feet to them, which is definitely a good thing. I mean, it might seem cowardly to some, but I know the Scions had the school faculty eating out of the palms of their hands. I didn't want to risk doing something that might provoke their wrath, or there goes my teacher's recommendations and my dream of attending Stanford goodbye.

Avoiding them was actually quite easy, considering the Scions had their own classroom, where they came and went as they pleased; their own private nook in the dining area, and a mass of students surrounding them whenever they went. It was a wonder they learned anything at school.

Then again, they probably didn't. Why would they need to, when they were already set to take over their family's empires?

I took a deep breath as Valesca's perfectly manicured campus came into view. I could do this. Just one more year, and then I would be on my way to college, where I can pretend my experience here was just been a bad dream.

I was annoyed but unsurprised to see the crowd gathered on the flight of stairs that led to the entrance. Everyone was laughing and hugging after an oh-so-taxing summer apart at their parents' villas in the south of France (note the sarcasm) but they were all casting surreptitious glances at the four empty, prime parking spots in the parking lot.

Located directly in front of the school and slightly separated from the rest of the lot, they were reserved for the Scions. On normal days, the Scions usually carpooled two and two, but on the first day, they each liked to make a grand entrance in their own overly priced sportsmobiles. During the other

school days, of course, two of those spots would remain empty, since no one would *ever* dare park in one of them.

Already in a bad mood, I elbowed my way through the crowd, ignoring my peers' curious glances. Before I could get inside, however, I heard someone scream my name.

"Maya! Mayaaaaaaa! MAYA LINDBERG!"

The last utterance was yelled directly into my ear, and I flinched a bit, waiting for the ringing in my ears to stop before I turned to face the petite, pretty redhead.

"Hi, Venice," I said with a genuine smile.

"Hiiii!" She enveloped me in a crushing hug that had me staggering back a few steps. For someone so small and thin, she sure weighed a lot. "I missed you so much!"

"I missed you too," I laughed, listening patiently as Venice rambled on about her amazing summer eco-tour of Costa Rica.

Venice France (yes, that really is her name. Her parents, apparently blessed with a sick sense of humor, also named her younger sister Kyoto and her older brother Frankfurt; understandably, he goes by Frankie) is one of the few genuinely nice, down-to-earth people in this school. In fact, she might be the only one.

We became close last year when we both had the unfortunate luck of being stuck in fifth-period AP Calculus with Mr. White, who is as albino-complexioned as his name suggests and who is way too pen-happy with his detention pad. Venice is also the only person who is privy to my seething hatred of the Scions and everything they stand for: elitism, superficiality, tyranny.

Suddenly, the entire school, it seemed, erupted into deafening cheers and hoots.

Oh *shit*.

I was about to slip inside the school when Venice grabbed my arm. "Where are you going?" she hissed.

"The bathroom," I blurted. "I really gotta go."

"No you don't. You just don't want to see *them*," she observed shrewdly.

"Well, if you know, why'd you ask?"

"Because I'm not going to let you slink away from them anymore!"

"I don't slink away," I protested. "I strategically miss them."

She ignored me and tugged on my arm, forcing me to walk down the steps with her until we were blocked by the crush of students. "I don't care what you call it, it's not healthy."

I eyed her suspiciously. "I bet you only want someone to gush to about how amazingly perfect they are."

She shrugged, not even bothering to deny it. "They *are*," she insisted somewhat defensively. "Physically speaking, anyway."

"There's more to life than looks," I countered, wincing when I realized how annoyingly preachy I sounded. Gotta work on that.

"Not if you're in high school. Now, shhh."

I shut up, not because she said so, but because the crowd had fallen silent, and I didn't want to speak and bring attention to myself.

Venice and I were standing on the very top of the stairs, and I heard them before I saw them—the sound of screeching tires as four very expensive,

very flashy cars turned sharply at the same time into their respective parking spaces.

I swear, if this was a movie, there'd be some dramatic soundtrack playing right now. Everyone except me waited with bated breath for the Scions to emerge, and when they finally did, the ensuing swoons and screams were a million times louder than before. As if the scene couldn't get anymore sickening, the clouds decided to part at that moment, and a golden beam of sunlight highlighted the quartet like they're really the gods everyone thinks they are.

Parker Remington was the first to get out. Slamming the door of his red Lamborghini shut, I felt like the renowned playboy should be moving in slow motion as he raked a hand through his wavy, golden brown hair. The son of the most powerful figure in the international finance and banking world leaned against the side of his car, his eyes shielded by a pair of aviators, and flashed a disarming smile into the crowd, causing more than a few girls to nearly faint.

Gag me.

The next to come out was Carlo Tevasco. The towering, dark Colombian, though equally gorgeous, was nowhere near as overtly smooth and charming as his friend. In fact, he looked a little annoyed at all the ballyhoo that greeted him. I shouldn't be surprised; a black belt in five different types of martial arts and the son of a multibillionaire real estate developer with rumored ties to the mafia, Carlo seemed to be the quietest and least attention-seeking Scion. Even his car, a simple but sturdy black Range Rover, reflected his personality.

Following Carlo was Zack Perry. The grinning Greek-god-look-a-like hopped enthusiastically from his bright yellow Porsche, his golden hair gleaming under the sun like a halo. In my opinion, the eternally good-natured Zack seemed to be the only one who's even remotely human in the group. A musician and singer, he constantly has a smile to his face, though I guess if I stood to inherit billions thanks to my family's dominance in the steel and railroad industry, I'd be happy too.

Suddenly, a low murmur rippled through the crowd, and when I looked to see what had everyone in such a tizzy, I was shocked to see a girl had emerged from the passenger seat of Zack's car. She was stunningly beautiful and supermodel tall, with a cascading mane of perfect blonde waves and a delicate, heart-shaped face that boasted bright blue-green eyes, high cheekbones, and rosy pink lips. Her slender, perfect body was encased in a beautiful pale green silk sundress that probably cost more than an average person's monthly rent.

Actually, now that I looked more closely, she bore a striking resemblance to Zack.

"No way. No. Freaking. Way." Venice's jaw was almost grazing the ground.

"Who is that?" I asked curiously. The Scions had never, *ever* made an entrance with a girl before.

"If I'm correct, that's no other than Adriana Perry, Zack's twin sister."

I blinked. "He has a twin sister?"

"Yeah." Venice didn't tear her eyes from the spectacle. "They're really close but she's been at some Swiss boarding school since eighth grade."

"How do you *know* all of this stuff?"

Venice just looked at me. "Um, I live for gossip, remember?"

Oh yeah. I'd forgotten about that.

Everyone had quieted down again, I realized, because the main attraction was finally showing his face.

Roman Fiori. The sole heir to the world's largest fortune, which encompassed shipping, oil, electronics, telecommunications, textiles, and sports franchises; an athletic prodigy hailed as the second coming of

Michael Jordan, Pele, and Joe Montana rolled into one; the single hottest specimen to ever walk the face of this earth.

According to all the girls who are currently peeing themselves in excitement, anyway. I mean, I guess I can *kind of* see it. The entire package—the thick, wavy black hair, the naturally golden bronze skin, the sleek muscular body, the cut-glass cheekbones, and those one-of-a-kind, gold-flecked dark violet eyes—was made to melt girls' hearts.

Ok, so I can totally see it, but luckily, it takes more than just supernaturally good looks to win me over. As far as I'm concerned, Roman Fiori is the biggest jerk alive and as arrogant as they come.

The small group made their way leisurely towards the school. Roman was at front, of course, flanked by Carlo and Parker; Zack and Adriana brought up the rear.

The crowd on the stairs parted like the Red Sea for Moses.

Roman's face was expressionless as he made his way up the stairs and inside the hallway.

Everyone waited until all the Scions and Adriana were safely out of earshot before they started buzzing about the latter's sudden appearance.

"Do you think something happened at boarding school?"

"Ohmygod, I can't believe she's going here now!"

"Man, she's *hot!*"

It was at that moment that the bell finally, blissfully rang.

I let out a relieved sigh. "Come on, let's get to class or we'll be late," I said, pulling Venice like she'd pulled me earlier.

"Yeah, I make you watch the hottest guys ever and you make me go write essays," she grumbled. "Some friend you are."

I smirked. "You'll thank me one day."

* * *

Rrrring! The bell signaling the end of third period and the start of lunch hadn't even finished ringing before the hallways were filled with hungry high schoolers clamoring for their daily intake of gourmet sushi and pastries flown in from France.

Yes, that is really what they serve in our Dining Center, or DC, as everyone calls it. Fitting, considering the politics in our DC outrivals that of our nation's capitol tenfold.

I sidestepped an overly PDA-ing couple and pushed my way into the girls' bathroom, which is all done up with Italian marble, sterling-silver faucets, and jewel-toned velvet furniture in the lounge area, though why a public bathroom—or any bathroom, for that matter—needs a lounge area is beyond me. There's even a bathroom attendant presiding over an array of European toiletries.

There were already three girls in the bathroom when I came in, all stick-thin, whose green-and-gold plaid uniform skirts were shortened to the skankiest proportions possible.

They're the type of girls who usually take the time to shoot me a disdainful look before going right back to their primpfests, sometimes throwing in a snide comment about me being a scholarship student or something.

Scholarship students were very, very rare at Valesca. Academically speaking, that was a good thing, since recipients were viewed very favorably by college admissions committees (according to my guidance counselor). Socially speaking...not so much. Merit was a main factor in scholarship decisions, but so was financial need. Being a scholarship kid basically implied my family wasn't rich enough to afford the schools six-figure tuition bill in full—which was true—and since there is virtually

nothing more important than money in Valesca, you can see why my scholarship status might be a problem.

In any other town, my family would've been considered well-off or even wealthy, but in Valesca, we were middle class at best. I don't really give a shit what other people think of me, but I hate it when my family gets looked down on just because we don't earn millions a year.

That's why I was more than a little befuddled when the girls took one look at me and scurried out the door, heads down. If they had tails, they'd be tucked between their legs right now.

It didn't take me long to realize why.

When I turned, I found myself face-to-face with Adriana Perry, who's even more flawless-looking up close, if you can believe it.

There was dead silence for a good ten seconds as we stared at each other. For the most part, her face was unreadable. I thought I detected a hint of amusement, but it was gone so fast I wasn't sure if I'd just imagined it.

"Hi," I said awkwardly, when I couldn't take the awkwardness anymore.

No answer.

I had just about figured she was ignoring me and was going to leave when she spoke up. "Hi," she answered in a soft, lilting voice. Though her eyes didn't stray from my face, I had the feeling she was examining me in the way only another girl can.

"Ok, well, it's nice to meet you—well, see you—but I'd actually better get going." I edged around her, painfully aware of the odd looks the bathroom attendant was sending our way.

"What's your name?"

I blinked. That, I didn't see coming. "Um, Maya."

Silence again.

"Maya Lindberg," I added.

Apparently, that was what she'd been waiting for, because she then held out her hand and said, "Adriana Perry."

I shook her hand hesitantly. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise." Giving me a brief smile, she proceeded to turn to the mirror and fix her already-perfect hair without saying another word.

Ooook.

Not wanting to stay in that bathroom a second longer, I made my way as quickly through the door as possible, without downright running.

The encounter hadn't been unpleasant, but it hadn't been, well, pleasant either. It had just been...weird.

What's even worse, I can't quite shake the feeling that that two-minute interaction had just cost me a year's worth of anonymity.

* * *

"So do you guys wanna go eat in the DC or eat out somewhere?" Zack asked, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers together behind his head.

"I vote for eating out. I've been craving Serrano's," Parker said, referencing Il Serrano, the chic Italian eatery that was practically a Valesca institution.

Zack smirked. "Yeah, and I bet that hot new waitress has nothing to do with your...*craving*."

Parker shrugged. "You know me."

"Yes, we do," Carlo said dryly. "Now, can we please decide where we're going to eat?"

"Let's go to Da Silvano instead," Zack suggested. "We've already been to Serrano's twice this past week."

"Da Silvano is in New York," Carlo pointed out.

"Yeah, but if we go right now and take one of the jets we'll probably end up missing only fourth period."

"Fine by me," Parker yawned. "What's the use of having a private teacher if he can't be flexible?"

"I'm sure he'll be glad he'll finally get a break from you troublemakers," a new, feminine voice said.

Parker sat up a bit straighter. "Hey, Adri."

"Hey." Adriana looked around the room. "Are you guys going to lunch anytime soon, or are you just going to stay in here all day?" she teased.

"We were thinking about going to Da Silvano or Serrano's," Parker said. "What do you think?"

"Oh, I think I'm just going to grab something in the DC," she replied airily. Half a day at Valesca and she'd already gotten the acronyms down pat.

Zack blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah, there's some interesting people here," Adriana said with an oddly secretive smile.

"Not in this school," Roman said, speaking up for the first time.

Adriana rolled her eyes. "You're too cynical, Rome," she chided. "That's no way to go through life."

"It's worked for me so far."

She shook her head. "All you need is a girlfriend," she decided. "A nice one. And then you won't be so moody."

"More like, and then pigs can fly," Carlo said loud enough for only Parker and Zack, whom he was sitting in between, to hear. They snickered.

Roman stared at her like she was crazy. "Does it look like I want a girlfriend?" he demanded.

Ignoring his tone, Adriana merely gave him a serene smile. "You will once you meet the right girl."

"I doubt it. The only thing girls care about is my money."

"There goes your cynicism again..."

Roman snorted. "Please. You're seriously telling me you can find a girl in this town who doesn't care I'm a Fiori?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"I'd like to see you try."

"Oh, boy," Zack sighed.

Adriana raised her eyebrows. "That sounds like a challenge."

"That's because it is."

"Fine." Adriana looked inexplicably smug. "Give me until the end of this semester. If you don't like the girl that *I* choose enough to ask her to be your girlfriend, I won't ever bug you about it again."

"Well, that's just one less thing I have to worry about next semester then," Roman said cockily.

"You guys are ridiculous," Zack groaned.

"Well, I'm all for it," Parker drawled. "My question, though, is how are you going to find the perfect girl when you haven't even been here for the past four years?"

Adriana smiled. "Parker, dear, never underestimate the power of female determination."

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CHAPTER 2

Adriana was on a mission. If there was one thing she lived for, it was a challenge, especially when the challenger was Roman.

Even though she had been at boarding school for a while, she still knew Roman a lot better than he thought. After all, they were both children of the Founding Four families, who themselves had been friends for generations. He might say he didn't want a girlfriend, but it was only because a) he was under the impression girls only liked him for his looks and/or money, which is fair, since most of them did, and b) he hadn't met the right girl yet. Adriana was sure there had to be at least one girl in the world who was right for him, and she was going to make damn sure she found her. After all, Roman was like another brother to her, and she hated seeing him so cold and emotionless all the time when she knew he was sweet guy deep down inside.

Way, way deep down inside. He just needed someone to trigger that part of him, and what better way to start the search for the Perfect Girl than at Valesca itself?

The sound of her Manolo Blahnik kitten heels echoed loudly in the empty halls, but she was so deep in thought she barely noticed.

As the sole heir to the largest private fortune on the planet, Roman had been spoiled beyond comparison in terms of material means, but his parents were a bit lacking in emotional affection. As a result, Roman had never really known what love was or how people in love were supposed to act or, let's face it, that there were people truly in love in the first place. The walls he'd built up against the opposite sex were layers thick, and whoever wanted to break them down needed to be tough.

Adriana ran through the requirements of the perfect girl in her mind. Physically speaking, she needed to be attractive enough to at least capture

Roman's temporary interest, until he got to know her better. Physically, she knew his type—he tended to prefer exotic brunettes over all-American blondes. That wasn't a problem. What the town's female population lacked in sincerity, they more than made up for in looks.

Personality-wise, Perfect Girl needed to be able to speak her mind but at the same time not be too aggressive; intelligent; able to carry on a real conversation, and possess a lack of superficiality or pretense.

Now, that ruled out a *lot* of girls in Valesca.

Well, I'll just have to focus on the easy part first, Adriana decided, changing direction mid-stride and heading towards the administration wing of the school instead of the DC.

The student affairs office was pretty quiet when she arrived, which was a good thing. Unlike her brother and his friends, she didn't particularly revel in flaunting her power in front of others. That was the good thing about boarding school; she didn't have to worry about others treating her differently just because she was a Perry.

Then again, there were definite perks to the title, especially when she needed a favor. Like now.

"Hi!" the office assistant simpered, immediately standing up when she saw who just came in.

"Hi." Adriana was careful to keep her voice neutral. She glanced at the assistant's name tag: Teri.

"What can I do for you today?" Teri asked eagerly.

"I need a draft of this year's yearbook," Adriana said authoritatively. Zack had filled her in on how yearbooks worked here. The students' pictures were taken over the summer by a professional photographer hired either personally or by the school, to eliminate any potential of bad lighting and poor angles. It also gave students a chance to rally their team of

professional hairdressers, makeup artists, stylists, aestheticians, and plastic surgeons. All the pictures were then sent to the school two weeks before classes started so that year's yearbook editor could put together a mock-up and hit the ground running on the first day of school. The draft was supposed to be top-secret and seen only by yearbook committee members.

Luckily, Adriana had studied up on every aspect of her new school, and she knew the draft was locked in the storage room of the student affairs office.

Teri blinked, not looking quite as eager now. "Oh, well..." She swallowed hard, obviously nervous. "But only the Director of Student Affairs has the key to the storage room," she admitted meekly.

Adriana didn't even blink. If there was one thing she learned from being around the Scions so much, it was how to get what she wanted in the least amount of time. "Well, then, I'll just have a chat with her," she declared, trying not to sound *too* imperious. She didn't enjoy being so commanding most of the time but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

Without waiting for a reply, she stepped around the front desk and made her way to the back, where the DSA's office was located, leaving a speechless Teri behind. Thank god Zack and Parker had given her an all-access tour a few days ago.

DR. WENDY WOLLENSKY, DIRECTOR OF STUDENT AFFAIRS, the bronze plaque mounted on the door read. Adriana gave one quick knock before twisting the knob and stepping inside.

Dr. Wollensky looked up, obviously startled. With her short silver hair and sleek black Prada suit, she looked astonishingly like Meryl Streep in *Devil Wears Prada*.

"Can I help you?" she asked, somewhat rudely. She obviously didn't appreciate Adriana just barging in like this.

Wow, *she even has the same British accent*, Adriana thought fleetingly, before she snapped back to the task at hand and gave Dr. Wollensky a polite

but warning smile. "Of course," she said smoothly. "I would like the draft of this year's yearbook."

Now Dr. Wollensky looked at her like she was crazy. "A draft of this year's yearbook?" She let out a short laugh. "That's not going to happen."

"I think it will," Adriana countered, her voice saccharine-sweet.

The administrator narrowed her eyes. "Now listen here, young lady, I don't know who you think you are, barging into my office like this in the first place, and now you want me to hand over a confidential document? That's not going to happen on *my* watch."

Adriana almost laughed out loud. Confidential document? Jesus Christ, this was a *yearbook* they were talking about, and not even a finished version at that. It didn't exactly contain a threat to national security.

"What is your name?" Dr. Wollensky demanded, pen at the ready. To scribble out a detention notice, no doubt.

Adriana leaned casually against the doorway. "Adriana Perry," she replied, her tone conveying the idea she could not be more bored with the whole thing.

Panic immediately washed over Dr. Wollensky's Botoxed face.

"The daughter of David Perry?" she asked slowly, visibly gulping.

"Yes." Adriana couldn't help a note of smugness from creeping into her tone. She did not mind lording her 'power' over Dr. Wollensky at all, though she did feel a bit bad about the assistant.

"Oh, well." Dr. Wollensky hastily stood up. "Of course. I'll go get what you need right away," she promised.

Barely two minutes passed before she came back, a thick, bound stack of paper tucked discreetly under her arm. "Here's the copy," she said. "I'm so

sorry about earlier. I had no idea..."

"Of course not." Adriana took the book and tucked it into her bag. "Well, I appreciate your help."

With that, she sauntered out of the office at the same moment the bell signaling the end of lunch rang.

"Dang," Adriana muttered under her breath. She'd been hoping to go over some of the pictures before fourth period, but that was obviously not happening. Unlike Zack, she tried to miss as little class as possible.

She would just have to continue her "mission" later.

* * *

"God, I love the food on the first day of school," Venice said, taking a huge bite of her gourmet burger. She closed her eyes in gastronomic delight. "If I ate like this every day, I'd be 300 pounds by now."

"You do eat like this every day," I pointed out, unscrewing the cap of my Voss. Trust Valesca to even have fancy water.

"I'm not talking about the *quality*, I'm talking about the quantity," Venice explained. "Not that my mom would let me eat so much anyways." She rolled her eyes.

Venice's mom is a former model, and even though she had retired over a decade ago, she was still super conscious about her—and her daughter's—appearance.

"Oh." I took a sip of my water and glanced around the DC. It had been spruced up over the summer, and looked more like a high-end restaurant than a cafeteria. It was also noticeably lacking one component.

The Scions' table, the closest to the slanted glass wall overlooking the campus' lushly landscaped grounds, was empty.

Their lack of presence was obviously felt by everyone else in the DC. The girls looked glum they couldn't throw themselves at the four's feet and the guys looked both relieved and disappointed that their idols weren't here for comparison.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Venice leaned over the table excitedly, her gray eyes sparkling with excitement. "What are you doing this Saturday night?"

"Why?" I asked warily. Things never turned out well whenever she asked me that question with that look in her eyes.

"Just answer me," she insisted.

Definitely not a good sign. I was about to say I had promised my family I'd go to dinner with them when she added, "And don't bother using that tired old family dinner excuse. In case you've forgotten, you told me your dad's away on a business trip until next Monday."

Damn it! This is one of those moments when I definitely regret telling her so much. "I guess I'm not doing anything," I admitted grudgingly. I hadn't realized how hard it is to come up with a believable excuse on the spot until today.

"Good." Venice beamed. "Stan Hoffman's having a party at his house and you're coming with."

"What? No way!"

"Why not?" she pouted. "You already said you're not doing anything."

"Because...what if I have a lot of homework due or something?" I argued feebly. It sounded lame even to my ears.

Venice gave me a cross look. "Maya Lindberg, you are a healthy, 17-year-old teenage girl. You do not need to do homework on a Saturday night and miss the school year's first party!"

"But the Scions might be there," I pointed out a bit desperately. "Like you said, it's the first party, and they're bound to be there."

"Uh...not really. They're super picky about which parties they get seen at, remember? They're probably not even going to be there, sadly."

Ok, so truthfully, it's not just about the Scions. I just don't like parties. Don't get me wrong, I'm not morally opposed to them or anything, but I've been to a few last year and they just seemed to consist of people getting drunk and hooking up with each other so others will gossip about them the next day. Not exactly my idea of a good time.

"Pleeeeeease?" Venice begged.

I shook my head stubbornly.

"Pretty please? With a cherry on top?"

When I steadfastly refused to reply, she let out an exaggerated sigh and leaned back in her chair. "Fine. But then I'd have to go alone, and if I end up getting so drunk I have sex with some random guy and get knocked up you better become the godmother."

"Venice France!" I nearly shouted, the use of her full name not nearly as intimidating as I might like it to sound thanks to the sheer silliness of it. "Don't even joke about stuff like that! Haven't you ever seen *16 & Pregnant*?"

She shrugged. "Technically, I'm 17. Besides, who knows? Things like this happen..."

"How about if you don't go instead?" I gave it one last shot.

"Do I really have to answer that?"

I scowled. Even though I knew the chances of Venice drunkenly hooking up with a stranger were slim to none—the girl couldn't even stand the smell of

beer, much less drink it—I still didn't want her going to Stan's party alone. The football player was a renowned womanizer, second only after Parker, and his parties seemed more like giant orgies than actual parties. "You should be glad I'm such a good friend," I groused.

Venice smiled cheekily. "Oh, cheer up, Grumpy," she said cheerfully. "It'll be fun. I promise."

* * *

Carlo deftly dribbled the ball around Zack and passed it quickly to Roman, who managed to break through Parker's formidable defense to slam-dunk the ball into the net, breaking the 80-80 tie.

"Whoo!" Carlo gave his partner a high-five, grinning as they continued their consecutive winning streak.

"Man, you guys always win," Zack complained good-naturedly, pulling up the hem of his shirt to wipe the sweat off his face and revealing a chiseled six-pack that bore no hint of the thousands of calories he shoveled into his mouth every day.

"Sorry, man, we can't help being better than you," Carlo joked, draping a friendly arm around Zack's shoulders.

"Uh, you are not better than us."

"I think our record more than speaks for itself."

"Hmm...yeah, you're right," Zack said thoughtfully. "Or not!" Abruptly turning, he grabbed Carlo in a head lock, laughing as his friend let out a surprised grunt.

However, it took Carlo only two seconds to recover, and he managed to extract himself from Zack's grip and pin him to the ground, wrestling-style, in even less time.

Parker burst out laughing at the look on Zack's face. "Come on, Perry, you know he's not a black belt for nothing."

"Yeah, yeah," Zack huffed, even though he was smiling. "Let's take it to the stage and see how you fare then."

"Hey, I never said music was my thing." Carlo shrugged. "Bit too sappy for me."

"Are you calling me sappy?" Zack asked suspiciously.

"You guys are ridiculous," Roman said, taking a swig of his Gatorade. "Why do I still hang out with you?"

"Because your life would be a boring wasteland without us?" Zack guessed.

"Because you would have to face all the people you offend without anyone to back you up," Carlo added.

"Aaand..." Parker paused dramatically. "Because you would just sit in your grand old mansion every day and not interact with the rest of society if we're not here to force you to do so."

Roman looked slightly affronted. "I would not," he snapped. "I'm a very sociable person."

His statement hung in the air for a moment, before Zack, Carlo, and Parker collapsed into fits of laughter.

"Haha...sociable person...that's a good one," Zack gasped.

Roman scowled. "I don't see what's so funny."

"Oh, I think he's serious," Carlo said, attempting a straight face and failing miserably.

"For someone who barely talks in school you sure have a lot to say when it's just us," Roman muttered. He glared at his friends.

"STOP LAUGHING!"

The other three Scions quieted down, but their mouths still twitched with amusement.

"Oh, come on, Rome," Parker cajoled. "You're not exactly the most social person on the planet and you know it. The only people you talk to is us."

"I talk to Adri," Roman pointed out.

"She doesn't count," Carlo countered. "She's practically one of us."

"Yeah, if Zack gets on our nerves too much, we can just sub her in," Parker suggested, earning himself a punch in the arm. "Ow! Watch it, these biceps are precious."

"Only to your ego." Zack stood up and brushed himself off. "Speaking of Adri, how're you feeling about that little...conversation between you guys earlier?" he asked Roman.

The head Scion shrugged. "She'll never manage it," he replied confidently. "Girls like that don't exist."

Parker shook his head. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you. How can you be so opposed to girls when you haven't even really had a girlfriend?"

"I barely like most of them enough to hook up with them, much less date them." Roman picked the basketball up from the floor and spun it absentmindedly on one finger. "They're too manipulative and high-maintenance."

"So would you rather date members of the same sex?" Carlo asked innocently.

Parker and Zack hid their smiles while Roman glared at his Colombian friend. "I wish you're really as silent as you appear in school."

"Sorry, no can do." Carlo crossed his arms over his chest. "But back to the subject. What happens if Adri does find the right girl? Would you actually be truthful and say something if you had feelings for her?"

"It's not gonna happen."

"But what if?" Carlo persisted.

Roman exhaled sharply. "*If* that happens—and I'm telling you right now it won't—I'll be truthful. When have you ever known me to lie?"

"That's good news, or else I won't hear the end of it at home," Zack noted wryly. Suddenly, a loud *ping* sounded, and all four boys reached for their phones.

"It's me." Parker quickly scanned the new text. His lips curved into a smile. "Ok, gentlemen, it's been real, but I have some business I need to take care of," he announced, pocketing his phone. "Talk to you later." He slapped hands goodbye with the other three and with one last wave, exited the Fioris' indoor basketball court.

"I bet his 'business' has something to do with a certain hot little waitress he met today," Zack remarked.

They had ended up going to Il Serrano for lunch after all.

Carlo shook his head. "Always ditching us for the ladies. What happened to bros over ho's?"

"It went the way of the CD player," Zack replied, earning himself an odd look from his friends. "What? I thought that was clever! You know, cuz no one uses CD players anymore..." Blank stares. "Oh, forget it," he huffed. "I see my sense of humor is under appreciated here."

"Apparently." Roman smirked.

Another *ping* sounded; this time, it was Zack's phone.

I need ur help. Come home now.

-Adri

"Not even a please," Zack grumbled. "Sisters." That was what he got for popping out two minutes later than Adriana.

Hmm...maybe *she'll* appreciate his wittiness.

Then again, maybe not.

"You're leaving too?" Roman asked.

"Yeah, Adri needs my help with something," Zack replied.

"I bet it has something to do with her search," Carlo remarked helpfully.

"I don't want you guys planning anything behind my back," Roman warned.
"Or else I'd think you *want* Adri to win."

"Of course not," Zack said, even though he secretly did. That was one of the few things he and Adriana agreed on: Roman seriously needed a girlfriend. Stat.

* * *

"Did you seriously spend your whole day looking at this thing?" Zack asked skeptically, flipping through the yearbook draft.

"Yes," Adriana answered somewhat defensively. She'd made a copy of the draft and given the original back to the DSA earlier. The copy she made had giant X's through the freshman and sophomore sections, as well as smaller X's through all the guys and upperclassmen girls who hadn't made the first cut.

"Gee, you're really serious about this whole challenge thing."

"Of course I am! Or else ten years from now everyone will be married and Roman will be by himself, miserable."

"Either that or he would have married some trophy wife and be perfectly content."

Adriana rolled her eyes. "Stop contradicting me and help me out with this," she ordered.

"It would be nice if you said 'please' every once in a while."

"Fine. Please."

"That wasn't very sincere."

"Do you want me to smack you?"

"Oooh, yeah, cuz that's going to hurt sooo—OW!" Zack yelped, rubbing the back of his head. "Hey, that's not fair! You have long nails!"

"Sue me. Are you going to help me or not?"

"Be very glad I'm such an amazing brother." Zack snatched the book from her hands.

Adriana smiled sweetly. "You know I love you."

"Yeah, yeah. Now what exactly is it you want me to do?"

"Wellll...although I like to think of myself as doing pretty well on the Valesca information front I've only still been at school for a day so I don't know that much about the people—"

"And you want me to cross out anyone who I think Roman won't like," Zack finished.

She beamed. "You really are the best brother ever."

"Don't get so happy yet," Zack said dryly, examining the page in front of him. "I don't know much about a lot of these girls, except—oh, definitely not her. Gold-digger to the max. And not her either." He lowered his voice. "I heard she went through *seven* plastic surgery procedures over the summer. Rome definitely won't like that, he prefers girls who are more natural. That's what he says anyway."

Adriana gave her brother a look. "For a guy, you're kind of gossipy."

"You're only just figuring this out?"

Eh. He had a point.

An hour later, the Perry siblings were collapsed on Adriana's bed, barely moving.

"Holy shit, I had no idea looking at pictures would be so tiring," Zack groaned. "I hate you for making me do this, Adri."

"Hey, Roman's your friend too, you know, and this'll be good for him." Adriana buried her face in her pillow. "Sometimes I wish I wasn't such a good person."

Zack snorted. "I think your wish came true a long time ago," he joked, earning himself a jab in his side. "Stop abusing me," he pouted. "It's not very nice."

"You weren't a lot of help," Adriana sighed, too tired to even be really annoyed. "You only crossed out six names!"

"Well, I'm not the girl expert in the group," Zack pointed out. "You should've asked Parker."

His sister sat up straight. "Oh yeah...you think he would be able to come over now?"

"I doubt it," Zack yawned. "I think he's with some girl."

Adriana made a face. "Right. Typical," she mumbled. "Well, I guess if I can't do this objectively, I would just have to get to know everyone better in person," she decided. "I heard there's a party this Saturday."

"You're talking about Stan Hoffman's party?"

"Yeah, I think that was his name. You know him?"

Zack shrugged. "Yeah. We have him run some errands for us sometimes. He throws pretty cool parties."

"Good." Newly energized, Adriana closed the yearbook and placed it in her bedside drawer. "Then we're going to that party."

"By we you mean..."

"Me, you, Parker, and Carlo, if he wants to come. I don't want Roman to know what I'm up to. Better surprise him with who the girl is so he doesn't have time to put his defenses up."

"I think it's just gonna be us and Parker. Carlo doesn't really care much for Stan's parties. Besides, we need someone to distract Roman."

"True," Adriana allowed. "You actually said something smart for once."

"Thanks," Zack said sarcastically.

"No prob," Adriana chirped, already looking forward to Saturday.

This was going to be fun.

CHAPTER 3

I heard it before I saw it: the deep, thumping bass of loud party music, which I could feel vibrating my seat even though we were halfway down the road.

"Oh, come on, move!" Venice grumbled, pressing down on her car horn. Hard. She narrowed her eyes at the line of cars snaking up the street, all waiting for their chance to park and party.

"I think this is a sign," I announced, running a hand nervously through my hair. It usually had a hint of wave to it, but Venice had flat-ironed it to sleek perfection earlier. "Maybe we're not supposed to be here tonight."

"No...Stan's parties are always like this," she answered distractedly, trying to maneuver around the Mercedes in front of us, to no avail. "It's the first party of the year! Of course there's going to be a lot of people."

"Great." I slumped down in my seat.

"Remember what you promised me earlier?" Venice asked pointedly. "You said you were going to keep an open mind and not be such a Debbie Downer."

"I know, I know." I sat up straighter. "You're right. Even though I despise the person throwing this party, don't know anyone else here, and completely disagree with the way things work in this town, that does *not* mean I can't have a good time!" I paused. "That came out a lot more sarcastic than I intended."

Venice laughed. "You're ridiculous." She eased off the brake as the line inched forward a little. "You've been in such a cranky mood lately I think tonight's the night."

A chill ran down my spine. "Uh...the night for what?" I asked slowly, knowing what she was going to say but dreading it nonetheless.

"The night to find you a guy!" she exclaimed, in a *duh* voice. "You are 17 years old and you've never even had a real boyfriend, which is...well, it's not normal, especially since you're *gorgeous*, girlie."

I blushed, muttering something about how I wasn't, really. Compliments on my looks always make me feel awkward. I don't even think of myself as pretty. I mean, yeah, I know I'm not ugly or anything, but when I look in the mirror I just see a regular teenage girl.

Venice groaned. "You kill me. Do you even realize how all the guys stop to stare at you whenever you walk into a room?"

"They don't."

"They do!" She gazed at me calculatingly. "But don't try to change the subject. There'll be plenty of hot guys here tonight and even if you won't date any of them you can still hook up, can't you?"

"You're the one who brought it up in the first place," I huffed. "And I'm not really a hook up type of person, V."

She ignored me, distracted by a parking space on the edge of the road. Granted, it didn't look large enough to even fit one of those tiny cars they drove over there in France, but it was a space nonetheless. Luckily, Venice's car was pretty tiny too, and by some miracle (or lack thereof, in my opinion), she managed to ease into the spot.

"Yes!" Venice beamed triumphantly. "Bow down to my driving skills, ye mere mortals."

"I'm bowing, I'm bowing." I stared nervously at the giant black Hummer in front of us. "Ok, let's go."

"Now you want to go in faster."

"I'm just getting claustrophobic." I stepped out of the car and was instantly bombarded with the smell of alcohol.

I blinked, staring at the chaotic scene in front of me. Take all the noise and people and alcohol from every party I've ever been to, multiply it by ten, and that's what it looked like right now. It's like a teenage movie party scene on steroids. All the lights were on in Stan's huge house, and I could see the shadows of drunk, horny teenagers in every one of them. In fact, there were so many people they spilled onto the vast lawn.

As I watched, a barely-clad girl in teeny-tiny shorts and an even teenier top raced past me, shrieking with laughter, with a shirtless guy in hot pursuit. A bunch of people were doing body shots on the hood of a car, of all places, while couples made out furiously *everywhere*.

I gulped. If this was what the party's like outside, I can't even begin to imagine what's happening *inside*. Or rather, I didn't even *want* to imagine what's happening in there. I was in way over my head.

Venice, apparently, didn't think so.

"Oh, thank god we managed to beat the worst of the crowds," she breathed, grabbing my hand and dragging me toward the house.

"We did?" I asked skeptically. It sure didn't look like it, but hey, what did I know? I was a Stan Hoffman party virgin.

We managed to make our way through the crush in the living room and outside again to the pool area, which was slightly less congested. Probably because someone had already thrown up in the pool.

I stood in the corner for a moment, surveying the scene. Not a single person looked sober, or even semi-sober. I discreetly checked my watch. It was barely eleven. Great. That meant we wouldn't be leaving for a good two hours, if I was lucky. I don't usually drink that much, but I had a feeling

there's no way I could get through this night completely sober without tearing my hair out.

"Hey, V, why don't we go get some drinks?" I suggested.

"That's the spirit!" She beamed. Then, gazing over my shoulder, a mischievous smile crept over her face. "Actually, why don't I go get the drinks? It'll be easier that way. You just stay right here."

With that, she hightailed it back inside.

I stared after her, puzzled. "Don't get drunk and pregnant!" I yelled, rather belatedly.

"A valid concern at Stan's parties," an amused voice noted from behind me.

Whipping around, I found myself facing a very cute, sandy-haired guy I didn't recognize. Ah. No wonder Venice was so quick to leave.

I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment. God, I must have sounded like someone's mom just now. "Oh...hi," I said awkwardly.

"Hi." His smile widened. "I'm James."

"Maya."

"I know."

When I shot him a quizzical look, he shrugged. "I asked a couple of my friends if they knew you," he explained.

"Who are your friends?" I asked curiously.

He gestured to a group of guys working on a keg on the other side of the pool. I have absolutely no freaking idea who any of them were.

"Apparently, everyone knows who you are," James explained.

My face fell. "They do?" I asked nervously. Either James was lying or I've been completely delusional for the past year.

Sadly, I suspected it might be the latter.

James laughed. "Cheer up, it's not the end of the world. I've never seen anyone look so sad about other people knowing her."

Ha! He knew nothing, I tell you, nothing. Besides, "sad" is not exactly the word I would use to describe what I'm feeling right now, which is...well, I'm not even really sure.

Suddenly, I just realized something. "Do you go to Valesca?" I asked.

"Nope, and damn proud of it. No offense," he added quickly.

"Believe me, none taken," I said dryly. "So where do you go?"

"La Terra," he answered, naming a high school in the next town. "My family used to live here but they moved when I was little, which is just as well. Valesca isn't really my type of scene."

"A guy after my own heart," I joked.

He smiled. "I certainly hope so."

While I blushed and racked my suddenly-frozen brain for a witty response, a commotion inside the house thankfully interrupted me, and both James and I turned to see what all the fuss was about.

I was surprised to see the procession of Scions, plus Adriana, making their way through the crowd. The former rarely ever attended open parties like this one and preferred to go clubbing at the latest New York hotspots. At least, that was what I heard.

I was even more surprised to see Roman and Carlo were conspicuously absent.

"Ah, the famous Scions," James commented.

"You know who they are?" I asked as I stepped to the side, partially shielding myself with a giant potted plant.

"I think everyone in the tri-state area knows who they are," he remarked wryly. A brief shadow passed over his face, but it disappeared so quickly I wondered if it had ever been there in the first place.

"Wonderful." My week just keeps getting better and better.

At that moment, Venice ran up, beer sloshing over the sides of the two red plastic cups she held in her hands. She didn't seem to notice. "Maya! Guess who's here?" she cried, her desire to gossip apparently outweighing her desire to give me and a total stranger (to her) some alone time.

"Big Foot?"

She shot me a you're-so-weird-sometimes look. "No. The Scions! Well, half of them anyway." She handed me one cup and gave

James the other one. "I'm Venice, by the way," she said, beaming.

"Hey, I'm James," he said easily. "Why don't you have this drink?" He held out his cup.

"Oh, no thanks. I'm not really a beer person," she explained. She gave me a sly smile. "I see you've met Maya."

He shot me an amused look. "Yes, I have."

"Don't you just *love* her? She's my best friend. She's amazing! She's so smart, and she's really pretty too, don't you think?"

Venice may not be a beer girl, but she had definitely imbibed some alcohol before she came back. "Venice! What are you doing?" I hissed under my breath, mortified.

"Yeah, she's beautiful," James replied, giving me another smile.

I coughed nervously, unsure what to say. "Haha...um, well...actually, I just remembered I have to go somewhere...well, it was nice meeting you!"

Before he could say another word, I'd already grabbed Venice and hightailed it inside the house, losing myself in the fortunately large crowd. Unfortunately, I was in such a hurry I didn't notice I had also hightailed into *someone*. The unexpected force caused my cup to tilt over, and I watched in slow-motion horror as the sticky brown liquid splashed all over a very expensive-looking shirt.

I slowly lifted my eyes from the stain, up, up, and straight into the face of none other than Parker Remington.

Oh *shit*.

* * *

"Chug! Chug! Chug! Chug!"

Adriana watched impassively as a slightly heavyweight guy in a too-small Abercrombie polo finished off the last of the giant keg in the Hoffmans' backyard, cheered on by his equally drunk and rowdy friends.

"You know, that's actually pretty impressive," Zack remarked, finishing off his own drink, which a simpering sycophant had brought over just a few minutes earlier.

"Yeah, if this were the Frat Olympics 2010," Adriana said, rolling her eyes. On any other night, this party would be pretty fun—great music, free-flowing liquor, and tons of people, which meant tons of cute guys. The only problem was, she wasn't here to find a guy for herself, she was here to find a girl for Roman.

"Where did Parker disappear off to?" she wondered aloud, scanning the yard. They had been mobbed by a frightening pack of drunk, horny girls the moment they arrived, and Parker had somehow gotten 'lost' in the midst.

Zack shrugged. "He's probably—"

"Ohmygod! Someone just spilled beer *all over Parker Remington!*" someone screamed. Everyone froze for one second, before they abandoned what they were doing to cram themselves into the living room, eager to witness the drama that was about to go down, and curious as to who was unlucky enough to offend a Scion so early in the year.

"Well, there's your answer," Zack said, chuckling. "This, I gotta see."

Despite the crowds, he and Adriana had no trouble making it to the edge of the circle, where Parker and a girl who had her back to them stood. The renowned playboy did, indeed, have a huge dark stain on his shirt, and surprisingly, he didn't look particularly upset.

When the girl turned, Adriana immediately saw why. It was the girl she'd met in the bathroom a few days ago, Maya. She didn't know why she remembered her so clearly, but there was something about her that stuck out from Valesca's preening socialites-in-training. Despite Maya's delicate appearance, she seemed to emanate a vibe that indicated she wasn't one to let herself be pushed around, which Adriana, who herself was no shy wallflower, appreciated.

Besides, it was clear Parker wouldn't be so quick to impose any sort of social pariah-dom on the poor girl--she was gorgeous. Even Zack, who was normally pretty laid-back when it came to expressing his opinions about the opposite sex, let out a low whistle.

Parker, not looking terribly upset, was saying something, but it was hard to hear, since everyone had formed the circle at a respectable distance from the two.

Adriana decided to take matters into her own hands, but before she could, she was surprised to see her brother step forward. "There's nothing to see here," he said firmly. And with those five words, the crowd reluctantly dispersed, though more than a few cast surreptitious looks in their direction.

Zack was about to make his way over to Parker and Maya when Adriana laid a hand on his arm. "Wait," she said, tilting her head towards a tiny redhead who was barreling towards the duo at an alarming speed.

"Maya!" the girl cried, her gray eyes the size of saucers as they darted between her friend and the huge stain on Parker's shirt.

"Wh-what happened? Are you okay? You're—you're not going to be expelled, are you?"

"Not if I have anything to say about it."

Adriana watched, intrigued, as a good-looking, sandy-haired guy stepped up behind Venice, staring directly at Parker.

Then, as if the scene couldn't get more dramatic, the front door opened and who should come in but Roman and Carlo?

Well, Adriana thought. *This party is finally starting to get interesting.*

* * *

"Um...uh..." I was speechless as I just stood there, taking in the damage I'd done to a shirt that probably cost more than an average person's monthly rent. A shirt that belonged to Parker Remington, no less. I was painfully aware that the rest of the party had stopped and everyone was pointing and whispering, but I couldn't focus on anything except for the fact my life was pretty much over.

"I'm sorry," I finally managed, desperately searching for a place to set down the offending and now empty cup. Unfortunately, the nearest table was about twenty feet away. "I'm really, really sorry. I didn't mean to spill it—it's just—I'm a bit—well, I was in a bit of a hurry so I just rushed in here

and I didn't see you and there's so many people that it just accidentally spilled—"

I knew I was rambling incoherently and embarrassing myself even more than I already had, but I couldn't help it. In my mind, I could see my chances of getting into Stanford, or any other good school, disappear in a puff of smoke.

The whole time, Parker just watched me with an inscrutable expression on his face. When I finally fell into silence, awaiting his next words with a Texas-sized pit of dread in my stomach, I somehow felt even more humiliated that I was basically groveling in front of someone for something as minor as spilling beer over him.

I mean, yeah, if it had been anyone else, I still would have apologized and tried to help him clean up, but the situation was only exacerbated by the fact Parker's a Scion. This time, I felt my cheeks heat up with shame and anger at myself for being too much of a coward to stand up to the Scions' dictatorial rule.

"Well, this wasn't part of my plans for tonight," Parker commented, lifting his sticky shirt away from his defined torso, which was clearly outlined through the soaked material.

I braced myself, wondering how to tell my mom my chances of getting into a top ten school were non-existent now.

"But it certainly isn't the end of the world."

Oh god. I was going to end up working at McDonald's for the rest of my life, subsisting on welfare—wait, what? "What?" I blurted.

I heard someone say something in the background, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the crowd that had been watching us miraculously break up, but I was so overwhelmed by the hope that was coursing through my veins I couldn't quite focus on anything else.

Parker laughed, flashing me his signature charming smile and the accompanying dimples. His green eyes sparkled mischievously.

"It's just beer," he explained. "I won't die."

"But I ruined your shirt," I protested. I couldn't believe I was actually *encouraging* him to be mad, but this didn't feel right. I mean, last year, I'd seen someone get kicked out of school for stepping on the back of Roman's shoe. Besides, I was still convinced there was a catch here somewhere.

Parker shrugged. "It's just a shirt, I have plenty."

"So...you're not mad?" I asked cautiously.

"Of course not. How can I be mad at such a beautiful girl?"

Coming from anyone else, the line would be corny as hell, but there was something about Parker that made everything he said sound smooth and charming.

"Maya! Wh-what happened? Are you okay? You're—you're not expelled, are you?"

I turned to see Venice rushing toward me, wide-eyed and panicked.

I was about to tell her that yes, everything was fine, but before I could get a word out of my mouth, James suddenly materialized. He looked decidedly less laid-back than before, and in fact, his mouth was set in a grim line as he stared Parker down.

"Not if I have anything to do about it," he said quietly.

"Really? And what are you going to do about it?"

The blood ran cold in my veins. I would recognize that voice anywhere.

Venice gently tugged on my arm, and I robotically took a step back so that James was facing Parker and Roman by himself. I saw Carlo move over to stand next to Zack and Adriana. I don't remember seeing them arrive on the scene, but I shouldn't be surprised. They always moved in a pack.

"I'm not going to stand here and let you push Maya around just because she *accidentally* spilled beer on you," James declared, even though he was looking straight at Roman now.

Roman's eyes narrowed and his gaze moved slowly, methodically from Parker's shirt, to me and Venice, and back to James. "I don't think you're aware who you're talking to," Roman said. His tone of voice had changed. It was casual, almost cavalier, which frightened me more than if he'd been screaming and raging.

"Oh, wait, I forgot, I'm talking to the mighty Scions," James said sarcastically. "How stupid of me. I should be bowing and scraping before you right now, shouldn't I?"

I exchanged a horrified glance with Venice. *What are you doing?* I wanted to scream at him. I didn't know James that well, but he was a nice guy, and I couldn't even bear to think what's going to happen to him after tonight.

"Maybe if you did that right now, I might be inclined to show some mercy in dealing with you," Roman declared.

I felt myself bristle at his choice of awards. He really did sound like some medieval king talking down to his servants.

Apparently, James felt the same way, because he didn't back down. "I don't think I need mercy from the likes of you," he responded, clenching his hands into fists. "You and your friends think you can do anything just because you're rich, but let me tell you something, money can't buy you dignity, or respect."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." Roman's lips curved up into a cruel smile. "Especially when you wake up one morning to find out your parents

just lost their job."

James' nostrils flared. "Don't you *dare* pretend you know *anything* about my family!" he roared, raising his fist.

Venice let out a small yelp next to me, but I'd had enough. I quickly grabbed James' wrist and forced it down. I'd noticed Carlo had gotten ready to defend his friend and knew James would not be the winner.

"That's enough!" I cried, stepping in front of James.

"Maya, what are you *doing*?" Venice whispered urgently from the sideline.

I ignored her, and lifted my chin, gazing into Roman's stormy orbs. For the first time, he looked taken aback.

"Now you listen, and you listen good," I began fiercely, fueled by over a year of suppressed anger that was bursting to be let out. "I don't *care* that your family founded this stupid town and this stupid school, I don't care how much money you have in your trust fund, or how everyone else worships you just because you happen to be lucky enough to be born with good genes and into a rich family. I am *sick* and *tired* of you bossing everyone around like they're your servants! They're not, and even if they were, you should at least treat other people with some respect! You have done absolutely nothing by yourself to earn anything you have!"

"Maya," Venice squeaked, her face whiter than white.

I knew I should stop, but I couldn't. I'd already dug myself in too deep, and I was on a roll. The words came out so easily I was barely aware I was even saying them. "Nothing gives you the right to threaten other peoples' lives and futures the way you do!" I continued. "Who are you to determine who gets expelled or whose parents will lose their jobs? You're just a teenager, for Christ's sake! Stop acting like you're god, because you're *not*! As far as I'm concerned, you're nothing but a spoiled, tyrannical *brat* who throws a temper tantrum anytime something doesn't go your way!"

I was panting by the time I finished, and it was the only sound in the room. The rest was dead silence.

Everyone—Venice, James, the Scions, the people at the party—just stared at me in shock.

I swallowed hard, hit by the urge to bolt. Though I'd felt free and relieved when I was reaming Roman out, I now felt suffocated.

Without waiting for a response, I pushed my way through my mass of frozen classmates and sprinted through the door, not stopping until I'd reached Venice's car. I leaned against the driver's side, where no one could see me, and closed my eyes, breathing deeply. The fresh night air felt soothing against my heated skin, but I still felt like I was about to throw up.

I couldn't believe I just did that. A year of forcing myself into anonymity, all down the drain in one night. But still, at least I had my dignity intact. I knew if I'd just let it go on the way it had back there without saying anything, I would regret it for the rest of my life. It was about time someone stood up to the Scions, and if colleges wanted some lemming with no backbone, well, I guess they weren't the right ones for me.

"Maya!"

I looked up to see a distressed Venice. "Ohmygosh, I'm so sorry," she cried, throwing her arms around my neck. "This is all my fault! If I hadn't—if I hadn't made you come tonight, none of this would've happened!"

"No, it's fine," I croaked, patting her awkwardly on her back. "It's not your fault. This was bound to happen anyway. I've held my tongue too long." I inhaled deeply and stood up. "Besides, it'll be ok," I said with forced cheer. "I'm not some prissy little thing. I can handle whatever they throw at me."

She just stared at me worriedly.

I bit my lip. "Is it that bad?"

"Well, I don't really know," she admitted. "I mean, I ran out here after you as fast as I can, but the party's definitely over, that's for sure."

We both looked at the house, and sure enough, people were starting to stream through the doors.

"Get in the car, I'll drive you home," Venice said.

I quickly made my way around the car and slammed the door shut. I had barely put on my seatbelt before we were already halfway down the road.

"Thanks, V," I said gratefully, leaning my head on the headrest. "You're the best."

"Hey, what are friends for?"

When we pulled up in front of my house, she gave me another hug.

"Listen, just know I'll always have your back, ok?" she whispered. "Whatever happens Monday, I won't give up on you."

I smiled for real this time, feeling unbearably touched. As I got out, she added, "And Maya?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really proud of you tonight. I wish I had the courage to do what you did."

As I lay in my bed that night, her words echoed through my mind, strengthening my resolve to not bow down to Roman or any of the other Scions anymore. To hell with what they'll do to me—whatever that may be.

In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced I'd done the right thing. My parents had always raised me to stand up for what I believe in and to not let others push me around; it was about time I made them

proud. Besides, I comforted myself with the thought Roman Fiori and his ilk would get what they deserved sooner or later.

I drifted off into a light, fitful sleep.

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CHAPTER 4

"That's four games in a row!" Zack crowed, raising his arms triumphantly in the air and nearly jabbing Parker in the eye with the pool stick he was still holding in his hand. "Who's the man?"

"Whatever, Perry," Parker said, tossing his golden brown hair out of his eyes. "I guess you're paying me back for what? The Six thousand times I've beaten you before?"

"Yeah, right," Zack retorted, his spirits not seeming the least bit dampened by Parker's reminder that he usually was not the Michael Jordan of pool, to say the least. "You're just mad because you owe me your custom Rolex."

Parker laughed. "Dude, I don't care about the Rolex. I have a dozen of those things. My grandparents send me one every Christmas."

"Still." Zack set his pool stick on the ground and leaned his weight against it, glancing at the opposite end of the lounge. Carlo was lounging on the couch, deeply engrossed in *Grapes of Wrath*, his favorite book. Roman was standing in front of the dartboard, where a cluster of darts neatly punctuated the center. There were so many they spilled out of the bull's eye and into the surrounding ring.

Zack couldn't see Roman's face, but he was pretty sure there was an angry scowl on it.

Like anything else is new.

"Hey, Rome, you wanna play? We can do doubles," he called out hopefully.

The four of them had spent all day hanging out in Roman's game room, one of the dozen or so rooms that made up his wing of the Fiori mansion. They

had started off hashing and rehashing last night's shocking events, with Roman getting progressively redder and angrier each time, until Zack, Carlo, and Parker all threatened to jump off the balcony if they didn't talk about something else.

From that point on, Roman had alternated between sulking in the corner, no doubt planning the demise of that poor girl, and venting his anger at the dartboard. The other three had amused themselves with the endless entertainment the game room provided, but it was hard to enjoy themselves when their friend was being such an obvious downer.

Roman didn't answer; instead, he ferociously hurled yet another dart at the board. It went whizzing through the air and precisely pierced the tiny area between two other darts.

Parker and Zack exchanged glances.

"Maybe we should start drinking," Parker half-joked, even though it was barely four in the afternoon.

"I'll get the vodka," Zack offered helpfully. He started to make his way over to the fully stocked bar in the corner.

Before he could take two steps, Roman turned and stormed over. As Zack had predicted, he was scowling.

"Who does that girl think she is?" he demanded to no one in particular. "To have the nerve to talk to me like that? Doesn't she know who I fucking am?"

Parker yawned, bored. He'd already heard this rant at least thirty times by now. "She's hot," he commented, completely ignoring Roman's previous statement.

Zack nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

"I mean, she can't possibly fucking think she'll get away with that," Roman continued. "I need to teach her a fucking lesson."

"I'm kind of surprised I haven't noticed her before, though," Parker mused thoughtfully, obviously a little put out that a cute girl had slipped past his radar like that.

"Maybe you're losing your touch," Zack offered innocently.

"When I'm done with her, she'll regret the day she ever stepped foot in this town!" Roman rambled on. His monologue seemed to be making him feel better, since his face was no longer a fire-engine shade of red, but his eyebrows were still drawn together so fiercely he could probably re-kill an army of zombies with just one look.

"That'll never happen," Parker stated confidently in response to Zack's remark. "I think I've found myself a new goal."

"You mean conquest."

Parker looked offended. "I do not have *conquests*, I have...fleeting girlfriends."

"Euphemisms," Zack scoffed.

Neither noticed that Roman was now glaring directly at them.

"ARE YOU EVEN LISTENING TO ME?" he roared so loud Zack swore he saw the glasses at the bar rattle a bit.

There was silence as his friends stared blankly at him.

"No, not really," Zack finally answered earnestly.

Before Roman could fly off the handle again, Carlo spoke up for the first time. "Why are you getting so worked up?" he asked, not even looking up

from his book. He was leaning leisurely against one arm of the couch while his feet were crossed on top of the other arm. "Just do what you usually do."

"But he doesn't usually do anything," Zack pointed out.

"Exactly."

The meaning behind Carlo's words had obviously already registered with Roman, and his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You're right. Why would I trouble myself dealing with her when I can let everyone else do it?"

In previous cases, of course, the other Valesca students had taken it upon themselves to get rid of anyone who offended the Scions. There was no reason this time would be any different.

Roman's lips curved up into a small, triumphant smirk. "She won't last a week."

* * *

Well, D-Day was here. Surprisingly, it didn't feel particularly different than any other day as I trudged toward school, basking in the warmth of the sun against my skin and letting it comfort me. But then again, that could be because I dreaded going to school every day anyway.

As I neared the school, however, my calmness left me little by little. I could feel about 10,000 butterflies fluttering away in my stomach, my heart felt like it was going to jump out of my chest, and I might even possibly throw up. It didn't make it any better that Venice had contracted the flu over the weekend and wouldn't be able to come to school today.

Although, now that I think about it, it might be better if she wasn't here for the carnage that was about to ensue.

When I arrived at school, the parking lot was empty. This might be due to the fact I've arrived a full hour and a half early.

Ok, fine. I'm still a bit of a coward, but what else can I do? I've used up all my courage for the month Saturday night, and now, I wanted nothing more

than to hide away in a place where no Valesca student would ever, ever go to: the library.

I stepped cautiously into the building, relieved but unsurprised to find the halls empty save for a lone janitor. It was the earliest I'd ever come in here, and I was suddenly struck by how beautiful the interior was when it uncluttered by the masses of students.

The floors were pure, unveined Italian marble, decorated with the giant forest green-and gold falcon school crest in the entrance hall. The "lockers" were built into the walls and looked more like high-tech cabinets; instead of clunky, ugly combination locks, they were secured by a small biometric pad where you press your thumb, making it quick and easy to get into the precious space (considering the extravagance of the items some kids threw in their lockers, 'precious' takes on a whole new meaning). Above them hung oil portraits of the school's many illustrious alumni, and enormous, glittering crystal chandeliers took the place of fluorescent lights.

Suddenly realizing I was in a bit of a stupor, I shook my head and mentally kicked myself for buying into Valesca's superficial perfection, even if it was only for a second.

I made my way into one of the wood-paneled elevators and pressed '3', staring at myself in the mirror.

I was wearing the female version of Valesca's uniform: a short-sleeve, white button-down shirt under a fitted green blazer with the school crest on the upper left side, a green and gold plaid skirt, and my own black ballet flats. The school's handbook never specified a specific shoe for the uniform, except that it had to be black, brown, and 'appropriate,' whatever the hell that meant.

The guys' uniform was the same, except with more masculine tops and green slacks instead of skirts. They also had to wear green-and-gold striped ties. All the uniforms were custom-made by Ralph Lauren, but I hated them. They made me feel constricted, conformed, and the last thing I wanted was to look anything like my classmates.

Of course, the only students exempt from the uniform rule were the Scions. *And Adriana*, I added silently, thinking about the gorgeous dress she'd worn yesterday. I still hadn't quite made up my mind about her yet. She was obviously cut from the same mold as her brother and his friends, and indulged in the same ridiculous privileges, but she also seemed... different, somehow. I just couldn't quite put my finger why.

The elevator let out a low, musical ping, announcing the arrival at my destination. As the doors slid open silently, I took a deep breath and pushed all thoughts of the Scions out of my mind. It didn't really matter if Adriana was different or not. It's not like we'll ever be friends. We just didn't come from the same world.

Since the library, which contained practically every book you could ever think of, dominated the entire third floor, I could enter it directly from the elevator. I stepped into the giant, hushed, bookworm's paradise, the silence enveloping me like a warm blanket on a cold winter night. I breathed in the comforting smell of leather-bound books, and managed to muster up a smile to flash at the elderly librarian.

I beelined past the checkout counter and bank of computers toward my favorite nook in the back, which consisted of a simple armchair and small table but had a picture window that provided the best view of the school's undeniably gorgeous, landscaped grounds.

I settled comfortably into the chair and pulled out my favorite book, *Grapes of Wrath*. I've literally read it a hundred times but I never got tired of it.

The next hour and a half flew by, and all too soon, the bell signaling the start of class rang shrilly, rudely jolting me from my book. A tight, familiar knot instantly formed in my stomach, and I felt myself freeze in my chair. I knew I should get moving, but my muscles wouldn't listen to me. It was like I'd been spontaneously paralyzed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the librarian cast a half-curious, half-disapproving glance in my direction, but I was so immersed in my panic I

didn't care. I *know* everyone who hadn't witnessed my showdown with Roman Saturday night—and that number was small—would've definitely heard about it by now, and I wasn't looking forward to their harassment, which, judging from past cases, was inevitable.

I placed my book into my backpack and reluctantly trudged toward the elevator. My finger hesitated over the down button, until I pressed it firmly, quickly, before I could change my mind. The doors immediately opened, suddenly looking like the gates of hell.

By the time I reached the second floor hallway, it was fairly empty, and I was relieved to find that, despite the frequent dirty looks and whispering, no one outright confronted me.

When I burst into my English class a few minutes later, the teacher, Mrs. Lavinsky, was in the middle of instructions for our end-of-the-term paper.

"—minimum fifteen pages, double-spaced—" She broke off when she saw me. "Miss Lindberg, you're late," she said pointedly.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, blushing. "It won't happen again."

"I certainly hope not." She signed and waved me towards my seat. "I'll let it slide this time, but next time I'll have to give you a written warning."

I nodded meekly, embarrassed. I've never gotten a written warning before, and Mrs. Lavinsky was actually my favorite teacher. I knew she didn't have an easy job. The rest of my classmates, while smart, were always giving her attitude. I hated having to disappoint her, too.

I slid into my seat and instantly felt something cold and sticky on the back of my skirt and thighs.

What the—I stood up hastily, or at least tried to. I was pulled down instantly.

Oh god. Please don't tell me someone put glue on my seat!

I yanked myself up again, putting in more force this time. Unfortunately, I didn't think about the consequence beforehand—namely, half my skirt ripped away.

The rest of the class burst into laughter. Mrs. Lavinsky looked horrified.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “Maya, why don't you go to the office—”

She hadn't even finished talking before I was out of there, my face flaming with humiliation.

Those jerks, I seethed silently as I raced toward my locker, where I kept an extra uniform. *They're going to have to do better than this. How immature could they be?*

I furiously jammed my finger on the biometric pad, and the door unhinged with a soft *click*, the loudest sound in the deserted hallway. When I swung it open, however, a shrill scream pierced through the silence.

It took me a moment to realize the scream had come from my own mouth, as I stared, horrified, into the cold eyes of the coiled-up snake in my locker.

* * *

Adriana sat cross-legged in an overstuffed armchair in the library, Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* lying open in front of her. She'd decided to grab sushi for lunch and had come back sooner than expected, so she'd decided to get some reading in. She'd read *Crime and Punishment* before, of course, at boarding school, but she'd enjoyed it and didn't mind paging through the long novel again.

Usually, she would've been hanging out in the lounge with Zack and the rest of them, but she was too disgusted right now.

A small crease formed on her smooth brow as she thought about this morning's events. She'd heard about the glue, the snake, the shredded gym clothes, and the tossing of Maya's math notes into the toilet, among countless other 'pranks'. Other than the snake—which had been deemed the

non-poisonous kind, thank God—they were all relatively harmless, childish tricks, but that didn't make them right, nor did it make them any less distressing.

Adriana was kind of pissed none of the guys had said anything yet. Of course, she knew they rarely—no, scratch that, they *never* interfered with Roman's power trips, but still. She knew Parker had at least some interest in the girl, so wasn't that some incentive to at least attempt playing knight in shining armor?

Adriana's frown deepened as uncrossed her legs and slipped her feet back into her flat, jeweled Giuseppe Zanotti sandals, a personal gift from the designer himself.

Of course, Parker wasn't exactly the knightly type. Knights didn't exactly go around seducing innocent—or not-so-innocent, in some cases—girls. They certainly didn't sleep around so much they had to go to surrounding towns to avoid the possibility of a second-night stand, which might be construed as, God forbid, a "relationship" in Parker world.

Adriana let out a small huff, slightly disgruntled. *Come on, Adri, get back to the task at hand*, she ordered herself.

She tapped one foot thoughtfully on the ground, the sound muffled by the plush Persian rug, and resumed analyzing the situation at hand.

Adriana knew she could always do something to diffuse the situation, though granted, no one except Roman could stop the abuse completely. In fact, she was already trying to come up with a way to make life a little easier for Maya. She liked the girl, for some reason. Adriana definitely admired her for standing up to Roman like that. It proved Maya was no shy wallflower, and that she actually had some sense in her head, unlike most of the preening, air-headed socialites Adriana was constantly in the company of.

As she scrolled through the ways she could help, a sudden thought occurred to her. Adriana sat up straighter, her eyes lighting up. God, it was so

obvious! With a little triumphant laugh, Adriana decided to not do anything. Yet. While it may help in the short run, in the long run...

Just as ideas scrawled themselves across her mind so quickly she barely had time to comprehend any of them, the elevator doors pinged open, and Adriana looked up, surprised. She'd thought she was the only one who ever came into the library.

Her perfectly shaped brows rose in interest when Maya burst in. Well, wasn't this an intriguing coincidence.

Maya was dressed in an egg-yolk-stained uniform. Actually, her top definitely had more than egg yolk stains—there was some red stain that was probably tomato, and some darker blotches. Her glossy dark hair was disheveled and she looked absolutely furious, but underneath the anger Adriana sensed the slightest bit of weariness.

When she saw Adriana, though, she froze. There was a beat of silence. Finally, Maya spoke up.

"So, what are you going to do?" she asked, her jaw set.

"I'm going to continue reading my book," Adriana replied matter-of-factly, without batting an eye. She didn't let so much as a hint of her interest show.

"If you're going to throw anything else at me, you might as well do it now," Maya spit out. "The lemmings are on a roll."

Hmm. Feisty. "Did you just call me a lemming?" Adriana asked rather interestedly. Now, that was a first. She tried her hardest not to laugh.

"As far as I know, anyone who's at Roman Fiori's beck and call would be classified as such," Maya replied coolly, with far more dignity than anyone else who had just been socially crucified would have.

Now Adriana was slightly offended, though you could never tell from looking at her.

"I'm Roman's friend, but hardly at his 'beck and call,' as you call it." Her eyes swept over Maya. "Besides, even if I did choose to join in this little... *game* everyone else is so actively engaged in, I would be far more subtle." Her tone was wry but truthful.

"So are you?"

Adriana cocked an eyebrow.

"Part of the 'game,'" Maya clarified sarcastically, placing air quotes around the last word.

Adriana smiled slightly, returning to her book. "You would know if I was," she said, not looking up again. A moment later, she felt Maya take the seat across from her. The two stayed there in a simultaneously comfortable and awkward silence until the bell rang a little later.

Adriana leisurely stood up and gathered her belongings. Maya was already halfway to the elevator, though Adriana didn't know why she was in such a rush. She certainly didn't have anything to look forward to.

"Don't let them get to you," Adriana advised almost off-handedly as she slung her purple Miu Miu tote over one shoulder. "I know you're strong enough to get through this."

She almost winced at the cheesiness of it. *Good going, Dr. Phil*, she thought, but she was much too confident to be embarrassed. Besides, it was true. Her instinct was almost never wrong.

Maya stopped, her back still facing the blonde. "You don't know me at all."

"Maybe not," Adriana agreed lightly. "Nevertheless, it's about time someone stood up to Roman."

This time, Maya spun around. "I thought he was your friend," she pointed out almost accusingly.

"He is." Adriana gave a carelessly elegant shrug. "But that doesn't mean I don't want to see him taken down a peg or two."

Or ten.

"Well, that makes two of us."

Adriana's delicate, bell-like laugh tinkled through the library. "I'll be honest. I like you Maya, and I can tell you that if you can withstand what those... lemmings—" Here, she let a smile escape. "—are dishing out right now, you'll find it'll be worth it in the end."

Maya smiled grimly. "Why, is there a prize waiting for me at the end of all this?"

Adriana's smile was imbued with mischief, matching the twinkle in her aqua eyes. "That depends on how you define prize."

* * *

Roman was very, very pleased. Things were going exactly according to plan. That girl didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of surviving the rest of the week. And that bit with the snake, that had been genius, especially since it turned Maria or Martha or whatever the fuck her name was, was deathly afraid of snakes.

He twirled a glass of whiskey absentmindedly around in his hand as a self-satisfied smile tugged at his lips. One of the best things about being a Fiori was you got everything you wanted without having to do any of the dirty work.

"What are you so happy about?" Parker asked, leaning back in one of the lounge's plush couches and propping his feet up on the slate coffee table, which had been imported from Barcelona just in time for the start of school. The hottest interior designer of the moment was hired to overhaul the Scions' school sanctuary every summer; this year's had gone for rustic but sophisticated chic.

Roman himself didn't give a shit whether the fireplace should be marble or brick, or whether or not the throws were Ralph Lauren, or even if there should be any throws in the first place. Parker was the only one out of the four who seemed to give a shit, so he was usually the one who handled all the arrangements.

"Nothing," Roman responded automatically.

Parker didn't say anything; he just waited.

As predicted, Roman elaborated a moment later. "Just thinking about how that girl's faring," he admitted smugly. "The snake was genius."

"You, my friend, have a serious case of schaudenfreude." Parker motioned to the bartender, who immediately hurried over with an ice-cold soda. Unlike Roman, he didn't believe in drinking in the (early) afternoon.

Roman was so delighted that Marisa (Maria?) would be out of his sight and sufficiently punished that Parker's wry tone didn't even dampen his unusually high spirits. "So?" He downed the rest of his whiskey. "You say it like it's a bad thing." He looked around the room, finally noticing the conspicuous absence of his other friends. "Where's Carlo and Zack?"

Parker shrugged. "I'm not their babysitter, but if I had to guess, I would say Adriana's giving them an earful right now."

Roman smirked. He'd known all about Adriana's plan to scope out a suitable candidate for the challenge Saturday night; unfortunately for her, he'd already heard about the party and only pretended not to. Besides, Carlo had been oddly distracted that night and didn't put up much resistance when Roman decided to go to Stan's house.

He settled comfortably into his seat, secure in the knowledge that he was, after all, Roman Fiori, and *nothing* significant happened in his town without his knowledge or consent.

* * *

A week passed by—the longest, most miserable, most paranoid week I had ever endured. By the third day, I had developed an almost masochistic attitude towards the other students' abuse. I no longer went to school early, nor did I hide out in the library. I also refused to take pity from the few teachers who tried to discreetly help me.

Instead, I went about my business as best I could, even though there was never more than a five-minute break between the harassment. It happened everywhere and at any time: in the classroom, the DC, the halls, the bathroom, during school assemblies and morning announcements and even while taking tests. Just the other day, I had been accused of cheating and had gotten my math test taken away.

That had been hard to swallow. I had always prided myself on my grades, but my concentration was slipping. That wouldn't do. I suffered the abuse because it actually made me feel better for the cowardliness I'd been cocooned in the past year.

I could tell my resistance was baffling to the others, who had never had much trouble driving everyone else away.

Still, at least it was Friday afternoon, which meant there would be two days worth of reprieve until it all started again.

I bowed my head, letting the warmth of the sun wash over me even as a slight chill signaling the arrival of fall floated through the air, gentle but crisp. It was getting hard hiding everything from my parents. I hadn't told them what happened, of course—I didn't want them to worry—but despite my best efforts to clean myself up before I went home, they were getting suspicious, and my excuses were growing flimsier and less believable by the day.

Suddenly, I felt a vibration in my bag, and with a small frown, I pulled out my cell phone. An unfamiliar number flashed across the screen.

I was confused. No one ever called me except for my family and Venice. I communicated with my old friends solely through emails, Facebook, and

text messages, though those had become few and far in between.

"Hello?" I asked warily.

"Hi, is this Maya?" a rather familiar voice asked.

I hesitated. "Yes?" It came out more like a question than I would've liked.

"Hey, this is James."

My eyes widened in surprise. James? The same James I'd met all that time ago? Actually, now that I thought about it, it had barely been a week.

God, Stan's party felt like forever ago.

"Oh, hi," I said, even more confused. Why was he calling me *now*? "Um... how did you get my number?" I immediately wanted to take back that stupid question. Though it was a perfectly reasonable one, it also sounded kind of rude.

James, though, apparently didn't think so. "I got it from my friend who knew Venice," he admitted sheepishly. "I hope that wasn't too forward."

"No...no, it's ok." I cleared her throat. "So..." I trailed off, hoping he would indicate why, exactly, he had called.

Luckily, he did. "Listen, I just wanted to apologize," James said quickly. "For Saturday night. I let my temper get the best of me and...well, I kind of feel like you're only in this predicament because you wanted to—protect me?" His voice lowered a bit at the end of the sentence, uncertain.

I pondered this a bit. I was surprised to find his conclusion was, in fact, right. I had wanted to protect him, because he'd been so nice and down-to-earth, which was ironic because I felt like he had wanted to help *me* by going toe-to-toe with Parker. At the same time, though, I had been motivated by other factors to ream Roman out. "You don't have to apologize," I assured him. "Trust me, it's not your fault I—" I stopped.

Something he'd just said finally registered. "Wait, what do you mean by my 'predicament.'?"

James took such a long time to answer I thought he'd hung up. Finally, reluctantly, he said, "Well, what's happening to you in school right now would be considered a predicament..." His voice trailed off.

"How did you know about what's happening?" I didn't bother trying to deny it. What was the point?

"Some of my friends told me."

Yeah, and they've probably participated, I thought, feeling bad even as I thought it. It wasn't James' fault Valescans were such assholes.

"Yeah, well, I'll survive." I shrugged, even though I realized he couldn't see me. "I mean, it's not—"

I broke off when I noticed a distinct black-and-electric-blue Ferrari pulling up beside me. I was so shocked I didn't even notice when my phone slipped out of my hands and crashed on the sidewalk, the back cover and battery promptly spilling out.

This was what I got for still using an old-school Motorola instead of an iPhone like everyone else.

I just stood there, stunned and paralyzed, as the window rolled down and Roman Fiori's irritated face, half-hidden by dark designer shades, emerged.

"Get in," he ordered gruffly.

I just stood there, mouth agape, wondering what the *hell was going on*.

Noticing my lack of response, the irritation on his face grew. "Get in!" he repeated, more forcefully.

This time, I had recovered enough to muster up a fairly strong and defiant, "No way in hell!"

Before I could say anything else, Roman, obviously exasperated, got out of the car, gripped my arm, and dragged me into the passenger seat.

The residual traces of shock were still in my system, slowing me down, and everything happened so fast I barely had time to think before Roman peeled away from the curb.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I demanded angrily, having finally found my voice. "Let me out right now!"

He didn't even look at me, that bastard. "Or what?"

"Or...or...or I'll call the police!"

He snorted, making a sharp right turn. I let out a small shriek as I slammed into the passenger side door. Deciding it was better to be safe than sorry, I immediately buckled my seatbelt.

"You and what phone?" he asked, casting a pointed glance at my empty hands. "Besides, it sure looks like you're making yourself comfortable in here."

"I am *not* making myself comfortable, I merely do not want to die," I snapped. "Now stop this car this instant! I don't want to be here!"

"Too bad," came the detached reply. It was followed by pounding rock music that drowned the car and nearly deafened me, and I noted with resentment that Roman controlled the sound system on his steering wheel. No way would I be trying to manipulate *those*, not unless I wanted us both to die.

As we sped through town at breakneck speed, however, it finally dawned on me that I was essentially being kidnapped by the heir to the most powerful family in the world, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it.

Have I mentioned how I really, really, *really* hated my life?

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CHAPTER 5

There was a look of grim determination on Roman's face as he guided his car through the town's pristine streets, narrowly avoiding hitting a pedestrian on several occasions and dangerously ignoring more than a few stop signs.

"Where are we going?" Maya demanded, her voice managing to rise above the thumping music to make its way into his ears.

Roman ignored her, pressing his foot down harder on the gas pedal. The Ferrari's quiet, powerful engine let out a satisfying small roar in response.

"*Where are we going?*" Maya repeated, this time sounding even more pissed off.

Roman gripped the steering wheel, trying not to explode from irritation, because in all honesty, he had no fucking idea. Not about where they were going, or why the stupid girl was in his car in the first place. He hadn't planned to drag her inside, it had just... happened.

It's official. I've gone certifiably insane, he thought. The past week had started off promisingly enough, but then it devolved into a disaster. How fucking hard was it for so many students to break one girl?

His violet eyes narrowed slightly as he examined her out of the corner of his eye. With her delicate features, silky straight dark hair, and uniform that still bore the faintest remains of food stains despite countless washes, she looked more fragile than the overpriced Lalique figurines his mother scattered all around the house.

But if that was true, why the hell was she still here?

"Are you going to answer me?"

Was she really still talking?

"Shut up," he finally replied crankily, though his words were mostly drowned out by the music. Whatever. He didn't care if she heard him or not.

When the car finally reached its destination, Roman, who had been driving without really thinking about where he was going, was surprised to be faced with a pair of exceedingly familiar wrought-iron gates.

Even though he couldn't see it, Roman knew an invisible scanner, part of the Fiori mansion's astronomically expensive, state-of-the-art security system, was taking in all the details of the car and its inhabitants at that very moment. A mere ten seconds later, the gates opened, sliding smoothly into the high, thick brick walls on either side.

Roman was oddly pleased to see a fleeting look of awe on Maya's face until she quickly covered up.

Thankfully, she remained silent until he had pulled up right in front of his family's imposing, palace-like mansion. The minute Roman fully stopped the car, Maya threw open the door, burst out onto the cobblestones, and ran down the driveway.

At least, that was what probably would have happened had she been able to get the door open. Unfortunately, Roman's customized Ferrari was so high-tech and complicated Maya couldn't quite figure it out, which was how Roman ended up standing by the passenger side with a smirk on his face as he watched her struggle to get out. He had locked the doors and made no move to help her.

Maya glared at him through the glass. "Let me out, you bastard!" Her voice was muffled by the shatter-proof glass.

Roman's smirk grew wider. He leaned against the side of the car so he was looking at her profile. "I'm sorry, what did you say?" he drawled, crossing his arms over his chest and thoroughly enjoying her discomfort.

"Let me OUT!"

He yawned, staring up at the sky. "Still don't know what you're saying," he declared loudly.

Maya's full lips thinned. She sat up straighter, narrowing her eyes, and drew in a deep breath. "I SAID LET ME OUT YOU GOOD-FOR-NOTHING SCUM OF THE EARTH!" she screamed so loud it would've shattered any regular glass ten times over. She punctuated her furious statement with an equally furious pounding on the window.

An angry hiss escaped Roman's lips, her insult finally setting off his temper's already short fuse. He violently yanked open the door, surprising the girl inside and causing her to nearly tumble on the ground.

To her credit, Maya stumbled only a bit before straightening up and brushing off her skirt. Sparks of fire were practically flying out of her eyes as she glared at him.

Roman glared back. What the fuck did *she* have to be angry about? He hadn't been the one insulting her in front of her own house!

"Drive me home right now!"

Roman's jaw nearly dropped at her astonishing demand. *No one* talked to him like that! Where was the groveling, the simpering, the fear? This was unacceptable!

"Do I look like your goddamned chauffeur?" he ground out, his voice low and dangerous.

She tilted her chin up stubbornly. "Since you apparently like driving me around so much, I would say yes, you rather do."

Her haughty tone of voice made Roman's blood boil until he was afraid he would explode. "God, you're a bitch!"

"Bitch. How original. Is that the best you can come up with?"

Roman's hands clenched into fists before he raised one arm, causing Maya to flinch.

He noted this with smug satisfaction. Though he would never hit a girl, it gave him immense pleasure to see her squirm. Gripping one of her arms, he dragged her toward the front entrance without a word.

"Let me go! What are you doing?" Maya struggled to escape his grasp, but it was like an iron shackle on her forearm.

Roman stormed into the foyer, dragging the unwilling girl behind him and tuning out her inane babble, even as he tried to ignore how soft and smooth her skin felt.

Suddenly, he froze, causing Maya to slam into his back. He barely noticed. Soft and smooth...? Where the hell had *that* thought come from?

Shaking his head slightly, Roman set his jaw and resumed his trek through the house. He need to get rid of this girl somehow, and fast. She was driving him crazier than he'd ever thought he could be.

* * *

"Eat."

I stared suspiciously at the admittedly delicious-looking slice of chocolate cake in front of me but made no move to touch it.

"No," I said, rather stubbornly. I knew I was being difficult, but can you blame me? The spawn of Satan decided to kidnap me after school, bring me to his house, mock me, and he was now...*feeding me chocolate cake*? Hmmm, now which one of those does not fit in with the others?

Roman narrowed his eyes at me from across the tile counter. "It's not poisoned, you know."

I sniffed disbelievingly. I had no way of knowing whether or not it really was poisoned—I wouldn't put it past him. Besides, even if it wasn't, I in no way wanted to ingest something that was even remotely associated with the name Fiori.

"Why don't you just cut to the chase and explain to me why I'm here," I snapped, shifting on the stool I was currently perched on.

A part of me was aware how ridiculous this scene was, me and Roman Fiori, chatting over cake in his obscenely huge kitchen.

Well, we weren't really chatting, but you get the idea.

"If you're not going to eat the cake, then I will," Roman said, ignoring my request. Without waiting for an answer, he slid the plate back over to his side and spooned a creamy chocolate chunk into his mouth.

I swallowed as my mouth involuntarily watered. Damn it...To make matters worse, my stomach chose just that moment to let out a loud, hungry growl, like it was scolding me for only feeding it a sandwich and some water today.

Roman smirked, but didn't offer me the cake again. Bastard.

Not that I would've changed my mind and accepted the offer, of course.

I glared at him. "I know you have an ulterior motive for bringing me here, so you might as well just spit it out." My fingers tightened on the edge of the table. "Do you have a mob waiting to finish me off once and for all?"

"Please," Roman scoffed. "Like I need a mob to finish *you* off."

"Right. So it's not like your twisted plan to run me out of school hadn't failed or anything," I retorted sweetly. I almost flinched when the words left my mouth. I was playing with fire here, but I couldn't help it. There was something about him that just makes me blurt things out without thinking.

Roman's suspiciously (and unusually) calm demeanor cracked a bit and I could see anger flare up in that chiseled face of his again.

Such a shame, really, that someone so good-looking could be such a monster...

Wait, what the heck? Why was I even thinking that? I should *not* be focusing on his looks right now! It's not like I was one of his mindless groupies.

Get it together, Lindberg.

"The game isn't over yet," he snarled, before getting a hold of himself. Calming down once again, he eyed me speculatively. "But since you want to know so bad, I brought you here to offer you a means of surrender."

"A means of surrender..." I repeated slowly. This was going to be good.

"Yes." Roman straightened up and studied me the way a lab assistant would study a research subject under a microscope. "If you surrender and publicly apologize for the rude way you spoke to me at the party, promising to stay out of my way and never cross me again, I will see to it that all the... inconveniences you've been experiencing lately will cease."

"Inconveniences."

"Yes. As long as you agree to the terms I just stated."

"The terms you just stated."

Roman shot me an exasperated look. "Did a parrot fly in here while I wasn't looking and take over brain?" he growled, his temper back in full force.

He was clearly bipolar.

I smiled sweetly. "Of course not," I cooed, feeling a flash of satisfaction at the surprise that leapt up in his eyes at my tone of voice. "Don't be silly." I

stepped closer. "Even I have to admit your offer is so generous there's only one thing I can say...SCREW YOU!" I shouted at the top of my lungs, nearly shaking from the intensity of the fury I felt inside. I emphasized my statement with a loud slap across his face. I swear the sound echoed in the huge room.

I only had a moment to revel in the absolute shock that crossed his face—now marred by a bright red handprint on his left cheek—before I regained my senses, took advantage of his temporary immobility, and hauled ass out of there.

* * *

She had slapped him. *Slapped* him. *Him*. Roman Fiori. Sole heir to a fortune so vast it probably couldn't even be translated into hard cash because there weren't enough hundred dollar bills in existence. The leader of the Scions. Ranked as the #1 billionaire heir under the age of 25 by a leading global business magazine. The most powerful teenager in Valesca.

Roman gritted his teeth as he reached up to touch his cheek. It had been hours since Maya had left him standing there in the kitchen, too stunned to move.

He could almost still feel the sting of her slap. What shocked him even more than the act itself, though, was the mixture of emotions that had been plaguing him since the incident. Sure, he was furious, but he was also confused. After all, his offer *had* been exceptionally generous; for any other person, Roman would've gone to all lengths to make sure they would never wanted to step foot in Valesca again. The emotions that worried him most, though, were those of reluctant admiration and something else he couldn't quite name, but was sure he didn't like.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Roman stared up at the ceiling of his bedroom, trying to calculate his next move. However, the only thing his mind could focus on was Maya slapping him across the face. Maya trudging home from school before he'd brought her here. Maya getting harassed by the other students. Maya yelling at him at that party.

The events of the last week sped through his mind like a tape on repeat rewind, flying by faster and faster until he felt like his head was about to explode.

"Agh!" Bolting upright, he flung his pillow across the room, where it hit the wall with a dull thud before sliding to the floor. Unfortunately, the pillow-throwing did nothing to alleviate his inner turmoil.

Roman scowled. "Stupid, stupid girl..." he muttered under his breath. "Stupid Adriana. Stupid Stan Hoffman...if he hadn't thrown that party, none of this would have happened..." He was quite aware of how ridiculous he sounded, but no one else was here, so who gave a fuck?

However, despite himself, Roman couldn't help but possess a burning curiosity about Maya. He hadn't bothered to really learn much about her, but now, for some reason, he wanted to know more. How did this girl, who had managed to slip past not just his but all of his friends' radars for so long, manage to withstand what had broken so many others in the past? Her resilience both frustrated and intrigued him.

He hadn't been in this much emotional turmoil since...well, ever. He really needed to get the damn girl off his mind, though he had a sneaking suspicion it would not be easy.

Roman narrowed his eyes as he went over his possible courses of action.

After deliberating for a few minutes, he grabbed his phone from his nightstand and scrolled through his phonebook until he came to the right number.

The phone rang only once before Richard, his father's third assistant and his occasional personal assistant, picked up.

"It's me," Roman said, not bothering with niceties as he slid off his bed and walked over to the dresser mirror. He stared at his reflection. Was it just his imagination, or was there still the slightest hint of pink on his cheek? "Listen, I need you to get some information for me..."

* * *

He didn't seem to be coming after me. I glanced cautiously over my shoulder, but I didn't see a Ferrari attempting to run me over, and it had already been fifteen minutes.

Even though Roman was probably scheming up another plan to make my life more of a hell than it already was, at least he wasn't chasing me down. I'm not slow or anything, but I can't outrun an Italian sports car. Hell, even Usain Bolt can't outrun that Ferrari.

With a sigh, I trudged down the sidewalk, though I was unable to stop myself from gawking at the glimpses of huge mansions hidden by thick, lush shrubbery and tall iron gates. I was willing to bet none of them could rival the Fioris' massive estate. It may house the devil himself in that opulent interior, but it had all the trappings of a paradise on earth. When Roman had pulled inside the gates, it was all I could do not to gasp out loud at the sheer luxury of it all. The main house itself could put Versailles to shame.

I shook my head slightly.

I couldn't believe arrogant twits like Roman got to lounge around their mansions and fly their private jets to ridiculously expensive locales where they did the exact same things they do at home—shop, party and turn their noses up at those less fortunate than themselves—when there were people starving out there.

There is no justice in the world.

Something rustled in a nearby bush, and I jumped nearly ten feet in the air. I stared at the bush warily until a furry brown squirrel hopped out, bushy tail sticking straight up. It stopped and stared at me for a second before scuttling up the trunk of a nearby tree.

I let out the breath I had been holding and laughed. God, I was paranoid, but it was getting dark, and I had never been to this area before. I wasn't even sure how to get home.

My smile morphed into a grimace as I stared forlornly at my broken phone. I'd tried to put it back together after leaving the Fiori residence, but it wouldn't work. Valesca was as safe as a town could possibly be, but that didn't mean I was ok with wandering the streets at night with no means of communication. Besides, my mom would *flip*.

Having resolved to phone home at the nearest pay phone, I had just resumed walking when I saw a car coming my way from down the otherwise empty road. I immediately stiffened. The black Range Rover looked awfully familiar...

It slowed to a stop next to me, and the windows lowered to reveal the handsome face of Carlo Tevasco.

I let out a groan. Are you freaking kidding me? Was today Harass Maya With Your Car day?

"Hey."

I eyed him suspiciously. "Hi..."

"What are you doing here?" His voice was surprisingly low and gentle.

"Walking," I answered blithely.

He raised his eyebrows. "I can see that." Then his eyes narrowed slightly. "Don't tell me you just came from Roman's house."

I didn't say anything.

Carlo laughed softly, his expression one of amusement and something else I couldn't place.

"Are you planning to walk all the way home?"

"Yes." I tilted my chin up. "It's good exercise."

"And a good way to get killed."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, the probability of me getting bludgeoned to death with a designer stiletto is pretty high at this time, given my current social status." I pursed my lips. "Shouldn't you be yelling insults at me right now? After all, I did offend your good buddy Roman." My voice dripped with sarcasm.

Carlo shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's not like he didn't deserve it." His mouth quirked up into a smile at my shocked expression. "Don't look so surprised. He's my friend, which means I'm well aware of both his strengths and weaknesses."

"Strengths?" I snorted. "*I* wasn't aware he had any."

"Yeah, well, I guess it's all relative," Carlo said rather amiably.

I cocked my head to one side as I studied him. Now that I looked more closely, he really wasn't as intimidating-looking as I'd once thought, unless you count how intimidatingly good-looking he was. His thick, wavy black hair just reached the top of his collar, framing a strong, masculine face with thick dark brows set above fathomless ebony eyes, chiseled cheekbones, and smooth olive skin. Despite the overwhelming masculinity of his appearance though, there was a touch of vulnerability that I couldn't quite put my finger on, which softened his entire look in the best way possible.

"Are you done staring at me?" Carlo's tone was wry.

I flushed. "I wasn't staring at you," I lied crossly.

"Right." He shot me a skeptical look but didn't say anything else. Instead, he looked me over, and with a sigh, said, "I'm taking you home."

"No you're not," I replied almost involuntarily. I couldn't help it—it was a knee-jerk response. Part of me still couldn't quite believe I was having a

civil conversation with a Scion. I was half-convinced I was going to wake up in my bed any minute now.

Carlo draped one arm over the open window and eyed me. "I don't usually do charity cases, but you've been through more than enough already. I really don't want to hear about you getting kidnapped or raped on the news."

"What are the chances of that happening?" I demanded, bristling a bit at the term 'charity case.' I was nobody's charity case. Nevertheless, a shiver of unease went down my spine. Call me superstitious, but now I was a little afraid something *was* going to happen just because I voiced my opinion that it wouldn't.

Carlo shrugged. "You never know. Valesca's pretty safe, but it's dark, you're a pretty girl walking alone, and there's some crazy people out there." As if to punctuate his point, a dog howled somewhere in the background, the sound echoing eerily in the otherwise silent neighborhood.

I nearly shot into the passenger seat. "Fine, I give in," I said, buckling my seatbelt. "You can take me home."

He looked at me incredulously. "Only you would be able to make it sound like you're doing *me* a favor," he chortled, making a sharp U-turn that threw me against the passenger door.

"Ow," I complained. "The reason I got in was so I wouldn't get killed, you know."

"Sorry. So where do you live?"

I gave him my address, and we settled into a comfortable silence as he navigated the pristine streets.

As I stared out the window at the passing scenery, I was surprised that I really *was* comfortable. I had never spoken to Carlo Tevasco in my life before today, and I'd never had any desire to, but my vibes about people were generally pretty accurate. I could tell Carlo had been genuine the

entire time we'd been talking, and he was a lot nicer than I thought any Scion could be. Plus, he had a sense of humor, which was always a plus.

"So, were you on your way to visit...him?" I asked, trying to utter the devil's name as few times as possible.

"No, I live there."

"Oh." I blinked. "That makes sense." Perfect sense. The area where Roman and Carlo lived was the most expensive part of town. *Of course* the Scions lived there.

"What type of music do you listen to?" Carlo fiddled with the radio.

"Any kind, except for country." I wrinkled my nose a little. "There are very few country songs I like."

"So which ones *do* you like?" He sounded curious.

I shifted in my seat. "Um...some Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood songs," I mumbled.

Carlo laughed. "Never figured you to be the type of girl who listened to Taylor Swift."

I arched one eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"I got the impression you were one tough cookie. I expected you to say heavy metal or rock."

I rolled my eyes. "Way to stereotype. Besides, do I look like a rocker to you?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes stereotypes make things a lot easier." His voice was wistful.

I was about to ask him what he meant when he abruptly changed the subject. "You know, you're a lot nicer than I thought you'd be. How'd you manage to stay under the radar for so long?"

I actually laughed aloud at that one. *I* was nicer than he expected? More like he was nicer than I expected.

"Thanks...I think," I answered wryly. Feeling compelled to say something nice back, I added, "You're not as surly as I thought you were."

Another smile softened his face even more. "Thanks...I think." His tone matched mine. "I don't know why everyone thinks I'm not a nice guy."

"Well, for one, you barely talk in school," I pointed out. "Plus, look at who you hang out with."

"My friends are good guys. Yes, even Roman," he added at the look on my face. "In their own ways. But—" He abruptly stopped.

"But?" I prompted. I was becoming more and more comfortable around him, especially since he was one of the few people who had been even remotely nice to me this week.

"Nothing," he muttered, staring at the road straight ahead. "I already said too much."

Too much? He'd barely said anything past the superficial. *Guys are just weird*, I reflected. Still, the mood in the car was comforting, and I could feel myself sinking against the plush leather seat, some of the tension knots in my shoulders relaxing a little.

"Besides, you didn't answer my question."

"What question?"

Carlo stopped at a red light, and he turned to face me, the streetlight casting a faint crimson glow over his sculpted features. "How'd you manage to stay

under the radar for so long?"

I shrugged. "Lots of practice and determination. Last thing I needed was to be thrust into the spotlight here."

"Most people live for the spotlight."

Like you and your friends, I wanted to say, but didn't. "Not me. It's too troublesome." My mouth thinned. "As I've learned all too well the past week."

The light turned green, and Carlo pressed on the gas, bypassing the particularly slow Lexus in front of us. He was silent for a while. "I feel like I should apologize for that."

I let out a sigh. "It's not really your fault." I couldn't believe these words were coming out of my mouth, but I meant them. Carlo had never personally hurt me, physically or otherwise. The only people I blame are the Valesca lemmings and of course, Roman Fiori.

"Not directly. But indirectly..." He paused, then seemed to shut down again. "Of course, I make it a point not to interfere with Roman's affairs." He pulled up in front of my house. I could see my mom pacing nervously in the living room window, and I winced. I was going to get a verbal beating for sure.

"Thanks for giving me a ride. I really appreciate it," I said, opening the door.

Carlo gazed at my house, taking in the small but tidy lawn, the red stucco roof, and the well-kept if modestly priced Toyota in the driveway. My father's promotion meant we could get a nicer car, but my mom was really attached to the Camry for some reason. "How many people live in this house?"

"Just my parents and myself." I frowned. "Why?"

"You can fit three people in there?" He sounded shocked.

I let out a huff. Here I was, thinking he was actually pretty down-to-earth, and he had to go say something like that. "Of course it can," I said crossly. "We're more than comfortable."

"If you say so." He sounded unconvinced, but as he looked at me, a faint glimmer of that strange, unidentifiable look I saw earlier crept back into his eyes. "Well, it's certainly been an eye-opening night."

"I suppose." I was lingering, I knew, but I wasn't eager to go inside. Mainly it was because I didn't want my mom yelling at me, but I was also surprisingly disappointed to be saying goodbye to Carlo. I was almost certain our sort-of bonding time was a one-time experience. "Well, good night."

Carlo gave me a faint smile. "Good night." With that, he pulled out of the driveway and sped off.

Apparently, he really had been driving a lot more cautiously with me in the passenger seat.

I stood in the driveway for a moment, mulling over the day's strange events. My life had become a lot more troublesome, but at least it wasn't boring.

Although, to be honest, excitement can be overrated.

CHAPTER 6

I shut the door behind me and smiled weakly at my mom, who looked equal parts angry, relieved, and for some reason, nervous.

“Are you ok?” was the first question she asked me.

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“Are you sure? No broken bones, no muggings, nothing like that?”

I sighed. “No.”

“Good. Then WHERE WERE YOU? I’ve been sick with worry! Maya, you know never to turn off your phone, especially when you’re late. You have no idea what I thought happened!”

“I’m sorry,” I apologized, ashamed. “But I...uh, broke my phone my accident.” I held out the pieces as evidence, and filled her in with a very abbreviated, very modified version of what had happened.

“Fine, but you should've been more careful, Maya.” She seemed appeased though, which surprised me. Normally my mom did not let me off the hook that easily. “Well, dinner’s just about ready, so come eat.”

I followed her into the kitchen, which also doubled as a dining room, and started setting the table while she put the finishing touches on dinner.

I had just put down the last fork when I heard a key turn in the front door, and a moment later, my dad walked in, jacket off and tie loosened. He looked tired but his face lit up when he saw us.

“Daddy!” I grinned and ran over to give him a huge hug.

Ok, so yes, I was a huge daddy's girl. Sue me.

"Hey, sweetheart. How was your day?"

"It was good." No need to make him worry. "How was work?"

"Boring as all hell," he replied laughingly, walking over to give my mom a quick peck on the cheek.

"Yeah, right." I scrunched up my nose. My dad loved his job. He had wanted to be an architect his whole life, and now he was one of the best in the state.

As we settled in at the table, I stared at my parents, feeling unbelievably lucky that they were still together and happy in a town where so many families were plagued with divorce, sordid affairs, mistresses, and children that were viewed as props more than anything else.

Plus, the way they had gotten together was so romantic.

I let out a soft sigh as I thought about it. My mom and dad had met at a street festival in San Francisco. He'd been an undergraduate at Berkeley the time, while she'd been working her family's Chinese herbal store. My mom initially resisted his advances, but my dad remained dogged in his pursuit until he finally succeeded. The two fell in love, and my dad proposed four years later, on the anniversary of their first meeting. They'd gotten married seven months later and had me practically before the honeymoon phase was over. Now, after almost twenty years, they were still very much in love.

I played with the spaghetti on my plate. Though I didn't particularly want a boyfriend right now, I fantasized about finding that one true love someday. I was a total sucker for cheesy, over-the-top romance.

"Maya?"

I snapped back down to earth and found myself facing my parents' quizzical looks.

"Sorry," I apologized.

"You've been spacing out so much lately." My mom's tone was gently reprimanding. "Did you hear what I just said?"

I shook my head.

She exchanged glances with my dad. "Your grandmother's coming down next weekend. She's going to be staying with us for a bit."

I nearly choked on the glass of water I was sipping. "What?" I gasped between coughs, hoping I had just heard wrong.

Unfortunately, I hadn't. That much was clear when my mom repeated the statement.

"Oh," I said, my voice filled with dismay.

I noticed my dad didn't look particularly thrilled either. Despite his meticulousness at work, he'd always been a bit scatterbrained at home, which had always put him at odds with my control-freak grandmother.

Don't get me wrong, I love my grandmother and all, but she could be a little...overbearing. Basically, she's your typical Asian grandma in every sense except she wanted me to get married and have babies very, very soon. Not that she wanted any grandchildren *now*, but she's been bugging me about getting a boyfriend forever, figuring by the time I graduated college, we would have dated for a sufficient amount of time and therefore could get married. If she had her way, I would have a ring on my finger the second I walked across the stage and accepted my university diploma.

Unfortunately, my grandmother wasn't exactly stupid, and she could see I had absolutely no intention or desire to get a boyfriend anytime soon. Instead of being dissuaded, she it upon herself to be a matchmaker and tried

to set me up with every boy my age who met her standards. Every phone call and visit from her had been peppered with the mention of Jared or Tom or Wentworth. There had even been one named Sigmund.

Now, I am sure Sigmund—who I’ve never met, thank God—is a lovely boy, but if I *were* to date someone, he sure as hell would *not* be named after what I considered a rather whacked-out psychologist who spent way too much time thinking about sex.

“Anyway, it should be fun,” my mom chirped brightly, obviously trying to be optimistic. “It’ll be family bonding time.”

“Yeah. Fun.” My shoulders slumped as I thought about coming home to my grandmother trying to force yet another mathematical genius/musical prodigy/future Bill Gates on me.

One thing was clear. I needed a plan, and I needed one fast.

* * *

“Yes, I received the package.” Roman strode into his bedroom and kicked the door shut behind him. “Just in time too, or you’d have been fired.”

Without another word, he snapped his phone closed and stared at the manila envelope in his hands. In it was everything he needed to know about Maya Lindberg, from her family’s annual income to what she ice cream flavor she liked best.

Maybe there would be something in there about why he couldn’t stop thinking about her even though she was more annoying than a splattered bug on his windshield.

“Screw it,” he muttered, opening the envelope with unnecessary violence.

As he scanned the papers though, a small, smug smile slowly made its way onto his face. Of course! He should’ve known. Nobody could be that resilient without some motivation.

“So, you’re a scholarship kid,” he murmured, a new plan forming in his head. Everything was so clear and simple now. If she was needy enough to get a scholarship, then clearly she was strapped for cash. She probably thought the best way to ease her money worries was to stand out and get the attention of the richest guy in school—aka, himself.

It was actually a pretty clever plan.

Roman narrowed his eyes. If that was the case, which he was sure it was, then making her surrender had just gotten a whole lot easier...

* * *

“I’m so screwed, V.” I flopped down on my bed and sighed heavily into the phone, wishing I could just transform into someone else until it was time to go to college. “I have enough problems at school without having to worry about my grandmother’s matchmaking. What am I going to do?”

Venice let out a loud snuffle, obviously still recovering from the flu. “When is she coming again?”

“Next weekend.”

“And she’s staying for how long?”

I let out another sigh. “My mom said ‘a bit’. I have no idea what that means.”

“Hmmm...” Venice sounded thoughtful. “Well, I think the solution is pretty obvious.”

I immediately sat up straight. “Really?” I asked eagerly. “What’s the solution?”

“Just have someone pretend to be your boyfriend!”

My face fell in disappointment. “Venice, can you come up with a plausible solution? How am I supposed to find a fake boyfriend? Everyone hates me!”

“Well...they don’t *hate* you...”

I snorted. “Yeah, uh...you weren’t at school this past week.” The instant the words left my mouth, I regretted it. I didn’t want to make Venice feel guilty for not being there. I mean, it’s not like she could help it—she had the *flu*.

Venice was quiet for a moment. “I know,” she said, sounding slightly tearful. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you out, really! I know it must’ve been hell for you but—“

“V, it’s ok,” I interrupted, feeling quite guilty myself. She was a good friend, and I didn’t want her to think otherwise. “It’s fine. I can handle it.”

Venice sniffled. “I know you’re strong Maya, but—I just—“ She let out a loud sigh. “You’re—you’re not going to withdraw from school, are you?”

“No way in hell!” I answered vehemently. “I’m not going to let Roman Fiori have that satisfaction.”

“Well, if you survived this long, I’m sure they’ll get bored soon,” Venice pointed out, sounding hopeful and relieved. “And then it wouldn’t be so bad.”

“I guess. Right now, I’m more worried about my grandmother. You’ve never met her, but let me tell you, Asian grandmothers are not to be messed with.”

“Just take my advice and find a fake boyfriend!”

“Like who?”

She paused. “Well...that cute guy from the party, James, asked for your number...”

I was horrified. “You want me to ask James to be my fake boyfriend? I barely even know him!”

“So? It’s not like you’re really dating! Although you guys would make a cute couple.”

I rolled my eyes. Venice never got tired of trying to set me up with someone.

“By the way, did he ever call you?”

“Oh. Uh...yeah,” I admitted reluctantly. I still haven’t told her about my little adventure with Roman and Carlo today.

“And?! What happened? Give me all the details!” Venice gushed, sounding completely recovered at the mention of the phone call.

I had no choice but to recount the story of what happened this afternoon. Knowing Venice, she was going to find out anyway.

“Wait, you went to Roman Fiori’s *house*?” she squealed when I’d finished. “*And* Carlo Tevasco gave you a ride home? Maya, that’s great!”

I pulled the phone away from my ear and stared at it.

Sometimes, Venice just amazed me. She really did. “What part of being kidnapped is great?”

“That part where your kidnapper is the most gorgeous guy on earth,” she retorted. “Hey, maybe Roman or Carlo can pretend to be your boyfriend!”

I almost choked on my own spit at the sheer ridiculousness of the idea. “Yeah, right,” I snorted. “First of all, need I remind you Roman and I don’t actually get along? He’s the reason why I’ve spent all my allowance money on dry cleaning! Plus, and you can quote me on this, the day Roman Fiori becomes my boyfriend—whether real or fake—is the day hell freezes over.”

* * *

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

I shot a pointed look at the petite brunette who had been glaring at me for the past half hour, and she turned away with a huff.

Weird. Actually, this whole week had been weird.

I came to school Monday expecting more abuse, but instead I'd gotten... nothing. Oh, sure, there'd been stares and whispers, but there had been no pranks, no nasty messages scrawled on my locker, nothing thrown on me.

It actually creeped me out a lot more than any snake or thrown food could.

When the bell finally rang, I was torn between relief and dread. On the one hand, it was always good to get out of Valesca as fast as I could; on the other, my grandmother was going to be waiting at home, and I still hadn't figured out a way to ward off her matchmaking advances.

I grabbed my bag and pushed past the other students, ignoring their silent stares. Well, if they'd all had brain transplants or something last weekend, that wasn't my problem.

"Hey, Maya!"

I turned, my jaw dropping when I saw who it was.

"So, where are you heading?" Parker asked casually, like we'd been friends forever or something.

"Uh...home." I eyed him suspiciously, gripping the strap of my backpack tighter and increasing my pace. Sadly, since I was a whole head shorter than him, he managed to match my pace perfectly.

"Want a ride?"

I rolled my eyes. Why were all the Scions trying to give me rides lately?

"No thanks."

“Are you sure? Because it looks like it’s about to rain,” Parker cautioned, opening the door for me and tilting his chin in the direction of the sky, which did look alarmingly gray and stormy.

I bit my lip. Usually, I don’t mind walking in the rain, but with my grandmother here, I didn’t need another lecture on how I never took care of myself, how I was going to get sick, blah blah blah.

“Come on, you know you want to,” Parker cajoled with a charming smile.

Well, I guess he’d never outright been mean to me. Actually, he’d been pretty nice about the whole beer thing...

“Fine. Thanks,” I conceded grudgingly. I couldn’t believe I was willingly getting into a car with Parker Remington, the biggest player since Casanova.

Maybe I’d fallen and smacked my head on the pavement but just didn’t remember it. Because, you know, I had smacked my head on the pavement.

“This is turning out to be a bit of a pattern, isn’t it?” Parker asked, sounding amused as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“What is?” I shrugged out of my hot, itchy blazer. For something so expensive, it sure wasn’t very comfortable.

“Getting rides home every Friday. Carlo told me what happened.”

“Trust me, it wasn’t like I had a choice,” I huffed. Ok, I had more of a choice with Carlo than Roman, but still.

I hesitated, then before I could lose my nerve, asked, “What’s going on with everyone?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why is everyone being...nicer? If that’s the right word.”

“You mean, why aren’t they shoving snakes in your locker?”

I shuddered slightly at the memory. I hated reptiles. “Yeah.”

“I have no idea.”

I shot Parker a disbelieving look. “You’re Parker Remington. You should know everything!”

“I should,” he agreed. “But I don’t. That’s more Roman’s forte, and maybe Zack’s. He kind of a gossip.”

I couldn’t help but snicker. I may not know him, but Zack did seem like that type.

“Well, then, why are *you* being so nice to me?” I asked.

We stopped at a red light and he turned to give me a heart-melting smile. I actually felt my knees weaken. Although I may not like the Scions—and that was putting it lightly—it didn’t mean I was dead. Parker was charming and good-looking enough to elicit a physical reaction from any living, breathing girl.

“Why do you think?” he asked, holding my gaze for several intense seconds.

A warm blush crept up on my cheeks. He was good, I’ll give him that.

I turned away. “Because you want to get in my pants?” I asked cheekily, trying to recover.

Parker let out a loud laugh. “Well, I’ve never heard a girl say that quite so bluntly before.” The light turned green, and he stepped on the gas. “Besides, I’m a guy. I want to get into every girl’s pants. Or skirt.” He raised his eyebrows at my bare legs.

I tugged down the hem of my skirt. "At least you're honest."

He shrugged. "I'm always honest. I don't see why people lie. It's never a good idea in the long run."

"I agree." I eyed him thoughtfully. "You know, you aren't as horrible as I thought." That was another worrying pattern that had emerged lately.

"Thanks." His tone was wry. "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"You're welcome." I smiled sweetly. I couldn't believe I was actually entertained by my conversation with Parker, but I was. "Oh, actually, you can let me off right here."

"Here?" Parker blinked. "But we're not at your house yet. We're at a daycare center." As if on cue, a ponytailed girl who was obviously a nanny walked out with a pair of adorable but fudge-covered twins in tow. "Is there something you forgot to tell everyone?"

"No!" I rolled my eyes. "I'm only seventeen! But...I just don't want my parents asking questions about who you are and stuff. It's been a long day."

He shrugged. "Your wish is my command." Parker tipped an imaginary hat at me.

I laughed. "Thanks for the ride," I said almost shyly. Then I smirked. "But you're never getting into my pants. Or skirt."

With that, I slammed the door shut, but not before Parker's laugh made its way into my ears.

When I arrived at my house, I wasn't surprised to see my mom's car out front. She'd probably just picked up my grandmother from the airport.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly opened the door and entered the living room.

I immediately saw my grandmother sitting on the couch, wearing a pair of gray pants and a black Mao-style shirt with red flowers that buttoned up her neck.

My mom fluttered nervously around her, looking jittery. She'd obviously consumed even more coffee than usual in preparation for this visit. "Oh, good Maya, you're home." She sounded massively relieved, which was far from how I felt.

"Maya, let me look at you," my grandmother said with a heavy Asian accent, standing up and eyeing me critically from head to toe. "You gain weight? Your butt so big."

My face turned beet red. "No, grandma. I didn't gain weight. How was your flight?" I asked, trying to deflect the attention from my butt.

"Good, good. Come, I show you something." She pulled me over to the couch and pushed a stack of pictures into my lap.

She was never was one for formal greetings.

"I found perfect boy for you," my grandmother promised, shoving one of the pictures under my nose. "He very good. Will be doctor someday. Going to Harvard, very smart boy."

I took the picture from her hands and stared down at the skinny, gawky Asian boy wearing a highly unfortunate sweater vest. "Uh...I'm sure he's very nice, grandma, but he's not really my type."

My grandmother snatched the picture and replaced it with one of another Asian boy, this one with a huge grin that showed off a mouth of crooked teeth. He was standing on a pier and holding a giant fish in one hand. "Not best picture, but he very handsome. He want to be lawyer."

I shook my head.

My grandmother frowned. “You no like Asian boys? Maya, you part Asian!”

“It’s not that I don’t like Asian boys, grandma, it’s just that—“ I shot a desperate, help-me look at my mother.

“Mom, why don’t we let Maya rest for bit?” my mom suggested. “She must be tired from school. And you must be tired, too.”

My grandmother let out an indignant sniff. “I seventy, not ninety! Not tired yet. Maya cannot wait. She seventeen! If she no find boyfriend soon, she will be old maid.” She rummaged through the pile of photos. “If you no like Asians, I have very good-looking white boy. He looks a bit like, what is his name? Ah, Carrot Top? But he will be good hus—“

“No!” I nearly shouted.

“What you mean, no?” My grandmother looked highly insulted.

“Uh, I mean, no, I don’t need to meet any of the boys because...um...” I gulped. “Uh...I already have a boyfriend!”

“You do?” My mom and grandmother chorused.

I gave my mom another look. “Uh...yeah. We’ve been dating for...for a month!”

“Really?” My grandmother narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “What’s his name?”

“Um...it’s...uh...”

At that moment, the doorbell rang, and I nearly shot out of my seat. Saved by the bell! “I’ll get it!” With that, I ran to the door and yanked it open. I blinked. “*Parker?*”

“Hey.” He gave me another one of those devastating grins. “You forgot this.” He held up my blazer.

I had completely forgotten about that. “Oh, thanks,” I breathed, taking the jacket from him. “You didn’t have to come all the way here to bring this to me.”

“I was already pretty close, remember?” Parker pushed his shades on top of his head. “Since I was such a gentleman, I think I deserve a dinner date, don’t you?”

I gripped the doorknob tightly. “Parker, this isn’t the best time—“

“Maya? Who’s at the door?”

Crap. “No one, grandma,” I called sweetly. “I—“

Ignoring me, my grandmother came over and nudged me aside. She stared disapprovingly at Parker. “Why you bother my granddaughter?”

“Good afternoon, miss,” Parker said smoothly, not seeming at all fazed. “I just came by to give Maya her jacket back.”

My grandmother propped her hands on her hips, looking like a tiny Asian Napoleon. “Why you have Maya’s jacket?” she demanded. “And I no miss. I seventy! You smooth-talking playbooks—“

“Playboys,” I whispered.

She ignored me. “You smooth-talking playbooks, I no trust you.” Then she turned and jabbed a finger at me. “Maya! You have sex with strange boy in car?”

“Grandma!” I yelled, absolutely mortified.

Parker coughed and covered his mouth with a fist, obviously trying to hide the huge grin that was spreading across his face.

Well, it was nice to see someone found this situation amusing.

“I didn’t have sex with him! He just gave me a ride home from school!”

“Why you get ride from strange boys?” My grandmother glared at my mom. “This how you raise daughter?”

My mom just looked bewildered. She obviously had no idea what was going on. Actually, neither did I.

“No, he’s not a strange boy!” I was desperate to make this stop. “He’s—uh...” Suddenly, I had a lightbulb moment. “He’s my boyfriend!”

My mom, grandmother, and Parker all whipped their heads around to stare at me in shock. They spoke at the same time.

“He is?”

“You are?”

“I am?”

I smiled sweetly and reached out to grab Parker’s hand, squeezing it tighter than normal. “Yes. This is Parker. He was the boyfriend I told you about.”

“Really?” My grandmother looked Parker over. “You stay for dinner,” she pronounced regally. “I have questions for you.”

Parker looked at me and raised his eyebrows.

I widened my eyes, sending him telepathic pleas. *Please, please say yes. Please say yes. I’ll do anything. I’ll wash your car, walk your dog, if you have a dog—*

“Of course. I’m looking forward to it.” Parker sounded completely sincere.

Someone had some experience bullshitting. Still, if there was anyone who would make a great fake boyfriend, it was the womanizing Parker Remington. Easy on the eyes, charming, and I won't have to worry about either of us falling for the other.

"I guess I'm staying for dinner," he whispered into my ear, following my grandmother into the house. "You owe me, by the way. Especially since I don't even really know you."

"I know. And it's not like that stopped you from offering me a ride home," I whispered back. "But thank you."

"I have an idea of how you can repay me..." He waggled his eyebrows.

I wrinkled my nose. "Ugh! You're such a perv."

"It's in my nature, sweetheart. I am unbelievably charming."

I snorted. "And amazingly modest."

He just smiled at me innocently. "Don't forget about that goodbye kiss you need to give me at the end of the night, if you want your grandmother to believe we're an item."

I groaned. This was going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 7

“This is delicious, Mrs. Lindberg,” Parker said politely, after he’d swallowed a mouthful of my mom’s famous mashed potatoes. “You’re a great cook.”

I took a sip of my water, trying not to roll my eyes at Parker’s kiss-assery.

“Why, thank you, Parker.” My mom beamed, obviously pleased. She loved it when people praised her culinary skills, which I sadly haven’t inherited. “I’m so glad you stayed for dinner.”

“I thought you date for a month,” my grandmother said rather suspiciously. “You never stay for dinner? Very, very rude boy.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I had a feeling my grandmother still wasn’t entirely convinced Parker was my boyfriend. Maybe it was because I tried to stab his hand with my fork when it stayed on my leg a little longer than necessary under the table.

“Oh, that’s not his fault, mom,” my mother quickly spoke up. “We’ve all just been a bit busy and haven’t had the chance to invite Parker over for dinner, that’s all.”

My grandmother pursed her lips, and stared at Parker. “You how old?”

“Eighteen.”

“You go to college when you graduate?”

“Of course,” Parker replied smoothly. “Right now I have my eyes set on Princeton. That’s where all my father and grandfather went.”

I saw an impressed look flash across my grandmother's face before she quickly replaced it with a frown. "Why you no go to Harvard medical school? Law school?"

"Well, I'm not looking to get into the medical or legal profession at the moment—"

"So what you want to be?" my grandmother demanded. "Pretty boy for life? That's no good. You need to support wife. You need to support Maya."

My face immediately turned the color of a tomato. "Grandma, we've only been dating for a month," I hissed, trying to ignore the rather shocked and appalled expression Parker was trying his best to hide. "It's too early to talk about that."

She wagged her finger at me. "Never too early for marriage. I know girl, she thirty. Date boyfriend for eight years. No ring. Why? She never plan ahead, stupid girl." My grandmother shook her head disapprovingly before addressing Parker again. "So how you support my Maya?"

Parker, having recovered, smiled charmingly. "I believe I will be taking over my father's company after I graduate college."

"Your father? What he do? He no plumber, is he? I no trust plumbers. Or Disney World. Working with mice, very shameful."

I nearly spit out my water at the look on Parker's face. Poor guy. How was he supposed to know my grandmother's deep hatred of Disney World stemmed from the one—and only—time she'd accompanied my parents and me to the amusement park, only to have me throw up in her lap after riding too many roller coasters?

Needless to say, even Mickey Mouse couldn't ease my grandmother's wrath. In fact, I'm pretty sure she saw red every time the word 'mouse' was even mentioned.

Although no one had ever figured out why my grandmother didn't like plumbers.

“Uh...no, m'am. He's a banker.”

“Banker?” My grandmother shooed away the peas my mom offered her. “I no like banks. Line too long.” She abruptly switched topics. “You have sex yet?” She pointed to me and Parker.

Clang! The sound of my glass banging against my plate echoed through the room, but I barely heard it through my utter humiliation. *Please, floor, just open up and swallow me whole. I beg you!*

“Grandma, you—you can't just ask people that,” I stuttered, horrified. I was suddenly glad my dad was working late tonight.

My mom looked equally horrified. “Mom! We are not going to be talking about—about Maya's sex life at the dinner table!”

Apparently, she'd forgotten Parker and I weren't *really* a couple.

“Why? Sex part of life,” my grandmother pointed out innocently, sounding quite progressive for a seventy-year-old Chinese lady. “How else I get great-grandchildren? I getting old. I no live forever. I want to hold great-grandson and great-granddaughter before I throw the bucket.”

“It's kick the bucket, mom, and you're perfectly healthy. You will probably live till you're a hundred!”

“A hundred? Why I wanna live till a hundred?” my grandmother snapped. “So people stick me on bad daytime shows saying, ooh, look at old lady? No good.” She gazed pointedly at Parker. “You never answer question, young man. You and Maya have sex?”

I swallowed hard, wondering what he was going to say.

Suddenly, Parker flashed me a mischievous grin, and my blood ran cold.

Oh, no. No, no, no, I thought fiercely, glaring at him so hard I was surprised I didn't burn a hole in his face. *Don't you dare! I swear to God, Parker Remington, if you say—*

“Yes. Yes, we did.” Parker actually managed to look bashful, that jerk. “Of course, I don't usually discuss something so...intimate out in the open, but you must understand, I'm a very honest person. I could never lie, especially not to my dear Maya's grandmother.”

My grip tightened on my glass as I pretended it was his throat. I snuck a peek at my family. My mom looked like she was about to faint, but my grandmother looked thoughtful.

“Really?” She clucked her tongue. “I hope you use protection. I no want grandchildren *now*. Very bad for college. But very good you are practicing now.”

I buried my face in my hands, wondering why I couldn't have gotten a normal grandmother who would rather throw away her knitting set than talk about sex, much less *encourage* it.

“Definitely.” Parker's face was almost angelic. “You don't need to worry about that. Right, sweetie?”

Ugh! Why did all the girls like him? He was...he was evil!

And then he winked at me. The asshole had the nerve to *wink* after embarrassing me like that?

Without thinking, and unable to take it anymore, I let out a frustrated yell and threw the remainder of the peas at him.

Sadly, in the process, I also knocked over the pitcher of water, which promptly spilled all over my grandmother.

Needless to say, things kind of went downhill from there.

* * *

“What do you mean, you’re grounded?” Venice stared at me in shock. “Your parents *never* ground you.”

I sighed, shoving my biology textbook into my locker before slamming it shut. “They do when I throw vegetables at dinner guests. You know how my mom is about me eating my fruits and veggies.”

She giggled, but immediately stopped when I glared at her. “Sorry, but that’s *hilarious*. Not about the grounding part, of course, but...I can’t believe you threw *peas* at Parker Remington! Actually, I can’t believe you told them he was your boyfriend!”

“Trust me, it was out of sheer necessity,” I mumbled.

Venice sighed. “If it were me, I would’ve at least tried to get a kiss out of it.”

I scrunched up my nose in disgust. “God, Venice, who knows where those lips have been? Actually, no, scratch that. I already know—they’ve been with every skank in the tri-state area.”

She rolled her eyes. “So? It’s not like you can get diseases from kissing!”

“Didn’t you pay attention in health class? Of course you can!”

“Whatever.” Venice waved my comment away dismissively. “For the chance to kiss Parker, it would be totally worth it.”

“You shameless hussy, you,” I joked, stepping out into the bright sunshine. I was relieved to see the parking lot was nearly empty.

Venice snickered. “Well, this shameless hussy needs to get to the mall and buy her sister a gift.” She made a face.

“Why? Is it her birthday?”

“Nope, but I accidentally broke my mom’s favorite pearl necklace and she kind of took the rap for me, so I owe her.” She gave me a hug. “I’ll see you tomorrow! Hope you get ungrounded soon.”

“Me too,” I said, even though I didn’t really care. After all, it’s not like I had anywhere to go after school or on the weekends besides Venice’s house, anyway.

With one last wave, Venice hopped into her chauffeured Benz. I was about to start walking home when I saw a pair of suspicious-looking, black-suit-clad men standing next to a black Town Car. They were staring at me and whispering into their earpieces.

Very subtle.

My heart immediately started racing. Oh *shit*. Was this it? Had Roman finally decided to hire hitmen to get rid of me, once and for all?

I looked left and right frantically, wondering where I could run. *Maybe you’re just being paranoid. Maybe they’re just bodyguards...after all, it’s not like kids at Valesca don’t have them.*

Trying to look nonchalant, I turned and started walking towards the school again. After a few steps, I stopped and looked over my shoulder.

Ok, they were definitely closer than they’d been before, although they were staring up at the sky and trying to act like nothing was amiss.

I turned back around and took another two steps, then whipped my head around.

Aha! Busted!

I frantically yanked on the doors to the school, but they were locked. *Crap!* The janitor must’ve just locked it.

Without thinking, I immediately sprinted to the left, not even sure where I was going, but I knew I needed to go *somewhere*. I'll be damned if I was just going to stand there like a lamb waiting for slaughter!

"After her!" one of the men shouted, all pretenses dropped.

Letting out a small grunt as I accidentally slammed my hip against the corner of a car, I skidded to a stop when I saw three more men in black coming towards me.

There were *more* of them? What, did they come from a clone factory or something?

I switched direction, my breath coming out in short spurts. I've never been a good runner, and the only thing keeping me going right now was my survival instinct.

I eyed the hedge that was blocking my way. I couldn't go anywhere else. I had to try. Taking a deep breath, I sped up, ignoring the men's shouts behind me.

The hedge was getting closer...closer...just a little more...*now!*

Closing my eyes, I leaped as high and far as I could, like an Olympian doing a high jump.

Problem was, I was no high-jump Olympian, and I don't think closing my eyes was the best idea, because when I opened them again, I was sprawled out on the grass. My face was pressed against the dirt and if I was right about the small stinging sensations on my legs, I had just cut myself in a million different places.

I tried to lift myself up, but the ensuing dizziness caused me to collapse again.

Suddenly, I felt someone grab both of arms. "We got her!" one of the men shouted.

I sucked in some air, my thoughts clearing up a bit as I suddenly remembered what was happening.

“Let me go!” I screamed, kicking out at the men and trying to twist my way out of their grasp.

Obviously surprised by my sudden movement, they let me go, and I stayed just long enough to give the closest one a well-aimed kick in the family jewels before I took off running again.

I was gratified to hear the man let out a loud, pained grunt, but that feeling was immediately replaced by panic once more when someone tackled me to the ground.

“You’re a feisty one,” the person on top of me muttered, yanking me up and carrying me bridal-style back to the parking lot, while two of his colleagues kept a firm grasp on my limbs.

“Who are you?” I yelled. “And where are you taking me? Let me go right now! This is illegal, you know! You could go to jail for this!”

The man holding me sighed and shoved me into the backseat of the Town Car. “Keep a close eye on her,” he warned his colleagues, before getting into the driver’s seat.

“Let me go!” I screamed again, wriggling in the seat.

“Hold still!” The man on my left sounded exasperated. “We’re not going to hurt you. We—ow!” He let out a string of curses. “She *bit* me!”

“There’s more where that came from, asshole!” I yelled, attempting to elbow the other man in the gut.

“Jesus Christ!” He evaded my attack just in time. “Screw this, it’s time to bring out the big guns.”

With that, he slapped a chloroform-soaked cloth over my mouth.

"Stop! What do you...think..." My muffled yells gradually faded away as darkness sank in.

* * *

Roman flipped impatiently through the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*, but was unable to focus on the words and images in front of him.

What the hell was taking so long?

You would think, with the amount of money he paid them, they could work a little faster.

Note to self: fire old staff and hire new ones.

There was a timid knock on the door.

"Come in," Roman called out in an irritated voice.

One of the maids walked in, looking a bit scared. "Mr. Fiori, she's ready."

"It's about time," he muttered, throwing the magazine aside. "Well, what are you waiting for? Bring her in!"

With a nod, the maid stepped out, and a moment later, *she* entered the room.

Roman's eyes widened slightly as he took her in. Her dark brown, almost-black hair gleamed under the lights and fell in soft, perfect waves past her bare shoulders. Her green eyes looked brighter and more vivid than usual, and set off her flawless bronze skin to perfection. The slinky black dress she wore—according to his stylist, it was Alexander McQueen and cost over \$2000—showed off her tiny waist and long, shapely legs to perfection, and her rhinestone-studded Jimmy Choo stilettos added three inches to her height.

For a scholarship girl, she looked breathtaking. She also looked very, very angry.

“I should’ve known it was you!” Maya spat, flames nearly leaping out of her eyes. “What the *hell* is all of this, Fiori?!”

He stood up, a little surprised by her reaction. “It’s a makeover, of course.”

She looked like she was about to spit fire. “I *know* it’s a makeover! But why are *you*, of all people, giving me one?” She planted her hands on her hips. “Did I say I wanted one?”

“Well, you certainly can’t go around dressed the way you usually do,” he pointed out, rather reasonably, in his opinion. “I have a reputation to protect.”

Maya narrowed her eyes. “And what does the way I dress have anything to do with your reputation?”

“Everything, of course,” he answered matter-of-factly. And here he thought she was supposed to be smart. “Well, now that that’s out of the way, let’s go over the rules.”

“Rules,” she repeated slowly.

Roman walked towards her, listing the guidelines as he went.

“One, you are to be dressed and made up by your personal stylist, hairdresser, and makeup artist every morning, which means you have to get up a bit earlier than usual. Say, three hours? Two, you are to always walk a step behind me in any public place, although of course you can walk next to me in private. Three, you are not to say anything that contradicts me. Four, you need to apologize to me for the party incident in front of the—“

“*What. Are. You. Talking. About?*”

Well, he guessed he would just have to spell it out for her. “The rules you need to follow as my girlfriend, of course!” Roman couldn’t help but smile smugly as he waited for her to gasp and gush her appreciation.

Unfortunately, that wasn't exactly what happened.

Maya's jaw dropped. "And who said I wanted to be your girlfriend?" she shrieked.

Roman sighed. Not the reaction he'd been expecting. "Of course you want to be my girlfriend. Everyone wants to be my girlfriend. I'm the only son of the richest family in the world. I'm good-looking. I'm smart. I'm powerful. I can give you things you can't even begin to dream of. Private jet, yacht, vacations to anywhere you want. Clothes and jewels, of course—"

"You *must* be crazy!" Maya's voice rose another pitch.

He winced. Second note to self: call Gucci to see if they made earplugs.

"I don't *want* your stupid jet. Or clothes. Or jewels—" To emphasize her point, she yanked the diamond-and-ruby necklace off her neck. "I want to go home. And I want *you* to leave. Me. Alone!"

"This hard-to-get game is getting a bit old," he snapped. "If you didn't want to be my girlfriend, then why did you go to all that trouble?"

Maya glared at him. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

He sighed. "Obviously, the only reason you yelled at me at the party and withstood all the students' abuse was to stand out and get my attention!"

Her jaw dropped, and she slowly shook her head, a disbelieving look on her face. "I always knew you were an arrogant blockhead, but I never knew you were delusional too! Listen to me, and listen to me good, Roman Fiori. I don't want to be your girlfriend, and I never will, *especially* when one of your lackies *chloroformed* me! I yelled at you because you are a heartless egomaniac who needs someone to put him in his place, and I managed to withstand everything *you* put me through because I'll be damned before I let someone like you walk all over me!"

Roman was stunned. “Why are you being so difficult?” he demanded angrily. “Any girl would kill to be my girlfriend! Besides, you’re a scholarship kid! You should be begging to be with me! I can give you all the financial support--”

“Are you listening to yourself? Do you know what an ass you sound like? I *don’t need your financial support*. Just because I go Valesca on a scholarship doesn’t mean I want to be your slave!”

His narrowed his eyes. “Is it because you’re already dating someone?” For some reason, the thought made him even angrier.

Maya threw up her hands. “Have you not been listening to a word I said? I don’t—“

“Actually, Rome, she does.” Parker strode calmly into the room, draping an arm around Maya’s shoulders. “She’s my girlfriend now.”

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CHAPTER 8

Sometimes, I wonder if I was a murderer in my past life or something. Obviously, I had to have racked up some pretty bad karma because my present-day life sucks.

I unconsciously moved closer to Parker as I stared at Roman with wide eyes, my previous anger replaced by fear at the look on his face. I was surprised I didn't see steam pouring out of his ears.

Unfortunately, the small movement on my part only seemed to make him angrier.

"Excuse me?" he ground out, his voice low and dangerous.

"She's my girlfriend," Parker repeated, not seeming to share any of my personal terror at all. He kept his arms around my shoulders. "Sorry, Rome, guess I beat you to the punch this time."

I blanched. "Are you crazy?" I hissed so that only Parker could hear me. "Now is *not* the time to bait him."

"Calm down, sweetheart, it'll be fine. Unless you would rather be his girlfriend instead..."

I just glared at him in response.

Parker smirked. "That's what I thought."

I was so caught up in silently cursing every Scion, as well as the stupid person who'd *invented* the word Scion, that I didn't notice Roman approaching until he forcefully yanked Parker's arm away from me.

“You didn’t beat to me to anything,” Roman snarled, his violet eyes a near-black. “You two aren’t really dating.”

I shot Parker a panicked look. Was Roman psychic?

“Of course we are.” Parker did a very good job of looking surprised. “What makes you think we aren’t?”

Roman’s eyes narrowed. “You guys don’t even know each other!”

“*Au contraire*, I just had dinner at her house yesterday,” Parker replied calmly. “I also met her family. They’re quite lovely, I must say. Now, since you are one of my best friends, I would appreciate it if you gave us your blessing and support—“

"Bullshit! You guys have never even talked before!"

"Not that you know of," Parker corrected calmly. "Your game's slipping a bit, Rome."

"Parker, you're my friend, but you need to shut the hell up!"

Parker stepped forward and placed his hands on Roman's chest to push him back from me. "Listen, Rome, I know you're mad, but--"

And that was when Roman hauled back his fist and punched Parker in the jaw.

"*What are you doing?*" I screamed, running over to Parker's side. "Oh my god, Parker, are you okay?"

He winced, rubbing his jaw. "Yeah, I'll be fine."

I turned to Roman, my own hands balling up into fists. "What is *wrong* with you? You can't go around punching people like that! And you wonder why I'm with Parker and not you? He's a great boyfriend--"

“Oh, *now* I get it.” Roman glared at me. “Guess you already found someone to give you the jewels and clothes, huh? You work fast, I’ll give you that.”

I’ve never been so insulted in my entire life. “Excuse me, but I’m dating Parker because he’s a genuinely good person,” I declared, straightening up and staring Roman straight in the face. “Which is more than I can say for someone else in this room.”

“Genuinely good person?” Roman snorted. “You’re talking about the biggest player in town! He’s been with every girl in Valesca!”

“Thanks.” Parker sounded touched. He didn’t seem to be all that upset that one of his best friends had just punched him in the face.

Roman and I both ignored him.

“Although, now that I think about it, that probably means you’ve been with him too.” His lips twisted. “It makes so much sense now.”

I couldn’t help but gasp. Was he accusing me of being a *slut*?

“Shut up!” I shouted, nearly blind with rage as all my previous anger came flooding back. “God, you’re such a *dick*!” I threw the necklace I’d taken off as hard as I could at his chest and impulsively stomped on his foot—in my three-inch heels.

To my immense pleasure, Roman let out a yelp of pain.

“And just so you know—“ I pulled the torture devices they called Jimmy Choos off my feet and threw them at him too. “—even if he was a homeless pauper and looked like the Hunchback of Notre Dame, I would *still* pick him over a soulless jerk like you!”

Not satisfied with just impaling his foot, I also slapped him across the face for the second time in a week before running out.

For some reason, I could feel tears prickling the backs of my eyes, blurring my vision. It shouldn't have upset me that he thought I was promiscuous, but it did.

I didn't like him, and I didn't care what he thought per se, but I was so sick of people making judgments about me before they even got to know me.

Oh, I'm a scholarship kid? That must mean I'm poor and pathetic or a gold-digger.

Oh, I'm part Asian? I must be super-good at math and science. (Well, I am good at them, but I'm much better at English and the social sciences).

Oh, I happen to think Parker Remington is actually a good person? That must mean I'm a slut who's already slept with him.

Fighting back a sob, I ran blindly down the hallway. I didn't even know where I was going—I just knew I had to get as far away from Roman Fiori as possible.

* * *

Adriana stormed up the stairs of the Fiori mansion, the sound of her stilettos echoing like gunshots in the massive halls. She pushed open the doors to Roman's room with unnecessary force.

He looked up from the video game he was playing with surprise.

“God, Adri, could you be any louder?” he asked, sounding annoyed. “I’m —”

Adriana stomped over to him and gave him a big, healthy whack on the head.

“Jesus! What the hell?” Roman yelled, rubbing the back of his head. “What was that for?”

“You know what it's for,” she snapped, about to give him another well-deserved slap, although he managed to evade it just in time. “God, Rome,

what the *hell* were you thinking? Kidnapping Maya and then bringing her here and basically implying she's a slut? You're a total idiot!"

Roman's face shut down as he turned back to his video game. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't bullshit me. Parker told me what happened."

"Oh, right, *Parker*," Roman said sarcastically. "Everyone believes Parker, because he's so perfect."

Adriana crossed her arms over her chest. "So what are you saying? That he was lying?"

Roman didn't respond.

"That's what I thought. And you *seriously* need to stop being jealous of Parker and get over yourself Rome, or you're going to end up with no friends. Not to mention, you need to apologize to Maya."

Roman snorted. "I'm not jealous of Parker," he snapped. "Why would I be jealous of him?"

"Because Maya is dating him and not you."

"So? It's not like I would want to date someone like her anyway. I don't even like her! Remember the party incident?"

Adriana rolled her eyes. Sometimes, she wondered why she even bothered. "Well, you're the one who brought her to your house and basically asked her to be your girlfriend."

Roman threw the joystick down. "I didn't *ask* her to be my girlfriend, I was just giving her a way out," he declared.

"Please. Just admit it. She intrigues you, and *that's* the reason why you want her to be your girlfriend," Adriana said knowingly. "And judging from the

look of things, it seems like you lost the bet.”

Roman let out an annoyed sigh. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The bet. I said I could find a girl in Valesca who doesn’t care you’re a Fiori. That girl is Maya.”

A muscle ticked in Roman’s jaw. “That’s not true.”

“And de Nile is not just a river in Egypt,” Adriana countered. “Seriously Rome, you like her, or at least, you’re starting to like her, and we both know it. If you keep on acting like such an ass, though, you’ll never have a chance with her.”

A shadow crossed Roman’s face. “She’s dating Parker, remember?”

Adriana tensed. “Well, it’s Parker,” she said nonchalantly. “You know how he is.”

“Personally, I don’t see the attraction,” Roman muttered. “He’s a huge player. I’m richer than him. I’m better-looking than him. What does he have that I don’t?” He sounded like a petulant child.

Adriana snickered. “You’re beginning to sound like a girl.” She tossed her golden hair over her shoulder. “Besides, like you said, Parker’s a player. He and Maya probably aren’t that serious, which means you still have a chance.”

Roman eyed her suspiciously. “Why do you want us to get together so badly anyway?”

She sighed. “You really are dumb sometimes. Because you are completely insufferable right now, and you need a girl in your life to make you a little *less* insufferable. So far, Maya’s the best, not to mention the only, candidate for the job. That is, if you can somehow clean up this horrible mess you’ve made.”

“Whatever.” Roman picked up the control for his video game again. “Just so you know, I’m only intrigued by her. That doesn’t mean I like her.”

Adriana patted him on the shoulder. “Sure. Whatever makes you sleep better at night.”

* * *

“Which of these adjectives best describes her?” Roman’s assistant, Richard, read aloud from the magazine in his hand. “A. Dainty and feminine—“

“Yeah, right,” Roman snorted, toweling off his hair, which was still damp from the pool. “No.”

“—B. quiet and shy. C. friendly and outgoing, or D. stubborn and willful?”

Roman pursed his lips. “D. Definitely D.”

Richard marked off the answer. “This is the last question, Mr. Fiori.”

“I know, I know, just ask it already,” Roman said impatiently.

Richard cleared his throat. “What qualities do you admire most in a girl? A. Intelligence. B. Beauty, C. Compassion—“

“What kind of dumb quiz is this anyway?” Roman demanded. “Who would like a dumb, ugly, mean girl?”

“Well, you were the one who gave me this quiz,” Richard murmured.

“What did you just say?”

“Nothing,” the assistant replied innocently. He resumed reading out loud. “Like I was saying, C. Compassion or D. Talent.”

Roman tapped his fingers on the table. “Compassion,” he finally answered. “Well? What are the results?”

“I’m looking.” Richard flipped to the back of the magazine.

“Look faster!”

Richard sighed. He’d been a loyal member of the Fioris’ staff for years, and the gig paid well, but it was times like these that he wished he actually completed business school. “I found it.” He skimmed the results, his face paling.

“Well, what does it say?”

“Mr. Fiori, I don’t think these types of quizzes are necessarily accurate—“

Roman made an impatient noise. “Let me see that!” He snatched the magazine from Richard’s hands. “The girl you like is someone who is strong, determined, and not afraid to speak her mind. However, despite her toughness, she is looking for a partner who is sweet and sensitive—“

Richard grimaced. Sweet and sensitive? Roman didn’t stand a chance.

“—and is not afraid to embrace his inner child.” He threw the magazine down. “Inner child? What is this, Parenting Magazine 101? This is such bullshit!” He glared at Richard. “You need to pick better magazines, Richard!”

Richard refrained from reminding his boss that he was the one who had chosen the magazine. “Don’t be mad,” he said soothingly, flipping to the next page. “Look, they have tips in the back.”

“Tips?” Roman narrowed his eyes. “I don’t need tips!”

“Oh, okay, then I will just throw this away for you—“

“Wait!” Roman grabbed the magazine. “I’ll throw it away myself.”

Richard hid his smile. “Of course, Mr. Fiori.”

* * *

“I am so sorry, Parker.” I sighed as I opened the door to my house, flicking on the lights. “I feel like it's my fault that Roman punched you.”

After I'd ran out of the parlor, I'd almost gotten lost because the Fioris' house was so huge. Luckily, Parker had followed me and managed to save me from getting stuck in the maze of hallways.

“Oh, don't worry about it.” Parker shrugged. “I've known him since kindergarten. Trust me, I've seen him at his worst. Besides, we used to play fight all the time.”

I grimaced. “Yeah, but this time wasn't exactly 'playing'.” I eyed his bruised jaw. “I can't believe he hit you that hard. Actually, I can't believe you're not mad at him!”

“Yeah, well, if I got mad at him every time he acts like a dick, we might as well stop being friends.”

I shook my head. “And you don't think you'd be better off *not* being friends with him?”

Parker stared at me seriously. “I'll admit, Roman may not come off as the nicest guy sometimes--”

I snorted.

He smiled slightly. “Ok, he *never* comes off as the nicest guy, but we've been friends our entire lives, and we've been through a lot of shit together. You may not see it, but he actually is a great friend.”

“You're right, I definitely don't see it.” I shook my head. “God, when did my life get so messed up? Today has to be one of the worst days ever. And that's saying a lot.”

Parker smirked, playfully toying with one of the straps of my dress. “At least you got a dress out of it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, that makes everything so much better,” I said sarcastically. “I don’t want to keep anything of his. I’m giving this back to him.”

“Why? That dress is worth \$2000. Just consider it partial payment for everything you’ve been through.”

“\$2000?” I was stunned. “Holy hell, that’s more than some people’s monthly salaries.”

Parker made himself comfortable on the living room couch. It was pretty late, and my parents and grandmother were thankfully already asleep. “Welcome to the high life, sweetheart.”

“I don’t feel like my life is very high right now,” I muttered, wrinkling my nose at my feet. After running around barefoot, they were disgusting.

“Trust me, it’ll get better. Especially now that we’re dating.”

I rolled my eyes and cast a furtive glance around to make sure my grandmother wasn’t lurking in the shadows. “We’re not *really* dating,” I hissed.

Parker gave me a wounded look. “Not even after I saved you from Rome? You hurt me, Maya, you really do.”

“I’m sure you’ll survive,” I said dryly.

“Nevertheless, Roman thinks we’re dating.” Parker laced his fingers behind his head and gave me an assessing look. “And...uh, I kinda told Zack and the rest of the guys we’re dating too.”

I groaned. “*Why?*”

“Well, I needed to tell them what happened,” he pointed out defensively. “Anyway, if we’re going to keep up this façade...we need to coordinate.”

I dropped down on the couch next to him. “What do you mean?”

“At school,” he explained. “If we’re going to play the part, we need to act the part, which means you can’t go around talking about how much you hate me anymore.” Parker smiled cheekily and patted me on the head. “You need to act like a good little girlfriend.”

I swatted his hand away with annoyance. “I’m not a dog, Parker. And define ‘act like a good girlfriend.’” I left out the ‘little’ part. After all, I was five foot seven! It’s not like I was a midget.

“Well, you should probably try to get along with my friends. We need to kiss, hold hands, spend time together...”

I stared at him in disbelief. “And you’re ok with all this? Won’t that ruin your reputation as an eternal bachelor or something?”

Parker yawned. “Eh, I don’t really care what people think. Besides, it’d be worth it for the Roman factor alone.”

I was about to ask what he meant by that when he spoke up again. “Besides, life was getting boring. You, my dear, just made it a *lot* more interesting.”

* * *

“Ugh! Go away,” I muttered, burying my face into my pillow and hoping whoever was ringing the doorbell incessantly would just disappear.

It was Saturday morning, for Pete’s sake. Didn’t they have somewhere better to be? Like their own bed?

Considering the fact the doorbell was *still* ringing, I guess the answer is no.

With a huge sigh, I swung my legs over the edge of my bed and stumbled down the stairs, wondering why my grandmother chose today of all days to drag my mom to tai chi in the park. My dad had left for yet another business trip yesterday and so I had the whole house to myself.

Whoever was at the door had given up ringing the bell and was now pounding on the door instead.

“Hold your horses! I’m coming,” I called out crankily. I’m not really a morning person.

I let out a huge yawn and opened the door, getting ready to shoo whoever was there away so I could go back to my best friend, aka my pillow.

When I saw who was on my doorstep though, my jaw dropped in shock.

What in God's name was Roman Fiori doing at my house on a Saturday morning, holding a gift basket? And why the heck was he wearing a Mickey Mouse T-shirt?

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CHAPTER 9

“Want a banana?” Roman held out the yellow fruit, which he’d plucked from the gift basket I’d reluctantly opened a mere minute ago.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “No, thanks.”

“How about an apple?”

He brandished the shiny red fruit like it was a trophy.

I gritted my teeth. “No, thanks. Look, I know you didn’t come here on a Saturday morning to offer me fruit. Why are you really here?”

As I eyed his Mickey Mouse shirt, then the apple, a horrible thought formed in my head. “You poisoned the fruit, didn’t you?” I accused.

Yeah, that’s right. I saw *Snow White*.

Roman stared at me like I was crazy. “Of course not,” he snapped, sounding a lot more like his regular self. “Do I look like a murderer to you?”

Now I was the one who looked at him like he was crazy. “Are you seriously asking me that question? Yes! You already kidnapped me twice. Murder is the next logical step.”

He rolled his eyes and dropped the fruit back into the basket, which also consisted of several large swirly lollipops, a bag of Lindt truffles, a teddy bear holding a giant HUG ME pillow, and a random lavender-scented bath products set. “Gee, I was just trying to be nice, and this is what I get in return?”

I snorted in disbelief. “You, be nice?” I looked out the window. “Nope, don’t see any pigs flying, which means you’re lying!”

Oh, hey, that rhymed.

Roman glared at me, although the full threatening effect was impeded by that ridiculous bright yellow Mickey Mouse shirt he was wearing. He looked like he was playing dress-down in his younger brother’s clothes, if he had a younger brother.

“Stop being such a grouch, Dr. Seuss. You think I *want* to be here? I’m only here because Parker, for a reason I can’t quite understand, decided he wants to date you. That means I’m going to have to see your stupid face all the time and it’d be nice if I don’t rupture an artery every time I see you!”

“Rupture an artery?” I repeated sweetly, not letting any of my inner ire show. “One can only hope. Besides, I distinctly remember *you* asking me to be your girlfriend yesterday! Did you hit your head and get amnesia overnight?”

Roman’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish’s.

Despite my irritation, I couldn’t help but giggle. I wish I had a camera with me right now.

“Yeah, well, I only did so to give you a way out,” he finally sputtered. “Not like I would actually *want* a commoner like you to be my girlfriend.” He gazed disdainfully around the living room. “My bathtub is bigger than this place!”

“Really? Then why don’t you go take a bath and get lost in there while you’re at it,” I snapped. Ok, so not the best comeback, but whatever. “If you’re going to stand here and insult my house, why don’t you just leave right now!”

I was seriously beginning to regret letting him in. In fact, the only reason I did so was so no nosy neighbors saw the Fiori heir standing on my

doorstep, which would inevitably lead to a lot of rumors and gossip I didn't need.

"Oh, I'll be happy to," Roman snapped back. "After you answer one question."

I clenched my jaw. He was put on earth just to annoy the heck out of me, wasn't he? "Are you going to ask it or are you just going to stand there and take up valuable space?"

"Like anything in here is valuable," he sneered. His lips thinned. "Why are you dating Parker?"

Now I was confused. "Uh...remember the part where you called me a gold-digging slut? Didn't that answer the question for you?" My tone was sarcastic.

Unfortunately, my sarcasm was completely lost on him. "You picked *Parker* out of all people?" Roman hissed. "He's the biggest playboy on the East Coast! He'll only break your heart, you know."

"Well, I guess it's a good thing *I'm* dating him, not you. Besides, why do you care if I get my heart broken or not? You'll probably throw a party if that happens!"

"Not if, when." Roman's jaw tensed. "And I *don't* care. You can date a million Parkers if you want, it doesn't mean a thing to me."

"Oh, really?" I taunted. "It sure doesn't seem that way."

I only said it to get on his nerves, but for some reason, his face turned bright red at my observation and he quickly looked away.

Huh. Weird.

"Let's just get back on topic," he finally said, still avoiding my gaze. "Look. Just consider this gift basket an olive branch, of sorts. Like I said, it'd be

best if we could get along just for Parker's sake. Though I don't necessarily agree with your relationship."

I rolled my eyes. "How generous of you."

Nevertheless, I grudgingly nodded in agreement. For once, Roman had said something that made sense. Parker and I weren't really a couple, but we had to act like one, which meant I was going to be around Roman a *lot*.

The thought kind of made me want to poke my eyes out, but that's my life for you. Besides, hating someone and showing it so openly was actually kind of exhausting.

"And...uh." Roman now looked uncomfortable. "I guess I just wanted to say that... I'm sorry about yesterday," he mumbled.

I blinked. "Huh?"

He let out a huge sigh. "I *said*..." His voice lowered. "I'm sorry about yesterday."

My jaw almost grazed the floor. Did he just...*apologize*?

"Obviously," he said grumpily.

Oh. I didn't know I'd voiced my thoughts aloud. "I can't believe you're apologizing to me." I was amazed.

"Trust me, it's not out of my own free will," he sneered. "Just so you know, I only did it so Adri would stop yapping in my ear. Tell me, was all of female kind born this annoying or do your moms teach you this kind of stuff?"

I glared at him. "And *you* tell me, did your childishness come free with the shirt or did you buy it on its own?"

"Your wit astounds me," he said sarcastically. "Well, now that everything's cleared up, I'm glad we can go back to existing in silent mutual hatred."

"Wow, how can I resist such a sincere and heartfelt apology?" This time, I was the sarcastic one. I tapped my foot on the floor and stared at him pointedly. "Since, as you say, everything's cleared up, can you leave now?"

Roman shot me a dirty look, and I just gazed innocently back at him.

However, before he had a chance to take even a step toward the exit, the front door opened, and my mom and grandmother walked in. They stopped when they saw Roman in the living room.

Roman straightened up a bit, a polite expression suddenly taking over his features.

It seriously weirded me out. I was so not used to seeing him act...human.

"Good morning," he said politely, not sounding at all like the boorish, egomaniacal brute he really was.

My grandmother, though, was having none of it. "Why you in my living room?" she demanded, planting her hands on her hips and drawing herself up to her full four feet, nine inches. "I never see you before!"

Then she turned her glare onto me. I gulped. Uh-oh.

"Maya! What going on here? He no Peewee!" Her horrified gaze swept over my tousled hair and pajamas. "Why you dress like that? Your hair look like rat's nest! Not presentable!" She pointed accusingly at me and Roman. "You cheat on Peewee?"

Peewee? Who was Peewee? I snuck a peek at Roman, who just looked stunned that this tiny little Asian woman was yelling at him.

"Peewee?" I croaked weakly.

It was the wrong thing to say.

“Yes, Peewee!” Now my grandmother looked *really* mad. “You throw peas at him Thursday night. Very bad manners. And now you look like...” She paused and shook her head, obviously unable to think of a word bad enough to describe what I looked like. “I very ashamed!”

Ohhh. She was talking about Parker. In a bout of completely inappropriate timing, I smirked a bit as I thought about what Parker would say if he heard himself being referred to as “Peewee.” He would probably die.

I silently vowed to tell him this interesting little tidbit the next time I saw him.

While I silently and gleefully contemplated on how to shrink Parker’s ego even more, my grandmother started on Roman.

“You!” She wagged a wrinkled finger at him. “You try to steal Maya from boyfriend?”

“No.” Roman looked utterly baffled. “Uh...I just came by to drop off some fruit.” He pointed lamely at the basket.

Apparently, my grandmother had the ability to turn even him into a stuttering idiot. Oh wait, he already was one.

“Fruit?” My grandmother walked over and picked through the basket. “Aha!” She triumphantly pulled out the lollipops and jabbed them accusingly at his chest. “I knew it! You think cuz I old lady, I stupid, huh? But I know what you try to do!”

“You do?” Roman and I asked at the same time.

We glared at each other before turning back to my grandmother.

“What am I trying to do?” Roman asked cluelessly.

“You try to seduce my Maya!” my grandmother declared. “Lollipops *very* phallic!” She shoved the lollipops into his hand and smacked him on the back of the head. Well, she tried anyway. Since she was so short and Roman was so tall, she only managed to swat his shoulder. “You shameful! Teenage boys these days, so dirty-minded! Now you listen. Maya has boyfriend. They marry after college. I no want you ruin that! You try to seduce her again, you regret it! I know Bruce Lee’s teacher!”

Roman just stared at the lollipops in his hand. “Isn’t Bruce Lee’s teacher dead?”

I groaned. Oh, that was the wrong thing to say.

My grandmother let out an indignant yelp. “You very insensitive boy! You no talk about Yip Man like that!”

“But all I said was that he’s dead. Which he is.”

By now, even I was starting to feel bad for him. “Um...you might just want to stop arguing with her,” I piped up, shooting him a warning look.

Luckily, my grandmother had moved on from the topic of her old friend Yip Man. Unfortunately, she had moved on to...Roman’s shirt.

“Mickey Mouse?” she gasped, staring at his torso like it had personally offended her. Which it had, I guess. In a way.

“Oh. Yeah.” Roman looked down. “It’s cute, right?”

I gulped, backing away slowly. This was not going to end well. At the same time, though, I couldn’t help feeling some perverse pleasure at the fact that he was getting totally beaten down by a seventy-year-old Asian lady.

“Cute?” my grandmother shrieked. “Mickey Mouse not *cute*! Disney World horrible! They want mice and ducks take over the world! And they *charge* you to help mice take over world! That what you want? Mickey Mouse be world king?”

“No?”

Judging by the look on Roman’s face, it was official. He thought my grandmother was batshit insane. Well, she *does* go crazy every time she sees Mickey Mouse. He had picked the worst possible day to wear that shirt, and the worst possible day to come to my house wearing that shirt.

My grandmother stormed over to the closet where we kept our cleaning supplies, yanked open the door, and pulled out a broom.

“No mice allowed in this house!” she declared, brandishing the broom like a weapon. “Get out! Get out, or I hit you with broom!”

“You don’t need to ask me twice,” Roman muttered.

I snickered, and he gave me a death glare. I waved innocently at him, my morning suddenly improved by leaps and bounds.

“Out!” My grandmother swatted at him with the broom, and he was smart enough to hightail it out of there before it made contact. “Shameful boy! Bring *Mickey* into the house!” She spit out the name like it was something foul. “Not welcome!”

When he finally left, I burst into laughter. Now I *really* wish I’d had a camera to document the whole encounter.

“Why you laughing?” my grandmother snapped huffily. “You wrong too! No lady with boyfriend let other boy in house.” She stared disapprovingly at my outfit. “Especially not dress like that!” She clucked her tongue and lightly tapped my butt with the handle of her broom. “Your butt too big for those shorts! It get any bigger, it need its own zip code!”

I stopped laughing. Was my butt really that big? I twisted my head around to try and take a look. Regardless, it was probably a good idea to appease her for now. “I know, I’m sorry grandma.”

I stared down at the gift basket. Damn. He had taken those lollipops with him. “It won’t happen again.”

I was about to offer her an apple or something to calm her anger when my finger brushed against the teddy bear. Gosh, it was so soft...

I picked it up, accidentally pressing against the HUG ME pillow. “Gooooood morning!” The high, squeaky mechanical voice almost caused me to drop the bear on the floor.

The bear continued. “Hug me! Hug me! I love you! Hug me!”

I stared down at the talking bear in disbelief and, unable to help myself, cracked up all over again.

* * *

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew pretending to be Parker’s girlfriend was going to drastically change my life at school. I just hadn’t known *how* much.

It all started when Zack and Adri showed up at my house Monday morning to give me a ride.

“What are you guys doing here?” I asked, staring at the two impossibly good-looking blondes in the front of Zack’s Porsche.

“We’re here to give you a ride!” Zack was nearly bouncing up and down in excitement. “It might be a bit tight—this car was made for two—but I’m sure you can fit! You’re really skinny.”

I blinked, my mind still a bit groggy from sleep. “Umm...why are you giving me a ride?”

Adriana pushed her Chanel sunglasses on top of her head and looked at me with an amused smile. Her blonde hair fell perfectly past her shoulders and her skin practically glowed.

Jeez, was it even human for someone to look that good so early in the morning?

“Well, you’re dating Parker now,” she pointed out. “We can’t have you walking to school anymore.”

“It’s bad for his image,” Zack supplied helpfully. “And for the Scions’ image as a whole.”

I hitched my backpack straps higher onto my shoulder. “I thought you guys didn’t care what people thought.”

“Uh...maybe we care a little bit,” Zack allowed. “Come on, get in! We’re going to be late.”

I sighed, but acquiesced. I was too tired to walk anyway. “So, why didn’t Parker pick me up himself?” I asked. I mean, if he was supposed to be my boyfriend, wasn’t he supposed to do this sort of thing?

Zack peeled out of the driveway. “Oh, he’s putting in some new gadgets in his car, so he grabbed a ride with Carlo today. I guess he felt kind of weird asking Carlo to go pick you up...”

“Let’s just tell it like it is. Parker would rather we pick you up than pick you up himself in someone else’s car,” Adriana clarified wryly.

“Oh.” Boys and their egos.

When we arrived at school, I was horrified to see the usual crowd of students milling around at the top of the steps, waiting for the Scions’ arrival.

Oh, crap. I had completely forgotten about that!

“You guys,” I hissed, sliding down in my seat. “Can you just let me out at the back entrance or something?”

Zack pulled into his parking space and turned to stare at me.

“What? Why?”

“I’m...um, not feeling well,” I replied lamely.

“Maya,” Adriana gently scolded. “You have to get used to this if you’re going to date a Scion. Besides, this way, everyone will know your change in status.”

Yeah. That was exactly what I was afraid of.

I stared out the window, the dread building in my stomach when I saw Carlo’s and Roman’s cars appear in the lot.

“It’s time,” Zack announced happily. “Ready for your first walk of fame, Maya?”

No. Not at all. I forced a smile. “Sure.”

I thought I saw Adriana give me a knowing look, but I was distracted by the deafening screams that erupted when Zack opened the door.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly followed Zack and Adriana out of the car, trying not to flash everyone.

The minute I got out, the crowd went deathly silent. I swallowed hard, falling into step next to Adriana as we headed up the stairs.

Even though I tried my best not to stare at them, I could feel everyone’s gazes on me.

Adriana reached over and squeezed my arm supportively. I flashed her a grateful smile, but I was more than aware that the rest of the students had broken out into shocked whispers.

“Oh my god, what is *she* doing getting out of Zack Perry’s car?”

“You know, I think someone told me she was dating Parker!”

“What a lucky bitch. She’s Valesca royalty now.”

“Hmmp. I wonder what *she* did to get that kind of cachet.”

The implication behind the last statement was clear.

I sighed, the dread spreading from my stomach to the rest of my body.

What had I gotten myself into?

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CHAPTER 10

Crap. Where do I go, where do I go...?

I glanced desperately around the hall, searching for an escape route even as I heard them getting closer. The sound of stilettos on marble was unmistakable.

It's a sad, sad day when a bunch of twigs in four-inch Louboutins can catch up to me.

Right? Or left? Making up my mind out of sheer panic, I darted right, panting slightly from the exertion. God, I really need to join a gym or something.

"There she is!" I heard someone shout.

I let out a small groan. Why oh why do these things always happen to me?

I was trying to figure out the best way to lose them when the girls' bathroom door opened and smacked me right in the face.

"Ow!" I cried, bringing my hand up to my stinging forehead.

"Oh my god, I'm so—Maya?"

I blinked. The person who'd opened the door was Venice. "Hi, V." I waved weakly.

"I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, running to my side. She gazed worriedly at my forehead. "Are you ok?"

“I—“ The sound of stilettos were almost on me by now. I grimaced. There was no way I’d be able to outrun them now, especially since I was feeling a bit dizzy. “Do you have to open doors so hard?” I grumbled, resigned to my fate.

Venice was staring, open-mouthed, over my shoulder. “Are they harassing you again?” she exclaimed. “But you’re dating Parker now!”

I sighed, my shoulders slumping. “Oh, they’re harassing me all right,” I muttered. “Just not in the way you’re thinking.”

She looked confused. “What are you talking—“

“Maya!” A perfectly manicured hand grasped my arm eagerly. When I looked up, I saw it belonged to a whip-thin blonde who wore a pair diamond earrings so huge I was surprised her earlobes didn’t fall off. “Finally, I caught up to you,” she simpered. “You know, you’re really...uh, athletic. In the best way possible, of course,” she added quickly. Apparently, in her world, an athletic girl wasn’t a compliment.

I forced a polite smile on my face, wishing for the umpteenth time that day that my parents hadn’t taught me the value of good manners so I could tell her exactly where to shove those earrings of hers. “Thanks, uh...”

“Agnes. Agnes Welden, of the Welden textiles fortune,” she pronounced smugly, tossing her hair over her shoulder. “Anyway, you left before I had a chance to ask you, where did you get those *fabulous* shoes? They’re amazing!”

I stared down at my shoes. They were just plain black flats.

“Um...Nine West?”

“Nine West!” she screeched, letting out a fake laugh. “How... quaint. That’s what I really like about you, Maya, you’re so, um, down-to-earth. How about we go shoe shopping this weekend? Sigerson Morrison just opened up a—“

“Oh, shove it, Agnes,” another girl said crankily, pushing Agnes out of the way. She’d obviously gotten tired of waiting. She turned to me with a big smile. “Hey, Maya! I’m Ricki. I’m in your English class. Listen, a bunch of us are planning to make a quick getaway to the Caribbean and of course, we’d love it if you came—“

“Maya! I’m having a party this weekend! You’ll be there right?”

“Ohmygosh, I *love* your hair! Who does it?”

“You’re so pretty, did anyone ever tell you that?”

“You know, I think that, like, you and Parker make *the* cutest couple. You guys are just so adorbs—“

Please, God, make it stop! I pressed my fingers to my temples, a small headache setting in as their high, screechy voices pierced through my eardrums like a spike heel through tissue paper. Didn’t they come with a “mute” button? If they didn’t shut up soon, I was seriously going to throw myself out one of the windows.

“Hey, Maya, we should go to lunch. All the good food’s going to be gone!” Venice, bless her soul, tried to save me by tugging on my arm, but the lemmings were having none of it.

“Um, excuse me, but we were talking to her,” Ricki said snottily, keeping a firm grip on my other arm. “That’s a bit rude of you, isn’t it...” She looked Venice up and down with a sneer. “I’m sorry, who are you again?”

“She’s my best friend,” I snapped. “Don’t talk to her like that! And let go of my arm!”

“You heard her. Get your last-season Pradas out of the way,” Agnes snapped, shoving Ricki aside. She gripped my wrist, her blue eyes wide. “So? What do you say to shoe-shopping Saturday?”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m busy.” I shot Venice a desperate glance.

“Let’s go!” she said loudly, pulling me down the hall.

Unfortunately, for someone who looked as if a strong gust of wind could blow her over, Agnes was quite strong and stood her ground. “What about Sunday? Are you free then? Or we can even go Friday afternoon!”

Sadly, I was unable to answer, due to the pain of having my arms tugged in completely opposite directions.

“You know, if you pull her arm off, she won’t be able to go shopping with you this weekend,” a very familiar voice said.

Venice and Agnes immediately stopped tugging as they stared at the newcomer in shock.

Carlo had managed to sneak up on us without anyone noticing, which will tell you how hysterical all the girls were in their efforts to become my friend since I’m now “Valesca royalty.” As a Scion, he usually couldn’t go anywhere without causing a few hoarse throats and swoons along the way.

“Well? Are you going to let go of her arm, or do I need to surgically detach you two?” Carlo asked, addressing Agnes. He sounded amused.

Agnes turned red. “Oh, of course,” she squeaked, dropping my arm.

I sighed in relief.

Carlo raised his eyebrows, and just like that, the entire horde of twigs scampered away.

“Dear Lord. *Thank* you,” I breathed, shaking out my hand. Tingles raced up and down my arm as sensation slowly returned.

“No problem.” Carlo gave me a small smile.

Venice cleared her throat.

“Oh, sorry!” I exclaimed. “Um, Venice, this is Carlo. Carlo, Venice.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Carlo said politely.

“Uhmfghsdyastwo,” Venice breathed, utter gibberish coming out of her mouth as she stared at him with googly eyes.

I rolled my own eyes. “Hey, Venice, didn’t you want to go to the DC before they ran out of good food?” I asked pointedly.

“Fine, fine, I can take a hint,” she grumbled, still staring rather dreamily at Carlo. “It was nice meeting you,” she breathed.

“It was nice meeting you too,” Carlo replied politely.

“I’ll see you there in a bit, right?” Venice asked me.

I nodded, and she turned and hurried towards the DC to grab the last of the roasted chicken.

Carlo and I just stood in a surprisingly comfortable silence for a while after Venice left. Well, I suppose it wasn’t all that surprising. For some reason, I feel more at ease around Carlo than I did around any other member of the Scions.

“Thanks for saving me from those girls back there,” I finally said, rubbing my arm. “I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t worry about it,” he answered. A glint of amusement lit up his dark eyes. “They’re pretty scary, aren’t they?”

I shuddered. “Scary, and faker than Pamela Anderson’s breasts. I think I preferred it when they were throwing stuff at me.”

Carlo laughed, a rich, deep laugh that filled the hallway and enveloped me like a warm hug. “You know, you’re one-of-a-kind, Maya Lindberg.”

I smirked. “Really?” I fake gushed. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s *ever* said to me!”

He glanced at me wryly. “Keep up the sarcasm, and I’ll call Agnes back here so you two can plan your shopping date.”

I was horrified. “No! No, I didn’t mean it, I swear!” I waved my arms frantically around. The thought of spending another minute with the twig made my whole body go limp with dread. “No sarcasm from me again. Promise.”

Carlo chuckled. “I was just joking, no need to freak out. I don’t hate you, you know.”

“That’s a relief,” I quipped. Suddenly, I noticed something sticking out of his pocket. “Is that...is that *Grapes of Wrath*?” I stuttered, a bit stunned that Carlo Tevasco was carrying my favorite book of all time around with him.

He glanced down at the tattered paperback. “Oh, yeah,” he said, pulling it out of his pocket and staring at it fondly. “It’s my favorite book.”

Un-freakin’-believable. Who would’ve thought I’d ever have anything in common with a Scion, even if it was as something as simple as a book?

“So, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.” Carlo leaned against the lockers and crossed his muscular arms over his chest.

“Sure. What is it?”

He glanced around, probably to make sure no one else was in earshot. “Why are you and Parker pretending to date?”

And just like that, my brain completely froze. I just gaped at him in shock. What—he—did—*how*?

“What—what are you talking about?” I laughed shrilly. It sounded fake even to my own ears. “Parker and I really *are* dating!”

“Uh-huh.” Carlo looked unimpressed. “And Valesca has just been voted the friendliest town in the US. Maya, you and him are pretty good actors, but come on, I’ve known him since we were babies. He is not going to date someone he’s never even had more than a dozen conversations with.”

“We’ve had more than a dozen conversations,” I muttered. The majority of them just happened to last under thirty seconds. I sighed, not even bothering to try and hide it anymore. Carlo seemed way too smart to fall for any of my excuses anyway. “You’re not going to tell anyone, are you?”

“Of course not.” He looked slightly offended. “Why would I do that? Although I’m warning you, I think Adri already knows.”

I groaned. “She *does*?”

“It’s ok, she won’t tell anyone either,” Carlo assured me. “Besides, it’s best she figured it out, or—“

He stopped.

I tilted my head curiously. “Or what?”

He cleared his throat. “Nothing.”

“You’re so weird,” I complained. “Well, do Zack and Roman know?”

“I don’t think Zack knows, unless Adri told him. And Roman’s a bit slow,” he added mischievously.

I snickered as I suddenly flashed back to Saturday. Boy, did Carlo get *that* right.

"You never answered my question, though. What's going on with you guys?"

With a sigh, I told him about my grandmother, her incessant matchmaking, and her desire to match me up with every boy who possessed an IQ above 130.

Of course, Carlo thought it was hilarious. "Oh man, I'd love to meet her," he laughed. "She sounds like a riot."

"Oh, she's a riot all right," I muttered.

Suddenly, the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch and the start of the next class period.

I blinked, thoughts of my grandmother flying out of my head. "Oh no! I missed lunch!" I whimpered. "And I just left Venice alone in there!" Eating was one of my greatest joys in life, and the DC's food was just about the only thing I could stand in Valesca. I stared sadly down at my stomach, which let out an obedient hungry growl. "Stupid twigs."

Carlo laughed again. "Venice will be fine. Are you really that hungry though?"

"Yes." I couldn't help but pout. "I'm a growing girl! I need sustenance."

He shook his head and reached into his pocket again. "Here, hopefully this'll hold you over till you can get something to eat."

He tossed me an Almond Joy.

I wrinkled my nose. I liked chocolate, but I hated Almond Joys. "Do you have something else?" I asked hopefully. "A Twix, maybe? Or Snickers? Or even a Three Musketeers?"

"Beggars can't be choosers," Carlo mock scolded me. "Now eat, before you faint."

“You suck,” I grumbled, grudgingly unwrapping the candy and taking a bite. I made a face. Ick.

“Keep on making that face and it’ll freeze that way.”

“You know, I think I like you a whole lot better when you’re not talking,” I huffed. I took another, annoyed bite without thinking, and almost gagged. God, I *hate* Almond Joys.

“That’s what everyone tells me,” Carlo said cheerfully. “Come on, let’s get you to class while you enjoy that delicious chocolate bar.”

I glared at him. I take back everything I ever said about him being nice. Carlo Tevasco was a terrible person.

* * *

Poor Mr. Martin. I actually liked the man, since he managed to teach physics in a way that wasn’t utterly boring, but unfortunately, no one was listening to him today.

That was because everyone’s too busy staring at me. Or, to be more specific, me and Parker, who had waltzed in here five minutes after class started, plopped down in the seat next to mine, and proceeded to steal the entire class’s attention.

“What are you doing here?” I hissed, trying to keep my voice as low as possible so no one else could hear.

“Coming to visit my girlfriend, of course,” Parker replied innocently. “I missed you at lunch today. Where were you?”

“Running from twigs,” I muttered, annoyed. My stomach let out another growl. Ugh.

“Running from twigs?” Parker gave me a strange look. “How... uh... entertaining.”

“It’s all your fault too,” I added, conveniently forgetting the fact that I was the one who’d made him become my fake boyfriend.

“How is it my fault when you’re the one who has a deathly fear of tree parts?”

“That’s not what I meant. I—“

“Excuse me, can I help you?” Mr. Martin’s voice stopped me.

I looked up and saw a skinny boy holding a brown paper bag in his hand. “I have a delivery for...” He looked down at the receipt. “Maya Lindberg?”

Mr. Martin frowned at me. “What’s this, Maya?”

“Um...uh...” I had absolutely no idea. “It’s—“

“Here you go,” the boy said, dropping the bag on my desk once he saw me respond. He left without another word.

Unable to help my curiosity, I peeked into the bag, my eyes widening when I saw a sushi combo box, a bowl of miso soup, and a bottle of water. My stomach growled again, even louder this time.

“Maya missed lunch today and I just ordered in something for her to eat,” Parker explained to the class as a whole, and to get Mr. Martin off my back.

Of course, it worked.

“You didn’t really order this, did you?” I whispered, pulling out the sushi box. It was terribly rude to eat in class, but I couldn’t help it. I was just so *hungry*.

“If I say yes, will it get me laid? Ow!” He winced in pain as I stomped on his foot.

Mr. Martin shot us a scandalized look but didn’t say anything.

“There’s your answer,” I replied sweetly, bringing a dragon roll up to my mouth. My eyes nearly crossed at the heavenly goodness. Oh my god, this was...this was unbelievable. I’ve never tasted anything so good in my entire life! I eagerly scarfed down another roll as Parker plucked something out of the bag.

“Oh, hey, there’s a note.”

I stopped. “Really?” I snatched the note from him and opened it.

Maya,

Check the bottom of the bag. It’s to make up for the Almond Joy.

~Carlo

I blinked in surprise, touched. Carlo had sent me the food?
Although I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised. Who else could’ve done it?

Curious, I reached in the bottom of the bag and pulled out...a Twix. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Parker asked, obviously baffled as to what could be so hilarious about a chocolate bar.

“Nothing,” I chuckled, feeling...well, I wasn’t sure what I was feeling. But this was probably the nicest thing anyone had ever done for me.

Today was just turning out to be a day of surprises.

* * *

“Where are you taking me?” I asked suspiciously, as Parker wound his Lamborghini down a road I’ve never been down before.

“Relax, honeybee, you can trust me,” he answered cheerfully.

“You’re a girl. You’ll love it.”

“Honeybee?” I was appalled. “You can’t come up with a better nickname than that? Actually, can you just not call me by any nickname? It’s weird.” I perked up as a thought hit me. “Are you taking me to a spa?”

“Nope.” Parker smiled slyly. “Of course, if you really want, I can give you a personal massage...”

I was about to whack his arm when I decided that wasn’t the best idea, considering he was maneuvering this deathmobile of his at ninety miles per hour. “Sorry, but that’s a privilege only my *real* boyfriend gets to have, perv,” I said cheerily.

“Ouch, that hurt.” Parker pouted. “See, that’s why I call you honeybee. You look sweet as honey but you sting like a bee.”

I snorted. “How clever of you, Ricky Martin. Seriously, though, where are you taking me? I need to be back in time for dinner.”

“No you don’t. I already called your mom and told her you’ll be with me.”

My jaw dropped. “*What?* You can’t just—just go around, calling other people’s families!” I spluttered. “Besides, I have homework!”

“You’re such a nerd,” Parker complained. “Stop stressing. It’ll be fun. Besides, it won’t take that long.” He paused. “Actually, knowing Adri, it’ll take very long.”

I crossed my arms over my chest, disgruntled. “*What* will be fun.?”

Parker came to a stop and pointed at something out the window. I followed his gaze and gasped when I saw the gleaming private jet idling on the tarmac we were currently parked by. “That will be.”

“A jet?” I couldn’t help but be awed at the sight. This was the first time I’ve ever seen a private jet in real life. “Why do we need a jet?”

Parker turned off the engine. “Homecoming’s coming up and Adri decided it’s time to find an outfit,” he explained. “And since you’re my girlfriend now, you can’t exactly go to homecoming in any old dress from the mall.”

I stared at him warily. “So where are we going?”

“Relax.” He ruffled my hair. “We’re just taking a short trip to New York.”

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CHAPTER 11

“You look like a pumpkin.”

This came from Zack, who was lying on the velvet bench with his head hanging off the side, and who had managed to stop playing Clash of Clans on his phone long enough to throw his ever-so-astute observation at his sister.

Adriana rolled her eyes. “Thanks, it’s nice to know I have such a supportive brother,” she replied sarcastically.

She frowned in the mirror. The pale orange Lanvin dress *did* make her look a bit like a pumpkin. Albeit a skinny one.

“Well, I happen to think you look like a beautiful pumpkin,” Parker told her, stifling a smile.

Adriana sighed in annoyance. “How sweet of you, Parker, really, but you should save those kind words for your girlfriend.”

“Are you saying I look like a pumpkin?” Maya asked, raising her eyebrows as she turned to examine her backside in the Givenchy dress she was currently clad in.

“Of course not, honeybee, you look like a work of art,” Parker assured her.

“Literally.” This time, it was from a cranky-looking Roman, who looked more than a little pissed that he’d just spent the last two hours following Adriana and Maya from Bergdorf’s to Bendel’s and then finally to Barneys. His gaze swept over Maya’s black-and-white frock. “You look like that modern art shit my father hangs up in his office.”

“Roman!” Adriana snapped. God, what was she going to do with him?

“What?” Roman shrugged. “It’s true.”

Luckily, Maya didn’t seem at all fazed. “Well, at least I’m not in a yellow Mickey Mouse shirt that makes me look like a demented banana who just escaped from Disney World,” she replied sweetly.

Roman immediately turned a bright red and slumped sulkily down in his chair, but he didn’t say anything else--a fact that didn’t escape Adriana’s notice.

“Huh?” Zack looked confused. He glanced at Roman’s shirt. “But he’s not wearing a yellow shirt.”

“Oh, you know, I was just being hypothetical,” Maya said blithely.

“Oh.” Zack’s brow creased. “Girls are weird,” he muttered.

“Excuse me, Miss Perry, but here are the dresses you requested.” Tracy, one of Adriana’s favorite saleswomen at Barneys, walked in, carrying an armful of designer silk.

“Thank you, Tracy. You can just hang it up right there.”

Tracy nodded, hanging the dresses on the rolling rack she’d brought in specifically for Adriana and Maya before discreetly exiting.

Adriana flipped through the dresses, until she found the one she was looking for. “Aha!” She pulled out the Fendi piece triumphantly. “You should try this on,” she encouraged Maya. “It’ll look *amazing* with your coloring.”

“Really?” Maya took the dress doubtfully. “I guess...what are you going to wear?”

“Oh, I already know which dress I’m going to wear to homecoming,” Adriana said airily, holding up the purple satin Proenza Schouler in question. “I was just shopping for some other clothes to add to my collection. Go ahead, though, try yours on!”

Maya fiddled with the price tag of the beautiful silk chiffon dress. Suddenly her eyes widened. “Adriana! This is...this is almost *three thousand dollars*,” she exclaimed hoarsely.

Adriana was a bit confused. “Yeah. It’s Fendi.”

“It’s three thousand dollars? That’s kinda cheap,” Zack commented, going back to his game. “Adriana’s dresses usually run in the five thousand range.”

Maya shook her head frantically. “I can’t afford this,” she protested. “The most I can spend today is five hundred, and that’s already stretching it.” She bit her lip, looking embarrassed.

Adriana was appalled. “Five hundred *dollars*? Sweetie, that’s for a pair of sunglasses, not a homecoming dress!” She guided Maya to a dressing room. “Look, just consider it a gift from me.”

“I can’t take such an extravagant gift!” Maya sounded horrified.

“It’s not extravagant at all,” Adriana insisted. She lowered her voice. “Trust me, watching you rip Roman a new one was worth at *least* what this dress costs.”

Maya snickered a bit. “Well...I don’t know...”

“Just take it or I’m going to be personally offended.” Adriana crossed her arms over her chest.

“Gee, how can I say no now? You’re so persuasive,” Maya joked as she reluctantly entered the dressing room. “I’m only trying this on though. I probably won’t get it.”

Adriana smiled. If her instinct was right—and it usually was—Maya was going to kill in that dress, so much so that she would *have* to get it.

“Good. Now my eyes can stop bleeding.” Roman’s tone was caustic.

Adriana was about to scold him again but Carlo beat her to the punch. “Rome, give it a rest,” the Colombian warned.

“Yeah, you need to lay off my girlfriend,” Parker added, a bit belatedly in Adriana’s opinion.

Roman glared at them. “Oh, so now you’re choosing that girl over me?”

“Excuse me, but ‘that girl’ is still in the room; hence, she can still hear everything you say,” Maya snapped, stepping out.

The room fell silent.

She blinked. “What? Do I look that bad?” she asked nervously.

Adriana herself was a bit stunned, which was no small feat. “Bad?” she echoed. “Maya, you look freakin’ *gorgeous!*”

And she did. The dress’ soft cream color stood out in stark contrast next to Maya’s tanned skin and glossy dark hair. The bodice was fitted and showed off her smooth shoulders, but the skirt fell in soft folds to just above her knees. The gold band encircling the waist gave the entire outfit a Greek-goddess feel.

“Really? It’s not too...I don’t know, it’s not too much?” Maya examined herself in the mirror.

“Of course not! Right?” Adriana asked the boys pointedly.

The four of them just stared at Maya like they were in a trance, even the usually composed Carlo.

Even Roman, Adriana thought, rather wickedly.

“Uh, right.” Parker snapped out of it first, a mischievous smile spreading over his face as he wrapped his arms around Maya’s waist. “Man, I’m so lucky to have such a hot girlfriend.”

Adriana smirked when she saw Maya wriggle a bit.

Anyone less dense than Roman and her brother could tell Maya and Parker weren’t *really* dating.

Thankfully, though, most people in Valesca weren’t that observant, which suited Adriana just fine.

She had her own plans for Maya.

* * *

“Ugh! Why do girls shop so much?” Zack complained, throwing two armfuls of shopping bags from almost every store on Fifth and Madison Avenues into the booth. “Who invented shopping anyway? It’s like torture.”

“Well, you didn’t have to come with us,” Adriana pointed out, looking unconcerned. “You could’ve just stayed home.”

Zack snorted. “Right. Valesca versus New York. Gee, I wonder which one is more exciting? Although I probably should’ve stayed home. At least I could’ve played Halo,” he muttered.

I just laughed. The Perrys’ relationship was just too funny. I stared happily out the window. It felt so good to be away from Valesca, even if I did have to be here with the Scions. They really weren’t that bad, though. Well, except for Roman.

“Hey, I never got a chance to thank you for the lunch, by the way,” I murmured to Carlo, as he slipped a seat next to me. For some reason, I

didn't want the others to know what he'd done.

"It's no big deal," Carlo answered, smiling a bit. "I had to make up for that horrific Almond Joy experience somehow."

I nodded slowly. "True, that *was* a pretty horrific experience," I agreed laughingly, before turning back to the others, who were still on the topic of shopping. More specifically, they were talking about boys and shopping.

"...just because I understand girls doesn't mean I necessarily *enjoy* shopping, at least not for myself," Parker was insisting. "I'm not metropolitan, you know."

Adriana eyed him dubiously. "I don't think that's the right word."

"Isn't it cosmopolitan?" Roman sounded bored.

"No, that's a drink."

"Isn't it neapolitan?" Zack tried.

Adriana rolled her eyes. "That's an ice cream flavor."

This time, *I* rolled my eyes. "Metrosexual. It's metrosexual, people," I cried, throwing up my hands. "And this is what Valesca charges a hundred thousand dollars a year in tuition for?"

"No, they charge that money so they can switch the chandeliers from Swarovski to Baccarat," Adriana corrected me.

"It's good to see my money's being put to good use," I huffed.

"I thought you were on scholarship," Parker pointed out.

"That's not the point."

I fished through my bag for my phone as a waitress came over to take our drink orders. After all that shopping, everyone had agreed to stop for some refreshments before heading to some restaurant named Masa for a sushi dinner.

“Oh, no!” I exclaimed.

“What’s wrong?” everyone asked at the same time.

“I think I left my phone in Barneys.” My face fell as I scrambled to get out of the booth. “I gotta go get it! My mom will kill me if I need to get another phone *again*.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” Parker asked, playing the role of concerned boyfriend perfectly.

I shook my head. “No, it’s fine.” I was already halfway out the door. “I’ll be right back!” I called over my shoulder.

I nearly ran down the street back to Barneys, glad I was in New York so I didn’t have to feel too bad about knocking into people.

When I arrived at the dressing room, I was relieved to see Tracy was still there.

She looked surprised to see me. “Hello again, Miss Lindberg,” she greeted me politely. “Can I help you? Is there something wrong with your purchases?” She sounded worried, obviously thinking about her commission.

I shook my head. “No, but did you find a phone by any chance? I think I might’ve left mine here.”

“Oh, well...” Tracy glanced at the closed dressing room door. “A gentleman went in right after you left. In fact, he’s in there now, so after he leaves, perhaps you can check.”

I nodded a bit impatiently. “Ok, thanks.” *If that “gentleman” steals my phone, I’m going to kick his butt*, I thought, a bit appalled at how violent I was becoming.

Stupid Roman Fiori. This was all his fault.

Ok, so it wasn’t directly his fault that I forgot my phone, but he makes a convenient scapegoat.

A few minutes later, the dressing room door swung open, and a tall, sandy-haired guy walked out.

My jaw dropped in shock. “James?”

He looked up, his eyes lighting up when he saw me. “Maya!” he exclaimed happily. “What a coincidence!”

“What—what are you doing here?” I stammered. I hadn’t spoken to him since the first time Roman “kidnapped” me and caused me to break my phone.

James shrugged, holding up a black suit. “I have an interview for an internship coming up, and I needed to get some business clothes,” he explained. “What about you? You don’t really strike me as the type of girl who shops at Barneys. And I mean that in the best way possible,” he added hastily.

“Oh, uh, I was just here to check out some homecoming dresses,” I replied. “But I think I may have left my phone here...”

“This wouldn’t happen to be your phone, would it?” James held up my new phone.

“Yeah, it is!” I couldn’t have been more relieved. I reached for it, but he held it out of my reach with a teasing smile.

I stopped, confused.

“I’m not giving you your phone back until I put something in it,” James explained, typing something into my phone. When he finished, he gave it back with a wink. “Now, you’ll have no excuse to not call me back.”

I blushed, suddenly remembering how our last conversation had ended. “I’m so sorry about the other day,” I apologized. “My phone, uh, died.”

Technically true. I was just going to spare him all the gory details.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” James assured it. A small smile lit up his face. “Although I do think you owe me a date for making me sick with worry like that,” he joked.

At least, I think he’s joking.

I turned even redder. “Um...well...” What do you say to something like that?

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” he persuaded. Oh. So he hadn't been joking. “And we can do something outside of Valesca, get away from all those snobs for a bit.”

I was actually a bit tempted, but I slowly shook my head. “I’m sorry, but I can’t,” I replied, slightly regretful. James seemed like a cool guy, and he was pretty cute, but if Parker was being loyal as my fake boyfriend, then I had to be loyal too. “I’m kind of...seeing someone.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding disappointed. “I suppose I should have guessed.” He gave me a small smile. “If you ever change your mind though, you know how to reach me.”

I nodded, smiling back. He really was nice. “Well, I should go. He’s, um, actually waiting for me.”

“Ok.” James nodded, gesturing to the suit. “And I guess I should pay for this before they think I’m trying to steal it,” he laughed. “Well, it was nice

running into you again, Maya. And you tell that boyfriend of yours he's lucky to have you, so he better treat you right." He winked at me.

By now, my face could be mistaken for a fire hydrant. "It was nice seeing you again too," I murmured, and with a quick wave, I headed back downstairs to the café where Adriana and the others were waiting. I couldn't stop a smile from spreading across my face though.

It was so nice to see a friendly, down-to-earth face, although I couldn't believe I managed to run into James in a city as big as New York.

What were the odds?

* * *

"Do I really have to wear this? It's uncomfortable," I whined, glaring down at the black cocktail dress I was stuffed into.

"Stop being such a baby," Roman said, sounding annoyed as he got out of the Town Car that had been chauffeuring us around all day. "That dress is Dolce & Gabbana."

"Considering Dolce & Gabbana seems to be Italian for I-can't-breathe-right-now, I don't really care," I snapped. I narrowed my eyes. "How do you know that, anyway?"

"They make men's clothes too. Plus, I can recognize their cut." Roman pursed his lips and gazed pointedly at Parker. "You need to educate your girlfriend on the finer points of life, if she's going to fit in."

Parker chuckled, wrapping an arm around my waist. "She's perfect the way she is," he said loyally.

"Aw, thanks, sweetheart," I gushed with exaggerated sweetness.

Roman grimaced. "I'm about to throw up," he muttered, not looking at us.

"Maybe you shouldn't go to dinner, then," I said innocently.

He ignored me.

“Settle down, children. Masa’s a restaurant, not a playground,” Adriana reminded us, as we entered the sleek, dimly lit restaurant.

We were immediately led to a table in the best part of the room.

“It’s ok, guys, I got this,” Parker said confidently, right after we sat down.

"Yeah, he knows all the best dishes," Zack said, nodding his golden head as he backed his friend up.

I shrugged. I didn't really care. Parker was the one who'd suggested we come here. As he rattled off a bunch of orders to the waiter, I gazed around the room.

It was so quiet and serene. And expensive-looking. I was half-glad Adriana had forced me to wear this dress, because all the other diners were pretty dressed-up too.

“You ok?” Carlo asked quietly.

I nodded. “This’ll be the second time today that I’m eating sushi,” I realized.

Carlo laughed. “Sadly, they don’t have Twix here as a dessert.”

I smiled, feeling touched all over again that he’d gone to all that trouble to send me lunch. Ok, so it had probably only taken a phone call, but still. It was the thought that counts.

“Really? Well, maybe they have a vending machine in here somewhere,” I joked.

Carlo let out another laugh.

I took a sip of my water, pleased. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw an older couple enter the restaurant. The man had his arm around the woman's waist, and he leaned down to whisper something in her ear before giving her a peck on the lips.

The woman giggled. She had on a low-cut green dress that looked even tighter than mine felt, while the man wore a gray suit that actually looked kind of familiar.

As I got a closer look, though, I suddenly realized why that suit looked so familiar, causing me to almost spit out my water.

The man looked up, and we locked eyes. A horrified expression crossed his handsome face as I felt the bile rise up in my throat.

No. No, it can't be! my mind screamed, as everything else in the restaurant seemed to fall away, leaving only my churning stomach and shocked, frozen body behind. *It CAN'T!*

I clapped a hand over my mouth, suddenly feeling unbearably nauseous.

"Maya! What's wrong?"

I wasn't even sure who asked me that question. I couldn't seem to think straight right now.

I pushed back my chair with a loud screech, causing everyone else in the restaurant to give me scandalized glares, but I couldn't care less what those overdressed snobs thought of me at the moment.

Biting back a sob and praying I didn't throw up right there on the floor, I ran out of the restaurant, even as I heard the man frantically call my name.

I burst through the doors and ran to the edge of the sidewalk, gripping a nearby lamppost for support as I dry heaved. Tears slowly ran down my face and blurred my vision, but they couldn't erase the image of my father kissing another woman, a woman who wasn't my mother, from my mind.

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CHAPTER 12

When I finally finished dry-heaving, I straightened up and slumped against the lamppost, my throat and eyes raw from crying.

Tonight was turning out to be the worst night ever. The fact everyone around me seemed so happy just made me more miserable.

I stared up at the sky, where the stars winked down at me. *Please, just let me wake up and find out it was all a horrible nightmare*, I silently pleaded. *Please!*

I was still standing there, hoping to wake up, when I felt someone touch my arm.

“Maya, look at me,” he pleaded.

And I knew that I wasn't going to wake up. Because this wasn't a dream, it was my life.

I yanked my arm away, glaring at my dad through eyes puffy from crying. No. Actually, he wasn't even my dad anymore. The dad I knew couldn't afford to go to restaurants like Masa—one of the most expensive in the world—with some slutty bimbo, to boot. He didn't lie to his family about going on business trips. And he definitely, *definitely* did not cheat on my mom.

“Don't touch me,” I spat, ignoring the hurt look that crossed his face. “I don't even know you anymore.”

“It's—it's not what you think,” my dad stuttered. “Why don't you just let me explain?”

“Oh, really? So what? Did I somehow hallucinate and *imagined* that you kissed that woman in there? Did the meaning of ‘going on a business trip’ change into ‘going to an expensive dinner in New York City with a bimbo’? Because unless those two things happened, then it’s *exactly* what I think!” I screamed, ignoring the looks passersby were throwing us.

“I—we—she’s—“My dad stopped, obviously at a loss for words.

“How could you do that to mom?” My lower lip trembled, and to my horror, I felt the tears rise again.

My dad let out a deep sigh, running a hand through his hair. Though it still held no flecks of gray, his face was weary, and for the first time, he looked every bit the 43-year old he was.

“Perhaps we should talk about this at home,” he suggested quietly.

I couldn’t believe it. He still had the nerve to say the word *home*?

“No!” I spat hatefully. “I want everyone to know what a *scumbag* you are!”

“Maya! Watch your language! I’m still your father, you know.”

“No you’re not! I *hate* you!” And with that, the tears started falling again, so that I barely noticed when someone pulled me protectively into his arms. “I hate you,” I repeated, sobbing into the person’s chest. I didn’t even care who it was. I just needed someone to lean on right now.

“Come on, why don’t we get you out of here?” I dimly heard Adriana suggest. “I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. Lindberg, but I think it’s best if Maya’s left alone for a bit.”

Obviously, she’d caught at least part of my rant.

I heard my dad agree in defeat, and before I knew it, the person whose arms I was in ushered me into the waiting Town Car. It wasn’t until then that I finally looked up.

I blinked in surprise. Even through my tears, I was able to make out the planes of Roman's face.

* * *

"Do you think Maya's going to be ok?" Zack asked, leaning over to whisper to Adriana as he stared at where the brunette was curled up in her seat, sleeping.

"She should be fine. She just needs some time." Adriana sighed. Poor girl. She's been through so much since school started, and they weren't even halfway through the semester yet.

"What bad luck. Out of all the sushi bars in all the world, he had to walk into ours," Parker said jokingly.

Adriana rolled her eyes. "It's nice to see you still have your sense of humor."

Parker shrugged. "Adultery's practically a fact of life in Valesca. Some people hide it better than others. And some take it better than others." He looked over at where Roman was sitting, staring down at his untouched glass. There was a zoned-out expression on his face. "There's nothing we can do except make the most out of it."

She didn't want to admit it, but Parker had a point. Affairs were more common than luxury cars in their town—they just ranged from discreet Mercedes to flashy Lamborghinis.

"Should someone wake her up? We're almost there." Parker checked his Rolex. "And she still hasn't eaten yet."

"I'll go do it," Carlo offered. He'd been unusually quiet since the dinner incident.

"No. I will," Roman suddenly said, taking everyone by surprise.

They all stared at him. Ignoring their shocked glances, Roman stood up from his seat and made his way down the lushly carpeted aisle to where Maya was dozing.

“Wow. Did he have a brain transplant or something?” Zack’s eyes were wide.

Carlo raised his eyebrows. “Should you really be surprised?”

“No, I guess not,” Zack allowed. “I suppose he is the best person to go talk to her right now.”

Adriana, though, didn’t say anything. Instead, she kept her eyes trained on Roman and Maya, a small smile playing on her lips.

It was time to just sit back and watch the show.

* * *

“Maya, wake up.” Someone was shaking my arm. They seriously needed to go away. “Wake up!”

“Leave me alone,” I mumbled, snuggling deeper into my seat. I could feel the delicious cover of sleep evaporating, and I was *not* happy.

Whoever it was sighed and dropped my arm.

Good. Now maybe I can go back—was that pasta?

My nose involuntarily twitched as the delicious smell of Italian food wafted into my nostrils. Reluctantly, I opened one eye, my mouth nearly watering at the sight of the huge bowl of pasta in front of me.

“That got your attention.” Roman smirked, taking the seat opposite me.

“You think you’re so clever,” I muttered, even as I sat up straight and grabbed a fork, eagerly digging in.

God, it was so good! Today was such a good food day.

Roman's jaw dropped slightly as he watched me shovel the food in my mouth. Ok, so I was not being ladylike, but whatever. I was *hungry*. I hadn't eaten since lunch and—

Suddenly, my chewing slowed as I remembered *why* I hadn't eaten since lunch. And just like that, my appetite was gone again.

"What's wrong? Isn't it good?" Roman asked, when I pushed the bowl away from me. I felt slightly nauseous.

"No, it's good, I'm just—not that hungry," I mumbled, staring down at my lap. I couldn't believe I was about to cry *again*. How much could a girl cry in one day?

A lot, apparently.

"Bullshit. You were just destroying that like you've never had food before." Roman paused. "Are you thinking about what happened at dinner again?" he correctly guessed in an unusual burst of astuteness.

I nodded, choking up.

"Are you going to tell your mom?"

I looked up. "Wow, way to make me feel better," I sniffled, even though I had no idea how to answer him.

Was I going to tell my mom? It would just be wrong to hide it from her, but at the same time, it would destroy her. I was completely trapped.

"There's no use going into denial and running from it." Roman's tone was bitter. "Might as well face the facts and salvage what you can from the debris that's left."

I drew my knees up to my chest and stared at him. "Why are you being so nice all of a sudden?"

Roman's head jerked up. "What—what do you mean?"

I couldn't help but giggle a little at the deer-caught-in-headlights expression on his face. "You're usually so nasty to me. Why are you being so nice now?"

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "We called a truce, remember?" he muttered.

"That didn't stop you from saying I looked like a shitty piece of modern art earlier."

Roman shrugged. "Well, you *did* look like a shitty piece of modern art. I just thought I'd let you know before you went to homecoming and became a laughingstock."

"Like that's going to happen. I'm dating Parker now, remember? They wouldn't dare," I half-joked.

"Oh. Right. How could I have forgotten?" he said sourly.

I gave him a strange look. He was so weird sometimes. "Anyway, I've been worse than a laughingstock at school," I added softly.

I didn't know why I was being so vulnerable all of sudden, and in front of Roman Fiori, no less. I guess it was because tonight had just drained all of my energy, and I didn't have enough left to put up my usual walls. Besides, he'd actually been pretty nice outside Masa.

Of course, I could also be a total idiot.

Roman stared at me, a rainbow of emotions flitting across his face before it finally settled on something that, had I not known better, I could've sworn was guilt.

We just looked at each other for several tense though not unnecessarily unpleasant seconds. A strange feeling had started to spread through my stomach until he broke eye contact and gestured at the food.

“You should eat. I don’t want you to faint before you get home.”

“I’m really not hungry.”

“Why do you have to be so difficult? Eat, or I’ll force-feed it to you,” Roman commanded gruffly, though it lacked his usual acidic edge.

“Ah, there’s the Roman I know and hate,” I quipped, though much more teasingly than usual.

I really was losing my mind.

“Eat!” he insisted.

When I didn’t budge, he grabbed a forkful of pasta and held it threateningly up to my mouth. “You sure you want to try me?”

“Fine, fine!” I snatched the fork from him. “You’re so mean,” I whined, even as my taste buds hummed in pleasure.

Roman just smirked, his gorgeous violet eyes smug.

Whoa. What? When the heck did I start thinking his eyes were gorgeous? Actually, when did I start noticing the prick’s eyes, period?

I shook my head, hoping to clear it, and wolfed down another mouthful of food.

Somehow, I’d gotten my appetite back.

Weird.

* * *

When I got home after school the next day, I was shocked to see my parents at the kitchen table, while my grandmother tottered around the kitchen, making her favorite chrysanthemum tea and muttering about how too much coffee caused people to grow wings.

She was a strange lady, my grandma.

“Hi, Maya!” my mother chirped, grimacing slightly as she took a sip of tea. She was obviously missing her usual java fix. “How was school?”

“Fine.” I gripped the straps of my backpack tighter and glared at my dad. “What are you doing here?”

“I...came back from my trip early, sweetie,” he said, clearing his throat and giving me a strained smile.

My mom stared at me curiously. Usually, I was always incredibly excited when my dad came home, and I always, always greeted him with a huge hug. I was a total daddy’s girl.

Or at least, I used to be.

“Really? And where was the trip to again?” I asked in a sickly sweet voice.

My dad shot me a look that was half-pained, half-warning, which made me even angrier. I couldn’t believe he had the nerve to waltz back in here like nothing was wrong!

Before he could say anything, my grandmother thrust a cup of tea at me. “Your memory so bad, Maya,” she scolded me. “He said many times before he go to Chicago.” She stared disapprovingly at my skirt. “Why skirt so short? Higher the hem, more brain cells you lose! Maybe that why you no remember. Have some tea. Good for mind.”

My lips flattened into a thin line as I silently accepted the tea. I’d gotten home late last night, well after everyone else had gone to sleep, and so this

was the first time I'd seen my mom since I saw my dad with that...that woman.

I was still torn about what I should do, but it sure as hell didn't feel right, standing there and trying to pretend everything was ok when it so, so wasn't.

"Actually, Maya, we have some news for you," my mom chirped, discreetly pouring some of her tea back into the pot when my grandmother wasn't looking.

"Yeah, what's that?" I mumbled, reaching for the plate of chocolate chip cookies on the kitchen counter.

Chocolate always makes me feel better.

My grandmother swatted my hand away. "No chocolate for you. You need to lose weight. Your butt too big. No one want to marry girl with big butt."

I groaned, wondering what it was about her and my butt. Seriously, this was like the fifteenth reference she'd made to it! "People like big butts nowadays, grandma. It's in fashion. Just look at Kim Kardashian."

She squinted at me. "Kim Katashi? Who that? She Japanese? Why you wanna be like Japanese girl?"

I give up.

My mom cleared her throat, gaining my attention again. "So, your dad and I have decided to go on a vacation!" she announced excitedly.

I nearly spit out my tea. "What?" I choked.

"Yep, we're going on a two-week trip to Napa Valley!" My mom's face was glowing. "We're long due for a vacation really, and we've both got so many days racked up at work that we figured, why not? Especially since they're having a deal that this adorable inn there, and we love wine, so—"

As she babbled on, I stared hard at my dad, who was pretending to be engrossed in his newspaper when I knew for a fact he most definitely wasn't. I didn't even have to ask who came up with the idea with this "vacation."

Probably suggested it so he could get mom away before I choose to spill the beans, I thought with a sneer, even though I wasn't sure if I would be. Spilling the beans, that is.

God, that is just so...so underhanded!

He was turning more and more into a stranger every day.

"Well, *Dad?* Don't you have something to say?" I asked pointedly, interrupting my mom mid-ramble.

His head jerked up guiltily. "What do you mean?" he asked, visibly gulping.

I gave him a big, fake smile. "Well, mom's obviously sooo excited about this trip. Aren't you?"

"Oh. Yeah. Of course." He laughed, a look of relief on his face. "Uh... you'll be all right here with your grandmother for two weeks, won't you?"

"Me?" My grandmother looked at him sharply. "What you mean?"

"Well...uh, since Shelly and I will be on the trip, it'll only be you and Maya in the house for a bit," my dad replied, obviously baffled.

My grandmother scowled. "What you think I am? Babysitter? Maya my granddaughter but I no live here! I have life back home." She sniffed. "There's annual mah-jongg tournament next week. I leave Friday. No way I let that Rose beat me again!" Her scowl deepened. "Rose, what stupid name that is," she muttered. "More like Loser Weed."

“You’re leaving this Friday? But we leave Sunday!” My dad turned to face my mom. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Oh, right.” My mom looked embarrassed. “I was just so excited it slipped my mind...”

I didn’t see what the big deal was. “So I’ll just stay here by myself. I’m seventeen, I can handle it.”

This was actually not a bad development. I needed the two weeks to figure out what I was going to do about the whole my-dad-is-cheating thing.

“What? No good!” my grandmother shrieked, waving a spatula frantically in the air. When did she get that out, anyway? “You girl! You cannot stay in house all by yourself for two weeks! Very, very dangerous!”

“Grandma, it’s Valesca,” I explained patiently. “The most dangerous things here are those birds that come out of nowhere and poop on you.”

But my grandmother wasn’t having it. “No.” She pointed the spatula at me. “You dating Parker now! I no want you and him in house by yourself when you having sex.”

My dad spewed his tea all over the table.

“Kids these days, they get up to kinky stuff when parents no around,” my grandmother continued. “I want grandchildren, but I no like kinky!”

“Parker? Who’s Parker? And why would you be getting kinky with him?” my dad sputtered.

“Parker’s her boyfriend, dear,” my mom informed him serenely.

Yeah, and you’d know that, if you weren’t so busy getting “kinky” with some slut yourself, I thought nastily, a bit appalled by my meanness. He deserved it though!

“I’m not going to be getting...’kinky’ with him!” I protested. “I can handle two weeks by myself! There’s no other option!”

“No!” My grandma stared at my parents. “Why you no postpone your trip till later?”

“Mom, I trust Maya. I’m sure she’ll be fine,” my mom assured her.

“No! Absolutely not! She can’t have the house to herself when she has a boyfriend,” my dad said vehemently. “We can just...hire someone to look after her.”

Like a *babysitter*?

My jaw dropped as fury rose up in me. “Are you kidding me?” I yelled, startling everyone in the kitchen. “I’m seventeen! I don’t *need* a babysitter for two weeks!” I clenched my fists. “God, you’re such a hypocrite!”

Unable to take it anymore, I stormed up the stairs to my room and slammed the door, leaving my stunned family in the kitchen.

* * *

Later that night, I was on my computer, half-heartedly Facebook stalking people I didn’t even care about in an attempt to forget how shitty my life was when someone knocked on the door.

“I’m sleeping,” I called out crankily, clicking on a random photo album.

My face screwed up in disgust. Eew! PDA overload! I shuddered and quickly exited the page. Some people seriously needed to keep their personal lives...personal.

“Maya, can I come in please?”

I stiffened. “I’m busy.”

“Please. I just need to talk to you for five minutes.”

I gripped my computer mouse so tight I was surprised it didn't break. Finally, I pushed back my chair, stormed over to the door, and yanked it open.

"Make it quick," I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest.

My dad stepped inside, closing the door behind him. He looked nervous. "Look, I think we should talk about..." He cleared his throat. "About what happened yesterday."

"You think?" My voice was sarcastic.

"Watch your tone, young lady," he automatically said.

I rolled my eyes. Like he had the authority to tell me to do anything anymore.

"Ok, I just wanted to say..." My father took a deep breath. "I was on a date with someone else."

Even though I already knew, I couldn't help but flinch when he finally admitted it.

My dad's eyes were pained. "I swear, I didn't mean to lie to you or your mom. I just..." He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "It gets hard sometimes, you know? I'm always traveling for work, and as wonderful as your mother is, sometimes she doesn't necessarily get how much stress I'm under...Lexi, though, she does. She works for the same company I do—"

"Are you in love with her?" I interrupted, my voice rather shaky.

"What? No!" My father's eyes widened as he shook his head. "No! Of course not. Maya, your mother's the one I love, but it gets so damn lonely on the road—"

And you just couldn't keep it in your pants. God, men were such jerks. Even the ones whom I thought were one of the few good ones left.

“—especially since we always end up on the same projects together. Honestly, though, yesterday was our first date.” My dad looked at me. “All the other times I’ve said I’ve been on business, I really was!”

“With her.”

He flushed slightly. “Sometimes. But it never went beyond flirting until... until recently. I know it was wrong of me. I swear, it’ll never happen again. Just...just don’t tell your mom, ok?”

I couldn’t believe it. “You want me to *keep* this from her?” I hissed.

I mean, I had thought about it, but it just seems so slimy for him to be the one to ask me to do it.

“Maya! Just look at it from another perspective,” my dad pleaded. “Look, I promise, I won’t ever see or talk to Lexi again unless it’s for professional purposes. Your mom doesn’t need to know, it’ll destroy the entire family. It was just a mistake.”

I swallowed. Maybe he had a point. I didn’t want my parents to divorce, even though my dad had made a major dick move. Most of all, though, I don’t think I could stand to see my mom in the pain I knew she’d be in if she found out.

“Did you sleep with her?”

“No,” my dad immediately said. “No, it never got that far. And it won’t. I promise.”

I sighed, feeling exhausted. My brain hurt. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was just a mistake, and everything didn’t have to change.

“How could you have even afforded that date anyway?” I muttered.

“I got a new credit card your mom doesn’t know about,” my dad answered somewhat sheepishly.

I snorted. How clever. Using a new card so my mom couldn’t see the charges. For someone who insisted it was a *one-time* thing, he certainly knew how to go about it.

“And I guess that’s why I suggested the two week trip,” my dad added. “To help us... rekindle that spark, I guess. Actually spend some time together.”

I wrinkled my nose. I didn’t even want to know what “rekindle that spark” meant.

“And you promise it’ll never happen again?” I demanded.

He nodded eagerly. “I promise.” He stared at me hopefully. “So, can we just keep this to ourselves? Please?”

After some hesitation, I finally, reluctantly nodded. I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. I *had* to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Not for him, or me, but for my mom and my family’s future.

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CHAPTER 13

At school the next day, I was practically a zombie. I hadn't gotten any sleep last night, and as a result, had slept through all of my morning classes. I was so distracted by my family drama that I wasn't even freaking out about the fact that I was probably screwed for next week's tests.

"Maybe you should go home early today," Venice suggested as we walked slowly to our next class. "You look like you're about to collapse."

"I concur."

I whipped my head around, and saw Adriana leaning against the wall outside the Scions' private classroom. I hadn't even noticed we were in this part of the school.

"I'm fine," I mumbled. "I can't just skip school."

"Don't be silly," the leggy blonde said, sounding exasperated. "You obviously need some serious R&R after yesterday. And if I'm right—which I usually am—you couldn't sleep last night, hence why you're walking around like a card-carrying member of the undead."

"Thanks. Do I look that horrible?" I asked dryly.

"You're getting there."

Adriana pushed herself off the wall and tossed her shining golden hair over her shoulder. As usual, she looked impeccable in a fitted suede jacket over a beaded tank and a pair of low-slung, perfectly faded Seven jeans that made her legs look miles long.

“Anyway, I’ve already secured permission from the school to take you two out for a girls’ day. Or afternoon, really.”

“Wait. You mean, I get to come too?” Venice asked excitedly, her green eyes even bigger than usual.

“Why not? You’re Maya’s best friend, and she needs as many friends around her as possible.” Adriana gazed at me with a hint of sympathy in her aqua eyes.

I shook my head. “Thanks for the offer but—“ Yawn. “I’ll be—“ Another yawn. “Fine.”

“Do I need to kidnap you?”

My face fell. If this kept up, I was going to break a world record for most kidnappings in a month. And I had no doubt Adriana would do it too.

“When you put it that way,” I groused, looking longingly down the hall, though I didn’t know why. My next class was AP Calculus BC, and I hated math.

Adriana looked pleased. “Good. Come on.” She began to walk down the hall towards the double glass doors that led outside.

Venice, at least, didn’t seem to have any hesitation in ditching school as she practically ran after the blonde, obviously thrilled at the idea of being able to miss calculus.

Sighing, I followed them into the backseat of a waiting chauffeured Rolls-Royce.

“Where are we going?” I asked, settling comfortably into the plush leather seat.

“La Maison de la Sérénité,” Adriana answered, putting on a pair of oversize Chanel sunglasses as she named the most expensive and exclusive spa in

town.

“Really? My mom loves that place,” Venice exclaimed. Leaning over, she whispered into my ear, “It’ll be good for you, Maya. I heard the masseuses there are *amazing*.”

I shrugged. “Ok,” I said. My voice was lackluster, but I felt a spark of excitement.

I’ve always wanted to go a spa.

“So what are you going to do about the whole babysitter thing?” Venice asked. I had filled her in on everything during lunch, which I’d taken in the library because I was too tired to deal with the Scions today.

Adriana’s head snapped up. “What babysitting thing?”

I glumly explained my father’s threat to her, and I saw anger flash across her face.

“Seriously? No offense, but that is so hypocritical of him,” she said, sounding annoyed.

“That’s what I said. What can I do?” I slumped down in my seat.

Adriana smirked. “Blackmail him?”

“I’ve thought about it, but I just don’t think I can go through with it,” I said honestly. “It’s not in my personality.”

She laughed. “That’s what I figured. You’re too nice sometimes, Maya.” She paused. “So you need someone to look after you for two weeks, huh?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Interesting.”

Right. Personally, I don't see anything interesting about my situation at all.

When we arrived, I couldn't help but gaze at the sleek, Japanese-style building in awe. It was surrounded by leafy trees and reflecting pools, and exuded an aura of utter serenity, just like its name implied.

In the breezy lobby, which was open on three sides, a slender dark-haired woman clad in all white greeted us with a warm smile.

"Miss Perry, Miss Lindberg, Miss France, please follow me," she said, leading us down a long hallway.

She showed us all into different rooms, explaining that "Miss Perry" had pre-booked different treatments for the three of us. I had gotten something called the Tahitian Goddess package, which included a manicure, pedicure, facial, body treatment, and 50-minute massage, all in a section of the spa that looked like, well, Tahiti.

Now, I don't consider myself a particularly materialistic person, but I had to admit, this treatment was nice. More than nice. I wondered briefly what it would be like to have so much money, to be able to buy whatever I wanted and go wherever I wanted without a second thought. I immediately dismissed it.

Sure, it'd be nice to have a private jet and weekly spa days and a closet full of Gucci and Prada, but if it meant I had even the slightest chance of turning into a typical Valesca rich-girl clone, then no thank you. I'll stick to land transportation and H&M like a normal person.

"Which color would you like, Miss Lindberg?" my pedicurist asked kindly, handing me a book filled with literally hundreds of nail colors by OPI, Essie, and Lippmann Collection.

"Whoa, this is a lot," I murmured, a bit overwhelmed.

Finally, though, I settled for a gorgeous deep burgundy. It seemed appropriate for fall.

By the time I received my Swedish massage, I was admittedly a million times more relaxed and refreshed than before.

Venice was right. The masseuses here *were* good.

Unfortunately, just as I was about to doze off, a loud knock on the door interrupted the tranquility. A moment later, the door swung open with a *bang*.

Letting out a surprised scream, I instinctively shot up from the massage table. Oh my god, was the spa being robbed or something?

No. It was much worse.

My jaw dropped when I saw Roman standing there. He was holding a bright pink handbag, for some reason.

“Wh-what are you doing here?” I stuttered.

He didn’t respond, and just stared at me with a rather stunned and embarrassed look on his face, which was flaming red.

I frowned. What reason did *he* have to be embarrassed?

Then I looked down, and gasped when I realized that I had to take my top off for the massage. Which meant that when I got up, there was nothing covering my torso. Which meant I was currently topless in front of Roman Fiori.

And that was when I really screamed.

* * *

“It was just a huge misunderstanding. My fault, really,” Adriana said, not sounding repentant enough for my liking as she walked up the little stone path that led to my house.

“Can we not talk about it?” I felt like the redness would never fade from my face, which was bad, because then my grandmother was *really* going to think I’d been up to “kinky stuff.”

“Ok,” Adriana chirped, sounding suspiciously like she was trying not to laugh. “That’ll teach me not to leave my Hermés behind anymore.”

“What I really want to know—“ I jammed my key into the lock. “—is how Roman ended up barging into *my* room.”

“I must’ve texted him the wrong room number,” Adriana answered innocently. “My bad.”

“Hmph.”

Likely story. Adriana was way too much of a perfectionist to get something like that wrong. She was up to something, I just didn’t know what. I was pretty sure I didn’t like it, though.

Still, I suppose I had to forgive her, since she *had* come up with a brilliant idea to save me the embarrassment of needing a babysitter while my parents were away. Hence, the reason why she was at my house right now.

“Whoa.” Adriana sucked in a breath as she stared at the living room, which looked like a tornado had just blown through it. “What is going *on*?”

“My grandmother is packing,” I answered matter-of-factly, sidestepping a stack of boxed ginseng.

Every time my grandmother visits, she somehow manages to accumulate two extra suitcases full of unnecessary...*stuff*, which she a) handed out to her friends back home, b) used to brag about her travel adventures, c) sold on eBay for twice its listing price, or d) all of the above (she had a tendency to take back gifts from people who offended her).

“Really?” Adriana picked up a skimpy black negligee, looking horrified. “This...is your grandmother’s?”

“Ew.” I whimpered, snatching the negligee from her hand and stuffing it under a sofa pillow so I didn’t have to look at it. “No! I guess my mom is packing too.”

I resisted the urge to gag. That was just gross. No daughter should have to see her mother’s lingerie.

“Maya! You home, honey?” My mom entered the living room, panting slightly as she set a giant cardboard box onto the floor with a small groan.

“Hey, mom. What’s going on?”

“Oh, just some cleaning and packing,” she replied cheerfully.

“Your grandmother’s in the kitchen.” She lowered her voice. “I think she’s cleaning out our sausage supply.”

“No problem here.” I shrugged. I was more of a bacon girl.

“Oh, you brought a new friend!” my mom exclaimed happily when she finally noticed Adriana. She held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Maya’s mom.”

“Good evening, Mrs. Lindberg,” Adriana said politely, shaking my mom’s hand with her own freshly manicured one. “I’m Adriana.”

“Oh, please, call me Shelley. Mrs. Lindberg makes me sound so old.” My mom made a face. “I’m so sorry about the mess, it’s usually not like this. Things are just a bit hectic this week.”

“I think Maya may have mentioned that to me earlier. You and Mr. Lindberg are going to Napa Valley?”

My mom nodded, a grin lighting up her face.

I swallowed, the tension coming back into my muscles as guilt took over again. I hated lying to her, but I hated hurting her more. Hopefully, my dad

had been telling the truth and wouldn't do it again.

I would never forgive him if he did.

"I have a family friend who owns a vineyard there. They hold some amazing wine tastings a few times a year, and I believe they're actually planning one for next week. I could put in a call and reserve a spot for you if you would like," Adriana offered.

Wow, that was pretty generous of her. I knew she was trying to butter my mom up, but still.

"Oh, no, I couldn't..." My mom's voice trailed off. We could all see she really wanted to say yes. "It's too much trouble."

"It's no trouble at all," Adriana laughed. "I just have to make a call. What do you say? It'll make your trip *really* unforgettable."

"Well..." my mom bit her lip. "If it's convenient for you, then I suppose it would be nice."

"Great, I'll call them now. Please excuse me for a minute."

Adriana shot me a meaningful look as she stepped outside to make the call.

I gulped, as my mom started sifting through the items in the cardboard box. Here goes nothing. "So, mom, about the babysitter thing..."

She sighed, pulling out a stack of dusty guidebooks. Where had *those* come from? "I know what you're going to say, sweetie, but unfortunately, your father and I have already made up our minds. Now, you know I trust you, but your grandmother is right. It's very dangerous for a girl to stay by herself for two weeks."

"You're right."

My mom stopped and stared at me in surprise. "I am?"

I nodded vigorously. “Yep. It is dangerous for me to stay here all alone. I don’t think a babysitter is the solution, though. I mean, not only is it *incredibly* expensive to hire someone to watch over me for that long, but who knows if the babysitter is even, um, trustworthy? Besides, I’m guessing it’s going to be a girl, and two girls aren’t safer than one, really.”

“I suppose you have a point,” she reluctantly agreed. She eyed me suspiciously. “And *I’m* guessing you’ve come up with a solution?”

I beamed. “Now that you mention it, I have.” I tried to sound casual. “Like Adriana said, I was talking to her about it earlier, and she suggested that I just stay over at her house for the next two weeks. It’ll be like an extended sleepover.”

My mom frowned.

Before she could say anything, I quickly added, “Think about it. It’ll be so much safer and better than a babysitter. Her house has security that would put the Pentagon to shame, and there’s always staff around, anyway. Besides, we go to school together, so I can even get a ride to and from Valesca without having to walk. And you don’t have to worry about me trying to cook at home and burning the kitchen down.”

My mom winced a little, obviously remembering the time I’d tried to scramble eggs and ended up setting the pan on fire instead.

“I don’t know, won’t you be intruding? What will her parents say? Two weeks is so much hassle...”

“Oh, it’s no hassle at all, Shelley,” Adriana said smoothly, suddenly materializing again. “My parents have already agreed, and honestly, I would *love* to have Maya stay over for two weeks.” She smiled. “It’ll be like having a sister.”

I held my breath, watching the indecision play over my mother’s face. “I’ll have to think about it,” she finally said. “I’ll talk to your father and get back

to you later.”

Yes! That was a total yes! Once my mom says she’ll “think about it,” it was as good as done.

“Thank you, mom, thank you, thank you, thank you,” I gushed, running over to give her a hug.

She laughed, waving me off. “All right, you troublemaker you. Why don’t you go in the kitchen and help your grandmother sort out what she needs?”

“Ok,” I said happily. I would’ve agreed to anything now that I didn’t need a babysitter.

I bounded into the kitchen, where I saw my grandmother standing on her tippy-toes on a chair, pulling down a can of sardines I didn’t even know we had.

“Grandma! Let me do it,” I called. “You might get hurt.”

“I fine,” she said impatiently, dropping the can onto the counter with a clang. She hopped off the chair, surprisingly agile for her age. “Why you put fish up so high? So hard for me to reach,” she said crankily.

She noticed Adriana. “Who are you?”

“I’m Adriana, one of Maya’s classmates,” Adriana answered with some amusement.

My grandmother examined Adriana head to toe, looking for a flaw to dissect. When she couldn’t find anything, she finally said, “Put hair away. Too blonde. Blinding me.”

“So, do you need any help?” I asked, staring at the kitchen counters, which were loaded down with a mishmash of stuff.

My grandmother shoved a can of Pillsbury cookie dough at me.

“What this?”

“It’s cookie dough, grandma.”

“Cookie dough?” She looked horrified. “Why cookie dough have ghost as mascot?”

“Ghost?” I was confused. “That’s not a ghost, it’s the Pillsbury Doughboy! It’s a really famous mascot, haven’t you seen it before?”

She scowled. “No!” She shuddered, tossing the cookie dough into the garbage.

I let out a whimper. That was my favorite!

“No wonder this house have such bad energy, when you all buying stuff with ghosts,” my grandmother scolded. “You eat too much of that, *you* turn to ghost. Why you think people who eat so much pork not as smart as people who no eat pork? It’s because their brain slowly turn to pig’s brain.”

I stared at her. Where did she *get* this stuff? “I don’t think it’s the same thing, grandma. For one, cookie dough is just...dough. It’s not meat.”

She ignored me.

“You become what you eat,” she lectured. “Eat more fish. It’s good for brain.”

“But I can already swim pretty well,” I joked.

I heard Adriana snicker beside me. Sadly, the joke was lost on my grandma. “And no more cookie dough, young lady. No wonder you gain weight.”

I rolled my eyes. I loved my grandmother and all, but jeez, she was not good for a teenage girl’s self-esteem. Or anyone’s self-esteem, really.

“You sure you want the sardines, grandma?” I wandered over to the counter and picked up the can of fish, wrinkling my nose. “I don’t know how long it’s been here.”

“Good.” My grandmother cackled. “I give to Loser Weed. She deserve it, cheated me out of hundred dollars last year.”

Loser Weed? Oh, she was talking about Rose, her biggest mah-jongg rival.

“Blondie, help me and Maya put stuff in suitcase,” my grandmother ordered, snapping her fingers like she was a diva or something. “And *no* drop my stuff, or you pay!”

I stifled a laugh, refraining from telling her Adriana had enough money to buy out all the supermarkets in town ten times over.

I was impressed, though, when Adriana actually did as she was told. Wow. I’m pretty sure the closest she’d ever gotten to physical labor before was walking from one spa room to the next.

I blanched a bit at my own thoughts. *Wow, way to stereotype, Maya*, I scolded myself.

It took the four of us—me, Adriana, my mom, and grandmother—two hours to pack up everything into suitcases or throw them out in the garbage.

When we were done, I collapsed onto the sofa, exhausted.

“That was pretty fun,” Adriana said cheerily, sitting down beside me.

I stared at her. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, it’s something new.”

Huh. I think she really is serious.

My grandmother tottered over and sat down on my other side. She frowned, then leaned over and sniffed me.

Oook. “Grandma, what are you doing?”

“What you do? You smell like flowers.”

“I went to the spa earlier,” I explained.

“Oh.” My grandmother sniffed me again. “You go to spa more often. Makes you smell better than usual.”

My face burned as Adriana burst out laughing.

See what I mean about my grandmother being bad for a girl’s self-esteem?

* * *

Zack closed his eyes, his fingers flying over the keyboard in his room as he did his cover for One Republic. “*It’s too late—*“

Bang!

Zack jumped a foot in the air, then glared at his sister, who had already jumped into his bed and was paging through his lyrics journal with a bored look on her face.

“Adri, how many times do I have to tell you not to do that?” he complained, snatching the journal from her.

“No matter how many times you tell me, I’m going to do it anyway.” She grinned cheekily at him. “That’s what twins are for.”

“You should’ve just stayed at that Swiss boarding school,” he huffed, climbing in next to her. “Where were you earlier?”

“I went to the spa, then Maya’s house,” Adriana replied casually. She held out her hand. “Isn’t this manicure fabulous?”

“I’m not gay, Adri, stop trying to talk to me about manicures,” he grouched.
“What do you want?”

She widened her eyes. “What makes you think I want anything?”

“Well...” Zack tapped a finger on his chin. “Since we’ve been born, you’ve come into my room about a million times, and you’ve wanted something every time, so I’ll just call it a hunch.”

“Awww.” She ruffled his hair. “I think my baby bro is getting smarter!”

“I hate you,” he pouted.

“No you don’t. You looove me, right?” Adriana gave him a huge hug.

“Stop! You’re choking me!” He couldn’t help but laugh though. “All right, I promise to help you if you stop it!”

Adriana pulled back, a mischievous look on her face. “Ok, but you promised.”

Zack couldn’t help but be a bit scared. “What is it?”

“I need you to help me get Maya and Roman together.”

His jaw dropped. “*What? Why?!*” Zack shook his head frantically. “No way. She’s Parker’s girlfriend! I can’t just betray a friend like that.”

She rolled her eyes. “I take back what I said earlier, you haven’t gotten smarter. It’s obvious they’re not really dating, genius!”

Zack frowned. Maya and Parker seemed pretty couple-y to him. “What makes you think that?”

“For one, I actually use my two eyes. Anyone can see they’re just friends. Ask Carlo if you don’t believe me. You and Roman are the only ones dense enough to fall for their façade.”

Zack blinked. Huh...he supposed it *did* make sense. The whole relationship had been pretty random. “Well, everyone else at school fell for it too!”

Adriana just looked at him.

His shoulders slumped. “Oh. I guess you have a point. But why do you want to get her with Roman? Is it because of the bet?”

“Kind of,” she said vaguely. “Look, once we get them together, I’ll explain it to you, but for now, I need your help, ok? I have a theory, and I need you to prove it.”

“Fine.” Zack shrugged.

He listened to Adriana’s plan, and couldn’t help but laugh. Oh man. If everything worked out the way his sister wanted, it was going to be a hell of a show.

CHAPTER 14

“Maya! Mayaaaa!! HELP!”

I turned at the sound of someone calling my name, and raised my eyebrows when I saw Zack running toward me, frantically waving his arms in the air.

“Hey, Zack, what’s wrong?” I asked, taking note of the panicked expression on his face.

“Something terrible happened!” he exclaimed, widening his blue eyes until they were the size of saucers.

I stared at him skeptically. Zack was a bit of a drama queen, so I wasn’t sure how seriously I should take this. “Did you stub your toe again?”

“No! It’s even worse! Come on, I’ll explain later!” He grabbed my wrist and began dragging me down the hallway and into the back stairway that led to the Scions’ lounge.

“Oof!” I flinched as I slammed into the railing of the stairway. “If that bruises, you owe me a year’s supply of chocolate!” I called after him, doing my best not to trip on the stairs at the speed we were going.

Zack came to an abrupt stop, causing me to walk straight into him.

“Ow,” I whimpered, hating myself for sounding like a baby. I couldn’t help it though. Walking into Zack was like walking into a brick wall.

“Sorry,” Zack chirped, not sounding at all sorry.

Maybe a lack of apology ran in the family or something.

I followed him into the lounge, keeping an eye out for blood, seizures, or wild animals running around. Nope.

“What’s the emergency?” I asked, slightly annoyed that I was going to miss lunch *again*. It was turning out to be a worrying pattern, and it’s not like I’ve been having the best week anyway.

“Look, guys, she’s here!” Zack announced, ignoring my question as he bounded over to where Parker, Adriana, and Carlo were seated.

Parker and Adriana were arguing furiously over something, while Carlo was lounging on the sofa, reading a worn copy of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Hmm, Ayn Rand, huh? I respected her as an intellectual, though I didn’t quite agree with her philosophy.

I briefly wondered where Roman was, but Zack’s voice broke through my thoughts. “Maya, tell them!”

“Tell them what?”

“Red, black, or white?”

I stared at him blankly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to know,” Carlo spoke up, peering at me over the top of his book with a slightly annoyed look on his face.

It didn’t seem like he was annoyed at me though, more like he was annoyed by his friends.

I crossed my arms over my chest. “What are you talking about? Red, black, or white *what?*”

“Lingerie, silly,” Adriana informed me in a you-should-know-this voice. “I bet these two idiots—“

“Hey!” Zack and Parker exclaimed at the same time.

She pretended she didn’t hear them. “—that obviously you would choose red lingerie over black or white, because you have good taste and so you would know it sets off your coloring—“

“But black’s *sexier*,” Parker butted in, throwing his hands up in exasperation. “There is nothing in this world that’s hotter than black lace.” He looked dreamy-eyed at the mere thought.

“Black’s too slutty,” Zack argued. “Maya’s more innocent than that! Of course she’d go for white!”

“Don’t be silly, white’s only for weddings—“

“Red’s the color of passion—“

“I’m telling you, it’s about innocence!”

“I’m her boyfriend, and *I* say it’s about sexiness—“

“Stop!”

The three of them shut up, obviously shocked.

“*What—*“ My tongue suddenly felt too heavy for my mouth. “—are you *talking* about? Why are you talking about my...my—“ I felt my cheeks heat up as I lowered my voice on the last word. “—*lingerie?*”

“Oh, My-My, you’re so cute,” Zack cooed.

I made a face. My-My?

“Homecoming is in three weeks! Which means, you know, it’ll be time.”

Now I was even more confused. “Time for what?”

The others exchanged amused glances, except for Parker, who just smirked.

“Well, it just so happens that it’ll be your one-month anniversary with Parker, so...it’ll be the perfect time to consummate your relationship,” Adriana announced proudly.

My mouth fell open, my entire body suddenly feeling like it was on fire. No. She did *not* just—consummate—what?!

“Yeah, I’m surprised you guys haven’t done it yet,” Zack added, throwing himself into an armchair, a slightly confused look on his face. “Usually Parker does it, you know, the first night.”

I snapped my mouth shut. “I’m *not* con—I’m—you—we—“ I sputtered, unable to form a coherent sentence in my humiliation.

“Oh, honeybee, don’t think I’m pressuring you, I won’t do that,” Parker assured me, looking like he was trying not to laugh. “But, *just* in case, you should have your lingerie options planned out. Like I said, I prefer black—“

“I’m not having sex with you!” I yelled.

No one seemed fazed by my outburst.

“You know, I heard it’s bad luck if you don’t consummate a relationship within a month,” Adriana commented thoughtfully.

“That’s a lie. I know plenty of people who didn’t have sex within a month. That’s so soon,” I insisted.

“Oh yeah?” She gave me a challenging look. “Like who?”

“Like—like—“ I was stumped. Damn it.

“That means it’s true!” Zack seemed inordinately excited as he jumped up from his seat. “It *is* unlucky!”

“What’s unlucky?”

I immediately froze when I heard the familiar voice behind me.

“Hi, Rome! You’re just in time!” Zack beamed.

“For what?”

I gulped, my heart racing in nervous anticipation as I stared stubbornly ahead, refusing to look at him as he brushed past me and settled into a chair next to Carlo.

However, I did have perfect peripheral vision, which told me he didn’t even spare a glance in my direction.

Unable to help myself, I glared at him. Oh, of course. He walks in on me topless and he can’t even be bothered to acknowledge my existence the next day.

He’s probably seen too many girls topless, I thought, pressing my lips into a thin line. For some reason, the thought irked me even more.

“They’re just being silly,” Carlo sighed, flipping a page in his book.

“We’re not being silly, it’s really important,” Zack insisted. Turning to Roman, he added, “We’re choosing the color of Maya’s lingerie.”

I groaned. *Ground, please open up a hole and swallow me now.*

Roman’s cheeks turned slightly pink, and he glanced quickly in my direction.

Without thinking, I crossed my arms over my chest, causing him to smirk slightly.

“Why are you choosing her lingerie?”

“We’re planning the consummation of Maya and Parker’s relationship,” Adriana explained calmly, as if she were talking about a birthday celebration or something.

Roman stilled. “Why are you talking about it like it’s a birthday celebration?” he asked sharply.

I blinked. Ok, that was just creepy.

“Well, it’s something to be proud of. Our little My-My’s growing up,” Zack sighed.

“I’m not anyone’s little anything,” I said, annoyed. “And stop calling me My-My.”

“I think it’s cute.”

“It makes me sound five years old.”

“That’s why it’s cute!”

There was just no arguing with Zack when he’s on a sugar high. Which is always, now that I think about it.

“So, we were in between red, black, or white,” Adriana said casually. “What do you think, Rome? Carlo here is being a spoilsport and won’t participate.”

Carlo smirked but didn’t say anything.

“None,” Roman ground out.

“Oh, you mean, no underwear at all?” Parker looked impressed. “Hey, that’s a pretty good idea.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Roman snapped. “Why are we even talking about this? What Parker and Maya do is their own business, so leave it up to *them* to decide!” He glared at me.

I frowned. What did *I* do? I didn’t even say anything!

“I’m going to the bathroom, and when I come back, I hope you guys are talking about something a little more important!” With that, he abruptly stood up and stormed out of the room, leaving behind a stunned silence.

I was rooted to the spot. Ok, what just happened?

“I think he voted for white,” Zack finally volunteered. “It’s the closest color to nude.”

* * *

“I can’t believe you didn’t help me earlier,” I groused, hugging my books to my chest as I walked down the hall with Carlo after school. “I almost died from embarrassment.”

Carlo shrugged, a small smile on his face. “It was pretty entertaining. Besides, they’re just messing with you.”

“I don’t think so. Adri’s taking me lingerie shopping later,” I said glumly, casting a pointed glance at where the blonde and her equally evil twin were walking in front of us.

“No talking about me behind my back!” she called without even looking at us.

How did she *do* that?

“Well, I’m sure you’ll have fun. Girls like shopping.”

I pouted. “Stop making fun of me.”

“I’m not making fun of you, I’m just having fun at your expense.” Carlo grinned, then lowered his voice. “Although I think animal-print would suit

you better. It's feisty, just like you."

I pursed my lips, my cheeks heating up again. "I'm not talking to you anymore," I declared haughtily, quickening my pace to catch up with Adriana and Zack.

Carlo just laughed.

"Hey, girl, excited about shopping, huh?" Adriana teased.

"Thrilled."

My sarcasm seemed to be lost on the twins, because Zack nodded enthusiastically. "You finally came around! You're going to have so much fun!"

And surprisingly enough, I did have fun. While the boys went to play basketball, Adriana took me to La Perla, which sold the most gorgeous lingerie I've ever seen in my life. I balked at spending \$300 on a bra, though Adriana insisted on buying it for me.

"It's on Parker, anyway," she said, giving me a wink as she slid Parker's black Amex across the counter.

When we finally finished, we headed to Il Serrano for dinner with the boys, the bags upon bags of bras and thongs and teddies and chemises burning into my thigh. I couldn't believe I'd just charged that much money to Parker's card. I'd tried to resist, but Adriana was having none of it, and I still needed to keep up my pretense as Parker's girlfriend.

Besides, as expected, Adriana's really good at persuading people.

When we got to the restaurant, Zack, Parker, and Roman were already seated in the private VIP dining room.

"Hey, honeybee," Parker said smoothly, standing up to kiss me on the cheek. "Did you find anything you liked?"

Adriana answered for me. “She definitely found a lot of stuff *you* would love.”

“Oooh.” Parker grinned, pulling out my chair for me. “I like the sound of that.”

Roman rolled his eyes. “Can we order now?” he asked crankily, pressing a button on the side of the table.

“Jeez, what’s up your butt?” Adriana unfolded her napkin and laid it across her lap.

“Ignore him, he’s been like that since lunch.” Zack smirked.

The waiter appeared and took our orders. After a bit of indecision, I finally settled on the pancetta.

“Where’s Carlo?” I asked, noticing the Colombian’s conspicuous absence.

“He had something to do,” Zack replied vaguely, looking a bit nervous as he exchanged a glance with the others.

Weird.

“So what color did you go for, honeybee?” Parker asked, breaking the inexplicable tension.

It took me a minute to realize what he was talking about. “Uh...I don’t know...” I mumbled, wondering why fate insisted on embarrassing me every day.

“Whatever color you choose, I’m sure you’ll look amazing,” Parker declared dramatically, grabbing my face and planting a giant smooch on my forehead.

“Come on, Parker, you can do better than that,” Adriana said, leaning back and grinning wickedly at us. “Why don’t you give her a kiss on the lips?”

“Yeah, I’ve never seen you guys kiss!” Zack cried, jostling the table in his excitement. “Do it! Kiss, kiss, kiss,” he chanted, banging rhythmically on the table like an eight-year-old.

Parker raised an eyebrow at me as I stared at him, horrified. Crap. I’d hoped the others wouldn’t notice he and I never did anything more than hold hands!

“What’s with the hesitation? I mean, a kiss wouldn’t be a big deal—unless you guys aren’t really dating...” Adriana’s voice trailed off.

Parker shrugged apologetically, then slowly leaned in. I immediately tensed.

“Sorry, honeybee,” he whispered in my ear, so the others couldn’t hear. “We have to keep up this façade until your grandmother leaves. Just in case.”

I sighed. Even though there was little chance of my grandmother finding out Parker and I weren’t really dating, I didn’t want to risk it.

“Besides...” Parker’s smile turned sly. “I’ve always wanted to do this.”

Before I had a chance to react, he pulled me closer to him and planted a long, lingering kiss, right on my lips, the type of kiss that left onlookers with no other conclusion than the fact that we were most definitely a couple.

The sound of a glass slamming on the table interrupted us.

I pulled back, slightly dazed. Whoa. I know I wasn’t really dating Parker, but the boy can kiss.

He winked at me, a smug look on his face.

I rolled my eyes, my head clearing a little. Not that I was going to tell him that. He had a big enough ego as it is.

We turned to face the others, whose mouths were practically grazing the floor.

A strange expression flickered over Adriana's face, but when she saw me looking, she quickly covered it up. In fact, it was gone so fast I wondered if I'd imagined it.

"I would appreciate it if you two can refrain from PDA," Roman said, narrowing his eyes at us as he tightened his grip on his water glass. "Some of us are trying to eat."

"But the food isn't out yet," Zack pointed out, scratching his head. "In fact, it—oh!"

"What happened?" Parker and I asked simultaneously, as Zack doubled over with a groan.

"Oh, god, my stomach hurts," Zack gasped, pushing back his chair and scrunching his face up in pain.

"What? You were fine just a minute ago!" I exclaimed, slightly worried. I've never seen Zack like this.

The blond grimaced. "I must've eaten something bad earlier..."

"I told you to stop stuffing everything you see into your stomach," Adriana scolded him. "Does it really hurt that much?"

"What does it look like?" Zack snapped. "God!" He doubled over even more, clutching his stomach like he was dying.

I gulped. "Maybe we should call an ambulance or something," I cried, rifling frantically through my bag for a phone. Zack must *really* be in pain, because he never snapped at *anyone*. "What if he has food poisoning?"

“Don’t call 911, it’ll just cause a scene.” Adriana threw her napkin onto the table and stood up. “I’ll drive him to the ER.” She shot us an apologetic look. “Sorry to bail on dinner like this, but as much of a doofus as Zack is, I don’t want him to die.”

“I can’t believe you’re—making fun—of me—while I’m on my—deathbed,” Zack gasped.

Adriana sighed. “Parker, can you help me bring this drama queen out to the car?”

“Sure,” Parker replied easily. He gave me another wink. “I’ll be right back, honeybee.”

“Text me and let me know how things go,” I told Adriana anxiously.

She nodded, slipping one arm around Zack’s shoulders while Parker supported him on his other side. The trio staggered out the door, leaving just me and Roman behind.

Well, this was awkward.

“I hope Zack’s ok,” I finally said, fiddling with the silverware in front of me.

“He’ll be fine.” Roman’s voice was curt. He didn’t say anything else.

So much for conversation.

We just sat there in silence for what seemed like forever, studiously avoiding each other’s gazes.

What’s taking so long? I thought, biting my lip and jiggling my foot nervously. I didn’t deal well with awkward silences, and Parker should’ve been back by now.

Suddenly, Roman cleared his throat, startling me.

My head jerked up and I stared at him, confused.

“So.” Roman shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I, uh, just wanted to apologize for—for yesterday.”

My jaw dropped. Had he just voluntarily apologized to me? For the second time? *And* he stuttered!

Hell must have frozen over by now.

I was too stunned to say anything, and he obviously took my silence to mean I didn’t accept his apology, because he continued, “I really didn’t mean to walk in on you while you were—er, you know—“ He broke off, his face turning red.

My own face turned the exact same shade of Il Serrano’s crimson walls as I remembered yesterday’s scene. “It’s ok,” I squeaked, jiggling my foot even more. “It’s not your fault. Adri just texted you the wrong number.”

“Right. Right.” Roman nodded absentmindedly. “And just so you know, I didn’t look or anything. I mean, I looked, but I didn’t stare. I mean, I’m not that sort of person—“

I couldn’t help but giggle a little at his discomfort.

“—I wouldn’t stare at you anyway, is what I meant to say.”

“Are you calling me ugly?” I couldn’t help but tease him a little.

Hey, you would do the same thing! It’s not like chances to make fun of Roman Fiori came along all that often.

Roman turned even redder. “No! That’s not what I meant! It’s—well, you’re Parker’s girlfriend, so that would be...inappropriate.”

“Very,” I agreed, hiding a smirk as he shifted again in his seat, an adorable frown on his face.

I blinked. Wait. Did I just think Roman was *adorable*? Oh, god, maybe Zack wasn’t the only one getting sick tonight.

Thankfully, the door swung open and Parker strolled back in, snapping his phone shut.

My relief faded when he gazed at me apologetically. “I just got off the phone with my mom, I have an emergency back home,” he said with a sigh. “I have to go.”

“What? What about dinner?” I blurted, panicking. No way was I going to stay here with just Roman!

“I wish I could stay but I can’t, I’m really sorry.” Parker frowned. “I do have to go though. I hope you understand.”

“Maybe we can do a group dinner later,” I suggested, scrambling to stand up. “Since no one’s here anyway.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s a shame for all that food to go to waste. I spoke with the chefs before I came back and boxed up Zack, Adri, and my meals. You two just enjoy your food here.”

“No, that’s all right. Parker, I can just go with you.” I begged him with my eyes, hoping we’d spontaneously developed an ESP connection overnight. “I can help you at home!”

“That’s a sweet offer, honeybee, but I’m afraid you won’t be of much help. Rome here can drive you home, right?”

Parker glanced over at where Roman was watching us with sharp eyes.

“Right,” the violet-eyed Scion finally replied.

“See? Everything will be fine.” Parker kissed my cheek. “I’ll see you tomorrow, honeybee.”

My shoulders slumped. “Bye,” I said glumly, as he walked out just as the waiter came in bearing our food.

I poked at my pancetta, my nerves doubling as it suddenly hit me that I was eating in a private dining room with just Roman.

“You know, poking at your food like that won’t make you any less hungry,” Roman said.

I looked over at him. He stared back emotionlessly, all traces of his previous adorable-ness gone, which is probably a good thing.

“You should eat.” He nodded curtly at my plate. “I know you’re sad your lover boy’s gone, but I don’t want you starving on my watch.”

“I am eating,” I protested. “See?” I took a bite of my pancetta to prove my point.

Roman snorted, then abruptly changed the subject. “So you and Adri went shopping earlier today, huh?”

“Yeah...” Where was he going with this?

“Funny, I figured you and Parker would’ve done the deed already,” he commented casually, digging into his own food.

I froze. “Why? Because I’m such a slut?” I asked lightly, trying not to show how much the assumption actually hurt.

Roman’s jaw tensed. “Because it’s Parker,” he answered flatly.

I stared down at my plate. “We’ve only been dating for a week...”

“Guess you’re looking forward to homecoming then.”

“What makes you say that?”

His lips twisted into a wry smirk. “So you guys can finally do what you’ve wanted. Isn’t that why you bought all that lingerie?”

I glared at him. “Have you ever heard the saying, when you assume, you make an ass of u and me?”

Roman shrugged nonchalantly, but his jaw was still tight. “I’m right though.”

“No, you’re not,” I snapped. I didn’t know why I was getting so riled up. I shouldn’t care what he thought of me, but I was getting undeniably frustrated and couldn’t stop the stream of words that came out of my mouth next. “You don’t even know anything about our relationship! Besides, I’ll have you know that I don’t even know if I want to—to do anything homecoming night! I mean, I’m a virgin, for God’s sake!”

The minute I said that, I slapped a hand over my mouth, horrified. Oh god, I did *not* just say that!

Roman gaped at me, his fork frozen halfway to his mouth. It would’ve been a funny sight, if I wasn’t too busy resisting the urge to crawl under the table and hide.

“You’re a virgin?” he spluttered.

I blushed. “Is it really that hard to believe?” I muttered, grabbing my water and gulping it all down, hoping to ease the fire that had spread to my neck.

I couldn’t believe we were sitting here, talking about my love life.

“But—but—“ He seemed to be at a loss for words.

I sighed wearily. “Don’t say anything. Let’s just eat, ok?”

I wasn't expecting him to let it go just like that, so imagine my surprise when Roman actually shut up and ate the rest of his dinner in silence.

When we finished, we walked outside, shivering a little in the brisk fall air. Roman unlocked his car, and I actually held my breath as I slid into the passenger seat. His car was so state-of-the-art and expensive, even compared to the other Scions' vehicles, that I was a bit afraid I would damage it or something.

"You know, you can sit all the way back," he commented, pulling out of the parking lot. "The seat's not made of glass."

"I know that." I tried to sound confident, but I did relax a little.

We were already halfway to my house when he spoke again.

"Are you really a virgin?"

And just like that, I tensed again. "I don't lie," I answered a bit sharply. Ok, maybe sometimes, but he didn't have to know that!

Roman glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. "And you're going to give it up to Parker, just like that?"

I sighed, exasperated. "I told you we might not even do anything." We *definitely* weren't going to do anything, since he and I weren't really dating, but I wasn't going to tell Roman that.

"Well, I hope you don't. Once he gets what he wants, he's just going to toss you aside," Roman said flatly.

I laughed a bit disbelievingly, not sure whether to be insulted or a bit touched by his concern. "Thanks a lot."

"I'm just warning you."

"Thanks for the warning, but I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself."

“Sure you can.” Roman slammed down on the brakes at a stop sign, and I silently thanked my mom for teaching me to always put on my seatbelt before anything else when I got in a car. “If he breaks your heart, don’t come running to me.”

I snorted. “Yeah, you’re the first person I would go running to when I have a problem,” I said sarcastically. “Why do you care so much anyway?”

“I *don’t*.”

“Uh-huh,” I replied, making it clear I was unimpressed.

“I really don’t!”

“I never said I didn’t believe you,” I sang, staring out the window and willing myself not to smile. Making fun of Roman was just too easy.

He let out an annoyed growl. “Why are you so...so...”

I cocked an eyebrow. “So what?”

“So dense!”

“I’m not dense!” Now I was insulted.

“Yes you are.” Roman pulled into my driveway and glared at me. “If you weren’t, then you can see Parker is just using you!”

Uh...more like, I was kind of using him. “He’s not, trust me.”

“You’re way too naïve if you believe that.”

“Look, I know Parker better than you think, and I can assure you, he’s *not* using me.” I tapped the window. “Are you going to let me out?”

Roman's lips thinned as he grumpily unlocked the door. "Fine. Don't say I didn't warn you."

I rolled my eyes, opening the door. "I won't." Before I got out, I paused, biting my lip. "And thank you for driving me home," I added rather reluctantly.

Who would've thought there'd be a day when I'd thank him for anything?

Roman was obviously just as surprised as I was, because he stared at me in silence for a few seconds before his shoulders relaxed a bit. "You're welcome."

We stared at each other for a minute longer, a strange feeling blossoming in my stomach. It was weird, but Roman seemed to be becoming more and more human the more I interacted with him, and it was making me feel funny.

Probably just shock that the devil's spawn can actually be human, I reasoned, though I couldn't help but be drawn to his eyes.

They were probably his biggest selling point. I bet no one else on earth had gold-flecked violet eyes like his. Heck, I bet no one else on earth had gold-flecked violet eyes, period.

Right now, they were darker than usual, unreadable but still unnervingly intense.

The feeling in my stomach spread even more, freaking me out.

"Uh, thanks for the ride," I blurted, completely forgetting I had already thanked him. I scrambled out of the car. "Good night!" With that, I slammed the door shut and almost ran into my house.

Roman may not have been as big of a jerk as he usually was, but I wasn't sure I wanted to be alone with him again.

And whatever was happening in my stomach seriously needed to go away.

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CHAPTER 15

Surprisingly, the rest of the school week was pretty uneventful, and the next thing I knew, it was Friday. Since my grandmother's flight was at night, my mom and I were supposed to drive her to the airport together. My dad was at work—at least, I sincerely hoped he was at work and not with that bimbo Lexi.

My mom's car just so happened to be in the shop for maintenance that day, so Parker had taken his family's Escalade to drive us instead.

"Thanks for driving us," I said, standing to the side as my grandmother and mother dealt with checking the luggage.

"No problem, how can I miss saying bye to dear old grandma?" Parker smirked, his eyes dancing with amusement as my grandmother harassed the poor lady behind the counter.

Apparently, she wanted a seat upgrade, and there was no way in hell she was going to leave until she got one.

"She must be the most entertaining old lady I've ever met," Parker chuckled.

"Only if she's not your grandma," I said dryly.

"What you mean I no get first-class?" my grandmother shrieked, waving her boarding pass angrily in the air. "You think I no look like I belong in first-class? These pearls real! Come from South Sea!" She pointed to her necklace, which my mom had gotten her for her birthday.

"That's not what I meant, ma'am," the lady said with a pained look on her face. "But you must—"

“No call me ma’am! I speak to manager! Now!” My grandmother balled her hands up into tiny wrinkled fists. “Or you regret!”

I could feel Parker shaking with laughter beside me; I just felt sorry for the poor woman. My mom, who knew better than to try and intervene, shot an apologetic glance at the increasingly annoyed people in line.

“Oh, man, I’m going to miss her,” Parker snickered. “I can see where you get your feistiness from.”

“Thanks,” I said wryly.

A wail rose above the other noises in the airport, and I saw a young Hispanic couple rush to calm their crying baby. The guy reminded me a bit of Carlo.

I frowned. I actually haven’t seen him much since Wednesday, and when I did, he’d been oddly quiet and distracted.

“Hey, do you know what’s up with Carlo lately?” I asked.

Parker shot me quick glance. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, he’s just been acting a bit weird...”

He shrugged, looking a bit uncomfortable. “I think he’s fine.”

“You sure? Is he in trouble or something? Because—“

“I think your grandmother’s ready to go,” Parker interrupted me.

“Come on, let’s walk her to the gate.”

I frowned. It was so obvious he was trying to change the subject, but I was going to let it slide. For now.

Parker, my mom, and I trailed after my grandmother as she somehow managed to intimidate her way to the head of the security line, a first-class seat ticket *and* a day pass for the airline's lounge in hand.

I swear that woman could take over the world if she wanted to.

"Bye, grandma, have a safe flight," I said, hugging her. "Good luck with your mah-jongg tournament."

"Oh, I no need luck. Loser Weed going *down* this year," my grandmother cackled. Then she narrowed her eyes and wagged her fingers at me and Parker. "You and Pee Wee, no do kinky stuff while I gone, you hear?"

I giggled at the horrified look on Parker's face. I'm *definitely* calling him that from now on.

"I promise, grandma."

With a satisfied nod, she added, "Next time I see you, I hope you thinner."

With that, she headed towards the security line, but not before she warned me to never work for the TSA because apparently "only perverts like job that feel others up all day. Bring shame to family, no one like perverts."

As I watched her put her shoes back on at the other side, no doubt grumbling about being patted down by a stranger, I was surprised to realize I was a bit sad to see her go. She could be annoying sometimes, but she sure spiced things up a bit.

Although my life definitely didn't need any extra spices lately.

* * *

When I woke up the next morning, I should've known it wasn't going to be a good day. The angry gray sky, pouring rain, and ominous thunder should've clued me in.

But no, I had to be in relatively high spirits, mainly because I managed to avoid my dad all morning *and* because my mom had made my favorite

eggs-and-bacon breakfast combo. Of course, once I received the call, my mood did a total one-eighty.

I got the call during an otherwise perfect moment, curled up in my bed, eating cookies and cream ice cream and watching my *Gossip Girl* DVD.

It was just getting to one of my favorite parts, the scene where Blair told Chuck she loved him, when my phone rang.

“Hello?” I said, my voice muffled by a mouthful of Ben & Jerry’s sugary sweetness.

“Hey, Maya, it’s me.”

I sat up a bit straighter, worried by her tone of voice. “Adri? Is something wrong? Did something happen to Zack?”

“No, he’s just as big a pain in the butt as he usually is—“

“Don’t speak ill of the...ill! I’m a sick man, Adri! A very, very sick man!” I heard Zack shout in the background, before he let out a series of very unconvincing coughs.

I shook my head, wondering if he knew how wrong that sounded.

Adriana let out a heavy sigh. “Anyway, Zack’s fine, as you can probably tell. I’m just calling because, well, we have a bit of a problem with the sleepover plan.”

My eyes widened and I set my bowl of ice cream on my nightstand as I gripped the phone tighter with one hand, panic coursing through me. “What—what kind of problem?” I squeaked. I could *not* have a babysitter! “My parents leave tomorrow!”

The other girl cleared her throat. “It turns out my mom decided it would be a good idea to renovate the entire sleeping wing of our house without telling us first, and they start tomorrow. I’m really sorry, Maya, but I don’t think

you can stay here for the next two weeks. I wish you could, but we're all living in the guesthouse right now, which hasn't been touched in *ages* and it's a bit cramped..."

My face fell. "What? Adri, what am I going to tell my parents? I *can't* have a babysitter," I moaned, flopping down on my bed and burying my face in my pillow in despair. "Can't I just sleep on the floor or something? I promise, you won't even know I'm there!"

"Maya, you are *not* sleeping on the floor for two weeks," she scolded.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to think of a last-ditch solution. "Maybe I can call Venice and ask if I can stay at hers..."

"Didn't you say her mom's vegetarian?" Adriana asked quickly.

I groaned. Right. Venice's ex-model mom was adamantly anti-meat and refused to let their chef make anything that used to move, while I was strictly carnivorous. I won't be able to survive on tofu and wheatgrass juice alone for half a month.

I shuddered at the thought.

"Well, what am I supposed to do?" I whined, aware of how childish I sounded.

"That's where you're in luck, because I've arranged for you to stay at someone else's house," Adriana chirped, sounding chipper again.

"Who?" I frowned, racking my brain as to who it could possibly be. It couldn't be Parker, he was part of the reason my parents wanted me to have a babysitter in the first place. Carlo had been so MIA lately, Adriana probably hasn't even had a chance to talk to him yet. Which left...

I sucked in a breath. Oh no. Oh, no no no no no. She was *not* going to say—

“Roman!” Adriana exclaimed happily. “I asked him and agreed! Which means you guys will be housemates for the next two weeks!”

* * *

“This is not a good idea,” I whimpered, cowering in my seat as Zack’s Porsche glided past the giant iron gates that guarded the Fiori estate.

“Stop hiding in your seat, it’s not like we’re sending you off to prison.” Adriana sounded exasperated. “It’ll be fine. It’s just for two weeks. Fourteen days. You can do this. Besides, I thought you two were getting along better.”

“*Better*. I never said we were getting along.” I stared glumly out the window, but despite my nervousness, I couldn’t help but be awed all over again by the breathtakingly landscaped grounds.

It was like paradise here. The grass stretched out in all directions like a lush emerald carpet, dotted with majestic trees, a koi pond, a rock garden, and bubbling marble fountains that put those in Rome to shame. I could see a small army of landscapers in the distance, pruning the seventy-foot-tall hedges that bordered the entire estate.

“I can’t believe he even agreed to this.” I frowned at Adriana. “Did you blackmail him or something?”

She smirked. “No. I just asked nicely. And guess what? He said yes, no questions asked.”

“Really?” I was a bit suspicious, but who could blame me? I was pretty sure Roman hated me. Ok, maybe not hated, but he certainly didn’t like me very much.

I sighed as Zack’s car *finally* pulled up in front of the main house. Carlo was missing in action—again. Parker had a family thing—again. I had no idea what was up with those two, and no one seemed willing to clue me in.

I climbed out of the car and was about to get my lone suitcase from the trunk when I realized a tall, silver-haired man was already rolling it towards

the house.

Actually, “house” was an understatement. I had been here once before, but last time I was too busy trying not to murder Roman to really appreciate the massive four-story mansion in front of me. No, not mansion—palace. Seriously, it put Versailles to shame. Its red tile roof was set on various levels, giving it a rambling effect, and there were so many windows and balconies I got dizzy just looking at them. A flight of marble steps, guarded at the base by two huge stone lions, led to a set of gleaming French doors so tall I had to crane my neck to take them in. Expensive-looking urns overflowing with greenery and flowers flanked the entrance, in front of which Roman currently stood.

I gulped when I saw him. He was barefoot and dressed down in a pair of gray sweatpants and white men’s tank that showed off his arms. I couldn’t help but stare. I’ve never seen him without some sort of jacket on, but boy, he should stop wearing those so often, because his arms were just...just...

Trying my best not to drool, I snapped out of it and started to follow the silver-haired man, who was probably the butler or something. Only, I think I only imagined walking, because when Adriana nudged me—hard—I realized I was still standing in the exact same spot.

“Easy there, tiger,” she teased, her blue eyes sparkling mischievously. “You have plenty of time to ogle him later.”

I snapped my mouth shut, my cheeks heating up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” My voice was remarkably steady. “Parker’s not here.”

Adriana smirked, a knowing look on her face. “Right. Parker.”

I bit my lip. Maybe Carlo was right. Maybe she *did* know we weren’t really dating. Of course, with my grandmother gone, it wasn’t a big deal anymore, but I didn’t relish having to tell everyone we’d been lying to them the whole time.

“My-My, come on!” Zack was bouncing excitedly on the balls of his feet. “I can’t wait to show you around!” He grabbed my arm and started pulling me to the door.

“I thought this was Roman’s house,” I pointed out, trying not to trip on the steps.

“Yeah, but we’re here so often we know it inside out. And now that you’re living here, we get to see you even more than usual!”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it, Zack was just too cute. Besides, I was glad he’d gotten over whatever he had Wednesday night, though his recovery was suspiciously quick, if you ask me.

“It’s nice to see some people are so chipper in the morning,” Roman grumbled when we reached him.

Now that I was closer, I could see that he’d probably just woken up. His eyes were heavy-lidded and sleepy, there was a pillow crease on his cheek, and his tousled hair was sticking up in all directions. He looked unusually and utterly adorable.

The minute the thought entered my head, I shook it out. *Come on, this is Roman Fiori you’re talking about!* I silently berated myself. *It’s not like he’s a puppy. He’s more like...like a flesh-eating vulture. Or something.*

“Good morning to you too,” Adriana said pointedly, coming up behind me. “Didn’t get enough beauty sleep last night?”

Roman just glared at her, completely ignoring me. Well, fine then.

“Hey, is Maya staying in the Greek suite?” Zack asked excitedly.

The violet-eyed boy barely had time to nod before the blond was off again, dragging me with him. “You’re going to *love* your room, My-My!” he shouted over his shoulder, pulling me into the elevator. Of course the Fioris’ had an elevator.

Roman and Adriana barely made it in time before the doors closed. Zack jabbed the “3” button repeatedly.

“No matter how many times you press that, it’s not going to go any faster,” Roman sighed.

“Says who?”

I grinned at Zack’s childishness. “Yeah, says who?” I echoed, unable to resist teasing Roman a bit again.

“Don’t you start with me,” he warned. “Remember you’re staying in my house for two weeks. I run things here.”

I smirked. “Whatever you say,” I agreed sweetly.

The doors opened again, and Zack grabbed my hand to pull me out. I caught a disgruntled look on Roman’s face before I stumbled down the seemingly endless hallway, until I arrived in front of a pair of gold-and-white double doors.

“Go ahead, open it,” Zack encouraged, his eyes shining.

I hesitated, then slowly twisted the knob. I stepped inside, then froze. Blinked. Blinked again. Holy. Crap. If the grounds had been paradise, then this was heaven, only better.

Everything was white and gold, from the gigantic four-poster canopy bed to the intricately carved marble furniture to the floor-to-ceiling drapes that covered the bay windows. The floor was covered with a wall-to-wall white Aubusson carpet that felt soft as clouds (note to self: never eat in this room), and the walls were a pale cream with gorgeous gold flowers delicately hand-stenciled on them.

“Maya Lindberg, welcome to the Greek suite,” Zack announced proudly, like he was showing off his own house.

For the next hour, he showed me around my suite. Yes, it really took that long, because it was *huge*. In addition to the bedroom, there were two walk-in closets, each the size of Manhattan studio apartments; a private bathroom, complete with a glass-doored waterfall shower, swimming-pool-size sunken bathtub, and a Jacuzzi; a balcony that had its own dining area and spectacular views of the Fioris' lake and gardens; a study nook with a platinum-plated iMac that had the Apple logo in diamonds on top, and finally, a den that consisted of a fully stocked mini fridge, 60" flat-screen TV that came out of the ground with the press of a button, and a monster sound system.

"I don't know that much about the gadgetry and stuff though," Zack said at the end, collapsing in a sofa in the den. "Roman will explain that to you."

I snuck a peek at where the heir himself was leaning against the wall, a bored look on his face. "I'll do that later," he muttered. He rubbed the back of his neck. "So, uh, you like your new room?"

I widened my eyes and nodded vigorously, the words getting stuck in my throat. The others laughed at the look on my face. "I love it," I finally managed, embarrassed.

"Well, I'm glad this all worked out then." Adriana clapped once, getting our attention. "I propose a nice little dinner party tonight to celebrate!"

"There's nothing much to celebrate," I said, a bit confused.

"Of course there is! Your parents just left you alone for two weeks, which means you can do whatever you want." Adriana smiled slyly. "Who knows, maybe you and Parker don't even have to hit that one-month mark to—"

"Why don't you go and call him and Carlo then?" Roman interrupted, pushing himself off the wall. "See if they can come."

"Sure. You go tell your chefs the plan," Adriana agreed with an oddly smug expression on her face.

“Fine,” Roman muttered.

I looked at him, surprised he was being so agreeable. Our eyes met for the briefest second, before he quickly averted his. I felt strangely disappointed. He had barely talked to me all morning.

I hadn’t expected a welcoming party or anything, but after Wednesday night, I expected a bit more...well, friendliness. Looks like that wasn’t going to happen, although I still couldn’t quite believe he’d agreed to me living with him.

Adriana’s voice broke through my thoughts. “Gosh, Carlo seriously needs to answer his phone,” she complained. “This is an emergency!”

I laughed. Of course she would consider a last-minute get-together an emergency. I hoped Carlo could make it though. I missed his company.

* * *

Six hours later, I was in the Fioris’ restaurant-sized kitchen, my mouth watering from the delicious smells that enveloped me. The chefs—yes, plural—were doing a fantastic job of whipping up a last-minute dinner for six. In fact, they were doing such a good job I couldn’t help but sneak a shrimp from the tray of shrimp cocktails on the counter. Oh, god, that was good. If I kept eating like this for two weeks, my parents won’t even recognize me when they came back.

“You haven’t even been here for a day and you’re already stealing stuff, huh?”

I snapped my head up to see Roman stroll in, a smirk on his face. He’d changed into a casual button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of jeans. He looked even hotter than this morning.

I wanted to kick myself. When did I start going gaga over his looks like every other girl on the planet?

They probably put something in the shrimp...

“I’m hungry,” I defended myself.

He brushed past me and opened a cabinet, pulling out a box of Pop-Tarts. I tried to ignore the way his arm muscles flexed when he did that, but failed miserably.

“You know dinner’s going to be served in less than an hour, right?”

To my surprise, Roman hopped up and sat on the counter, nearly knocking over the shrimp cocktails. A chef hurried over to pull them out the way.

“An hour’s way too long,” I complained, eyeing his Pop-Tarts.

He took a bite out of his and raised his eyebrows. “Want one?” He held out the box.

Wow, he was actually acting like a normal human being. “Yeah, tha—“ I stopped and scowled when he pulled the box back at the last minute.

Never mind, then.

“That’s mean,” I huffed.

“Never said it wasn’t.” Roman smirked, finishing off his Pop-Tart.

I frowned. For someone so refined in public, he was kind of a pig in his own house. “I never figured you for a Pop-Tart person. Don’t you usually snack on caviar or the heads of the people you annoy to death or something?”

“Usually, but they get stale after a while,” he responded blithely, tearing open another package.

I stared at him, shocked he didn’t respond with his usual snarky sarcasm. “D-did you just make a joke?” I stuttered.

Roman stared at me blankly. “No, I was serious.”

I couldn't help but laugh. Who knew he had a sense of humor? He was pretty good at keeping a straight face too. "Nice one."

"I have no idea what you're talking about." Roman hopped off the counter and tossed the box of Pop-Tarts at me.

I let out a yelp, managing to grasp it just in time before it hit the floor.

"Knock yourself out," he called over his shoulder. "Just don't spoil your dinner, or Anthony will be furious. You don't want to make him mad."

I glanced over at where the head chef was methodically slicing vegetables. I gulped when I saw him shred a cucumber into a million different slices in less than thirty seconds, then quickly put the Pop-Tart box back into the cabinet and ran after Roman.

"Hey! Stop leaving me behind, I've already gotten lost five times," I said, a bit annoyed.

Zack and Adriana had gone home earlier but were coming back for dinner. I wasn't sure if Parker and Carlo would be able to make it though.

Roman did look at me as he continued to wind his way through the mansion's seemingly endless halls. "You seemed to have found the kitchen ok."

"I just have a good sense of smell," I muttered. "It would've been nice if you could've showed me around though. Just a little bit."

He stopped and looked at me with yet another smirk. "That desperate to spend more time with me, huh?"

My mouth flopped open at his audacity, which only caused his smirk to grow more. "Wh—no!" I resisted the urge to stamp my foot childishly. "I would just like to be able to get around this house without getting lost for the next two weeks!"

Roman rolled his eyes. “Chill out, I’ll show you around later. Besides, there’s a map in your room.”

Yeah, too bad I couldn’t read maps. I mean, no one uses them anymore now that Google Maps exist.

We started walking again, and I made sure to stay close in case he tried to ditch me. When I tried exploring by myself earlier, I’d ended up in an art gallery filled with paintings that were even creepier than the Mona Lisa. I don’t care what anyone says about that being a great piece of art, because the way her eyes follow you around is just creepy.

With my luck, I’ll probably have a nightmare about it tonight.

“Are Carlo and Parker coming tonight?” I asked hopefully, when it became clear he wasn’t going to voluntarily speak anytime soon.

Roman sighed. “Don’t worry, your boyfriend will be here. As for Carlo, who knows?”

“Aren’t you his friend?”

“I’m his friend, not his mother.” He gave me a droll look. “Besides, aren’t you his friend too?”

Well, he had a point.

“I’m sure he’ll be here. He’s probably just busy,” Roman finally said, noting the look on my face. “Maybe he’s planning Adri’s birthday present.”

I blinked. “Is it coming up?”

“It’s a week after homecoming.”

“Really?” I was stunned, mainly because neither had mentioned it and because I’d expected someone like Adriana to start planning her celebration

months in advance. “Why would Carlo be planning it?”

He sighed, looking aggravated. “Because we surprise her with a big present every year, and we alternate the planning. She’s the only girl in the group, so it’s kind of hard for us to know what she wants. This year is Carlo’s year.”

I couldn’t help but pull an aww-face, which seemed to make Roman nervous. “Aww, you guys do that every year?” I gushed.

“That’s so *cute!*”

He turned red and let out a small grunt, obviously embarrassed.

“Whatever. We did it once when we were little and it’s just habit,” he muttered.

“Isn’t that adorable?” I cooed in a baby voice, delighting in the appalled expression on his face. I laid it on even thicker. “You must be the *cutest* little friend ever!”

“God, stop!” Roman shuddered. “Stop doing that! I like you so much better when you’re being a pain in the ass.”

“Did you just admit you like me?” I exclaimed.

He flushed. “No! Jeez, stop being so annoying!” He turned and stomped down the hall.

I giggled, racing after him. “Hey, come back, I’m not done teasing you yet!” I shouted.

“Leave me alone! Go eat some Pop-Tarts!”

I burst out laughing when I saw Roman run into a half-open door in his haste to get away from me.

Oh, I was going to have so much more fun than I'd originally thought.

* * *

Carlo tossed his notebook aside with a deep sigh, rubbing his tired eyes. He'd been trying to work on his essay all day, but between worrying and planning Adri's birthday present, he wasn't even close to finishing.

He had to pick this year to come back, he thought with a frown, twirling a pen around his fingers. If only he'd come back next year, when Carlo was already at college—and far, far away from him.

The only thing Carlo could hope for was that he didn't stay long. He never did. There was always another fight, another job, another girl, and he'd be gone.

Suddenly, Carlo's shoulders tensed as he felt a presence behind him. He whipped around and blocked the person's punch before it landed, aiming one of his own at the other's stomach.

The guy grinned in delight as he dodged out of the way just in time, turning the motion into his famous roundhouse kick.

Luckily, Carlo was prepared. He'd been in more than a few fights with this one before. He waited until the last minute before ducking and letting loose his own kick.

Surprised, his opponent stumbled a bit, and Carlo took the opportunity to grab his arms, twisting them behind his back in an iron grip. "How did you get in here?" he demanded. "The door was locked!"

The guy smirked, not looking at all fazed that he was essentially pinned down at the moment. "Let's just say I picked up a few things in Rio."

"You don't need to 'pick up any more things', Rico," Carlo said quietly. "Or have you forgotten about what you did two years ago? There's a reason you had to leave the country."

Rico's face hardened. "I told you, that wasn't my fault."

“The evidence said otherwise.”

“Yeah, well, the evidence was bullshit. Now are you going to let go, or are we going to have to do this the hard way?”

Carlo raised his eyebrows. “I believe I have the upper hand right now.”

Rico laughed loudly. “Ah, yes, you’ve definitely picked up a few things yourself while I’ve been gone. You never did use to be able to dodge my roundhouse.”

“Things change.”

“So I see.”

Before Carlo could say anything else, his phone rang, and he hesitated before reluctantly letting Rico go. “Don’t try anything funny,” he growled, reaching for his phone.

Rico smirked. “You have too little faith in me. I’ve changed.”

Yeah, you say that every time. But you never do. Carlo kept his eye on the other guy as he answered his phone. “Hello?”

“Carlo, where have you *been*? I’ve been trying to reach you all day!”

He sighed. “Hey, Adri. Sorry, I’ve been a bit...busy.”

She paused. “Are you with—“

“Yeah.” His reply was curt.

He could practically hear her thinking over the phone. “Well, you don’t need to constantly deal with that bull, C. Listen, we’re having a bit of a get-together at Roman’s in about an hour. Why don’t you come? Take your mind off things.”

Carlo frowned, pondering the offer. He wanted to keep a close eye on Rico, but it was true. He'd been so stressed since Rico came back that his head was about to explode. It would be nice to hang out with his friends and relax a bit. "Maybe."

"Carlo..."

He couldn't help but smile. "I know, I know. I'll be there." He ended the call and glared at Rico, who was fiddling with a picture on his nightstand. "Don't touch that."

"Tsk, tsks." Rico picked up the photo, which was of Carlo, Roman, Parker, and Zack at Machu Picchu. The photo was taken a few years ago when they'd gone to Peru during summer break. "Who was that? One of your little friends? I haven't seen them in a while, it'd be nice to say hi..."

"Leave them alone," Carlo ground out.

Rico set the picture back down, a hurt expression on his face, but Carlo knew it was an act. "You know, you're always so nice to everyone except me. What do you think I'm going to do? Kill them?" He laughed.

"You can't blame me. Who knows what you're capable of?" Carlo snapped.

"That didn't stop you from picking me up Wednesday night."

"I had no choice."

Rico's eyes darkened. "I told you, Carlo, I've changed. You said so yourself. Things change, people can change too."

"Not you." Carlo suddenly felt as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders. "You never change."

Rico frowned, looking away. "That's not true. I've learned my lesson."

Carlo clenched his jaw. “We’ll see about that. Breaking into others’ rooms doesn’t necessarily help your case though.”

Rico shrugged. “That was just for kicks, to see if I still got it. You worry too much, little bro.”

“You can’t really blame me, after what you’ve put this family through,” Carlo said tersely. “I have to be somewhere tonight, so do your best and try to stay out of trouble.”

Rico chuckled. “I swear, sometimes you act like you’re my older brother and not the other way around.”

Carlo’s lips thinned as he brushed past Rico, grabbing his keys. “Well, someone has to be the adult around here.”

And with that, he stormed out the house, leaving his brother behind.

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CHAPTER 16

“I’m not going in there.”

“Stop being such a wuss!”

“I’m not being a wuss!”

“Yes, you are!”

“No, I’m not!”

I crossed my arms stubbornly over my chest and glared at the violet-eyed boy standing in front of me. There was no way in hell he was going to get me into that room.

Roman matched me stare for stare, and I don’t know how long we would’ve stayed there if Carlo hadn’t come along, holding a giant bowl of buttery popcorn and a bag of Hershey’s Kisses.

My nose instinctively twitched as the smell of popcorn hit my olfactory senses, and I couldn’t help but tear my gaze from Roman’s to stare at those tiny little foil-wrapped balls of deliciousness in Carlo’s other hand. Well, they’re not really shaped like balls, but you know what I mean.

Roman smirked smugly, obviously thinking he’d won the stare down.

“You did that on purpose,” I said accusingly, pointing at the food.

Carlo cast an amused glance in my direction. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You know I can’t resist chocolate and popcorn!” My mouth literally watered as I reached to grab a handful of buttery goodness.

“Nuh-uh.” He pulled the bowl out of my grasp. “You’re not getting any unless you promise to go in there and watch the movie with us.”

I pouted. “Carlooo...”

The Colombian smiled cheekily and turned to walk into the Fioris’ private theater. “See you soon!”

Unable to help myself, I stomped childishly after him, but not before I heard Roman mutter, “Oh, *now* you go in,” under his breath.

In all honesty, I didn’t really mind. I was glad Carlo actually showed up for the dinner party, since I haven’t seen much of him in the past few days. He’d been a bit moody and distracted at the beginning, but it’s nice to see he was back to making fun of me again.

Although I am not at all happy about what we were about to do. How did a dinner party turn into a scary movie viewing, anyway?

I was about to go take a seat next to Adriana when Zack plopped down into the cushy leather chair with a groan. Considering the boy had destroyed almost half the food all by himself, I was surprised he could still move.

With a sigh, I took the only seat left—right in between Carlo and Roman.

“So what are we watching? *No Strings Attached*?” I chirped faux cheerily, hoping to plant the idea in their head.

“Nice try.” Adriana picked up the remote and pressed a button. The lights immediately dimmed, and I shivered a bit as the giant movie screen flickered to life. “We’re watching *The Grudge*.”

I suppressed another shudder as I thought about the creepy DVD cover. This was not going to be fun.

One hour later

“Aaaaaaahhh!” I was nearly crying as I buried my face in the tiny nook between Carlo’s shoulder and the back of his chair, my nails digging sharply into his arm.

I *hate* horror movies!

The others erupted into laughter at my fright. Well, at least *some* people found this funny.

I would’ve lifted my head to glare at them, except I was too scared to even risk the chance of seeing whatever it was on the screen.

For the past sixty minutes, I’d been “watching” the movie with my hands over my eyes, which meant I could only see the lower left corner of the screen. Nevertheless, the sounds alone were enough to send shivers down my spine, and not the good ones either.

“Uh...Maya?”

“Yes?” I whimpered.

“You’re cutting off my circulation.”

I peeked out from behind Carlo’s shoulder and looked down at his arm, which did look a bit whiter in the area where I gripped him.

“Oh, sorry,” I mumbled, embarrassed. I let go, leaving behind a clear set of nail indentations on his forearm.

“It’s all right, I’ve gotten used to it already,” Carlo said wryly.

“Are you trying to make a move on my girl?” Parker joked, clasping his hands behind his head.

“More like your girl’s trying to make a move on me.”

Parker gave me a faux offended look. “Maya. I never thought you would do such a thing.”

I scowled as everyone laughed at me. Again.

“Aw, My-My, it’s ok, it’s just a movie!” Zack exclaimed. “There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid, I’m paranoid,” I grumbled.

“You guys, stop making fun of her,” Adriana scolded, even though she was smiling.

As the others continued to rib on me, though, a light bulb suddenly came on in my head, and I forgot about the movie as I realized something.

Roman had said Adriana’s birthday was a week after homecoming, but it wasn’t *just* her birthday. It was Zack’s birthday too! Which meant I had to get two presents. Unfortunately, my money supply was dwindling fast, and besides, I had *no* idea what to get them. I mean, what do you get two people who already had everything?

I needed help.

“Um...I’m going to get more popcorn,” I announced, standing up and grabbing the empty bowl. I made sure to avert my eyes from the screen. “Carlo, can you come with me?”

“Scared to go alone?” he teased, but he followed me nevertheless.

“Don’t hit on my girlfriend!” Parker yelled after us.

“I think you should worry about it being the other way around,” Carlo replied.

I smacked him lightly on the arm. “Don’t encourage him!”

Carlo just laughed.

I smiled. “It’s nice to see you laughing again.”

He glanced at me in surprise. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged, our footsteps echoing in the vast marble corridor.

“You’ve been kind of...down all night.”

A flicker of emotion crossed his face before Carlo looked away. “It’s nothing. I’m just tired.”

“From planning Adriana’s gift?” I guessed.

He paused. “Yeah.”

“I actually wanted to talk to you about that.” I pushed open the doors that led to the kitchen. “Are you guys planning a big gift for Zack too?”

Carlo laughed a bit as I filled up the bowl at the popcorn machine. Yes, they had a freakin’ popcorn machine in the kitchen.

“No, he likes getting a lot of different gifts. Makes him feel special.”

I smirked. That sounded like Zack, all right. “I kind of need some help, then. I’m not sure what to get Adri and Zack for their birthday.”

I set the bowl on the counter and grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge. Popcorn was delicious but seriously dehydrating. I tossed the second bottle to Carlo, who easily caught it.

“Thanks.” He fiddled with the cap. “You don’t have to get them anything. You can actually join in with us on Adri’s present.”

“What? Of course I do!” I exclaimed. “They’ve done so much for me, especially Adri...”

“She doesn’t really like to make a big deal out of her birthday,” Carlo explained. “Honestly, the presents are more formalities and tradition than anything else.”

“Well, it’s a tradition I want to participate in,” I insisted. “And ok, Adri is taken care of, but what about Zack? You know him better than I do. We can go sometime this week.”

“You’re quite the persistent little thing,” Carlo teased.

“Does that mean you’ll help me?” I asked hopefully, giving him my best puppy-dog face.

He laughed, ruffling my hair. “Who can resist that face? Are you free after school Thursday?”

I nodded, beaming.

“Good. It’s a date then.”

* * *

I’m happy to say I managed to drag out our little popcorn-filling mission long enough that the movie was almost done by the time we got back to the screening room, though I supposed the time we took made it a bit suspicious, because when we settled into our seats again, I saw Roman flashing us annoyed looks.

“What took you guys so long?” he demanded.

“We...uh, accidentally spilled the popcorn all over the floor,” I lied, nudging Carlo sharply in the side when he snorted at my very lame and blatant lie.

“Right.” Roman snorted. “Parker, I think your girlfriend’s cheating on you.”

Parker stretched his arms over his head. “Bad Maya.”

“I’m not a dog,” I groused, attempting to kick Roman in the shin, since I couldn’t reach Parker. “And I would *never* cheat on someone! I’m not—“

I’m not my dad. The sentence almost slipped out, but I stopped just in time. It didn’t help though, because the others froze. They had all witnessed my breakdown in New York, and they obviously knew what I was going to say.

An awkward silence fell over us.

I slunk down in my seat, staring resolutely at the ground. I hoped they didn’t bring it up. I was not ready to talk about it yet with other people.

Finally, Adriana cleared her throat. “I think we should get going, guys. It’s pretty late and we have school tomorrow.”

Zack, Parker, and Carlo chorused their agreement and got up to leave.

As I said goodbye to them, Carlo whispered, “If you ever want to talk, you know who to go to.”

I nodded, smiling gratefully. He was too sweet.

In the end, Roman and I were the only ones left in the theater.

“What was Carlo whispering in your ear about?” Roman asked suspiciously, turning off the movie’s ending credits.

“None of your business.”

“I hope you know you’re still dating Parker.”

“I *know* that.” Even though I wasn’t sure. I mean, now that my grandmother was gone, were Parker and I still dating...er, fake dating?

As I was trying to decide, a huge yawn escaped, followed by another one. And another one.

Roman raised his eyebrows, and I smiled sheepishly. “Um...can you show me to my room?” I asked. “I’m really tired and I forgot how to get there.”

“For someone who’s supposed to be so good in school, you have a sucky memory.” Still, he began to head down the hallway. “Just be glad I have to go that way anyway.”

I hurried to catch up. “Is your room near mine?” For some reason, the thought made me nervous.

“Maybe.” Roman smiled slyly. “Planning on visiting me?”

“You wish!” I snapped, my cheeks heating up. “I just want to know so...so I can avoid it.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that. It’s right across from your room.”

Great.

After what seemed like an eternity later, we arrived in front of our respective suites, just as a particularly loud crack of thunder made me jump about ten feet in the air. I grimaced. I hated storms, but judging from the overcast sky earlier, it was going to start raining. Again.

“Uh...thanks for walking me here,” I said almost shyly. Jeez, what was *wrong* with me? All that sugar must have short-circuited my brain cells, because I had no reason to be shy around Roman.

He shrugged. “Whatever. I had to come here anyway,” he muttered, not looking at me.

I frowned. Right. He didn’t need to be so blunt about it though.

“Fine,” I huffed, a bit annoyed. “Good night.” I yanked open the doors to my room and, while I didn’t quite slam them, I did shut them hard.

Once I saw my room, though, I couldn’t help but relax a bit. How could I not, when my surroundings were so beautiful? Of course, I was still a bit paranoid from the movie. I glanced nervously at my bed, remembering the scene where the girl climbed into her bed and lifted up her covers to see that...*thing* under there.

Maybe I shouldn’t go to sleep right now.

After some indecision, I finally decided to take a long, relaxing bath. Another crack of thunder made me jump again, and I flinched when I saw the lightning zigzag across the sky outside the window.

I quickly pressed the remote that closed the curtains and padded into the gorgeous marble bathroom. There was a whole shelf filled with different bubble baths, shower gels, and bath oils, and I finally settled on a lavender-scented soak.

As I waited for the bath to fill up, I turned on the sound system so that soft, soothing music piped through the speakers, and stripped down.

I climbed into the bath and exhaled a peaceful sigh as the bubbles immersed me in their softness. Wow, I need to take baths more often, because this was amazing. I could feel all the tension leaving my muscles. It was almost as good as a massage.

But, like everything else in my life, the peace didn’t last long, because right after yet another boom of thunder, the lights and music both started flickering in and out.

I shot up, my heart suddenly pounding. Every hair on my body stood on end. It was like some scene out of a horror movie.

Oh my god, ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod, I thought frantically, gripping the edge of the bathtub. *I’m going to die!*

I am a total idiot, taking a bath after watching *The Grudge*. This is why I don't watch horror movies, it's bad karma! I stared at the bubbles, frozen, as if a creepy dead Japanese boy was going to pop up like it did in the movie.

And then the lights went out.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”

It took me a moment to realize the piercing scream had erupted from my own mouth, I was so distraught. Nearly crying, I scrambled out of the tub, feeling around for the bathrobe I'd thankfully laid right next to it earlier.

I ran to the bathroom door, adrenaline pumping in my veins, and did the first thing I could think of. I ran out my suite and across the hall to Roman's room.

I never stopped to look behind me, afraid that if I did, I would see something I didn't want to see.

“Roman! Roman, open the door!” I cried, pounding on his door. “Please!”

What was *taking* him so long? Didn't he know I was *this close* to death?

The door opened, and I almost collapsed with relief when I saw Roman's familiar face, illuminated by the light from his phone.

“What's all this screaming?” He looked at me. “And why are you only wearing a bathrobe?”

Ignoring his questions, I pushed my way into his suite. “She's after me,” I whimpered, clutching his arm like it was my lifeline.

He frowned. “Who?”

“The girl from the movie!”

Roman just stared at me before he burst out laughing. “Maya, she’s not real. It’s a *movie*. Besides, we’re not even in Japan.”

“So?” I shrieked, grabbing his arm even tighter as I frantically looked around his suite, searching for anything suspicious. “She’s not human! How else do you explain why the lights went out right when I was taking a bath? A *bath*! That’s always where people die in horror movies!”

“Yeah, and I don’t suppose the giant storm outside had anything to do with the lights going out,” Roman said sarcastically.

“Now’s not the time to make jokes!” I was nearly hysterical.

“Maya!” Roman grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look at him. “Calm. Down. Take a deep breath, and count to ten.”

“But—“

“Do it!”

I shut up and did as he asked. Inhale. One...oh my god, she’s right behind me, isn’t she? Two...she’s reaching out a hand... three... I’m going to die...

No, stop! It’s not real, she’s not real...

I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to finish counting to ten. When I did, I slowly opened them to see Roman gazing at me with amusement.

“Better?”

“A little,” I admitted.

“Can you let go of my arm now?”

Startled, I looked down and realized I was gripping him the same way I’d grabbed Carlo earlier. “Sorry!” I exclaimed, turning red and dropping his

arm like a hot potato.

“Don’t tell me the great Maya is scared of the dark.” Roman smirked.

I was never going to live this down. “Whatever. The dark is scary,” I defended myself. “Who knows what’s hiding in the shadows? Can’t you turn the lights back on?”

“What do I look like, the Wizard of Electricity?”

“Yeah, well, isn’t Roman Fiori supposed to be able to do anything?” I pointed out, striking at his most prized possession: his pride.

Judging from the scowl on his face, it worked. “There’s a generator, but it’s out back. Everyone’s asleep already, and there’s no use waking them up. Besides, it’s already nighttime. Once you fall asleep, it’ll be fine.”

I blinked. Who knew he was so considerate towards his staff? I peeked nervously out into the inky-black hall. “Um, Roman,” I started in a small voice. “Can I, uh, stay here for a bit? You know, until the lights come back on?”

I hated asking him for anything—even though I was staying in his house—but I did not relish the idea of going back to my pitch-dark suite by myself.

“What if the lights don’t come back on tonight? You’ll be here—“ Roman stopped when he saw the look on my face. “Fine,” he sighed. “As long as you put on some clothes.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. “I don’t want to go back there by myself.”

He groaned, muttering something to himself. He moved away from me, taking the light with him, and I automatically followed.

He opened one of the dresser drawers and pulled out a button-down shirt and a pair of boxers. “Here, put these on,” he said gruffly, tossing them at

me.

I stared at them. “These are clean, right?”

Roman shot me an annoyed look. “What do you think?”

Alrighty then. “Can you turn around?” I asked sweetly.

He scowled but obliged. “I love how you act like this is *your* room,” he mumbled.

Ignoring him, I slipped out of my bathrobe and into his clothes. I was immediately enveloped in what seemed to be Roman’s signature woody scent, and I couldn’t help taking a deep whiff.

How could someone so evil smell so *good*? Although I supposed he wasn’t all that evil, if he was letting me stay here. As long as he didn’t plan to murder me in my sleep.

The boxers had an elastic waist so they fit ok, though they were a bit big on my legs. The shirt fell to about mid-thigh, higher than the boxers’ hem. I carefully laid the robe over a chair and ran a finger through my damp hair.

“Ok, you can turn around now.”

Still grumbling, Roman turned to look at me, a surprised expression flitting across his face when he saw me. His eyes flicked over me, and he stared so long I started getting fidgety.

“What? Do I have something on my face or something?” I asked, shifting my weight uncomfortably. I hate when people stare at me.

Roman started a bit, then looked away. “No. Just don’t get my clothes dirty.”

“I just took a bath,” I huffed. What, did he think I was going to purposefully spill something over his precious shirt?

Now that he'd agreed to let me stay here until the lights came back on though, I wasn't sure what to do, so I just wandered over to an armchair near the window and curled up into the plush softness. I was only a little bit surprised when he dropped down into the chair opposite me a minute later.

We sat in silence for a while, but it wasn't necessarily an uncomfortable one. Nevertheless, I never did do well with prolonged silences, so finally, I said, "So...what did you get Zack for his birthday?"

Maybe I can get some ideas.

Roman actually answered without a hint of sarcasm. "A boat."

I gaped at him. "You got him a *boat*?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "He crashed his somehow, so I got him an upgrade."

I gulped. Yeah, there was no way I could afford that. A toy boat, maybe but not a real one. If that was Zack's gift, I didn't even want to know how much Adriana's cost.

"Her gift is different."

I blinked, coming back to reality. "What?"

Roman looked amused. "I said, her gift is different."

"Did I just say my thoughts out loud?"

He nodded smugly.

I groaned. Of course that would happen to me. "How is it different?"

"You'll see."

How helpful. We lapsed into silence again, before I spoke up, again. It was something I'd wanted to ask for awhile. "Roman..."

"What?"

"Why were you so nice to me after I...you know, after that scene in New York?"

It might've been my imagination, but I thought I saw him stiffen a bit. He didn't answer.

"Is it because you went through the same thing?" I asked quietly. I'd thought about it constantly, and that was the only plausible explanation I could come up with.

I was probably right, judging by the way Roman's jaw immediately tensed. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You know, it helps to talk about it—"

"I *said*, I don't want to talk about it!"

I snapped my mouth shut, feeling inexplicably hurt. I shouldn't, I should be used to him yelling and snapping at me, but I still felt hurt nonetheless.

Roman drew in a deep, slightly shaky breath as he ran his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry," he said in a calmer voice. "I shouldn't have snapped at you like that."

"It's ok." I ran a finger absentmindedly over the soft velvet of the chair's arm. "I shouldn't have pried." I gave him a small smile.

"Be careful, or else apologizing might become a habit." Despite his words, he returned my smile.

"You're right, you know," he said after another prolonged silence.

I raised my head. “What?”

“About me going through the same thing.” Roman didn’t look at me. “When I was younger, my dad...well, he was always away for ‘business.’ Sometimes, it really was for business. Most of the time, though, he was off to see one of his many mistresses, and everyone knows it.” His tone was slightly bitter.

I held my breath, not wanting to say or do anything that might make him clam up again. I couldn’t believe he was confiding in me, of all people, although I supposed I did know what he’s going through.

Roman continued. “He was never home, and when he was, he just locked himself up into his office all day. My mom turned a blind eye to all his... indiscretions, mainly because she didn’t want to lose her status as Mrs. Fiori, but also because she really does love him. Or did. I don’t know.”

He stared out the window, an unusually melancholy expression on his chiseled face. “So after a while, my dad got bolder and bolder, and he even started bringing his mistresses home. I walked in on them a couple of times, you know. The first time was when I was seven. I was so young, I wasn’t exactly sure what it meant, so I ran to my mom. She slapped me—“

At this, I let out a quiet but still audible gasp. His mom had slapped her seven-year-old son? For telling her her husband was cheating on her? What kind of mother was she?

“—and told me to never speak of it again.” Obviously, Roman caught the horrified look on my face, because he added, “I know what you’re thinking, but it’s not like that. My mom was a fairly good parent, certainly a lot better than my dad, but he just drove her over the edge. She started taking pills, anti-depressants, then added alcohol in the mix. She’s usually boozed or drugged up all the time now. Most of the time, she’s not home either. My dad sends her over to Europe to stay at one of our other houses, to keep her out of the limelight. Being an alcoholic is apparently more shameful than cheating.” Roman’s tone grew more bitter.

I swallowed, not sure what to say. He looked so vulnerable. It was the first time I'd ever seen him that way, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't tug on my heartstrings.

"God, you must think this is just another poor little rich boy story." The melancholy expression was wiped off of Roman's face when he turned to look at me. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this, but..." He took another deep breath. "It feels kind of good to take it off my chest."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, wishing I could say something to make him feel better. I felt so bad. At least I still had my mom. Roman, though, didn't have either of his parents, at least not in a way that counts.

Without thinking, I walked over and wrapped my arms around him. He immediately tensed up.

"What are you doing?"

"Giving you a hug."

"I don't need a hug." Apparently, the stony façade was back in place. "And if you tell anyone what I just said, I'll kill you."

I wasn't even fazed. "Shut up, and just let me hug you, you idiot."

Roman remained tense for a few more moments, but then I felt him relax the tiniest bit. He shifted his weight, and I thought he was going to push me off, but he pulled me down so that I was sharing the chair with him.

He slowly, hesitantly returned my hug, burying his face in the crook of my neck like a little child.

I closed my eyes and rested my chin on his broad shoulder, trying to ignore the little thrill that ran through me when I felt his strong muscles through his thin T-shirt.

"You smell good," he mumbled into my neck.

My eyes widened in shock, but I couldn't help but laugh a little. He really did sound like a little child. "You smell good, too," I murmured.

We didn't say anything else, just sat there and held each other. I wasn't sure how long we stayed like that, because the night had taken a toll on me, and I soon drifted off into a deep sleep. I didn't even feel Roman lift me up and gently tuck me into bed.

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CHAPTER 17

Something was tickling his arm.

Without opening his eyes, Roman frowned and attempted to scoot away from the source, only to find he couldn't move his arm. It seemed to be under something heavy. And it was seriously tickling him.

Reluctantly, Roman cracked one eye open, then the other one, hoping there wasn't a horse's head in his bed or anything. The first thing he saw was a mass of silky dark hair.

He frowned, but when he moved his gaze lower and saw Maya snuggled into the crook of his arm, the events of last night rushed back to him.

With a groan, he resisted the urge to hit himself in the head. He couldn't believe he'd told her about his parents. He'd never told anyone about the situation with his parents, not even Carlo and the others, who knew only the vaguest details.

And now she has the perfect blackmail material, Roman thought darkly, berating himself for how stupid he was.

With a scowl, he propped himself up with his elbow and tried to pull his arm out from under Maya's head without waking her. It didn't work.

Letting out a low curse, Roman tried again. And failed again.

He sighed, falling back on the bed in defeat. Without even noticing, though, Roman's scowl softened a bit as he looked at Maya's sleeping face. Her long lashes cast a shadow over her cheeks, and there was a small smile on her lips. A stray strand of hair fell over face, and he willed himself not to brush it away for her.

She looked so peaceful when she wasn't yelling at him.

Roman was so busy looking at her that when his alarm sounded, he jumped about ten feet in the air, jostling her in the process.

He winced when Maya let out a groan and slowly sat up, rubbing the back of her head. She yawned and opened her eyes, and then—

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhh!”

The scowl came back in full force. Ah, there was the Maya he knew and loved—disliked.

“It’s a bit early in the morning for that, don’t you think?” he pointed out, shaking out his numb arm. A tingly feeling invaded his limb as feeling slowly crept back into it.

“Why were we sleeping together?” Maya asked accusatorily, her green eyes wide as she scooted back to the edge of the bed like he was going to attack her or something. “What happened last night?” She narrowed her eyes. “You didn’t take advantage of me, did you? Because if you did, I’m going to—“

“Of course not,” Roman snapped, swinging his legs over the side of his bed and walking over to his closet to grab something to wear. “If I remember correctly, you came in here screaming about some monster being after you. Then you invited yourself to stay over in here till the lights went out, fell asleep, and when I put you down on the bed to sleep so you didn’t wake up with neck cramps, *you* pulled me down beside you and used me as your pillow. So no, I didn’t take advantage of you. It’s more like you took advantage of me.”

He grabbed a Thomas Pink shirt and a pair of jeans and turned to face Maya again.

She relaxed the grip that was strangling her shirt—his shirt, actually—as realization dawned over her face. “Oh.” She smiled sheepishly, obviously remembering everything that happened. “Oops.”

“Yeah, oops.” Roman rolled his eyes, pulling on his jeans. Girls were just too much trouble. He had no idea why Parker liked them so much. Well, he had an idea, but they just weren’t worth it, in his opinion.

As he buttoned up his jeans, he realized that Maya’s face had turned pink, and she was staring intently in his direction.

A small smirk appeared on his face when he realized what she was looking at. “See something you like?” he asked cockily, pulling his shirt over his head in a deliberately slow motion.

Maya’s face turned even redder as she quickly looked away. “You wish,” she snapped, getting out of the bed.

Roman chuckled. She was pretty cute when she was embarrassed. He froze. Did he just think of her as cute? What was wrong with him?

Stupid storm. This is all its fault.

This time Maya smirked. “See something you like?” she taunted.

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, my clothes. Which you’re wearing. I’d like them back please.”

Maya turned the color of a fire hydrant. She crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not stripping in front of you!”

Roman couldn’t help but laugh at her indignation, which seemed to make her even madder. She was too cute. “I never asked you to. Your room is right across the hall...” He trailed off, expecting her to be smart enough to catch his drift.

“Oh.” The embarrassed look came back. “Right. Well, I’ll be back then,” she muttered, almost running out of the room.

It really was too bad she tripped over a stray tennis racket and fell face down on the carpet.

“Ow!”

Roman burst out laughing again. He should probably go help her up, but he was having way too much fun. Besides, it was payback for her laughing at him when he ran into that door.

Maya glared at him as she stood up. “Thanks for helping me!”

“No problem,” he chortled, trying to contain his laughter.

He almost succeeded, until Maya took another two steps and tripped. Again. Over nothing at all this time, it seemed.

This time, Roman was almost in stitches. He bent over double, his shoulders shaking with mirth as Maya let out a string of very unladylike curses. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard.

This was probably the most entertaining Monday mornings he’d ever had.

* * *

“How about this? I think Zack would like this.” Carlo smiled impishly as he held up a hideous green-and-red paisley shirt. It was so ugly I actually gagged.

“That’s disgusting!” I complained, covering my eyes with my hands. “Stop! Put it away before I’m scarred for life!”

Carlo laughed, and I didn’t take my hands from my eyes until I heard the shirt being put back on the rack. “You’re too easy to rile up.”

“Am not,” I said rather childishly, quickly dragging him as far away from that Christmas tree they called a dress as possible. “You’re supposed to help me find a birthday present, not make fun of me!”

It was Thursday after school, and Carlo and I had gone to La Terra, the next town over, to find Zack's present since he probably had everything he wanted from Valesca. Sadly, our shopping expedition was not going too well. The fact that I was on a bit of a budget did not help matters at all.

"Ok, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Carlo held up his hands. "I promise, I'll be serious now." He gave me his best solemn face.

"You look like you're constipated," I snickered, even though he didn't. Hey, I had to get him back somehow, right?

Carlo didn't look offended. "What a liar. You're just mad because you can't think of a good present."

"That's what you're supposed to be here for," I grumbled, eyeing a wall of cologne. Nah. Zack probably already had every cologne under the sun. "Besides, not everyone can afford to buy people a boat."

I still couldn't believe Roman was getting Zack a *boat*. Seriously, these people had too much money.

I bit my lip as I thought about Roman. We'd been co-existing pretty peacefully the past few days, with the exception of my total humiliation Monday morning. It seemed as though our little conversation Sunday night had eased some of the tension between us, although I was far from feeling comfortable with him. It wasn't necessarily a bad discomfort, it was just—

The sound of a phone ringing interrupted my thoughts.

"Sorry, excuse me for one second," Carlo said, pulling out his iPhone. His face darkened when he saw the caller ID, and I wondered who it was.

"Hello?" His voice was terse. "No. I'm not at home. No. I said *no*. Stop being so difficult! I swear if you—you better not do anything stupid. I'm not covering for you. Yes, I know." Carlo let out a huge sigh, looking the most annoyed I'd ever seen him. "Fine. I'll see you later." He didn't sound too happy about it.

“Who was that?” I asked curiously as we wandered past the jewelry counter.

“Nobody important.”

I was unconvinced, but if he didn’t want to talk about it, I wasn’t going to force him.

“Anyway.” Carlo quickly changed the subject. “We have to try another tack for Zack’s present. Try to think of things with sentimental value, not material goods. He already has all the material goods he wants.”

I furrowed my brow. Zack and I were friends, but it’s not like we were best friends. How was I supposed to know what had sentimental value and what didn’t?

“If it helps, besides music, he’s also really into photography,” Carlo offered.

My jaw dropped as I stared at him in disbelief.

He blinked. “What?”

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me earlier,” I groaned. I grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the store we were in and into the main part of the mall. I was sure we’d passed by a store selling photography equipment before. “You could’ve saved us so much time!”

“Sorry,” Carlo said a bit sheepishly.

I couldn’t be mad though, because after only half an hour in the photography store, I found what I was looking for. All I needed was to put my project together before Zack’s birthday. The end result wasn’t going to be a boat or Cartier cuff links or anything, but at least it was thoughtful.

“Thanks,” I said a bit excitedly as the cashier placed my purchases into a brown paper shopping tote.

She smiled warmly at me. “You’re welcome. Have a nice day.”

“You too!” I chirped, grabbing the bag and swinging it happily. I was so happy I finally knew what I was getting Zack for his present. I kept thinking I should get Adriana something too, but Carlo insisted the group present would be enough.

He hadn’t told me how I could contribute to the group present yet though.

“Are you hungry? We can grab something to eat before we go,” Carlo said as we walked out of the store. “There’s some pretty decent restaurants in here.”

“Sure,” I said. “Where do you want to eat?”

After some indecision, we finally settled for good old pizza at a charmingly rustic parlor tucked into a quiet corner of the mall.

I sighed with relief as I sank down into the red leather booth, my feet thanking me for the reprieve from a hard afternoon of shopping.

“Thanks so much for coming with me, I know guys hate shopping,” I said, lifting my hair off my shoulders and smiling at the waiter as he handed us our menus.

“It’s ok, I don’t mind.” Carlo shrugged, his eyes skimming over the menu. “It’s a nice break.”

“From what?”

Judging from the deer-caught-in-headlights look on his face, it was clear he’d said the wrong thing. “Uh...just from Valesca,” he answered, looking down.

“Right,” I said a bit suspiciously. I had a feeling he was lying to me.

“I’ll be right back, I need to go to bathroom,” Carlo suddenly said, setting down his menu. “You can order for us if you want, I eat anything.”

“Ok.” I stared at his back as he headed towards the bathroom, slightly confused. Why was he acting so weird?

When the waiter came back, I decided to order some breadsticks and a margherita pizza for the two of us. Everyone liked those, right?

“Maya?”

I blinked when a familiar sandy-brown head came into view. “James?”

He grinned when he saw me. “Hey!” he said happily. “Fancy running into you here!”

“Oh, yeah, I was just doing a bit of shopping,” I murmured, blushing a bit as I indicated the bag next to me. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here with a few friends. I live in La Terra, remember?” he added when the questioning look stayed on my face.

“Oh, right.” Now I felt like an idiot. He *had* told me he lived in La Terra when I met him at Stan Hoffman’s party.

“So, you here alone or are you with Parker?” James asked casually, glancing at the two water glasses on the table.

“No, I’m here with—wait, why’d you ask about Parker?” I frowned a bit, trying to remember if I’d told him I was ‘dating’ Parker. I was pretty sure I hadn’t.

“Some of my friends at Valesca mentioned he had a new girlfriend named Maya,” James explained. “And you’re the only Maya I’ve heard of there, so I figured...”

“Oh, yeah. Well, I’m not here with him.” I cleared my throat. “I’m here with, uh, another friend actually. I needed to find a birthday present.”

“Cool.” James nodded. “I didn’t get a phone call from you, by the way...” He raised his eyebrows playfully.

I blushed. “I have a boyfriend, remember?”

“You can do better than Parker Remington.”

My head jerked up, as his tone seemed a bit sharp, but when I saw his face, it was as relaxed as ever. “Or are you dating him because he’s a Scion?” James questioned.

“Of course not!” I was insulted he would even ask such a thing. “I don’t care about anyone’s social status or whatnot. Parker’s a nice guy once you get to know him. Really.”

“Maybe.” James sounded unconvinced. “I’d advise you stay away from all the Scions though, they’re bad news.”

“Thanks for the warning, but I think I can handle myself.” I used to think they were bad news too, but now that I’d gotten to know them better, they honestly weren’t that bad.

“So, how about it?” James said, sliding into the booth opposite me and abruptly changing the subject.

I was confused. “How about what?”

“A date with me.”

My jaw dropped. “James! You know I have a boyfriend.”

He shrugged, smiling a bit impishly. “Ok, not a date then. A friendly outing?” He gave me a puppy-dog face.

I couldn't help but laugh. "Sorry, I don't think I can."

"Come on," James persisted. "It'll be fun, I promise! There won't be champagne and caviar, but it'll be a nice, simple da—er, outing."

"I don't know..."

"How about we go to an amusement park?" he suggested. "There's one right by La Terra. It's pretty cool, and I know you guys don't have one in Valesca..."

"Well..." I bit my lip, unsure. An amusement park *did* sound fun, but I didn't lead him on.

"I promise, we will go as just friends." James held up one hand solemnly, as if he were taking an oath. "I won't get the wrong idea. We shall only eat lots of corn dogs and pray we won't throw them up after a day of scream-inducing roller coasters and long lines filled with screaming children."

I laughed. "How could I resist an offer like that?" I teased, but I finally relented. "Ok, fine. *One* outing, as friends. That's it. But if you throw up on me, you're going to be in big trouble."

James grinned happily. "Deal. This Saturday then? Or is that too soon?"

"This Saturday's fine."

"Great! Do you need a ride, or do you want me to come get you?"

"Oh, no, I think I can get here by myself." I remembered there was a bus that went from Valesca to La Terra. "There's no point in you driving all the way to Valesca and back again."

"Well, then, I look forward to seeing your lovely face this weekend." James winked at me. "You have my number if you need anything. I'll see you later!"

“Bye.” I smiled, his enthusiasm contagious.

James left just as Carlo came back from the bathroom.

“You took a long time in there. What were you doing?” I teased.

“Let’s just say someone wasn’t feeling too well in there and I decided to play the Good Samaritan,” Carlo said with a bit of a grimace, just as the waiter came back out with our food.

I wrinkled my nose. Eew.

“So homecoming’s next week,” Carlo commented casually, placing a slice of pizza on his plate. “Who’re you going with?”

I stared at him, chewing my bread slowly. I swallowed before answering, “Um, Parker?”

“Oh.” He frowned a bit. “Are you guys still pretending to date then?”

“I...guess so,” I replied slowly. I mean, Parker hadn’t said anything, so I’d just assumed. “Why? Did he say anything?”

“No, but I thought he was finally going to—well, anyway, it doesn’t matter,” Carlo said quickly. “It’s too bad though.”

“What is?” I swear, it’s like he was speaking in riddles today or something.

“If you weren’t going with him, I would’ve asked you to homecoming,” Carlo said nonchalantly, taking a bite of his pizza.

I immediately started choking on my food. My breath came out in wheezing gasps as I struggled not to suffocate myself with carbs.

“Are you ok?” Carlo asked with a concerned frown.

“Uh huh,” I gasped, grabbing my water and taking frantic gulps.

Once I'd calmed down, I wiped my mouth and gaped at him. "Why would you ask me to homecoming?" I blurted. He couldn't—he didn't like me, did he?

"I actually enjoy talking to you." Carlo was still acting infuriatingly calm. "I usually go with random girls whom I can't stand, so it'd be a nice change."

"Well, why don't you go alone?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm a Scion. Bad for the image and all that."

"Oh." I bit my lip, feeling a bit disappointed with his explanation. Suddenly, I thought of something. "Does that mean Roman and Zack are going with dates too?"

"Yep. I think they already found dates."

My face fell, the disappointment heightening. I wasn't sure why. I didn't care if Rom—if the others had dates. It wasn't like I wanted to go with hi—with any of them anyway.

I grabbed another breadstick and tore it apart semi-angrily, ignoring Carlo's questioning stare.

Nope, I didn't care. Not at all.

* * *

It turns out James wasn't the only surprise of the day, because when I got back to Roman's house, I got a double whammy.

The first occurred right as I set foot in the foyer. *Hava Nagila* started playing on my phone, indicating a call from my mom. I'm not sure why it's my ringtone, since neither of us were Jewish, but I liked the way it sounded.

“Hello?” I shut the door behind me and pressed the button for the elevator.
“Mom?”

“Hi, sweetie!” my mom said cheerfully. “How are you doing?”

I smiled at the sound of her voice. “I’m good, how are you? How’s Napa Valley?” *And my jerk of a dad?*

“It’s amazing! The wine tasting your friend set up for us was out of this world,” she gushed. “So, you’re enjoying your time at Adriana’s house?”

My eyes narrowed as my defenses came up. I knew that tone of voice. It never boded well. “Yeeesss...” I answered slowly, even though I wasn’t staying at Adriana’s house. But she didn’t need to know that.

“That’s wonderful, dear. Really.”

I pulled open the doors to my suite and kicked off my shoes.

“Mom, what is it? I know something’s wrong.”

“Well.” My mom hesitated. “It’s not that something’s wrong, per se. I’m just not sure—“

“Mom, just spit it out. I’m a big girl, I can handle it,” I said patiently.

“Ok, fine. Your father and I entered a contest here at the inn and we ended up getting an extra two weeks’ stay here for free!”

“What?” I exclaimed, then quickly lowered my voice. “What?” I repeated.

I could practically see my mom fretting over the phone. “I know, dear, it’s a bit...unexpected, but it’s a wonderful opportunity. Of course, if you don’t want to stay there for an extra two weeks, that’s fine, we’ll come back—“

“No, no.” I shook my head, trying to process the information. “I mean, it’s great, it really is. But what about work?”

“We both have enough vacation days accumulated to fit an extra two weeks into our schedule.”

“Oh.” I was a bit disappointed I wouldn’t be able to see my mom for longer than I’d thought, but I was happy she was having fun, I really was. Besides, I didn’t really want to face my dad anytime soon anyway. “You should stay, mom. Don’t worry about me. I’m having a lot of fun at, uh, Adriana’s house.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, mom,” I replied. “Really. Enjoy your time there.”

“Ok.” She sounded both worried and happy. “If you need anything, you have all the emergency numbers, right?”

“Yep.” A knock sounded on my door, and I frowned, wondering who it was. “I have to go right now, but I’ll talk to you later, ok? Love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie. And your father says hi.”

Right. “Bye.” I didn’t acknowledge her last statement.

I hung up and called out, “Come in!”

When I saw Parker stride in, I couldn’t help but smirk at the pink polo he was wearing.

“You look like such a prep,” I said dryly, eyeing the signature Lacoste alligator on the front of his shirt.

“What? Not even a hello kiss from my girlfriend? You really *do* have a thing with Carlo,” Parker joked, dropping down on the bed next to me and draping an arm over my shoulder.

“Yeah, sorry I forgot to tell you, but I decided things just aren’t going to work out between us,” I teased. “So what’s up? Are you here to visit Roman?”

“Not really.” He dropped his arm from my shoulder as a more serious expression came over his face. “I’m here to see you actually.”

I tilted my head curiously. “Ok...”

“Well, you know how we started dating because you basically forced me into it to get your grandmother off your back?”

I rolled my eyes. “Gee, thanks for making it sound like I tortured you or something.”

Parker smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, but you know what I mean. Anyway, now that she’s gone, we *technically* don’t have to pretend anymore...”

I had a feeling I knew where this was going. “Uh-huh...” I dragged out the last syllable, prompting him to continue.

He cleared his throat. “Well, I was just wondering if perhaps we could stop pretending?” He asked in a rush. “I mean, it’s not that I don’t like you or anything. I really do. You’re so hot, I would totally do you, especially if you wore that lingerie—“

“Parker!” I held up a hand. “Stay on track.”

“Right. Sorry. Anyway, like I said, I really do like you, and it’s kind of an asshole thing for me to do, what with homecoming next week and all, but...er, I think it’s best if we told everyone the truth, you know?”

“Ok.”

“I’m sorry! I really—wait, ok?” He blinked at me.

I smiled in amusement at his face, resisting the urge to pinch his cheeks. He looked so cute with that dumbfounded expression replacing his usual smirk. “Yes, ok. What, did you think I was going to slap you or something? You did me a favor, for which I’m incredibly thankful, but you’re right. We should tell them the truth soon.”

Relief washed across Parker’s handsome features. “Oh, thank god.” He groaned, flopping down on my bed. “You have no idea how nervous I was all afternoon!”

“You, nervous?” I playfully poked him in the stomach. “Darn it, I should’ve made you squirm.”

“But you didn’t, because you’re such a nice person,” he said happily. “You’re the best, Maya.”

“I know,” I joked. “So who is she?”

Parker shot up so fast I was surprised he didn’t sprain anything. “What do you mean?” His cheeks turned red.

I snickered. “Who’s the girl you want to ask to homecoming? That’s the reason why you don’t want to fake date me anymore, right?”

He turned even redder. “No one! I mean, no one,” he repeated in a lower voice. “I just...it didn’t feel right, lying to my friends like that.”

“Sure.” I didn’t really believe him. “Oh, hey, what’s the big gift you guys are planning for Adri anyway? Carlo won’t tell me, which sucks, because I’m supposed to be part of it.”

“You’ll see. And don’t worry about it.”

I groaned. “Why does *everyone* tell me that?”

Suddenly, I realized something. The flush on Parker’s face seemed to have deepened a bit at the mention of a certain someone’s name, and my eyes

widened in realization. No way. He did *not* have a crush on—

“So, we have to figure out how we’re going to tell everyone else we’re not really dating,” Parker said, breaking through my thoughts. “I don’t think they’ll be too happy to find out we’ve been lying to them.”

“Well, Carlo already knows,” I mused. “That’s one less angry person we’ll have on our heels.”

Parker shook his head. “He’s too smart for his own good. I’m not too worried about Zack. Adri...well, I have no idea how she’ll take it. I’m most worried about Roman though. I feel like he’s going to flip a shit when he finds out we’ve been lying to him about our relationship.”

I nodded in agreement, shuddering a bit as I imagined Roman’s reaction.

Turns out, I didn’t need to imagine it, because a second later, a very familiar voice roared, “What do you mean you’ve been lying about your relationship?!”

Parker and I froze, staring at each other with wide eyes before turning slowly around.

I gulped when I saw Roman standing there, sparks flying from his stormy violet eyes as he glared at us. He looked very, very angry.

I whipped my head around. “Parker! Did you forget to close the door?” I hissed.

Parker ran a hand nervously through his hair. “Haha, um...oops?”

Oops. That’s what he had to say. Oops.

I turned back to Roman with my sweetest, brightest smile, hoping that’ll calm him down. It didn’t work.

We are so dead.

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CHAPTER 18

“Stop! You’ll kill him!”

I frantically grabbed a fistful of Roman’s shirt and gave it a hearty yank. He didn’t budge, but my hands slipped on the smooth cotton so I ended up falling backwards, right on my butt.

“Oof!” I groaned, glad the floor was carpeted. However, the pain dissipated in the wake of my fear as I stared, wide-eyed, at the scene before me.

Roman had slammed Parker up against the wall and was huffing and puffing like an angry dragon. I was surprised I didn’t see steam pouring out of his ears. Meanwhile, Parker looked a bit scared—though not scared enough, in my opinion.

“It’s alright, Maya,” he said rather calmly, not seeming at all fazed by the fact that Roman looked like he was about to punch him in the face. “He won’t kill me. He’s supposed to stay in my family’s house in Oahu next summer.”

Roman let out a low growl, and I groaned. “Parker! Now’s not the time to be making jokes!”

I scrambled to my feet and attempted to pull Roman off once again. It didn’t work; he shrugged me off as easily as if I were a feather.

However, after a moment, he finally let go and took a step back to glare at us, sparks practically flying from his violet eyes.

“Were you ever going to tell me?” he roared, his voice loud enough to shatter glass. If all the glass in the room hadn’t been shatterproof, that is.

I instinctively whimpered and stepped behind Parker.

“Er...well, we *did* plan on telling you, sooner or later.” Parker cleared his throat as he straightened his shirt.

“I can’t believe it,” Roman muttered furiously. “All this time, I thought you two were dating. I even tried to get along with her!”

He jabbed a finger in my direction. “I even went to her house! With lollipops!”

Parker’s eyes widened, swiveling his head between Roman and myself. “You went to her house? With *lollipops*?”

“That’s not the point!” Roman bit out, but his face had turned pink. Inanely, I wondered what ever did happen to those lollipops. “The point is, I would never have had to—to be so *nice* if you two hadn’t *lied* to me!

Parker sighed. “Oh, calm down.”

I couldn’t help but stifle a giggle as Roman’s eyes almost popped out of his head. A vein pulsed dangerously in his forehead. “*YOU’RE TELLING ME TO CALM DOWN?!*”

Oh boy. I immediately covered my ears with my hands to protect my eardrums, but I could still hear him loud and clear.

“How can I *calm down* when I just found out one of my *best friends* has been lying to be for *weeks?!*”

“It’s not necessarily lying,” my big mouth piped up of its own accord. “It’s more like—like acting.”

Roman shot me a don’t-you-start-with-me look and I immediately shrunk back, wondering when I’d started fearing Roman Fiori.

“And why exactly were you two ‘acting’?”

That, I can answer. Eagerly, frantically, I launched into an explanation about my grandmother's matchmaking schemes and how Parker just so happened to show up at the right time. "I mean, you've met my grandmother, you know how scary she is," I babbled almost incoherently.

Parker's loud guffaw interrupted me. "You met her grandmother?" he chuckled. "How did *that* go?"

I winced. Oh. Maybe now hadn't been the best time to bring *that* little incident up...

Roman's face turned purple. "I. Don't. Want. To. Talk. About. It," he hissed, glaring at me like it'd been my fault. The venom in his voice made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Nevertheless, I huffed indignantly. Well, I never told him to wear the darn Mickey Mouse shirt, and I certainly never told him to come to my house in the first place. He had only himself to blame.

"You know, I don't know why you're so mad, Rome," Parker commented conversationally, draping an arm over my shoulders. He really liked doing that, didn't he?

Roman's eyes turned to slits, and I bit my lower lip nervously. Couldn't Parker be serious for just one second?

"If anything, you should be glad," Parker continued. "Happy, really."

"And why is that?"

For some reason, the gaze Roman leveled at his friend seemed to be almost a warning.

Parker smirked. "You tell me."

Roman tensed. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said stiffly, but I noticed with relief that his anger seemed to have abated a bit.

“Sure.” There was a highly amused look on Parker’s face, although personally, I don’t see what’s so funny about the situation. “You know, this means Maya doesn’t have a date to homecoming...”

I scowled. Oh yeah. “Thanks for leaving me high and dry like that,” I mumbled. Guess I was just going to have to go alone.

I sighed. A senior going to her last homecoming alone. Am I cool or what?

“I’m sure you’ll find a date soon.” Parker’s jade-green eyes twinkled mischievously. “Right, Rome?”

I darted a quick glance in his direction. Roman seemed to have perked up a bit, but when he saw us looking, he scowled again. “I don’t know, I’m not psychic,” he finally snapped, a weird expression on his face. “You know what? I don’t have time for this. I’m leaving.”

With that, he stormed out of the room.

I rubbed my temple. His mood swings were giving me a headache.

Parker chuckled. “You two are a riot.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said tiredly.

“Of course you don’t, honeybee. You’re quite dense.”

My mouth flopped open and closed like a fish’s. “*I’m* dense?” I sputtered. “I don’t see how—“

“Come on, walk me out.” Parker cut me off and guided me to the door by my elbow.

If anything, he was the one walking *me* out. When we passed by Roman's room, I couldn't resist peeking through the half-open door. What I saw nearly made me laugh out loud.

Roman may be rich and good-looking, but the boy danced like a spastic chicken with its head cut off.

Although I couldn't quite figure out why he was dancing in the middle of the day anyway.

* * *

"Deck the halls with boughs of holly, fa la la la la, la la la la," Zack hummed merrily as he pushed open the door of the Scion's private bathroom and into the hall. *"'Tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la, la la la la!"*

He really had no idea why he was singing Christmas carols in October, but he was in a good mood today, and Christmas songs were just so *happy*.

Now, if only he could find Maya...

Zack pursed his lips, his blond head turning from side to side as he tried to catch a glimpse of the half-Asian. Adriana had told him to invite Maya to their country cottage over the weekend—and to leave out the fact that everyone except Roman would have "sudden emergencies" that prevented them from going.

That wouldn't be a problem, if he could only *find* her.

Suddenly, he caught sight of a bright flash of red hair. Zack squinted. Hey, wasn't that Maya's friend? What's-her-name? He was pretty sure she was named after a city. Florence? Paris? Vienna? He racked his brain before it finally hit him.

"Venice!" he shouted, bounding down the hall towards the petite redhead.

She spun around, her jaw dropping when she saw him. "Are y-you t-talking to me?" she stuttered, pointing to herself.

Zack was confused. Was there someone else named Venice here?

He looked around. Nope. No other people were in the hall. “Yes. You are Venice, right?”

She nodded frantically, making her look like one of those bobble-head figures he used to collect when he was little.

Zack laughed. She was kind of cute. “Do you know where Maya is?”

“Erm, no.” Venice tucked a fiery strand of hair behind one ear. “I think she left, but I’m not sure. Why?”

Zack’s face fell in disappointment. “Oh, I just wanted to invite her to my family’s country house this weekend.”

“Oh.” Venice paused. “You know, I don’t think she can go this weekend. She has a date tomorrow.”

This time, *his* jaw dropped. “A date? With who?!”

Please say Roman, please say Roman, please say—

“James.”

Oh god that’s not Roman. Adri’s going to throw a fit.

At the thought of his sister’s wrath, Zack shuddered a bit. Sometimes he couldn’t quite believe he managed to make it out his mother’s womb unscathed. Thank god he couldn’t remember anything from when he was a fetus because sharing that tiny little space with Adriana must’ve been a nightmare.

“Are you ok? Why did you shudder when I said his name?” Venice asked, furrowing her brow.

“Oh, no reason,” he muttered, trying to think of a plan. “Where are they going?”

“I think she said something about an amusement park.”

“An amusement park,” Zack repeated slowly. There was no amusement park in Valesca. The closest one was near La Terra.

There was no going around it. He had to call Adriana.

“Can you stay here for just one second?” He held up one finger to make his point as he speed-dialed his twin with his other hand.

Venice shrugged. “Sure.”

When Adriana answered, Zack quickly explained the situation. She didn’t react the way he expected.

“So why are you calling me?” Her voice crackled over the line.

Zack frowned. “Because, uh, I don’t know what to do now?”

Adriana sighed wearily. “Follow them, Zack. You follow them.”

“Follow who?”

“Maya and James, Zack! Maya and James! Follow them tomorrow and find out what’s going on between them!”

“Ok, fine. I was just asking. Jeez,” he huffed. She didn’t need to be so *snippy*.

“But don’t go alone. Take someone with you.”

“Carlo and Parker?”

“No, Carlo’s got enough to worry about and I don’t trust Parker to get the job done. You were talking to Venice, right? Take her with you. She knows Maya well, so she can read her actions better than any of us.”

“Oh.” That made sense. “Ok. What—“

“Sorry, Zack, I have to go. My manicurist just came in. Text me if anything new comes up, ok?”

“Sure.” Zack pouted. She never had time for him anymore.

When he made his way back to Venice, she looked at him questioningly.

He flashed her a dazzling smile. “Are you up for an adventure tomorrow?”

* * *

“You copied me!”

“No, *you* copied me!”

“No, obviously *you* copied me! Mine is a girl’s coat!” Venice tugged on the sleeve of her khaki trench to emphasize her point.

Zack frowned down at his almost identical trench. Except it was a lot manlier than hers, of course. “So? Mine’s Burberry!” That’s what Adri told him anyway.

He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at Venice. He thought it would be clever to dress up as a spy detective this morning, like the ones in the movies. He’d worn the trench, the fedora, and the oversize sunglasses, and added a touch of casual with his old Levi’s.

And then Zack arrived at Venice’s house, only to find her wearing... a trench, jeans, fedora, and sunglasses.

“We look like one of those matching couples,” he complained. “That’s lame.”

“Well, too bad,” Venice huffed, climbing into the passenger seat of his black BMW. He’d chosen to drive this today because Maya had never seen it, and because it was less flashy than his Porsche. “I’m not changing.”

Zack frowned, wondering when she’d changed from cute to annoying. He reluctantly pulled out of her driveway just as she flipped on the radio and turned it to a Taylor Swift song. Venice immediately started warbling the lyrics to “You Belong with Me” at the top of her lungs.

Zack flinched. The girl could not hold a tune to save her life.

This was going to be a long day.

Two hours later

“Ohmygod! Look at the roller coaster! It looks like so much fun! Can we go on it, pleasepleasepleaseplease *please?*”

Venice bounced excitedly on the balls of her feet as she pointed at the giant green roller coaster in front of them, her eyes wide and shining.

It made Zack tired just looking at her. He thought he had a lot of energy? Try Venice on a sugar rush.

I knew we shouldn’t have gotten that sixth cotton candy, he thought.

“We’re not here to go on roller coasters,” he pointed out, even as he stared the metal structure longingly. “We’re here to find out what’s going on between Maya and James.”

Venice pouted. “I don’t see why we have to follow them all day. They’re just friends.”

“Yeah, but they could—“

“Ooh, a puppy!” she squealed, racing after the tiny Pomeranian.

“Wait, stop!” Zack shouted, running after her, his coat flapping behind him. He saw people giving him strange looks but he ignored them. He’d gotten so many of those since they stepped foot in the park that they didn’t even faze him anymore. “They’ll see us!”

As if on cue, Maya and James, who’d been talking and laughing a little ahead of them, turned to see what all the commotion was about.

Panicking, Zack grabbed Venice’s arm and immediately yanked her behind a garbage can. In their haste, they ended up knocking heads.

“Ow!” Venice rubbed her forehead, her nose twitching. “Eew, it smells.”

His own nose twitched a bit. “It’s a garbage can.” He peeked cautiously over the top. “I don’t think they saw us.” He turned to Venice with a stern look. “Don’t pull that again, ok? If they’d seen us, we would be in big trouble.”

Venice looked abashed. “Sorry,” she squeaked.

“What is going on here?”

Zack looked up to see a beefy security guard scowling down at them, a suspicious expression on his pudgy face.

“Oh, nothing,” he chirped, pasting on his most innocent smile. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Venice do the same.

“Nothing, huh?” The security guard narrowed his eyes. “Y’all look awfully suspicious, hiding behind the trash can like that.”

“Oh, erm, we were just playing hide and seek,” Venice offered brightly. She stood up, brushing down the front of her coat. “But, uh, we’re done now. We won!”

“Yeah!” Zack jumped in. “Our brother’s never been able to win!” He let out an evil cackle.

The suspicion morphed into fear on the security guard's face. He probably thought he was dealing with lunatics. "Is that right?" He took a step back. "Well, uh, have fun." With that, he scurried away, but not before Zack heard him mutter, "They're a bit too old to be playing hide and seek. Too old to play dress-up, too."

"Great. Now everyone thinks we're crazy," he sighed, even though he wasn't all that upset. Crazy people had all the fun. "Come on, let's go."

Zack started speed-walking in the direction Maya and James had gone in, hoping they hadn't lost them, when he realized Venice wasn't following. He turned and saw her still standing by the trash can.

"What are you still doing there?"

"There's gum on my shoe!" she wailed. "On both my shoes!"

He groaned. Of all the luck—"That's ok, I'll just pull you." Zack grabbed her arms and tugged. Venice lurched forward a bit, but that must've been the Krazy Glue of gum because her feet didn't budge.

Zack frowned determinedly, giving her another tug. No dice. "Can't you help me at least a *little*?"

"What do you want me to do?" she snapped crankily. "I'm the immobile one here! Do you have anything I can use to cut the gum out?"

"If I had a knife I would've used it on you already," Zack mumbled, appalled at the violent turn in his thoughts.

No! That was a mean thing to say. Think of happy things, Zack, happy things. Fluffy bunnies and rainbows with pots of gold and...and leaping unicorns eating cotton candy...

Cotton candy! At the thought of the stupid snack that had gotten Venice so hyped up in the first place, Zack gave another mighty tug without thinking,

causing Venice to tumble forward right into him.

“Oof!” Zack fell down on the ground with a loud groan. To his horror, he felt something wet on his lower leg.

“Aaaah!” He jumped up and frantically spun around like a dog chasing its tail, trying to see what he’d fallen in. He prayed it wasn’t...

“There’s ketchup all over you.” Venice looked like she was trying not to laugh as she pointed at the oozing red condiment on his jeans.

“Noooo!” Zack wailed. “These are my favorite jeans!”

She frowned. “Are you gay?”

“No!”

“You sure sound gay.”

“Shut up and come with me to the gift shop to buy some clothes!”

“Hey, don’t you be telling me to shut up, I thought you were supposed to be the nice one---ooh, puppy!”

“Don’t you dare!”

The two continued to bicker as they stormed into the nearest gift shop. Well, Zack stormed, and Venice hobbled, since she still had gum on the bottom of her shoes. Fifteen minutes later, they came out, the redhead in new flip-flops and trying not to laugh while Zack tried to keep his one-size-too-large shorts from falling.

Stupid store. They had to run out of his size.

“Great, now we lost them,” Zack sighed. Adri was going to kill him.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that, Blondie.” Venice, who’d gotten over her Scion starstruck-ness a long time ago, pointed at a small outdoor restaurant,

where Maya and James were eating burgers and laughing.

Zack breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe there was still hope. Then, to his horror, he saw James lift up a hand to brush a strand of hair out of her face. Maya blushed and turned away, but James placed a hand under her chin and tilted it up so she was facing him again.

“Oh, no, they’re going to kiss!” Zack squawked. Crap. “She’s supposed to kiss *Roman*, not that overgrown hedgehog!”

“Hedgehog?” Venice squinted at the sandy-haired boy. “He doesn’t look like a hedgehog to me. And why is she supposed to kiss Roman?”

Zack barely heard her as he ran towards the café. No, Maya could *not* kiss James. That would ruin everything! He was a better matchmaker than that!

As he watched, James lowered his face closer...closer...

“FIRE! There’s a fire!” Zack yelled randomly, saying the first thing that came to mind. “Fire! Run for your lives! Forget about your burgers and your kisses, RUN!”

The people sitting at the café looked around, confused, as a low titter ran through the crowd.

“Fire? Where?”

“I don’t see any smoke—Peter, put out your cigarette!”

“To hell with it, I’m finishing this burger. If I’m going to die, I might as well die eating Kobe beef.”

Maya and James looked just as confused as the rest of the people. Maya’s eyes scanned the crowd, and Zack gulped, realizing she was going to see him in just a second if he didn’t do anything.

He looked around frantically just as Venice caught up to him, panting and out-of-breath.

“Sorry, sir, I’m just going to borrow this for a moment,” Zack blurted, grabbing a huge map of the park from a passersby’s hands.

“Hey! Get your own map!”

Ignoring the man, Zack whipped open the map and shoved it in front of his and Venice’s faces just in time.

“This is ridiculous,” Venice hissed, glaring at a point on the map that indicated the location of the Slip-Slider. “What were you talking about? There’s no fire.”

“I know that,” Zack hissed back, afraid to lower the map in case Maya was looking in their direction. “But I had to do *something*.”

“Young man.” He twisted his head to see two security guards, neither of whom was the one they’d ran into earlier, staring sternly at him.

“Yes?” he asked weakly.

“Young man, we’re going to have to take you into headquarters for disturbing the peace.”

Venice and Zack let out simultaneous groans. Could this day get *any* worse?

* * *

The “outing” with James today had gone surprisingly well, except for that one weird incident during lunch when someone had yelled “Fire!”

I shook my head, slipping one foot out of my sandal and flexing it as James pulled into the Fioris’ driveway. Some people were too weird. Luckily, James wasn’t one of them. He had been funny, sweet and easy to talk to, and I actually had a lot of fun.

“Thanks so much for today, I needed it,” I said, smiling at him as I unbuckled my seatbelt. “And thank you for driving me back. You didn’t need to.”

“The pleasure was all mine.” James smiled back. “And of course I did, I wasn’t about to let you go on that bus at night. We should do this again sometime.”

I bit my lip. “As friends, right?” I liked him, but I didn’t *like* him, and I didn’t want to lead him on. He’s nice, but we got along a little too well. He did everything I wanted to or asked, and it was a bit...boring.

Not like Roman. The thought popped up so suddenly I almost jumped, but thank god I didn’t. I shook my head a little. Today must have gotten to me, because that thought alone proved I was going certifiably insane.

James lips twisted wryly. “As friends.” He glanced at the mansion in front of him, his expression darkening slightly. “Is this your house?”

“Uh, no, it’s my friend’s. I’m just staying here while my parents are out of town.” For some reason, I didn’t want to tell him it was Roman’s house.

“Who’s your friend?”

Guess I didn’t have a choice. “Er...Roman.”

James eyes suddenly sharpened as he whipped around to face me. “Roman Fiori?” The name came out as a hiss, and I instinctively shrunk back at his unexpected fierceness.

“Yes?”

James scowled. “Why are you staying here with him? It’s not safe!”

“Well, he offered...” My voice trailed off. “Anyway, he’s not as bad as you think he is, really!” I’m not sure why I was defending that pain in my butt, but I bristled a bit at James’ tone.

James snorted. “Yeah, right. He’s a menace,” he muttered. “You don’t even know what he did.”

I frowned. “What did he do?”

He stared at me for a moment before looking away. “Nothing, it’s not important,” he said. “Just—I just don’t like him.” He let out a deep sigh. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you like that.” His next smile was rueful. “Not exactly the way I wanted to end today.”

“It’s ok, I understand,” I assured him, though curiosity was still burning inside me. “You’re just looking out for me. I appreciate it.”

“Yeah.” James leaned closer, and I stiffened, thinking he was going to try and kiss me again. And he did—only it was a friendly peck on the cheek. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

“No need,” I said quickly, my face flushing. Don’t they only do that on dates? “It’s right there. But, um, I should get going. You know, it’s pretty late—” I glanced at the car clock and winced when I saw it was only nine-thirty. Wow, I’m a loser.

Luckily, James didn’t say anything. “Ok, hopefully I’ll see you soon.” He gave me another, warm smile. “And if you need anything, don’t hesitate to call me, alright?”

I nodded, thanking him once again before getting out of the car. When I opened the door, I turned to wave goodbye, and waited until he pulled out of the drive before heading to my room.

I only got halfway there before something stopped me. Or rather, *someone*.

“Where were you all day?” Roman demanded, folding his arms over his broad chest as he stared imperviously down at me from the staircase.

I sighed, not in the mood for his interrogation. “I was out with a friend.” I started up the stairs, but he blocked my way.

I looked at him with annoyance. “What do you want?”

“Who’s your friend? I called everyone, no one’s seen you.”

“What, are you stalking me now?” I crossed my own arms, mirroring his stance.

He ignored my question. “Tell me!”

“For your information, his name is James!”

“James,” he repeated.

“Yes, James! Now let me through!”

“And do I know this James? What were you doing? Were you on a date? Why were you out so late?”

I groaned. Seriously? “Well, gee, I don’t know if you know him, Roman, why don’t you ask yourself? And *no*, it wasn’t a date, we just went to an amusement park!” I neglected to tell him James was the same guy he almost fought at Stan’s party all those weeks ago.

“You went all the way to La Terra?” Roman stared at me accusingly. “With some guy you don’t even know that well? Don’t you know how dangerous that is? You could’ve been raped, or killed!”

“But I wasn’t,” I snapped. “And for your information, James is a very nice guy.”

“Yeah, sure,” he sneered. “I bet he is, when he’s trying to get in your pants.”

What the—of all the—“What are you *talking* about? He doesn’t!”

“Did he try to kiss you?”

I opened my mouth to respond, then snapped it shut, remembering the way James had looked at me during lunch. Telltale pink tinged my cheeks.

Roman’s eyes turned fiery as he gripped the banister. “He did, didn’t he?”

“That’s none of your business!” I attempted to shoulder my way past him, but he grabbed my arm and spun me round so I was pressed up against his chest.

“To hell it’s none of my business!”

We just stood there on the staircase, glaring at each other, but at the same time, I couldn’t help but feel a bit dizzy from the heat that emanated from his body. I swallowed hard, the warmth of his grip burning my skin, but it wasn’t a painful burn. Far from it, actually.

My breath hitched as I stared up into Roman’s eyes, which had darkened to an almost purplish-black color, making the gold flecks stand out even more. I focused in on those mesmerizing golden dots, my entire body tingling. The only thing to be heard was the sounds of our labored breathing and the frantic beat my heart was drumming against my chest. That woodsy scent of his snuck through my nostrils, making me feel woozy.

Sensory overload! Sensory overload! my brain screamed, urging me to turn and flee before I fainted. Or worse, before I...

“So are you two going to homecoming together now?” Roman’s voice was gruff, and he didn’t loosen his hold on me.

“No.” I answered without thinking, my voice coming out smaller than I would’ve liked. *Homecoming*.

“Really?”

Was it just me, or did he sound slightly hopeful?

A random, inane image of Roman and I attending the dance together flashed through my mind. I would be in the dress from Barneys, he would be in a tux. We would walk in and everyone would turn and stare, marveling at how good we looked together...

And just as suddenly, the image was replaced by one of Roman with some beautiful, bitchy ice queen by his side, and my stomach clenched a little. Oh right. He already had a date.

I yanked my arm away, effectively breaking the moment. Roman blinked and stumbled a little, as if dazed, while I tried to ignore the sudden chill that enveloped me.

“Actually, I forgot. I do have a date. I’m going with Carlo,” I blurted, taking satisfaction at the stunned look on his face.

I sincerely hoped Carlo’s offer was still open. Roman wasn’t the only one who could get a date! And I’d be damned if I was going to stand there all night like some wallflower while the guys waltzed around with their dates.

“I’m sure you’ll have a lot of fun with your date too,” I added coolly, backing away. “Good night.”

With that, I turned and nearly ran to my room, not stopping until I’d locked the door behind me. I slid down the wall and collapsed on the ground, breathing heavily.

For some reason, the image of Roman and the theoretical ice queen remained in my mind, which wasn’t the problem. The problem was why I felt like crying every time I thought about it.

My eyes widened as I thought back on the past few weeks. The way he’d looked so vulnerable the night of the blackout, how my heart broke for him when he told me about his parents, how I kept unconsciously comparing James to him at the park today. The way I blushed around him and the way my skin felt like it was on fire every time he touched me.

But no. I hated him. After everything he did, I should hate him. I definitely did. But that didn't explain why I'd been slightly relieved when Parker told me we didn't have to pretend anymore, nor did it explain why a part of me had foolishly hoped Roman would've asked me to homecoming while we were on the staircase.

There was no way. It defied logic and everything sane. I mean, I didn't—I couldn't *possibly* have a crush on Roman Fiori, could I?

I gulped. Oh crap.

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CHAPTER 19

“So they didn’t kiss?”

“Nope.” Zack shook his head, popping a Hershey’s Kiss in his mouth and chewing thoughtfully. “I made sure of that.” He looked extremely pleased with himself.

Adriana couldn’t help but laugh as she pictured her brother yelling “fire” in the amusement park. “I can’t believe you got hauled into police headquarters.”

Zack made a face. “Security headquarters,” he corrected her. “And it wasn’t a big deal. They let me go once they found out who I was.”

“Well, I’m glad you did something right for once,” Adriana teased, pulling a Mason Pearson brush through her shining gold locks. She was in an inordinately good mood today. It was as if she knew something good was going to happen, even though it been a normal Sunday so far.

Zack shot up from where he’d been lazing on her daybed, a wide-eyed look on his face. “Did you just compliment me?” he asked excitedly.

She rolled her eyes, smiling a bit. “Maybe—ow!”

Zack had tackled her in a blur of tousled blond hair, nearly knocking her to the ground.

“And here it starts again,” Adriana complained. “This is why I’m never nice to you.”

“Don’t lie.” Zack squeezed her hard. “You love me and you know it.”

“I know no such thing.” Adriana batted him away, but she was laughing. “Are you going to stay in here all night?”

Zack gave her an offended look. “No. I have very important things waiting for me, you know.”

“Like your video games?”

He ignored her. “Just out of curiosity though, who are you going to homecoming with?”

Her hand stilled, then resumed brushing. “I think I’m just going to go alone.”

“Really?” Zack’s eyes widened even more. “Why? Did no one ask you?”

Adriana shot him a dirty look. “People asked me, Zack, I just don’t want to go with any of them.”

“Oh.” He fell silent, then smiled impishly. “Ok, cool. Well, I’ll see you later then.” With that, he bounded out of her room.

Adriana frowned, turning back to her mirror. Her brother was just too weird.

She set down her brush and was just about to grab her lotion when she heard the door open again.

“I thought you were going to play video games,” she said without looking up, unscrewing the top of her Crème de la Mer. It was supposed to be a face cream but she used it as an all-over body moisturizer.

“Sorry, babe, video games aren’t really my kind of thing.”

Adriana whipped her head around, trying to mask her surprise when she saw Parker striding towards her. He wore a pale green button-down that

brought out the color of his eyes and had his hands stuffed in his pockets. There was small, smirky smile on his handsome face.

“Ever heard of knocking?” she asked, recovering quickly.

“Knocking?” Parker raised his eyebrows. “What’s that?”

Adriana rolled her eyes. “Funny. Zack just left a minute ago. He’s probably in his room.”

“I know.” Parker leaned against the edge of her dresser and stared down at her. “I didn’t come here to talk to him.”

“Oh.” For some reason, Adriana’s stomach twisted nervously. It was not a sensation she was used to.

“Maya and I broke up.”

She froze, then started applying the cream to her hands with more vigor than ever. “So you finally decided to end the ruse, huh?”

Parker stared at her in shock. “You knew?”

Adriana smirked, feeling more like herself. “It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure it out. Everyone knew.”

He ran a hand through his golden-brown hair. “Roman didn’t.”

She laughed. “It’s Roman. What did you expect?”

Parker cracked a smile. “True.” He reached out and fiddled with one of her perfume bottles. “So...who are you going to homecoming with?” he asked casually.

Adriana sighed. Why was everyone asking her that question tonight? “No one. I’m going solo. Don’t have to be tied down to one guy that way,” she answered flippantly.

Parker frowned a bit, his green eyes flickering. “Right.” He stared down at the perfume bottle in his hand. “Don’t you want to know why we decided to end it now, right before homecoming?”

There was something about the inflection in his tone that caused Adriana’s mouth to dry up. “Why?” The word came out as a whisper.

Parker looked up, locking eyes with hers. She felt a strange sizzle beneath her skin, which had warmed considerably, even though the A/C was still at full blast.

What are you doing? she screamed to herself. *This is Parker. The boy you’ve known since you were both in diapers.*

“I thought it wouldn’t be fair to go with her to homecoming when I really wanted to go with someone else,” he said softly, never breaking eye contact.

Adriana instinctively held her breath, feeling a bit dizzy. She was feeling so unlike herself it was disconcerting, though not altogether unpleasant.

“So who do you want to go with?” Her voice came out scratchier than she would’ve liked.

Parker didn’t say anything for a moment, then he broke his gaze and pushed himself off of her dresser.

Adriana blinked, disoriented from the sudden loss of contact.

“I’ll show you.” Parker held out a hand to her.

She was confused. “What do you mean?”

“Trust me,” he insisted.

After only a second of hesitation, Adriana slipped her hand into his, trying to ignore the small jolt that ran through her.

Since when did Parker make her so jumpy, anyway?

She thought he was going to take her outside, but instead he led her to her balcony. When they stepped outside into the cool night air, Adriana shivered a bit, and he slid an arm around her in response.

“What did you want to show me?” Adriana looked around. She couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“Look down.”

She obeyed, and immediately sucked in a breath when she caught sight of her family’s Olympic-size pool, which was located right under her balcony. Usually, it was a perfect, pristine blue, but tonight, the water glowed from the dozens of tiny votive candles scattered on its surface.

Tiny votive candles that spelled out one simple sentence: *Will you go to homecoming with me?*

Adriana’s throat suddenly felt too tight, and she gripped the railing of her balcony, unable to look away. For a long moment, no one said anything, and then she breathed, “How—how did you...?”

She felt more than saw Parker shrug. “Zack’s a pretty good distraction. Plus, I found out you can custom-make just about anything as long as you’re willing to pay.”

It was getting a bit hard to breathe. “This is for me?”

Parker spun her around, his face more serious than she’d ever seen it. “For someone who’s supposed to be so smart, you can be so dense sometimes,” he said softly. He was so close she could feel his breath fan across her face.

Adriana swallowed involuntarily, her heart feeling like it was in the race to win the Indy 500. In the back of her mind, she felt as though she should be

insulted, but she wasn't. It was kind of hard to concentrate, when Parker was staring at her like that...

"What do you mean?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

The green in Parker's eyes intensified until they were practically smoldering. "Remember that time we were fourteen and went on vacation to France? And you were supposed to go meet that guy but couldn't because your bike suddenly got a flat tire?"

Adriana's breath hitched. "You did that," she suddenly realized.

Parker neither confirmed nor denied it. "And remember when we were eight, and I pushed you into the pool? You didn't speak to me for days..."

"Until you came over with a bunch of daisies you picked from the yard and an ice cream cone, to say sorry," she remembered fondly, a small smile creeping onto her face at the memory.

Parker smiled in return. "Didn't work out too well. Who knew ice cream melted so quick?"

She wanted to laugh, but the odd feeling in her throat prevented it.

"Were you ever upset?" Parker changed the subject abruptly. "When Maya and I were 'dating'?"

Adriana's stomach bottomed out. "No. I knew you weren't really dating."

He eyed her closely. "Not even when we kissed at Il Serrano?"

Her grip tightened on the railing as she remembered the strange feeling that tugged at her heart when she saw Parker and Maya kiss. She wanted to say no. She *should* say no, but the word wouldn't come out.

Parker sighed, his eyes flickering again. "Adri...why do you think I did all that?" He gestured to the pool.

She swallowed. “I don’t know.” Even though, deep in her gut, she knew. She just couldn’t quite believe it.

He sighed again, a strange expression crossing his sculpted face. He stared down at her, gently tilting up her chin with one finger. “Then I guess I’ll have to tell you now.” His voice was so quiet she almost didn’t hear him. “Adri, I’ve liked you since we were both children.”

Her heart nearly stopped.

“I just didn’t have the courage to tell you, then you went away to Switzerland...” He trailed off.

Adriana swallowed. “But you’ve had so many girlfriends.”

“None of them were you.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” she whispered.

He shrugged, turning a bit red. “When I was pretending to date Maya, I kept on thinking how she would be the perfect girlfriend. Beautiful, smart, funny, all that. And I really did like her—“

A ripple of jealousy coursed through her veins, shocking her. She *never* felt jealous. Adriana opened her mouth to say something, but Parker held one finger up to her lips, shushing her.

“—as a friend. Because the whole time, I couldn’t stop thinking about how much I’d rather be with you instead.”

“So—“ Adriana’s voice was thick as she tried to process all this information. “So what—what now?”

“Let’s take it one step at a time, hmm?” Parker rested his forehead against hers. “So will you go to homecoming with me?”

It was a no-brainer. Adriana threw her arms around his neck, an act of ebullience she'd never done before. "Yes!"

And with that one word, she knew her life had somehow completely, irrevocably changed in the space of an hour.

* * *

"Damn, I am on fire, if I say so myself!"

I laughed as I watched Venice twirl in front of the three-way, full-length mirror in Adriana's room, the skirt of her dress billowing out around her. Her dress was a strapless black number, splashed with brightly colored flowers that matched her personality perfectly.

I had to admit, she *did* look good. Adriana's amazing hair skills had even managed to tame Venice's riot of fiery curls so they fell in smooth waves down her back, and her alabaster skin gleamed under the lights.

"No moving," the blonde now instructed as she finished curling my own hair. "Unless you want to end up looking like Shirley Temple."

I made a face. "Like you would ever let me out of the house like that."

Adriana laughed, wrapping one last lock of hair around the piping-hot barrel. "That's true. I can't wait till the boys see you. You look gorgeous."

"Not that I would know," I groused. She hadn't let me look in a mirror since we started getting ready.

"She's right, you know." Venice bounced over, eyeing me critically. "You look like a goddess. Carlo is going to *die* when he sees you."

I blushed. "I don't know about that," I mumbled.

I was so grateful that Carlo was still willing to go to homecoming with me though. How embarrassing would it have been if he'd already been going with someone else? A part of me felt bad, like I was using him or something, but honestly I was pretty excited about going with him. I always

felt so comfortable around him, he was easy to talk to, and he wasn't exactly hard on the eyes.

"Done," Adriana announced, turning off her gold-plated curling iron. She beamed down at me. "My finest work so far, I have to say."

"Really?" I reached up to touch my hair self-consciously. My hair had always been pin-straight, except when I went to the beach and it got all wavy from the sea water. I'd never purposely curled it before.

"Really. Go on, take a look."

Venice clapped her hands excitedly. "Oh gosh, I can't wait."

Eyeing them a bit suspiciously, I stood up and walked over to the mirror. My hair was the last thing we needed to do before we were completely ready, and according to the clock on the wall, the guys should be downstairs waiting already

I knew Adriana was a master with hair and makeup, and the dress was gorgeous—which it better be, considering how much it cost. Nothing prepared me for what I saw though.

The girl staring back in the mirror looked exactly like me, only better, if that made sense. Her glossy black hair fell in big, lush waves down her back, setting off her bronze complexion that glowed as if lit from within. Her eyes were large and smoky, fringed by mile-long lashes, and her full, pouty lips were perfectly glossed to rival Angelina Jolie's. The beautiful Fendi dress was clingy on top and bared her shoulders, while the skirt swished elegantly around her thighs, revealing just enough leg to be sexy but not skanky. The pair of gold Jimmy Choo stilettos Adriana had lent me completed the look perfectly.

"Is this really me?" I asked, stunned.

Adriana came up next to me, an unusually gentle smile on her face. "I told you, Maya. You look beautiful."

“Thanks,” I whispered, still a bit in shock. I smiled gratefully at her. “Thanks so much, Adri. You look gorgeous too.”

And she did, even more than usual. She was all legs in her purple satin dress, and combined with her towering silver Blahnik heels and perfect golden locks, she looked like a princess, albeit a very seductive one.

“Ooh, I can’t wait till the boys see us!” Venice grabbed our arms. “Let’s go down!”

I laughed at her excitement, but I was feeling a bit fluttery myself. I knew Carlo, Parker, and Venice’s date were waiting downstairs. I’d been surprised when Adriana told us the story about how Parker had asked her out, but I was more than happy for them. It turns out my instinct was right after all.

The three of us descended the winding staircase that led to the Perrys’ giant living room, and the butterflies increased when I saw Carlo standing at the bottom. He looked devastatingly handsome in his tux, with his hair slicked back and a smile on his face.

“Hey,” he said, upping the wattage of his smile when he saw me. His gaze flickered appreciatively over me. “You look...amazing.”

I blushed. Even though I had an inane crush on he-who-shall-not-be-named, I wasn’t blind. Carlo was on fire.

“Thanks,” I murmured.

He handed me a single, perfect white rose. “I thought it’d match your dress.”

“Thank you.” I accepted the flower, touched. It was beautiful. No guy had ever given me a flower before.

Just a gift basket...

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. No. I would not think about him. Not tonight. I deserved to have my fun.

“Are you ok?” Carlo asked quietly, as the others moved towards the front door.

I nodded, slipping my arm through the crook of his. “I’m fine. Perfect, actually.”

The concern in his face eased a bit. “Good.” He glanced in front of us, where Parker and Adriana were whispering conspiratorially to each other while Venice talked her date’s ear off.

I wonder where Roman and Zack were. *Ugh, can’t I not think about him for even one second?!*

“Rome and Zack are picking up their dates,” Carlo said, almost as if he’d read my mind. “They’re meeting us at the dance.”

“Oh. Ok.” My stomach fell a bit when I remembered Roman had a date too.

Not that it mattered. I wasn’t going to let that bring me down tonight. Not one bit.

* * *

Where the heck were they?

Roman scowled into the night, glaring at the limos that were pulling up, filled with couples who were *not* his friends.

“Roman, who are we waiting for?” the accented voice to his left asked, sounding a bit annoyed.

He turned and eyed his ‘date’ with aggravation. Objectively speaking, Solange was beautiful, as all supermodels were. The Brazilian had a thick dark hair, crystal-like blue-green eyes and a body most girls would’ve died for. She also had the personality of cardboard and was getting on his last nerve.

And the night had barely begun.

“My friends,” he said slowly, like she was too dense to understand the two words. Which she probably was.

Roman glowered at Zack, who seemed to be all fine and dandy with his date, a willowy redheaded model from Idaho or Iowa or one of those states.

The Scions usually brought models to school functions, if they went at all, because it was less hassle and they wouldn’t have to deal with the clinginess of Valesca girls afterward.

That is, until Parker decided to go with Adriana—which had been surprising but fine—and Carlo decided to go with Maya. Which was decidedly less fine.

Roman set his jaw at the thought. Out of all the people in the world, Carlo *had* to go with her.

What’s so great about her anyway? he thought furiously. She was upsetting the balance of everything, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“Oh, I think that’s them!” Zack pointed to the Rolls-Royce limo that had just pulled up.

“It’s about time,” Roman grumbled, stiffening a bit as he waited for his friends to get out.

Maya’s little redheaded friend and her date were the first to get out, followed by Parker and Adriana.

Roman tensed when he saw Carlo. The Colombian held out his hand to the last person in the limo, and a second later, Maya came into view.

All the air whooshed out of his lungs. Roman swallowed hard, rooted to the spot as Maya started walking towards him. Her dress fluttered behind her

from the wind, and she looked more gorgeous than he'd ever thought anyone could look.

As he watched, she laughed at something Carlo said. In response, his friend wrapped an arm around her waist and said something that made her laugh again.

The scowl reappeared on Roman's face as he resisted the urge to rip Carlo's arm away from her.

"Hey, guys," Maya chirped when she finally reached them. "You all look great." Her eyes flickered over Solange before quickly looking away.

Narrowing his eyes, Roman reached out to grab his date's hand. "Maya, I don't believe you've met my date, Solange," he said coolly.

Maya's smile tightened a bit. "It's nice to meet you," she told the Brazilian politely.

Everyone else quickly introduced themselves, but Roman's blood practically boiled at her indifferent courteousness. What the hell happened to the fiery-tempered girl he knew?

Whatever. It doesn't matter, he thought darkly, as they made their way into the hotel ballroom where homecoming was being held.

The dance was already in full swing, but instead of joining everyone else on the dance floor, Roman stomped over to the Scions' reserved VIP table. The others followed reluctantly.

"You don't want to dance?" Solange asked in her thick accent.

"No," he replied curtly.

"Well, in that case, can you look after our bags for us?" Adriana asked sweetly, placing her silver clutch on the table.

“What do I look like, your butler?” Roman growled, but it was too late. Everyone else had already moved to the dance floor.

For the next half hour, he just sat there and fumed, getting more and more irked as he watched everyone else have the time of their lives.

Carlo spun Maya around and dipped her exaggeratedly, like they did in the movies, and she broke out into silvery laughter as he did so.

Roman grabbed a glass of water from the table and took a huge gulp before slamming it down, causing the other glasses to rattle a bit.

What right did they have to be so happy when he wasn’t? He set the standards!

Who does Carlo think he is anyway, Fred Astaire? he thought rather nastily.

“Roman, I’m bored,” Solange whined beside him.

“So, go do something about it,” he answered disinterestedly.

Solange huffed angrily and stood up, her chair screeching as she pushed it back. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

When she didn’t receive an answer, she stormed off, but Roman barely noticed. He couldn’t take his eyes off a certain couple on the dance floor.

Several songs later, his friends came back to the table for a rest, sweaty and out of breath. A disgruntled Solange had also returned, and though she didn’t say anything, he could feel the waves of annoyance coming off her.

“I’m going to freshen up a bit,” Adriana announced, grabbing her clutch. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll go with you,” Maya offered, and Venice and Zack’s date, Cynthia something-or-other, echoed the same sentiment.

Apparently deciding another trip to the ladies' room was preferable to sitting at the table not doing anything, Solange followed, leaving the boys to themselves.

They were silent for a moment.

"I'm sorry, what's your name again?" Zack asked Venice's date.

The boy flushed, obviously unable to believe he was sitting with the Scions. "Gr-Grant."

"Grant." Zack frowned. "That's kind of a weird name."

Parker shot him a surprised look. Zack shrugged. "What? It is."

"Oh, y-yeah. My grandfather was named Gr-Grant, so—" The boy shrugged, turning even redder.

"Oh." Zack sipped his water. "How do you know Venice?"

"We-we're in Eng-English together."

"Fascinating."

Any other day, Roman would've questioned Zack's unusual snarkiness, but right now, he was too focused on the rose Maya had left on the table.

"So, Carlo, did you give that to her?" he asked casually, leaning back in his chair as if he didn't care about the answer.

His friend didn't even blink. "Yes."

"That's a bit tacky, isn't it?" Roman sneered. "I mean, I thought people usually tried to get laid after prom, not homecoming."

"Roman!" Parker's voice was sharp, but Carlo shook his head, gazing steadily at Roman.

“I’m not trying to get in her pants, Roman.”

“Oh, really?” His grip tightened on his glass. “Judging by the way you two were dancing out there, I find that a bit hard to believe.”

“Not every guy has sex on their mind, Roman,” Carlo said calmly, infuriating Roman even more. “Besides, you might want to pay attention to your date instead of mine. Solange didn’t look like she was having too much fun.”

“Yeah, well, she’s my date, so I can do whatever the hell I please,” Roman snarled.

“And Maya’s mine, so I can do whatever *I* please. Although, I have to say, you need to stop making her uncomfortable.”

Roman narrowed his eyes. “And if I don’t? What are you going to do about it?”

This time, a challenging look flashed across Carlo’s face. His voice was quiet but threatening. “You don’t want to know.”

* * *

“Are you guys ready?” Venice asked, grabbing a paper towel from the dispenser and wiping her hands.

“I am.” Cynthia, Zack’s date, smiled brightly. I’d been surprised by how friendly she was, though I supposed I shouldn’t stereotype all models as stuck-up snobs.

As much as I hated to admit it, even Solange was pretty nice. She wasn’t exactly the brightest bulb in the chandelier, though, if you know what I mean.

“Maya? You ready?” Adriana tilted her head.

I swallowed, turning the faucet on and off. “Um, in just a moment. You guys go ahead first, I’ll meet you out there.”

She gave me a curious look but thankfully didn’t say anything. “Ok. I’ll see you in a bit.”

One by one, the other girls left the bathroom, and the moment the door closed, I slumped against the counter, breathing a sigh of relief.

The truth was, I just didn’t want to go out there and face Roman again. More specifically, I didn’t want to face him and Solange together again.

I swallowed hard, my heart panging as I thought about them. They looked good together. Better than I would ever look with him...

No. Stop it. Don’t think about it, don’t think about it, I silently chanted, but I couldn’t stop. I’d vowed not to let him ruin my night but it turns out I was just fooling myself.

It didn’t help that all the progress we’d made lately seemed to have disappeared. Roman had barely talked to me all night. He hadn’t even looked at me.

I bit my lip. To my horror, I felt tears spring up in my eyes. *Out of all the guys in this world, why do I have to like him?* I thought bitterly. He was the worst person to have a crush on. It had been so much easier when I hated him.

I still remembered how I felt when I first saw him standing there, waiting for us, earlier this evening. He’d looked...perfect, and for the briefest moment I’d imagined that was waiting for me. Then I saw Solange, and it all came crashing down.

Of course he wasn’t waiting for me. He had his own perfect, beautiful supermodel date, and I was just some charity case living in his house.

I sniffled, trying my best not to cry and ruin all the hard work Adriana had put into my makeup. Most of all, I didn't want to give him the satisfaction. I've never cried over a guy, and I certainly wasn't about to start now.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, counting to ten and trying to push all thoughts of Roman out of my mind. Once I felt I was calm enough, I pushed open the bathroom door and started to walk back to our table.

On the way there, I caught sight of a couple making out against the wall. I frowned. Whoa, PDA much? They looked like they were about to rip each other's clothes off.

When I got closer though, I realized the guy looked exceedingly familiar from the back, even though I couldn't see his face due to the fact it was attached to his girlfriend's. There was something about his hair, and the build...

And then I saw the girl's dress. A slinky red silk number I've definitely seen before—because Solange had been wearing it.

I sucked in an unsteady breath, my legs suddenly feeling wobbly. No. It couldn't be...

At that moment, the guy lifted his head, his stormy gold-flecked violet eyes locking onto mine.

I let out a small, involuntary gasp as I gripped my clutch so tight my fingers became numb. My face flushed, my heart threatening to burst out of my chest as pinpricks of pain danced across my skin.

A cruel smirk slashed across Roman's face as he cupped Solange's face in his hands. Without ever taking his eyes off from mine, he drew the Brazilian into another rough, passionate kiss.

It was as though all the breath had been knocked out of me. My stomach churned, making me feel as though I were about to throw up.

Air. I need air.

The tears welled up, blurring my vision, and I was finally able to gain enough control over my muscles to run past them. I didn't even know where I was going, just that I needed to get away from *him*.

I was vaguely aware I'd passed by our table on my way out, but only because I heard Carlo calling after me.

Ignoring him, I burst through the doors of the hotel ballroom, stumbling a bit when I hit the crisp night air. I bent over double, dry-heaving a bit as the image of Roman and Solange locked replayed in my mind, over and over.

It shouldn't hurt this much. Even though I liked him, it shouldn't hurt this much. He was arrogant and insufferable and downright cruel. I shouldn't even like him in the first place.

But I did.

"Maya."

I felt Carlo place a soothing hand on my back, but his comforting touch only made me feel worse. I was so stupid, I didn't deserve anyone trying to comfort me.

"It's ok," he murmured quietly.

I shook my head, gasping for breath. "I'm such an idiot," I sobbed, hating myself for letting Roman get to me like that.

Carlo wrapped his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. "No you're not," he said soothingly, running a hand over my hair and brushing the strands out of my tear-stained face. "You're not. You're perfect just the way you are."

I shook my head in denial, pressing my face against his chest. I felt bad about ruining his shirt, since I was sure mascara was running down my face,

but his embrace was so warm and comforting, and didn't I deserve to be selfish just this once?

"I just—I just want to go home," I hiccupped. There was no way I could go back in there. I should, just to show Roman I could. But I couldn't. "Please, Carlo. Can we just go home?"

"Of course. I already called the driver." He rubbed soothing circles on my back. "It's ok. Just let it out. I'm here for you."

That was when I couldn't hold it in any longer. Wrapping my arms tightly around his waist, I cried my eyes out while he just stood there and held me.

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CHAPTER 20

When I woke up the next morning, I felt like I had the world's worst hangover, even though I didn't even drink yesterday. My head was pounding, my eyes were puffy and swollen, and there might be a beaver lodged in my throat. That's not even counting the nausea in my stomach.

I grimaced, slowly climbing out of my bed and into my bathroom. I don't really remember how I'd gotten back here. All I remembered was crying. And crying. And crying. I didn't even know the human body could produce so many tears.

When I saw my reflection in the mirror, I winced. Wow, I looked like absolute hell.

Almost robotically, I went through the motions of my usual morning routine. Brush my teeth, wash my face, shower, brush my hair. For once, I dabbed on a bit of makeup even though it was the weekend, trying to hide the redness and puffy eyes. It didn't completely cover everything, but it was good enough.

I sighed, shuffling back into the bedroom just in time to hear my phone ring. After silently debating on whether or not I should let it go to voicemail, I picked up.

"Hello?" My voice was hoarse, and I cleared my throat to clear it.

"Hey Maya, it's Carlo. How are you feeling?"

"Like someone took a sledgehammer to my head," I answered wryly, curling up in an armchair.

A mixture of warmth and guilt filled my veins at the sound of his voice. Carlo had been so sweet and understanding yesterday, which only made me

feel worse about the fact I'd ruined his senior homecoming. "I'm so sorry you had to take care of me yesterday night though." I sighed. "I don't know what came over me." I bit my lip. "What did you tell the others?"

"That you weren't feeling well and that's why we left early. I figured you wouldn't want them to know."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Carlo was the only person who had an inkling of what really happened, and I intend to keep it that way. "Thank you so much for everything, Carlo. Really."

He chuckled. "No problem. Are you packing today?"

I furrowed my brow. "What?"

"Aren't you supposed to move out today? Your parents are coming back tomorrow, right?"

I sucked in a breath, a block of cement instantly forming in my stomach. "Crap," I whispered.

With everything going on the past few weeks I'd completely forgotten to tell Roman about my parents' extended stay in Napa, and there was no way I could tell him *now*. Not that I wanted to stay in his house for an extra two weeks.

I quickly relayed this information to Carlo, adding, "I guess I'll...just go home and deal with my parents when they get back."

"Don't be ridiculous," Carlo gently scolded me. "You—" He hesitated, as if mulling something over. "You can stay at my house."

I frowned. "No, I don't want to bother you."

"It won't be a bother at all. We have a huge guesthouse out back that no one's used since the Beckhams were here."

“Beckhams?” I immediately perked up. “Are you talking about David and Victor—“

“So is that a yes?” Carlo cut in smoothly.

I sighed, slumping down in my chair once again. “I don’t know...”

“Victoria might have left some shoes there.”

My foot twitched. A second passed. Then two. Then, “Deal.”

I stayed on the phone with Carlo for a bit, and he suggested I move out today, which I was perfectly fine with. I didn’t want to stay in a house with that *jerk* any longer.

The more I thought about yesterday night, the angrier and more embarrassed I felt. I had no idea why Roman did that. I mean, he couldn’t possibly know I like him. Right?

My skin turned cold at the thought. No, there was no way. He was just trying to get on my nerves, that’s all--and he succeeded spectacularly.

I scowled, unable to believe I’d broken down like that. I *never* cried like that. *And I’m definitely not going to do that again*, I thought fiercely.

With newfound resolve, I got dressed, yanked open the doors of my suite, and stomped down to the kitchen, before I caught myself and slowed my gait to a more normal stroll.

However, I did falter a bit when I saw Roman in there. With Solange.

The nausea came back full force, but I forced myself to walk in nonchalantly as if nothing was wrong.

Solange waved when she saw me. “Good morning, Maya,” she greeted me in her thick Brazilian accent. She was wearing nothing except for an oversized men’s button-down.

He sure has a thing for lending out his shirts, I thought grumpily, remembering the night I'd stayed in his room after watching *The Grudge*.

I quickly shook the memory away and smiled back, trying to not dwell on the reason why she was here. In the morning. In Roman's shirt.

The devil himself didn't bother greeting me. He just leaned against the counter, gazing at me with hooded eyes and a small, self-satisfied smirk on his face.

That stupid smirk. To my relief, my blood began to boil. Anger was a lot easier to deal with than that other pesky emotion that started with a J.

"Looks up you're up," Roman drawled, not taking his eyes off me. "Why'd you leave so early yesterday? Something upset you?"

Resisting the urge to knee him in the groin, I calmly slid onto the stool next to Solange and grabbed a freshly baked muffin from the basket in the middle of the table. "Just my stomach," I answered smoothly. "It was a bad idea to eat Mexican food before homecoming. My mistake."

"Really?" Roman didn't look like he believed me. "It looked like you were crying to me."

"And when was this?" I asked, blinking innocently. I knew he couldn't say outside the bathroom, without admitting he'd been watching me while making out with Solange.

His eyes narrowed a fraction of an inch. "On your way out."

I shrugged, biting into the muffin and letting the warm deliciousness calm me. "Like I said, I really wasn't feeling well. I tend to shed a tear or two when my stomach acts up the way it did last night."

"I drink lemon juice," Solange offered randomly, swishing her thick chestnut hair back and forth.

“Maybe I’ll try that next time.” I flipped my own hair over my shoulder and stared at Roman challengingly. “Luckily, Carlo was such a gentleman. He bought me some medicine at a nearby drugstore and I felt so much better afterwards. He didn’t even mind me ruining homecoming for him.” I let out a dramatic sigh. “He really was the perfect date. I’m going to have to find some... method of making it up to him.”

I took in Roman’s reaction out of the corner of my eye, and was gratified to see the smirk slip off his face, to be replaced by his trademark scowl.

“How generous,” he sneered. “I didn’t realize a trip to the drugstore was all it took. A bit easy even for you, isn’t it?”

Pain flashed through me at the barely-veiled implication behind his words. Was he seriously bringing out the slut card again, even though I’d specifically told him I was a virgin? I don’t know why, but it always got to me, even though we both knew it wasn’t true.

“Roman, I thought we were going shopping today.” Solange’s full red lips formed a perfect pout. “I really want to get that limited-edition Gucci purse.” She seemed oblivious to the tension in the air.

“We are going,” Roman said, not looking at her. “Wait outside for me, will you?”

“Ok,” the leggy Brazilian agreed amiably. Then she stopped. “I can’t go out dressed like this.” She looked down at her bare legs.

Roman finally gave her an annoyed glance. “I’m sure Maya wouldn’t mind lending you some of her clothes, right?” He raised his eyebrows in my direction.

“Not at all,” I answered icily. “I’m happy to help a friend out. Come on, Solange, I’ll show you to my room.”

I led her up the stairs to the Greek suite, glad to be away from Roman's presence. God, keeping up that charade was harder than I thought.

"This is nice," Solange enthused, looking around at the ornate gold-and-white décor. "Almost as nice as Roman's."

I flinched a bit at the evidence she'd been in his room. "My clothes are in the closet, just pick whatever you want," I mumbled.

The supermodel finally settled on one of my day dresses, a flowy aqua number that looked more like a top thanks to her mile-long legs.

"Do you think Roman will like it?" she asked, twirling around in front of the mirror.

I swallowed. "Every guy will love it, you look gorgeous," I admitted truthfully, trying not to envy her perfect looks.

Sure, Solange wasn't the smartest girl in the world, but most guys, especially ones like Roman, didn't like smart girls. They preferred the hot ones who'd do anything they asked, who didn't slap them or yell at them or —

Stop it! He's not worth thinking about.

"Really?" Solange turned to face me, her face lighting up. "I like Roman. He's...er, how you say...different. From other men."

I smiled tensely. If by different she meant bipolar, then she was so right. "Well, you should get going. I don't want you to, uh, lose that Gucci purse."

Solange beamed at me. "You're so sweet." She waggled her fingers at me. "See you soon?"

"Sure." The word tasted bitter on my tongue. As she swished out of the room, I couldn't help but think how good she and Roman looked together. They certainly made a picture-perfect couple.

Which was totally fine. If he wanted her, he could have her. I don't care. Or at least, I won't care as soon as I moved out of here and forgot all about Roman Fiori.

* * *

"Wow, this is the *guesthouse*?" I breathed, my eyes widening as I gazed at the massive two-story structure in front of me. "That's amazing."

Carlo chuckled. "After the Fioris' residence, I'm surprised you're even shocked by my humble abode."

I snorted. If you called an indoor pools, fifteen bedrooms, three tennis courts, and a garage that could be converted into a martial arts dojo with the flip of a switch *humble*.

"Your luggage is already in the master bedroom on the second floor," Carlo said, opening the door. "The butler brought it up for you. The guesthouse has its own bathrooms, kitchen, living room, and an intercom system that links to the main house. Whenever you need anything, just let the staff know and they'll take care of it for you."

We stepped into the elegantly decorated house. It was less lavish than the Fioris' suite, but I actually liked it better. It was more welcoming.

"Thank you, really," I said softly, looking around. "You've been such a great friend."

Carlo smiled gently at me. "You said it yourself. I'm your friend, and what are friends for?" He handed me the key. "I have something I need to take care of, but I'll be right back. Make yourself at home. Just one thing."

I stared at him curiously.

Carlo hesitated a bit, a more serious expression crossing his face. "It's probably best if you stay out of the main house for a bit. Just as a—precaution."

A precaution? Against what? But the look on his face told me he wouldn't tell me anyway, so I just nodded. "Ok."

The seriousness faded, and he smiled once more. "Dinner's at seven, I'll come eat with you here. How does Thai sound?"

My stomach rumbled at the thought of pad Thai. "Perfect."

He laughed. "See you later then."

For the next hour or so, I explored the guesthouse, which was about twice the size of any regular house in any other part of America. I could feel myself relaxing, just from being away from the Fiori residence, even though it was only two streets away. It almost seemed as though yesterday had been a bad dream.

I pushed open the curtains of my room, delighted to find I had a perfect view of the Tevascos' giant lagoon pool. Today was fairly warm for a fall afternoon, and the water looked so inviting...

Making up my mind, I threw on my favorite black bikini, grabbed a towel, and flip-flopped down to the pool.

When I got there, though, I was surprised to see someone had beat me to it. From the back, he looked an awful lot like Carlo, except a bit taller and broader, and his hair was longer.

He turned when he heard my footsteps, and my eyes widened.

Whoa. He looked almost exactly like Carlo, only different, if that made sense. The coloring was identical, and their facial structures were similar, only the guy standing in front of me had thinner lips and a nose that looked like it'd been broken more than a few times. The most startling difference though, was his eyes. Whereas Carlo's were warm and soulful, his were harder, more cynical.

“Well, hello, darling,” he said, eyeing me head-to-toe in a way that made me shiver. “And who might you be?”

I held the towel in front of me, wishing I’d worn a cover up. His lips tugged into a smirk at my action.

“I’m Maya. Carlo’s friend,” I said, my voice surprisingly clear and steady. “Who are you?”

He chuckled. “Rico. Carlo’s brother.”

My jaw dropped. Carlo had a brother? And he never told me? A frisson of hurt snaked its way through my system.

“Don’t worry if he never mentioned me,” Rico drawled. “He rarely does.” His eyes burned through my towel, and I clutched it tighter to me.

“Oh. W-why?”

There was something about Rico that made me incredibly nervous. *Forget swimming. Just go back in the guesthouse!* my mind screamed.

Rico smirked. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” There was a strange inflection in his voice, but before I could do anything, another voice cut in.

“Rico! What are you doing here?”

I nearly collapsed with relief when I saw Carlo stride over angrily. He looked madder than I’d ever seen him. Actually, I’ve never seen him mad before, period. It was a little scary.

Rico shrugged, seemingly unperturbed. “Just getting to know your friend, little brother,” he answered cavalierly. “Besides, this is my house too.”

“For now,” Carlo muttered. He switched his gaze to me, concern filling his face. “Are you okay?”

I nodded.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded again, wondering why he looked so on edge.

“Come on, let’s get you back in the guesthouse,” Carlo murmured, guiding me inside.

“It was nice to meet you!” Rico called out laughingly. “I’ll see you around...*very* soon.”

Carlo’s hand stiffened on my back, but neither of us said anything until we were inside.

“What was that?” I breathed. You could’ve cut the tension between Carlo and his brother with a knife.

He shook his head. “Just my brother being a jerk, as usual.” He frowned down at me. “I’m sorry you had to run into him.”

“It’s no big deal. He didn’t do anything.”

“Good.” Carlo sounded relieved. “Just—be careful around him, ok? He’s not the nicest person on the planet.”

“Hey, if I can take on Roman, I’m sure I can handle him,” I half-joked.

A sad smile flitted across his face. “It’s not necessarily the same thing. Just promise me you’ll be careful?”

I bit my lip. “I promise.”

Carlo’s shoulders relaxed a bit, and the smile reappeared. “So tell me. What are you going to do about Roman?”

Now it was my turn to stiffen. “What do you mean?”

A mischievous twinkle lit up his dark eyes. “Well, you are going to get revenge on him for what he did, right?”

I frowned. “I never thought about it.”

“You should. It’ll be pretty easy, he gets jealous quickly.” Carlo smirked.

I rolled my eyes. “You can only be jealous if you like someone, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t like me. What?”

Carlo was staring at me in disbelief. “Are you sure you’re an honor student?”

“Of course I am!” I huffed, insulted. “I’ve been an honor student all my life!”

“So you’re honestly telling me you don’t think he likes you?”

I blinked. “Um. No. I mean, yes.”

He laughed. “Wow, this is going to be fun.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He just shook his head. “You’re coming with us to celebrate Adri and Zack’s birthday next week, right?”

“Of course. We even picked out Zack’s present together, remember?”

Carlo grinned. “Good. That’ll be the perfect time.”

“For what?”

“To make him jealous.”

I stomped my foot. “I told you, you can’t make someone jealous unless—“

“Unless they like you, yadda yadda yadda.” He tugged on a lock of my hair. “Come on, don’t knock it till you try it. Besides, wasn’t he trying to make you jealous yesterday? Why don’t you give him a taste of his own medicine?”

“I’m pretty sure he was just trying to be a pain in my butt yesterday, as usual,” I sniffed.

Carlo just looked at me. I threw my hands up, letting the towel fall to the floor. “What do you want me to do? I’m not good at this stuff!”

He laughed. “Wearing that bikini might be a start.”

I made a face. “What a perv.”

Carlo smirked, ruffling my hair. I grumpily tried to swat his hand away. “Don’t worry, I’ll help you out. Just consider it a social experiment of sorts. Have fun with it. Even if it doesn’t work, just consider it an ego boost.”

Part of me still wanted to say no. Considering I’ve never had a real boyfriend, I’m not so good at these flirting games people pay. On the other hand, what if I *could* make Roman jealous? Or at the very least, upset?

I suddenly flashed back to the scene on the staircase, after I came home from the amusement park with James.

A small smile curved my lips. Huh. Maybe was Carlo right. It was time to give Roman a taste of his own medicine.

* * *

“Thank you for an amazing day,” Solange cooed, as Roman pulled up in front of the hotel where she was staying.

She trailed her fingers down his chest until it rested precariously close to a certain region below his belt. “You can come up with me if you want,” she breathed. “I have a hot tub in my room.” She eyed him suggestively.

“No, thanks,” Roman answered curtly, grasping her wrist and placing it in her lap. “You should get some sleep. You leave early tomorrow.”

Solange pouted. “I can make time for you.”

Jeez, couldn’t she get a hint? “I’m tired,” he snapped.

She frowned. “Fine,” she huffed, grabbing her new Gucci purse angrily and opening the door. She stopped and looked back at him hopefully, as if he were going to call her back.

When he didn’t, she slammed the door shut.

The minute she did, Roman peeled away from the curb. God, dealing with Solange for an entire day was insufferable. Trying to have a normal, intelligent conversation with her was like trying to pull teeth.

If it weren’t for Maya, I wouldn’t even have to deal with her, Roman thought angrily, slamming his foot on the brake at a stop sign.

He’d only brought Solange back to the house yesterday because he thought Maya might be up, but she wasn’t. Then, the model had downed an entire bottle of wine by herself, babbling about shopping the whole time until he finally told her he’d take her to the mall today just to shut her up. Solange ended up spilling some of the wine on her dress in her excitement, hence why he’d reluctantly let her borrow a shirt. And on top of all that, she’d passed out before he could call a cab to take her home.

Roman had planned to make up an “emergency” so he could get out of the shopping trip, but then freakin’ Maya had waltz into the kitchen. He certainly wasn’t about to cancel in front of *her*.

His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he thought back to the kitchen scene.

“He really was the perfect date. I’m going to have to find some...method of making it up to him.”

No need to ask what her “method” entailed.

A low growl erupted from his throat as he pulled up in front of his house, tires squealing.

Carlo, Carlo, Carlo. Of course Carlo could do no wrong. He was perfect.

Roman stomped angrily into the house, his boots echoing loudly in the marble halls. What did Carlo have that he didn’t anyway? Did girls seriously like that oh-so-sensitive bullshit?

It was wimpy as hell, in his opinion.

Of course, what *really* galled him was the fact that seeing him with Solange seemed to have no effect on Maya whatsoever. Just picturing her sitting there at the kitchen table that morning, calmly eating her stupid muffin, made his blood boil. She wasn’t supposed to be so nonchalant!

Well, what did you expect? a voice asked smugly inside his head. *Did you really think she could like you?*

“What’s there not to like?” Roman growled out loud. “I’m Roman Fiori!”

Yes, but that doesn’t mean a thing to her. Honestly, she’s better off with someone else. Someone like...Carlo.

“Shut up!” Roman roared, causing a passing maid to shoot him an alarmed look and scuttle into the closest room as fast as her feet could take her.

Why do you care so much anyway? Could you possibly have feelings—

“No way,” Roman muttered furiously. “I’m just mad because she’s the only girl who isn’t fawning over me the way. She’s. Supposed. To!”

He yanked open the door to his room and slammed it shut behind him.

He only took two steps before he stopped, turned, and stormed across the hall to her room. He wasn't sure what he wanted to say to her, but he had a feeling she was lying about being sick yesterday.

At least, he hoped she'd been lying. She seemed pretty upset when she saw him kissing Solange.

Roman scowled even more at the memory of the kiss. It had been a necessary evil, or so he'd thought. Now, it just seemed like it had all been for nothing.

"Maya!"

He stepped into the Greek suite, searching for a glimpse of her dark hair. Roman's eyes scanned the empty room, puzzled.

Her bed was perfectly made, and he couldn't hear any noises. That was weird. She was usually back by this time.

"Maya?"

No response.

His heart speeding up a bit, Roman thoroughly checked the bedroom. Something was off, but he couldn't tell what. By the time he'd gone through the dressing rooms, bathroom, study area, and the rest of the suite, he was full-on panicking.

Where the hell was she? Had she been mugged? Kidnapped?

His heart tugged violently at the thought.

Roman quickly pressed the intercom button, and the head housekeeper answered immediately.

"Gloria, where's Maya?" he barked.

The housekeeper paused. “I don’t believe I’ve seen Miss Lindberg all day, Mr. Fiori.”

“Well, she’s not here!”

“Perhaps she went out?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, where could she possibly have gone?” he snapped. “Find her!”

“I—“ Before Gloria had a chance to answer, Roman released the button.

He whipped out his phone, calling Parker, Adri, and Zack in succession. None of them knew where she was, which left him no choice.

Roman reluctantly speed-dialed Carlo, and the Colombian picked up after three rings.

“Hello?”

“Have you seen her?” he demanded without preamble.

“Seen who?” Carlo asked calmly.

“Maya!”

“Yes.”

Relief filled Roman’s lungs. “Where is she? She’s not here!”

“I know. She’s here, with me.”

And just like that, the relief was replaced with roaring jealousy. Roman’s grip tightened on his phone. “Where is ‘here’, and why the hell is she there at this time of night?”

“She’s in my guesthouse.” Carlo sounded almost amused. “Didn’t she tell you? She’s staying here for the next two weeks.”

Roman froze, ice filling his veins. “What?” His voice was hoarse.

“Her parents are extending their stay in Napa, and she’s decided to stay with me until they come back,” Carlo explained serenely.

By now, Roman was gripping his phone so tight he heard it crack a little. His stomach clenched painfully at the thought of Maya and Carlo. Alone. For two weeks. “Why didn’t she just stay here?” he hissed, even though he didn’t really want to hear the answer.

He could almost hear Carlo shrug on the other end. “She said she felt more comfortable staying with me. Can’t hog her all to yourself, you know,” he said jokingly, even though Roman did not find it funny at all.

He resisted the urge to reach through the phone and throttle his soon-to-be-ex-friend.

“Carlo? Who are you talking to?” Maya’s lilting voice in the background came through loud and clear. “Dinner’s here.”

A red haze formed before Roman’s eyes as he pictured them sitting together, eating a romantic dinner by candlelight.

“I’ll be right there,” Carlo called back. Speaking to Roman, he added, “Sorry, gotta go. I’ll see you later.”

Roman sputtered angrily as the other boy ended the call, a vein pulsing angrily in his neck.

“Dammit!” Feeling the need to break something, and violently so, he hurled his phone against the wall, not caring he’d paid almost a thousand dollars to customize it. It promptly shattered into pieces.

Later that night, Roman tucked his hands behind his head, staring up at the ceiling in his darkened room. He couldn't sleep. The hopefully imaginary scene of Carlo and Maya eating dinner, finishing dinner, kissing, and maybe even doing more , kept replaying in his head like a broken record.

He turned on his side, closing his eyes and willing sleep to descend. It didn't work.

Roman gripped the top of his comforter in frustration. How did that girl manage to stay on his mind even when she wasn't anywhere near him?

A hollow feeling spread in his stomach as he thought about the empty suite across from his. For some reason he'd always slept better, knowing she was right there across the hall.

The dinner image was instantly replaced by a memory of that night she'd ran into his room, screaming about the girl from *The Grudge*.

A small chuckle escaped his throat as he remembered how freaked out she'd been. She was pretty cute when she was scared.

Roman buried his face in his pillow, trying to push her out of his mind. It wasn't until three hours later that he finally managed to drift off to sleep, a picture of a certain green-eyed brunette's face lingering on his mind.

CHAPTER 21

I'm in Hawaii.

Seriously, I'm in freakin' *Hawaii*. I never thought I would get to visit Oahu, but here I am.

I have to say, being friends with the Scions did have its perks. Plus, at least I finally know what Adriana's birthday present is.

"I can't believe you guys flew us all the way out here for our birthday," Adriana was saying, as Carlo checked us all in at the counter of the ultra-exclusive Halekulani resort.

"Yeah, well, we knew how much you guys loved Hawaii. We had so much fun last time we were here," Parker explained with a grin, leaning down to kiss her on the cheek.

"Why does my sister get all the special treatment?" Zack huffed good-naturedly, his hair looking even blonder than usual under the lights.

"Why, you want a kiss?" I teased, feeling much better than I had all week. I mean, who could blame it? I was in paradise.

The past week had been pretty relaxing, with the exception of a few more run-ins with Rico at Carlo's house and Roman at school. I tried by best to avoid both of them, sticking with Carlo, Venice, and Zack. Adriana and Parker had been in their own little world lately. I'd also started talking to James again, and I was glad he'd gone back to normal. He didn't sound upset with me anymore, nor did he even hint he wanted anything more than friendship. It was a huge relief.

Of course, I was determined to leave all my worries behind, at least for this weekend. After all, I was in *Hawaii*. I didn't even care that a certain violet-eyed boy was standing less than two feet from me, tapping furiously on his

brand-new phone. He was probably texting Solange. Honestly, his old phone had seemed perfectly fine, but I guess rich boys liked to switch up their gadgets as much as they did their girls.

No. I'm not going to think about it.

Taking a deep breath, I smiled at Carlo as he walked over with our room keys, but my smile faded a bit when I saw the look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. He looked slightly upset.

“Uh, there was a bit of a mix-up with the rooms,” Carlo said apologetically.

Roman’s head snapped up. “What kind of mix-up?”

“Well, we have two suites and one smaller room—“

“Isn’t that what we’re supposed to have?” Zack pointed out.

“Let me finish,” Carlo said patiently. “We have the Royal Suite, which has two bedrooms. That’s the one you, I, Parker, and Adri are supposed to be staying in. Then we have a single room for Venice, per her request, and one for Roman and Maya.”

“What?!” Roman and I shouted at the same time.

“What do you mean, one for Roman and Maya?” I asked furiously.

“I did *not* agree to share a room with him!” The thought alone made me want to jump right back on the private jet to Valesca, Hawaii be damned.

“Yeah, I like I really want to share a room with you either!” Roman snapped. “You snore!”

I gasped. “I do not!”

“How do you know she snores?” Adriana asked curiously.

“I do not snore!” Then her question sunk in, and Roman and I gazed at each other, horrified, while the others eyed us with a mixture of suspicion, amusement, and cluelessness (the last one would be on Zack’s part).

“I guessed,” Roman muttered. “She looks like a snorer.”

“No, I don’t!” I stomped my foot childishly. I do not snore! Do I?

Carlo cleared his throat. “Well, once you’re both done acting like you’re on a kid’s playground, can we get back to the problem at hand?”

“I thought you already told us the problem. I—“ I jabbed a finger at myself. “Have to share a room with *him*.” Now I pointed at Roman.

“That was planned beforehand,” Carlo said dismissively. “I mean, it just makes sense. Parker and Adri are obviously together, Venice doesn’t want to room with anyone for some reason, and trust me, you do not want to room with Zack.” He didn’t mention the fact that he and Roman were still acting cool towards each other, which meant they wouldn’t be rooming together. “Anyway, you two are in the Orchid Suite. However, I thought that there would be more than one bedroom, but it turns out there, er, isn’t.”

The color slowly drained from my face while Venice burst into a fit of giggles beside me. I glared at her, shutting her up. While I was glad Venice was here, I am not happy about the fun she was having at my expense.

“I’m not sharing a bedroom with her,” Roman declared pompously.

“No, correction, *I’m* not sharing a bedroom with *him*.”

“You’re right, you’re sharing a bedroom together,” Carlo cut in calmly. “Sorry, I didn’t know.” He looked apologetic.

I was about to cry. “Carlo! You can’t! Why don’t we switch it around? I can trade places with Zack and stay with you instead!”

I wouldn't mind. I knew Carlo wouldn't do anything, and I'm always comfortable around him.

"Yeah, I bet you'd like that," Roman sneered.

I ignored him. "Please?" I begged, nearly hyperventilating at the thought of sharing close quarters—or any quarters—with Roman.

Carlo scratched the back of his neck. "You have to ask Zack."

I swiveled my head towards the blond, a pleading expression on my face.

"Sorry, My-My." Zack looked guilty. "I can't share a room with Roman, he gets really violent when he's tired."

"And so you'd rather I be there instead?" I near-yelled, drawing scandalized glances from the people around me.

"But you're a girl, he can't hit you," Zack said cheerfully. "I'm a guy, he can hit me. Besides, it's only for two nights!"

"That's true, it won't be that bad, honeybee," Parker assured me.

I shook my head frantically. "V? Can I share with you?"

She didn't meet my eyes. "I mean, you *could*, but I don't know if there's enough space. Besides, I don't think you can sleep if you shared with me."

Oh right. I may not snore, but Venice did. Loudly. *Very* loudly. The one time we attempted a sleepover I had to sneak into the guest room next door, and even then I could hear her through the walls.

"Parker? Adri?" I gazed at my two last remaining hopes with my best puppy-dog expression.

"Sorry, no can do. We have plans." Adriana smirked, and the rest of us made gagging noises.

I don't even want to know.

"Ok, guess that's figured out. We'll all get freshened up then meet for dinner before hitting the club," Carlo announced. The Perrys' birthday wasn't until tomorrow, so tonight we were just relaxing until the festivities really started.

A low snarl erupted from Roman's lips before he stomped off towards the elevator, the others staying a safe distance away.

"Carlo! How can you do this to me?" I hissed once they were out of earshot. "You *know* why I can't stay in a room with him!"

Carlo smirked. "Au contraire, my friend, I know why you *should* stay in a room with him. We need to activate Phase One of Operation Revenge."

My jaw dropped. "You did this on purpose!" I accused. "I bet you even told Zack to feed me that bull—"

"Regardless, it'll be...eye-opening," Carlo interrupted, smiling cheekily. "Shall I brief you on Phase One?"

"I didn't even know there was a Phase One," I grouched. "Or an operation, period."

"Don't you remember our conversation from last week?"

"I thought you were joking!"

"I wasn't. Anyway, Phase One is seduction."

Now I was sure I heard wrong. "Excuse me?"

"Seduction," Carlo repeated. "Although I suppose that's not quite right, since seduction implies you will go through with the deed. I suppose you should just—tease him a little?"

“Carlo Tevasco!” My face was bright red by this point, whether from anger or embarrassment, I couldn’t tell. Probably a mixture of both. “I am not seducing him! Or teasing him! In fact, I am not talking to him, period.”

“It’s a bit hard to get revenge that way. You do want revenge, don’t you?”

“Well, I—you—it’s just—“ I closed my eyes, drawing in a deep, calming breath. “I’m sure there’s another way.”

“Listen, Maya, this is the perfect weekend to do that. I have it all planned out. When have I ever led you astray?”

“That time you made me eat an Almond Joy?”

“You need to get over that. I promise it will work.”

I bit my lip nervously. “How do you even know I *can* seduce—“

“Tease.”

“Fine. How do you even know I can tease him? I’m sure he’s not attracted to me that way. He hates me.”

Carlo shook his head slowly, like he was disappointed in me. I found that a bit unfair. If anything, I should be disappointed in him for setting me up like this.

“Maya, you sell yourself short. It doesn’t matter whether he likes you or not, he’s a guy. And trust me, he’ll be attracted to you once he sees you in your lingerie.”

I was horrified. “What lingerie? I didn’t pack lingerie!”

“The lingerie you bought with Adri all those weeks ago,” Carlo answered simply. “Might as well put it to good use. Don’t worry, I put it in your suitcase at the last minute.”

I turned even redder at the thought that Carlo had seen all the silky, lacy scraps of material Adriana practically forced on me.

“Oh, and don’t do anything until you get back to your suite after dinner and you’re ready to go to bed.”

I sighed, a headache setting in. “But I don’t know how to se—how to tease people.”

Carlo smiled smugly, obviously knowing he’d won. “Don’t worry. That’s what I’m here for.”

* * *

I couldn’t believe I’d let Carlo talk me into this. This was a very, very bad idea. The worst idea in the history of bad ideas. In fact, I think sunbathing topless in Moscow during the middle of winter would be a better idea than this.

“Maya! What’s taking you so damn long!” Roman pounded furiously on the door. “You’ve been in there forever!”

I forced myself to steady my voice before answering. “I’m a girl! Deal with it!”

I heard him utter a string of profanities but at least he stopped bothering me. I shouldn’t be feeling like this. After all, I was currently in what is possible the most beautiful bathroom in the world, complete with a steam shower, therapy pool (I’m not sure what that means, but I need to use it after dealing with Roman all night), a plunge tub, and views of the hotel gardens.

Dinner had been fine, once I got over my horror at not only having to share a bedroom but a bed with Roman (since both of us absolutely refused to sleep on the couch).

The problem started after dinner, ergo fifteen minutes ago, when I put on the darned lingerie (Carlo decided I should go for black).

I gulped, staring at myself in the mirror. I couldn't believe people actually wore this stuff. The "lingerie" looked more like a very, very tiny dress or a long top, with a tied satin ribbon at the bust. Its straps were dental-floss-thin, and the front dipped low to reveal an unnerving amount of cleavage, pushed up by the dress/top's built-in bra. The bra area itself and the "skirt," which is just a little ruffled flounce of material that barely covered my decent parts, were made of soft tulle. The rest of the lingerie was sheer.

Yep, that's right. As in see-through, for the most part. To make matters worse, the back dipped so low as to be indecent, which meant I was barely getting any coverage no matter how you looked at it.

In my opinion, I looked totally slutty.

I gulped, lunging towards my makeup bag and frantically dialing Carlo's phone. He answered on the first ring.

"You have to go through with it," he said before I had a chance to speak.

I glowered at my cell. "I didn't even say anything." My shoulders slumped. "Seriously, I can't do this. I look like a hooker!"

"You are not a hooker, you're a...seductress."

"Who looks like a hooker."

"Come on, remember what I taught you earlier? Breathe, be confident, you'll do fine." He paused. "How long have you been in the bathroom?"

I blushed. "None of your business. Can we put this off for another night?"

"No. I have another plan for tomorrow night."

I groaned, seriously regretting confiding in him. Who knew Carlo could be so diabolical?

After ten more minutes, he finally convinced me to finish Phase One. At least, I hoped I could finish it. Taking a deep breath, I wiped my sweaty palms on a guest towel and covered myself with a short black satin robe.

I slowly turned the doorknob and stepped out into the bedroom, rearranging my face into what I hoped was a seductive expression.

Roman wasn't there.

I frowned. Crap. Now what? Maybe he was in the outer suite. When I went to check though, he wasn't there either.

Great. I pouted, going back into the bedroom. Even though I wasn't all that happy about this part of the plan, I was upset I'd psyched myself up for nothing. I didn't even know if he'd be coming back tonight.

Slightly disappointed at the thought, I sighed, running a hand through my hair. I'd curled it before dinner, but the curls had loosened into big, natural waves after a few hours.

Well, since Roman wasn't here, Carlo couldn't blame me for not trying. At least now, I could get out of my not-so-comfortable lingerie.

I slipped out of my robe and hung it on its hook in the bathroom, then re-entered the bedroom and bent over to fish some PJs out of the bottom drawer.

"What are you doing?"

I froze. The voice was so familiar. I knew it was him. After all, who else could it be? But he sounded different, more...hoarse? I'm not even sure.

Gulping audibly, I slowly turned around, my heart pounding so hard it felt like it was going to batter its way straight out my chest.

Roman was standing in the doorway, wearing a pair of low-slung jeans and a soft, well-worn gray T-shirt.

I gulped again, trying not to drool over his muscular arms and broad shoulders. This was the first time and hopefully last time I see him in an outfit like that, because if this turns into a regular occurrence, I might go into cardiac arrest.

It should be illegal for someone to look that good, especially if their insides didn't match.

"What do you mean?" My voice high-pitched and squeaky, not a seductress' voice at all. I quickly tried to compose myself. "I was just changing, that's all." I nudged the drawer closed with my leg. I guess I was stuck in this outfit for the rest of the night.

Roman's gaze swept over me, making my skin tingle as warmth raced through me. Every area his eyes rested on burned pleasantly. There was a strange expression on his face as he took me in.

"You're going to sleep in that?"

Be cool. Be confident. "Of course." I ran my hand through my hair the way they did in movies—at least, I hoped I did it like that—tousling it a bit, and walked slowly over to him.

I saw his breath hitch a little as I neared, giving me the confidence booster I needed. "Will that be a problem?" I peered up at him through my lashes in my best attempt at a smoldering look.

Apparently it worked, because when I trailed a finger down his chest, I could feel his heart beating wildly. I hid a smirk. I was beginning to enjoy this.

"What are you doing?"

Wow, he sounds like a broken record.

“I’m just talking to you,” I said innocently, trailing my hand lower until it rested on his rock-hard abs. Yeah, I was definitely enjoying this too much.

Who knew abs could cause a girl’s mood to do a total one-eighty in two minutes?

Roman’s hand immediately snapped up to grip my wrist before it could go any lower, not that I’d been planning on going any lower. A girl had to draw the line somewhere.

“You know, a few hours ago you couldn’t stand me. And now you’re... trying to seduce me?” His voice was suspicious.

Oh, darn it. Why did he have to turn smart all of a sudden? Ok, time to improvise.

I closed the distance between us, until we were pressed up against each other, trying to ignore the explosion of tingles that went off in my own body. “Is it working?” I breathed, running my hands up his arms. My mouth dried at the feel of smooth skin covering rock-hard muscles.

Holy crap, he had a good body. I mean, I always knew he did, but it was one thing to see it and quite another to feel it.

Ugh, now I feel like the biggest perv on the planet, albeit a happy one.

Roman’s eyes darkened, but it wasn’t from anger, I soon realized. It was from lust. I gulped for the third time tonight. The look on his face scared me a little—I was so not used to guys lusty after me, and no, Parker’s perverted jokes don’t count—but it also excited me a bit.

To be honest, the idea that I could do that to someone like Roman gave me a heady rush, but I hoped I wasn’t in over my head. Carlo had told me to use my judgment as to when to stop, assuring me that Roman wouldn’t push me into doing anything I didn’t want.

Judging from the way he was looking at me right now, though, I wouldn't be too sure about that. He was eyeing me the way a starving man would eye a juicy steak.

"Oh, it's definitely working," he growled, lowering his head until we were mere inches apart.

I gasped as he gripped my hips and pressed me even closer. He was right. It was working. I could, um, feel it.

My face turned bright red, and I started to sweat nervously. I go back to my earlier point. This was a bad idea. What the hell am I supposed to do now?

"Was this the lingerie you bought earlier?" Roman whispered, toying with one of the straps. They were so thin and he was so strong I was afraid it would snap at any moment.

As if he heard my inner panic, he let go of the strap, but I barely had time to breathe a sigh of relief before he started caressing the bare skin on my shoulders, sending my heart into overdrive. I was glad he was holding me, because I would've collapsed right then and there.

Screw the operation. I needed to get away from him. *Now.*

The only problem being, my feet didn't exactly want to move.

"What's wrong?" Roman moved his head so it hovered just above the sensitive spot behind my ear. I instinctively grasped his shoulder, my nails digging into his skin. He didn't seem to notice. "You're usually not so quiet." When he spoke, his lips brushed my skin, so gently I could barely feel it, only I did, and it was causing some very strange and unwanted reactions in me.

I needed to take back control.

Closing my eyes, I tried to focus, sifting through Carlo's advice until I found a suitable one.

“Well,” I murmured, pulling away and taking several slow steps back while keeping my eyes trained on his. I stopped when I felt the bed hit the backs of my thighs, and I sat down, leaning back so I was propped up on my elbows. I made sure to keep my legs crossed. Flashing him was *not* part of the plan. “Talking isn’t high on my list of things to do right now.”

“Really?” Roman’s eyes darkened even more. “Funny, we agree on something for once.”

Then, he did something that totally shocked me. He started taking off his top.

My jaw dropped. Uh-oh. “Wh-what are you doing?” In my panic, I completely forgot about my seductress voice.

“Since you’ve changed into your...outfit for the night—“ Roman tossed his shirt carelessly on the floor, and I nearly drooled when his lean, muscled torso came into view. It was every bit as beautiful as the one other time I’d seen him shirtless, after I fell asleep in his room. “—I figured I should do the same.” He gave me a wolfish smile as he began unbuttoning his jeans. “Did I forget to mention I sleep in my boxers?”

The room suddenly turned into a sauna. “I believe so,” I croaked, silently cursing Carlo with all my might. This was all his—oh my. Roman stepped out of his jeans. The temperature rose another ten degrees, at *least*.

He eyed me hungrily, and a swarm of butterflies immediately invaded my stomach. I unconsciously licked my lips.

Bad move.

Before I even knew what happened, Roman was on the bed. More specifically, he was on top of me on the bed, his legs straddling my hips. The only thing that kept the entire length of our bodies from pressing against each other was the fact he had propped himself up with his hands.

My breathing became shallow, even as I dimly realized the tables had totally turned. I wasn't teasing him, it was more like he was teasing me.

Although is it still considered teasing when he's about to kiss me?

As I lay there frozen, unsure what to do, his mouth began its descent to cover mine. The majority of me was yelling *abort! Abort!* but there was another, shameful part of me that wanted the kiss to happen.

Then, in what had to be either my stupidest or smartest move of the night, I blurted out, "Thank you."

Roman froze, his face so close to mine I could count all the individual gold flecks in his eyes. "Thank you?" His voice was strangled.

"Yeah." I fought to retain my calm. "I wanted to see the effect this lingerie has on the opposite sex—practice and all—so thanks for helping me out." I shrugged to the best of my ability, considering I was pinned down on the bed.

Confusion clouded his features. "Practice for what?"

I said the first thing I could think of. "For when I wear this for Carlo later." The minute the words left my mouth, I wanted to hit my head against the wall. Wow, I just keep digging myself into deeper holes.

And just like that, the passionate, lustful Roman was gone, replaced by one I knew so well. Only, not really, because even though he roughly pushed himself off me, he wasn't scowling at me like I expected him to. Instead, his face was a stony mask and completely unreadable.

"Glad I could help," he finally said coolly.

I swallowed, sitting up straight and involuntarily grabbing a fistful of the comforter in my hand. This wasn't what I expected. Angry Roman, I could handle. But this one, the cold, detached one? I had no clue how to handle him.

He walked over to the other side of the bed and grabbed a pillow off of it.

“What are you doing?” I asked, confused.

“I’m sleeping in the living room tonight.” Roman turned his back to her. “Maybe that way you could pretend Carlo’s sleeping next to you later.”

I watched, slightly stunned, as he disappeared into the living room. If I didn’t know better, I would’ve sworn he was hurt.

I should probably feel triumphant right now, but the only thing I felt was lost.

* * *

“I want to call it off.”

“What are you talking about?” Carlo kept his voice low as we stepped out of the open-air Jeep. “According to what you told me, you did well last night. Better than I expected, really.” He looked like he was trying not to laugh.

I frowned at him. “Thanks,” I said sarcastically. “Honestly, Carlo, this whole getting revenge thing isn’t me. I can’t handle another night like last night.”

“You don’t need to,” he said. “We finished phase one. We need to move on phase two.”

I was curious despite myself. “Which is?”

“Jealousy, of course,” he answered flippantly.

I shook my head frantically. “No, we can’t. It’s—“

“Shh.” Carlo shushed me as we stopped into a clearing. I gasped at the sight before me, all thoughts of the plan flying away for the moment.

Wow. We had given Zack his gifts earlier, and luckily, he had loved the photo canvas I'd given him, with a collage of his favorite photos that he'd taken (I had to thank Adriana for helping me out with that one).

Now, it was time for the real celebration for the twins: a giant carnival-style party.

As I took in the spectacle in front of me, I couldn't help but wonder how much time and money went into planning this party. I also couldn't believe how many famous people the twins were friends with, and how many of those famous people flew all the way to Hawaii to celebrate two high schoolers' birthday.

Fortunately, I didn't see any other Valescans, but I did spot several Victoria's Secret supermodels, professional athletes, movie stars, and singers, including a certain high-profile rap star mogul and his equally high-profile R&B songstress wife. Everyone was standing in the clearing with big smiles on their faces, while Parker and Carlo untied the blindfolds covering Adriana's and Zack's eyes.

The blindfolds fell away, and for once, I saw shock cross Adriana's face as she stared at the giant carnival grounds in front of her. There was a Ferris wheel, merry-go-rounds, the whole shebang, and above all that was a giant sign that spelled out HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ZACK AND ADRI in blinking neon lights.

"Surprise!" all the guests shouted.

"What?" Adri exclaimed, clapping a hand over her mouth. "No way!"

As everyone went to say happy birthday to the twins, I lingered behind, grinning at the sight of their happiness. Carlo told me earlier that Adriana had been a huge fan of carnivals as a child, but her parents never let her go because they thought carnivals were too "low class."

"You guys are really good friends," I murmured, too starstruck to even approach some of my favorite celebrities, who were milling around like

regular people. I narrowed my eyes at Carlo. “But don’t think I’m changing my mind about the plan.”

He sighed. “Maya, when will you learn to trust me?”

“I do trust you, I just don’t like hurting people.”

“Hasn’t he hurt you enough?”

I fell into silence. It was true. Roman had hurt me a lot, but did I really want to stoop to his level?

“Come on,” Carlo said quickly. “We can talk about this later, ok? Let’s just go enjoy ourselves for the time being.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Ok,” I agreed happily.

For the next few hours, I forgot about all my worries as I ran around the carnival grounds like I was a child again. They even had popcorn and cotton candy and everything! After a while, it didn’t even seem all that strange to share the Ferris wheel with one of the stars from a hit vampire-themed TV series. Let me tell you, he is even hotter in person.

In fact, there were so many people I managed to avoid Roman the entire night. Actually, even if I didn’t try to avoid him, he probably would’ve avoided me the way he had all day. Every time I came within five feet of him, he just moved away. Which was fine by me.

Really.

Soon, though, the rides stopped and the carnival grounds turned into a giant dance floor. The DJ from Iceland had been playing music all night long, but now he segued into a series of slow songs, and everyone paired up to sway to the music.

Well, everyone except Zack and Venice, who were doing some sort of strange interpretive dance mixed with the flamenco mixed with...hip-hop?

I'm not sure, but needless to say, everyone was giving them a wide berth.

I sat down on one of the benches, watching the couples wistfully. The whole scene was so romantic, it actually made me wish I had a boyfriend.

Unwillingly, I felt my gaze slip to Roman, who was of course surrounded by a gaggle of young models and actresses near the merry-go-round. I blushed as we locked eyes for a second, and a weird look crossed his face before he turned away, totally ignoring me.

A moment later, he broke away from the group to lead a leggy blonde onto the makeshift dance floor.

I frowned. Well, he seemed to be having fun. Anger suddenly surged through me. Why did he get to have all the fun? I should be out there flirting too! I didn't know why I was still feeling so bummed about last night. Surely I must've imagined the hurt look on his face.

Devils don't have feelings.

"Excuse me, would you like to dance?" A smooth British accent cut into my thoughts.

I looked up, my breath catching when I saw the very handsome, very famous face of Oliver staring down at me. Known only by his first name, Oliver had recently been named as the "male model of the decade" by *Vogue*. Even in person, he looked photoshopped.

"You want a dance? With me?" I squeaked, pointing to myself.

He nodded, giving me a dazzling smile no girl could resist. "Only if you would like to, of course."

Oh, would I look to!

I happily accepted, feeling better now that I wasn't sitting by myself like some loser while Roman was flirting with everything in a skirt.

Oliver led me to the middle of the dance floor, near where Roman and the blonde were dancing. He gently grasped one of my hands in his while his other arm slipped around my waist.

Just then, Edwin McCain's classic "I'll Be" came on, and I sighed, wishing I was with someone I loved. It was the ultimate romantic song, and while Oliver was hot and all, it would've been so much better if I was dancing with my boyfriend. If I had one, that is.

"What's wrong?" Oliver murmured, his intense blue eyes boring into mine and making me a bit weak in the knees.

Did the boy even know the effect his looks had on people? Seriously, he was almost as good-looking as the Scions. In fact, he might even be on par with them. It's not fair.

"Nothing," I lied, watching Roman and the blonde out of the corner of my eye. Gosh, they looked like they were glued together! Feeling disgruntled, I smiled at Oliver and pulled my hand out of his grasp to wrap my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

He looked surprised but not displeased as he rested his hands on my hips. "Good. I don't want any unhappiness to mar that beautiful face of yours," he murmured.

Ok, so that was cheesy as hell, but he was hot and seemed nice enough, so I'll give him a pass. "Thanks."

I rested my chin on his shoulder, and as we turned, I locked eyes with Roman again. He was glaring in my direction with a very angry look on his face.

What was his problem now?

Choosing to ignore him, I averted my gaze, then stiffened as I felt Oliver's hands slip lower to a rather inappropriate part of my body. Hoping it was an

accident, I moved it back up to my hips, where it stayed for about ten seconds. Then it moved back down.

“I don’t think I’m feeling well. I should go sit down,” I said, highly uncomfortable now.

He frowned down at me. “Why? We’re just getting started.”

I shook my head. “No, really, I should go,” I insisted, but Oliver wasn’t listening.

He was looking at something over my head, a rather wicked smile on his face. “Amazing. I believe he really minds this time.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Instead of answering me, Oliver grabbed my face and crushed his lips against mine. I let out a muffled squeal of surprise, too shocked to do anything for a moment. I was just about to push him off when I felt someone yank him away from me.

I stumbled back a bit, then gasped as Roman threw Oliver to the ground and punched him in the face. Blood spurted from the male model’s nose and dripped down onto his pristine white shirt.

“Roman! What the hell are you doing?” I screamed, while the people around me stopped what they were doing to stare at the spectacle in front of them.

Roman ignored me as he went to punch Oliver again.

Oliver managed to roll away at the last second and he stumbled to his feet, wiping some of the blood from his face. “Bloody hell, that hurt,” he muttered.

“Yeah, well, it’s going to hurt a lot more when I’m through with you,” Roman growled, a dangerous expression on his face.

“Oh yeah? Let’s see you try then,” Oliver taunted.

I groaned. Did he want to die?

I looked around frantically, hoping to spot Carlo, Parker, *anyone*, but I couldn’t find my friends anywhere. Even Venice and Zack were gone. None of the other party guests seemed willing to help. In fact, some of them were recording the fight on their phones. I guess celebrities weren’t much better than teenagers after all.

“Stop!” I shouted as Roman and Oliver continued to fight each other. I was nearly crying in frustration.

Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore. Even though I knew it was a stupid move, I ran towards them and managed to yank them apart.

“Stop fighting! Do you guys know how stupid you’re acting right now?” I demanded angrily.

Roman glared at me, his eyes ablaze. “I can’t believe this,” he hissed, his face a mottled red as he trained his gaze on my hand, which was currently pressed against Oliver’s chest to hold him back. “You’re taking his side?”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side!” I cried exasperatedly. “I just don’t want you to fight anymore!”

“Yeah? How would Carlo feel about you messing around with another boy behind his back? Again?” Roman sneered, obviously referring to our little moment last night.

I flushed. I couldn’t believe he was bringing this up right now. “That’s our business,” I hissed.

“Yeah, mate, you need to calm down,” Oliver said. “It’s not my fault she’s more into me than you.”

That seemed to make Roman snap all over again. I swore I saw his blood pressure rise as he lunged towards us to take another swing at Oliver.

“Stop!” I screamed, trying to block him. I did, in a way.

The only problem was, the punch Roman intended for Oliver ended up hitting me instead, and let me tell you, he hadn’t been holding back at all.

I managed to see horror cross everyone’s faces before I blacked out.

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CHAPTER 22

My head really, really hurt.

I groaned, trying to shift positions to ease the stiffness in my lower back, but the minute I moved, a searing pain tore through my head and I instantly stilled.

My wasn't the only thing that hurt. My jaw was throbbing, my throat was dry and scratchy, and I felt dizzy even though I was lying down.

"Water," I croaked without opening my eyes. I didn't even know if anyone was around me. With my luck, I was probably talking to myself right now. "I need water."

"I have water!" a cacophony of voices shouted at once, making me wince.

I reluctantly cracked one eye open, then the other, until I saw Adriana, Zack, Parker, and Venice crowded around me with concerned looks on their faces.

"She's awake!" Zack exclaimed. "Here!" He shoved a glass of water in my direction.

"Thanks," I murmured, taking a sip. I almost spit it right back out. "Zack, why is this spicy?"

"I put a dash of chili powder in it," he explained, beaming. "I read online that it's supposed to help."

"You put chili powder in her drink?" Venice shouted. "Do you want to kill her?" She grabbed the glass from my hands and gave me another one. "Here, drink mine. It's *normal*."

I nodded, immediately gulping down the refreshing liquid to soothe the burn from the chili-infused H₂O.

“What? So you think my water is inferior to yours or something?” Zack huffed.

“Obviously. Didn’t you see her face turning red?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, it wasn’t *that* spicy. I just added a dash!”

“Do you even know how much a dash is?”

“Isn’t it the same as a tablespoon?”

“God, you’re so—so—“

“So what?”

“Zack, Venice, stop arguing,” Adriana said sharply. “Or if you are going to continue, don’t do it here.”

“Fine!” they shouted at the same time, then stomped out of the room together, bickering the whole time. Apparently it didn’t take much for them to forget about me.

Not that I was complaining. As much as I loved them, they were giving me a headache.

“Maya, are you ok?” Adriana asked gently, once Zack and Venice’s voices faded away.

I was about to nod, but then wisely settled for a “Uh-huh” instead. I looked around, immediately noting the absence of two certain males. “Where’s Carlo and Roman?”

Adriana and Parker exchanged glances. “They’re outside, honeybee,” Parker finally said. “Do you want them to come in?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I rubbed my forehead. “What happened anyway?”

Adriana looked startled. “You don’t remember?”

I frowned. “I just remember being at the carnival, and I was dancing with that really hot British model, then—oh.” My mouth formed a perfect O as the events of tonight, or last night, or whenever they happened, came flooding back. Oliver had kissed me. Then Roman pulled him off and they got into a fight. And then...Roman punched me.

I immediately slumped back down on the pillows, a lump forming in my throat as I remembered how much that had hurt. Not the physical act itself—though that had been no day at the spa—but everything that led up to that point. I know Roman didn’t do it on purpose. I don’t blame him for the punch.

What I did blame him for, though, was everything else. What the hell had he been thinking, punching Oliver like that? Ok, so maybe the Brit shouldn’t have kissed me, but he didn’t deserve to get his nose broken. His face was literally his moneymaker.

I closed my eyes, tuning Adriana and Parker out. I wasn’t even sure if they were speaking to me. My thoughts were speeding through my head like a runaway train, leaving me even dizzier and a bit nauseous.

I knew Roman had a short temper, I just never expected him to be so violent. It did fit in neatly with his other vices, namely rudeness, arrogance, insensitivity, and downright unreasonableness.

And I liked him? There was something seriously wrong with me.

The door to the room opened, and I immediately tensed. I didn’t have to look to know who the newcomers were.

“Maya, how’re you feeling?”

I finally turned my head to Carlo sitting on the edge of the bed, his face wracked with worry. He brushed his fingers gently over my jaw, and I immediately flinched from the pain.

He immediately dropped his hand. "I'm sorry! Does it hurt that bad?"

I smiled weakly. "Could be worse. How does it look?"

Carlo smiled back, a bit sadly. "Could be worse. It's a little bruised, but that'll fade."

I sighed, and I saw Adriana and Parker quietly slip out in the background. Of course, *he* was still here, just hovering near the door. He had his hands in his pockets and an unreadable expression on his face.

I pointedly ignored him, but a moment later, he walked over to the bed, causing me to stiffen.

Carlo reached down to grab my hand and squeezed it comfortingly.

There was a heavy silence before Roman spoke up. "You know, I didn't mean to hit you."

No apology, no remorse. The statement was delivered in a flat, emotionless tone, like he was a robot or something. Actually, no, scratch that. Even a robot had more feelings than him.

I didn't say anything. I just stared straight ahead, trying to suppress the anger and hurt coursing through me.

Carlo whispered something fiercely to him, and then Roman reluctantly added, "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." My voice was clipped. "I don't need your apology. Oliver needs it more than I do."

"I'm not apologizing to that prick!" Roman's voice rose.

My head snapped up and I glared at him. “Oh, *he’s* the prick? *He* wasn’t the one that punched someone for no reason!”

“He kissed you!”

“So? It’s not like he kissed you! Why do you care?”

Roman crossed his arms over his chest. “Because you’re dating Carlo and you’re going around kissing other guys!”

“Oh, we’re not dating,” Carlo said casually, brushing a strand of hair out of my eyes. “Drink some more water, Maya.”

I obeyed, secretly enjoying the stunned look on Roman’s face.

“But—she—other night—lingerie—“ He sputtered, pointing at me.

“I never said I was dating him,” I cut in. “In fact, we’re just friends.” I shrugged.

Roman scowled. “Oh, so why did you say you were going to wear that—that outfit for him later?”

“Uhh...” I racked my brain for a plausible explanation.

Luckily, Carlo came to the rescue. “It was a bet,” he explained. “She bet she could seduce any guy in that outfit, and I said she couldn’t. Which, of course, made her all the more determined.” He gently tapped my nose. “Not that we would’ve done anything. I wouldn’t want to ruin our friendship.”

This time I squeezed his hand out of gratefulness. “Neither would I. It was just a stupid bet,” I agreed, playing along.

“You’re serious?” Roman sounded faint.

His voice brought all my emotions to the surface again, and the smile dropped from my face. “Yes. So now that you know the whole story, I would appreciate it if you left the room. I don’t feel well.”

That was true, at least. My stomach churned nauseously and my jaw still throbbed painfully from the punch.

This time, a flicker of remorse passed through Roman’s eyes, and instead of leaving, he moved around to the other side of the bed, opposite Carlo. I stiffened again as he sat next to me.

“I’m going to go check on Venice and Zack,” Carlo said, releasing my hand. “They looked like they were about to kill each other earlier.”

“What? No, stay,” I blurted, grabbing his arm. He could *not* leave me here with Roman!

“I’ll be just outside, ok?” he said soothingly. He gently pried my fingers from his arm while shooting Roman a warning glance. “I’ll call up some room service too. You must be hungry. I’ll be back in a bit.”

He left the room, and I immediately tried to get out of bed, but my body was so sore my feet didn’t even manage to touch the ground before I brought my legs back up and slumped against the pillows.

Neither Roman nor I spoke for a good five minutes.

“You know, I really am sorry. About your jaw,” Roman finally said, reaching up to touch my bruise the way Carlo had earlier, only this time, I instinctively jerked away before he even made contact.

I saw that same hurt expression I’d seen last night, right before he went into the living room. At least, I thought it was hurt. Who knew? He could be faking it.

“It’s fine, it’s not like I’m going to die,” I said coolly. “And like I said, you should be apologizing to Oliver.”

The frown came back. “Even if you and Carlo aren’t dating, he still kissed you against your will.”

“How did you know it was against my will?” I challenged.

Surprise flitted across Roman’s face as his eyes bore into mine. I swallowed, trying my best not to focus on those beautiful violet orbs. More than ever, I wished inner and outer beauty were directly correlated. It would certainly save a lot of people a lot of pain and heartache.

“Was it?” he asked quietly, but there was a dangerous undertone.

I sighed. I suddenly felt exhausted, even more than when I first woke up. I just didn’t have the energy to argue with him anymore.

“Are you going to apologize to him or not?” I asked flatly, evading his question.

A muscle ticked in his jaw but he didn’t reply.

“Guess I got my answer.” I turned over so my back was facing him. At least the soreness in my body had faded a bit. “Can you leave, please? I want to rest.”

With that, I closed my eyes, keeping my body tense and taut until I felt his weight leave the bed. I didn’t open my eyes until I heard the soft “click” of the door closing.

I stared at the wall in front of me, tears blurring my vision. I don’t even know why I was crying. Maybe it was because the first, and only, guy I’ve ever really liked was such a huge jerk, who didn’t seem to care about anything other than money and having things go his way. Seriously, why did I even like Roman? He was the embodiment of everything I’ve ever abhorred, but I had foolishly believed he could change.

Apparently, I was wrong. He was still the same asshole he's always been, and always will be.

My chest heaved with my efforts to contain my sobs, until I finally buried my face in the pillow, soaking the cotton with my tears as random images flashed through my mind.

The snake in my locker. The torn gym clothes. The students in school, laughing and jeering as they threw eggs and tomatoes and God knew what else at me. Roman kissing Solange at homecoming. Roman and Solange in the kitchen. Roman and Oliver fighting at the carnival, and finally, the look I'd seen on his face right before I blacked out.

There had been so much anger there, it actually scared me, more now than ever because I had feelings for him. How could I possibly like someone I was frightened of?

The answer? I couldn't.

I wasn't going to be naive enough to think he could change. A leopard can't change its spots. I couldn't even trust Roman enough to tell him how I felt.

But that's ok. It might take some time, but I would get over him. I had to.

* * *

"You're an idiot." Adriana stated this matter-of-factly as she took a dainty bite of the Orchids' crab cake she'd ordered from room service, her hair looking more silver than gold under the moonlight.

Roman scowled, glaring at his so-called friend as she continued to enjoy her dinner. The two of them were standing on the Royal Suite's balcony, while the others were inside sleeping or tending to Maya. None of them had gotten much sleep last night.

Maya. His chest squeezed painfully as he thought about that giant purple-and-black bruise on her jaw, the one he was responsible for. He barely remembered anything that happened after he accidentally hit her yesterday.

He just remembered screams, and Oliver yelling at him, and then everyone had rushed over to her while he just stood there, still in shock.

His friends had ripped him a new one, that he did remember. Even Zack. Hell, even if they hadn't, he would've done it himself. Roman had done a lot of things in his life, but he would never purposely hit a girl. But he'd just been so angry last night, watching that stupid British pretty boy kiss her, and he hadn't been thinking straight.

Actually, he never seemed to think straight whenever he was around her.

"So, are you going to say anything or did you call me out here to watch me eat?" Adriana asked, setting down her fork and leaning back in her seat to stare at him questioningly.

"I don't know." Roman ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He had no idea what he was feeling, but it wasn't good. It was just a tight, nauseous feeling that seemed to have taken over his entire body, and nothing he did or said could make it go away. "I'm just confused."

"About what?"

"I don't know!" He slammed his fist down on the railing, barely noticing the pain that radiated up his arm as a result. "I can't believe I hit her." He was speaking more to himself than Adriana. "She probably hates me now."

"Probably."

He whipped his head around. "You're not helping."

Adriana threw her hands up in the air. "What the hell do you want me to do, Roman? I don't have superpowers, you know. I tried so hard to help you guys, I really did, but you're both too stubborn for your own good. Especially you. I thought it was working for a while, but you and your stupid jealous male pride had to go and ruin it all."

Roman just stared at her, the nauseous feeling growing. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Adriana’s lips thinned. “You know what? Forget I said anything. I don’t think you really deserve her. She should be with someone who actually has two brain cells to rub together. Someone like Carlo.”

Roman’s hands clenched into fists. The mere sound of Carlo’s name right now put him on edge. Why was everyone so *obsessed* with him?

“You should stop talking right now,” he said through gritted teeth. “They’re just friends.”

“Friends can turn into more.” Adriana crossed her arms over her chest. “Why are you so upset? Does the idea of Maya and Carlo together upset you? Maybe it won’t be Carlo. Maybe it’ll be someone else, like Oliver.” She shrugged. “They’d make a cute couple. She probably enjoyed that kiss.”

“Shut up!” Roman snapped, the nausea mixing with rage as the memory of Maya and Oliver kissing came flooding back.

“Why should I?” Adriana snapped back. “Seriously, you need to get *over* yourself and open your eyes before it’s too late. If it isn’t already,” she added rather acidly. With that, she pushed back her chair and stormed inside, closing the sliding door with a *bang* behind her.

Roman barely heard it. A lump seemed to have formed in his throat as her words echoed in his head. *If it isn’t already, if it isn’t already, if it isn’t already.* The words got louder each time until they were all he could hear.

The image of Maya and Oliver kissing faded, only to be replaced with the memories from that morning. The way she’d instantly backed away when he reached out to her, and the way she turned her back to him before asking him to leave, politely, like he was just some stranger she couldn’t care less about.

Whenever they'd argued in the past, Maya had always been hot-tempered and emotional, but that morning, her attitude had been cold, almost detached. It was like she just didn't care anymore.

Roman's stomach dropped as realization swept over him. The thought that she didn't care enough anymore to even hate him terrified him more than anything else in the world, because somehow, against all odds, he'd fallen in love with Maya Lindberg.

He swallowed hard as he leaned heavily against the railing, the epiphany shocking him so much he barely had enough energy to stand. He couldn't believe it had taken him this long to figure it out. All the signs had been there; he'd just been too stubborn to acknowledge them.

But did Maya even like him back? Roman had no idea. He had to give it a shot though.

He just hoped Adriana was wrong for once and that it wasn't already too late.

* * *

I sank back into the sofa of the Tevasco guesthouse's living room, absentmindedly shoving handfuls of caramel popcorn in my mouth as I watched a *Gilmore Girls* rerun on TV.

It was the only thing I'd done all day. When I got home from school, I showered, changed, then plunked myself in front of the TV with a year's worth of cavity-creating, waistline-expanding, sugar-coma-inducing snacks.

Yes, I know. I'm in a funk, and a pretty terrible one at that.

The Perrys' birthday weekend had started off great, but ended with a spectacular crash. After Roman left the room, I'd just stayed in bed until it was time for us to return to Valesca, ordering room service and writing down every single thing I disliked about him on the hotel napkins.

The only problem was, every time I wrote down a con, a pro popped into my head. For example, I hated how arrogant he was, but then I would

remember how nice he'd been after I found out my dad had been cheating on my mom. I would think about how bossy and overbearing he was, but then I would remember how vulnerable he looked the night of the blackout, like a little child.

Soon, the things I technically should have disliked, like his stupid cocky smirk and his constant snarky comments, turned into pros, because honestly Roman wouldn't be Roman without them.

I scowled. Getting over him was proving to be more difficult than I thought.

I jammed my hand into the bowl, eager for more sugar, but it was empty. Great. Just great.

I stood up grumpily and was about to walk to the kitchen to grab some more popcorn when the doorbell rang.

I stopped, frowning. Who could it possibly be? I knew Carlo wasn't here. He was at some martial arts thing tonight. I hope it wasn't Rico. He seriously creeped me out, even though he hadn't done anything to me.

I pulled back the curtain next to the door, my stomach knotting up when I saw Roman standing there, an uncharacteristically nervous look on his face.

I debated whether or not to pretend I wasn't here, but it was too late. He already saw me.

I let the curtain drop and took a deep breath, grimacing when I saw my reflection in the hall mirror. Wow, I looked horrible. I had no makeup on, my hair was pulled up into a sloppy bun, and there was some sugar stuck on my cheek.

Quickly wiping the sugar off with the back of my hand, I opened the door but kept my hand on the knob. My heart thudded painfully when I saw the bouquet of white roses in his hand. White roses were my favorite.

“Hey,” he finally said quietly, when it was clear I wouldn’t be speaking first.

“Hi.” I made my voice as cold as possible. “What are you doing here?”

I didn’t care if I sounded rude. Besides, I really was curious as to why he was here. He’d made no attempt to talk to me at all after our little encounter Saturday morning, which I was perfectly fine with. The less I saw and talked to him, the quicker I could get over him.

“I, uh, just wanted to come by and give you these.” Roman thrust the flowers in my direction. “You know, as an apology.” His gaze landed on my jaw. “Does it still hurt?” he added softly.

I gripped the knob tighter, not making a move to take the flowers. “Yeah, it does,” I answered, giving the words double meaning.

Roman shifted his weight. I’ve never seen him look so nervous.

“I’m so sorry about Friday night. Really,” he said, his eyes searching my face.

I resisted the urge to bite my lip. It took all of my willpower to keep my blank expression intact. “It’s fine,” I said. “Apology accepted. Now we can just go back to the way things are supposed to be.”

He frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means.” I took a deep breath before continuing. “It means we go back to the way they were before everything. You can go be the leader of the Scions, date supermodels, pick fights, whatever you want. And I go back to my life. It’ll be like we never even met.”

Roman’s jaw tensed. “It doesn’t work like that, Maya.”

“Yes, it does,” I snapped. “Look, I was never cut out for your world, ok? I had a perfectly good, normal life until I got caught up in—in all this.” I

gestured to my surroundings. “I just want things to go back to the way they used to be!”

“Oh, yeah? What about the twins? What about Parker? What about Carlo? Are you just going to ditch them like that?”

“I’m not ditching anyone,” I hissed. “I can still hang out with them. I just don’t want to hang out with *you*. We were never friends. We’ll never be friends. I don’t know why we should pretend otherwise.”

Roman swallowed hard. “So you’ve never liked me, at all. Not even as a friend.”

Tears pricked the back of my eyes. I’ve always been a bad liar, but I sure as hell couldn’t tell him how I feel. If I did, he’d probably break my heart, rub it in my face, then go back to Solange so the two of them could laugh about how stupid and naïve I was.

“No.” My voice shook a little, but thankfully he didn’t seem to catch it. “As far as I’m concerned, you’ll always be the person who made my life a living hell here. I can’t even list all the things you’ve done to me, but don’t think for a second I can ever forgive you.”

Liar! You’re a liar! a voice in my head screamed.

Shut up! I mentally yelled back. What did the voice inside my head know anyway?

“Oh.” Roman’s voice was completely emotionless, but his chest heaved as though he couldn’t get enough air in his lungs. “Thanks for clearing that up for me. Don’t worry, I won’t be bothering you anymore.”

I pressed my lips together, trying not to let the tears spill over as he placed the flowers in front of the doorstep. “Do whatever you want with those,” he mumbled.

He started walking away, but stopped after a few steps and turned to look at me. His usually expressive eyes seemed dull and lifeless. “I really am sorry,” he added. “For everything.”

A ragged sob escaped my throat, and I quickly pressed my fist to my mouth, but he didn’t seem to have heard it, because he just kept walking until he finally disappeared around a corner.

I reached down to pick up the flowers with a trembling hand, my heart hurting so bad it was a wonder I could still breathe. I couldn’t shake the image of his face out of my head. Before he’d left, I could’ve sworn I saw real pain there, but it was probably just my imagination.

He was probably secretly jumping for joy over the fact he didn’t have to put up with my lowly commoner presence anymore. In fact, he was probably going on a date with Solange or some other six-foot-tall fashionista right now.

I shut the door behind me, sliding my back down against the wood until I was sitting on the floor. More sobs broke the silence in the guesthouse as I pressed my forehead to my knees.

I’d done the right thing, the only thing I could’ve done if I didn’t want my heart broken. I knew that. Roman and I never would’ve worked out, even if he did like me back, which I’m almost positive he didn’t. If he did, he had plenty of chances to show it, but that never happened. I knew I had just saved myself a whole lot of heartbreak in the future.

So why did it feel like my heart was broken anyway?

CHAPTER 23

“Is there something wrong with your food?”

Adriana looked up from her perfectly cooked steak to where Parker’s jade-green eyes were assessing her quietly.

“No, my food’s fine,” she answered, taking a sip of her wine. “I’m sorry, I’m a bit distracted tonight.”

The candlelight flickered over Parker’s sculpted features as he nodded in understanding. “Let me guess. Roman and Maya?”

“Bingo.” She sighed. “Those two are way too stubborn. I’ve never had so much trouble playing Cupid.”

“If it makes you feel better, you’re the hottest Cupid I’ve ever seen.” Parker smirked.

She rolled her eyes at his cheesiness but smiled. “I bet you’ve seen a lot, huh?”

“Well, I don’t mean to brag...” he bragged.

Adriana snorted. “Ok, player. We all know you’ve had your fun. If you cheat on me though...” She waved her fork threateningly in the air.

“I would never. I waited too long for this,” Parker said seriously.

She almost melted in her seat. Who knew there would be a day when she’d succumb to Parker Remington’s charms? As she’d learned over the past few weeks though, those charms were just too irresistible.

“I just wish they’d admit their feelings to one another. Being in a relationship isn’t as horrible as some make it out to be,” Parker half-joked,

cutting into his own steak.

Adriana nodded in agreement. “How’s Rome? Still moping like a baby?”

Parker shook his head. “He’s even more bipolar now than before. One day, he’s cleaning out his bar and muttering about how much his life sucks. The next, he’s flirting with every girl in a skirt.”

“And Maya refuses to even go near him. She practically runs away whenever someone brings him up.” Adriana threw her napkin on the table. “This is ridiculous. There are our friends. We have to help them.”

Parker cleared his throat. “Trust me, we’ve all tried talking to them. I would do it again, but I’m not suicidal. I’m far too young and good-looking to die.”

“You’re not too young and good-looking to go without sex for a month because your girlfriend is mad at you,” Adriana said sweetly.

Parker froze, then straightened up. “Ok, what’s your plan? I’m all ears.”

One hour later

“Talk to him? That’s your plan?” Parker exclaimed as Adriana rang the Fioris’ doorbell. “That’s the worst plan I’ve ever heard. We tried that already, remember?”

“Yes. You, Carlo, and Zack tried. I haven’t yet.”

“What difference does it make?”

“I’m a girl,” Adriana said simply.

The doors swung open, and the couple blinked in shock at the beautiful, elegant woman before them. Her black hair tumbled past her slim shoulders, framing a heart-shaped face with gold-flecked hazel eyes, high cheekbones, and red lips. She wore a pair of sleek satin Christian Louboutin

pumps and a black silk Prada cocktail dress that stood out in stark contrast to her creamy alabaster skin. A pair of diamond studs glittered brightly under her earlobes, battling with the foyer's chandelier for eye-catching brilliance, and for once, she looked sober.

Adriana was the first to recover. "Giselle, you look absolutely lovely, as usual," she said smoothly, stepping forward to give Roman's mother a double air-kiss.

"Adriana, my dear, you are too kind," Giselle tilted with a small smile made a bit stiff from Botox. "Boarding school in Switzerland suits you."

"Actually, Adriana goes to Valesca now," Parker spoke up. "She just transferred this year." He also gave Giselle a double air kiss. "Look at you. You look better than some of the twenty-year-olds I've met."

Giselle smiled, obviously pleased. "Parker. Always the charmer." She smoothed down the front of her dress. "Are you two here to see Roman?"

"Yes, is he home?"

A shadow crossed her face. "He's in his room. I went to check on him and he seems to be quite—intoxicated. Gloria tells me it's been a near daily occurrence. I am wondering if I should send him to the rehabilitation center in Arizona. I heard it does wonders."

Adriana couldn't help but think Giselle had gone to that center herself. She'd never seen Roman's mother so coherent and sober. And she was actually answering the door herself? That had to be a first.

"I'm sure he'll be fine. He's just going through a phase," Adriana assured her.

"I sure hope so." Giselle patted down her hair. "You two go on up now. I am positively *exhausted* after that horrid flight back from Monte Carlo, and I'm supposed to meet up with Maria Tevasco for drinks later."

Ok, maybe she wasn't totally sober. At least, she was still drinking. It was a surprise that Carlo's mom was also in town though. She usually spent this time of year at her family's estate in Cartagena.

Adriana and Parker bid Giselle good night. When they arrived at Roman's room, they were immediately bombarded with the smell of alcohol.

"What the hell?" Adriana crinkled her nose in disgust as she gazed around the room. It was littered with empty beer, vodka, and rum bottles, and Roman was sitting amidst the debris, slumped down in his custom-upholstered leather armchair. His hair was tousled and his eyes were bloodshot as he stared at seemingly nothing at all.

"Parker, honey, why don't you wait outside?" Adriana said quietly.

Parker didn't need to be asked twice.

Once the door shut behind him, Adriana made her way gingerly through the suite to where Roman was sitting. He didn't look up.

She stared at him for a moment, then walked over to the fridge and pulled out an ice-cold bottle of water, unscrewing the cap before she returned to Roman. Calmly, she emptied the entire bottle over his head.

He immediately jerked out of the seat, though he didn't stand up. "Adri! What the hell are you doing?" He glared at her, the most emotion she'd seen from him in the past few days.

"What does it look like? I'm trying to wake you up." She set the emptied bottle on a nearby table and sat down next to him, smoothing her skirt primly over her legs.

Roman snorted. "Obviously I'm awake."

"I don't think you are. Look at yourself." Adriana indicated the trashed room. "When was the last time you let the maids in here to clean?"

“None of your business.”

“It is my business!” She was this close to losing her patience. “When will you see that your stubbornness is affecting everyone? Not just you, ok? So stop being so selfish for once and get your act together.”

“Look, it’s my life, and I’ll do whatever I want. No one, not even you, can tell me what to do,” Roman ground out.

“Your mom’s home.”

His expression turned stony. “I know.”

“She’s sober.”

He snorted again. “She won’t stay that way for long. She’s probably drinking right now.”

“Like mother, like son, right? Drowning your sorrows in alcohol and running from your problems?”

Roman’s eyes crackled with anger. “Do *not* compare me to her, or anyone else in my family!”

Adriana shrugged, unfazed. “I will once you stop giving me something to compare you with.”

He sighed, slumping back down in his seat and running a hand through his messy dark hair. “What do you suggest I do, Adri? Act like everything’s normal?”

“No, I’m suggesting *you* act normal.” She pointed at him. “What happened to the Roman Fiori I know? The one who always gets what he wants because he refuses to give up until he does? The one who’s confident and sure of himself? I don’t see him right now. The only thing I see is a pathetic broken mess moaning about how he can’t get a girl.”

Roman gripped the armrests of his seat. “It’s a little more complicated than that,” he said through gritted teeth.

She was definitely at the end of her patience now. Adriana stood up and placed her hands on her hips. When she spoke, she made sure to enunciate each word clearly, so he knew exactly what she was saying. “There’s nothing complicated about it. You want Maya, right? So go get her! You’ve wasted enough time, and if you don’t do anything soon, I can’t guarantee she’ll be waiting when you do come to your senses.”

Roman’s jaw tensed. “She doesn’t like me that way. She told me herself.”

“Girls often say things they don’t mean. Trust me, I know.” Adriana slung her bag over her shoulder. “I’m done playing Dr. Phil for the evening. Take my advice or don’t take it, it’s up to you, but make sure you know what you’re losing if you don’t.”

With that, she walked out, leaving Roman to sit in silence once again.

* * *

“Thank you so much for driving me home. I feel so bad, always making you drive all the way out here,” I apologized, unbuckling my seatbelt as I smiled at James.

“It’s not a big deal. It’s worth it if I get to see you,” James said, winking at me.

I rolled my eyes but laughed. “What a charmer,” I teased.

We just had a dinner and coffee “date” that I enjoyed immensely, mainly because James had absolutely nothing to do with the Scions. We’ve been talking more and more lately, mostly on the phone, though sometimes I went to La Terra or he came to Valesca to hang out. Thankfully, he no longer tried to make a move on me, though he still flirted like crazy of course. I actually considered him a good friend now.

“I’ll talk to you later, then. Have a good night,” James said.

“Good night!” I waved to him before shutting the door of his car and treading the now familiar path to my guesthouse.

My parents were due back Sunday, which was just two days away, and I haven’t seen them or been home in so long it weirded me out a bit to think about it. Honestly, I am not too thrilled about having to see my dad again, because something still didn’t sit right with me about our little “keep quiet” arrangement.

I was so busy thinking about what was going to happen when my parents come back that I didn’t even notice Rico standing directly between me and the guesthouse. When I did notice, I let out a startled shriek and instinctively backed away.

“You sure spook easily,” Rico drawled, stuffing his hands inside his pockets as he eyed me.

I gulped, trying to appear calm and unruffled. I don’t think I succeeded. “Well, you know, I’m a girl alone at night. I’m just being cautious,” I laughed nervously, trying to edge around him.

Rico stepped to the side, blocking my way. “It is pretty dangerous for a girl to be out by herself so late at night,” he agreed, his eyes flicking over my dress. “Hot date?”

“I just went out with a friend. Actually, I’m really tired. I think I’m going to go to sleep.” Once again, I tried to sidestep him, and once again he blocked me.

“Why don’t I walk you back? Our security’s pretty good, but you never know.” He smirked.

Fear washed through me. “It-it’s ok. I’m sure I’ll be fine,” I stuttered.

“Scared to walk with me? What, do you think I’m going to rape you?” Rico’s voice was light, but his expression had darkened. He took another few steps until he was standing right in front of me, while I stood frozen by

fear. “You know, you’re really hot,” he whispered. Now that he was so close, I could smell a trace of alcohol on his breath. “No wonder my brother’s with you so much. What do you two do all alone in the guesthouse, hmm?”

He ran a finger down my arm, but I was unable to answer. I couldn’t even speak. It was like my brain at shut down at the worst possible moment. Holy crap, he wasn’t going to sexually assault me or anything, was he?

Thankfully, I never found out, because Rico looked over my shoulder at that moment and stepped back, a small smirk on his face. “See you around, Maya,” he said rather suggestively, before turning to walk back to the main house.

When he left, I let out a sigh of relief as my muscles jump-started again. *You guys are so useful*, I told them sarcastically in my mind. Someone placed their hand on my shoulder and I let out a shriek, whipping around with my handbag ready to whack whoever it was in the head.

“Whoa! Calm down, it’s just me!” James held his hands up, a familiar silver bracelet dangling from his fingers. “I think this fell out in the car.”

“Oh.” God, I was going crazy. When I placed a hand on my chest, I could feel the heavy pounding of my heart. “Sorry, I’m just a bit jumpy. Thank you.”

“No problem.” James handed me the bracelet, raising an eyebrow curiously in the direction of the main house. There was a strange expression on his face. “Who was that?”

“Carlo’s older brother.” I fastened the bracelet to my wrist again.

“That’s Rico Tevasco?”

I nodded. “Why? Do you know him?”

“He’s pretty infamous.” James hesitated, then added, “He was part of this gang a few years ago. They did some pretty horrible stuff. You know, drug trafficking, extortion, grand theft auto, probably even murder, though that was never proved.”

A chill went down my spine. “Are you serious?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Don’t worry though, all the members were put in jail after a huge bust two years ago. Well, all of them except Rico.” James’ face darkened. “Apparently he was the worst. I heard he raped a bunch of girls, and he beat the last one up so bad he almost killed her. But of course, he’s a Tevasco, so his father covered the whole thing up and sent him out of the country. And now he’s back.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe you’re living here with him. It’s not safe.”

By now, I felt sick. Was what James said true? Rico’s voice echoed in my mind. *What, do you think I’m going to rape you?*

The hairs on the back of my neck immediately stood up. “Carlo never told me,” I whispered. If he knew his brother had done all that, why didn’t he say anything? Why didn’t he even warn me, considering I was living here? My head spun with questions.

James snorted. “Of course he didn’t. The Scions don’t care about anyone except themselves.” His tone was bitter.

“That’s not true. Carlo isn’t like that,” I automatically said.

“You never know,” James mumbled. He glanced up at the night sky. It was darker than usual, since the moon was half-hidden behind a rather ominous-looking cloud. “How about I walk you back to the guesthouse?”

I nodded. “That would be great,” I said gratefully, unable to keep images of Rico killing someone from flashing through my mind. Suddenly, I was incredibly glad my parents were coming back on Sunday.

I made sure to stay close to James until we reached the guesthouse. Fishing my key out of my purse, I opened the door and flicked on the lights.

What I saw made me gasp.

Every available inch—and by that, I literally mean every available inch—of space was completely covered with flowers. Giant, lush bouquets of flowers. It seemed as though every floral species on earth was in here. Roses of all colors, tulips, carnations, orchids, forget-me-nots, sunflowers, violets, lilies, they were all there, their mingled scent coating the house in a sickly sweet smell that invaded my nostrils the moment I took a breath.

“Holy crap,” James breathed behind me. “Did you forget to tell me you’re opening a flower shop in here?”

I shook my head, unable to speak for the second time that night. How the heck did all these flowers get in here? Did Carlo do this?

“There’s a card.”

I whipped my head around, to see a heavy white envelope on the little table by the door. My name was engraved on the front in gold.

With shaking hands, I pulled the card from the envelope while James watched curiously.

Dear Maya,

I’m sorry for acting like such a jerk before. Give me a chance to make it up to you?

~Roman

I nearly fainted from shock. Was this someone’s idea of a joke? There was no way in hell Roman actually did this. It was probably Adriana or Zack who sent it in his name.

“Roman Fiori? I thought you weren’t talking to him,” James said with a deep frown when I told him who it was from. The strange expression crossed his face again.

“I’m not,” I answered flatly, glaring at the flowers.

I didn’t know for sure who sent them, but I knew I sure wasn’t keeping them.

* * *

As it turns out, Roman really did send those flowers. And how do I know this, you ask? Because he called me the next morning to ask if I’d received them.

Of course, being the smart person I am, I promptly freaked out and hung up on him without saying a word.

For some reason, that only seemed to make him more determined, and I got so many calls I contemplated blocking his number. I couldn’t bring myself to do it though. I just let my mailbox fill up so he couldn’t leave any more voicemails, none of which I checked. I also put my phone on silent so I didn’t have to listen to the incessant ringing.

I was so not ready to face him yet, because honestly, I don’t think I can trust myself around him. Try as I might, I’m still not over him, and it pissed me off.

On Sunday, Carlo helped me move back into my parents’ house, and I didn’t mention running into his brother. I was just so happy to be away from Rico that I didn’t feel like bringing the mood down by talking about him.

My parents were both tanned and happy when I saw them, and they’d brought back countless bottles of wine as well as some super-cheesy souvenirs like key chains and shot glasses. My dad tried to get on my good side by offering to pay for a plane ticket to California so I could experience it myself over winter break, but I declined. First, I didn’t want anything from him anymore. Second, California kind of pales in comparison to

partying with supermodels in Hawaii, although I kept that opinion to myself.

When I went to school on Monday, it started off as a normal day. That is until I opened my locker, and found it filled with chocolate, my favorite. There was a whole mountain of it: bags of Lindt truffles, boxes of Godiva, and some other fancy European chocolates whose names I couldn't even pronounce.

No need to ask who sent them.

This gifts continued throughout the day. When I went to English, I found my desk covered with original, autographed versions of my favorite books. In math, we had a substitute, and we ended up doing one of those worksheets where you solved problems and the answers corresponded with a letter to spell out a phrase. Guess what mine said?

PLEASE TALK TO ME.

I'm not even kidding.

I would be lying if I said I wasn't a little flattered, but the whispers of my classmates and the extra attention was really annoying.

By the time I got home, I was ready to tear someone's head off. I couldn't even find Roman at school to give him a piece of my mind, considering he seemed to be avoiding me. What kind of game did Roman think he was playing? I don't know why, but the stupid, naïve part of me thought I'd get a reprieve from the incessant gifts at home. I was so wrong.

"Maya, sweetie, why don't you go get that?" my mom suggested after dinner, as the doorbell rang. "I'll finish cleaning up."

"Ok," I agreed, wiping my hands before making my way to the front door.

I peered through the peephole and almost fainted when I saw Roman standing there, but he wasn't looking up. Instead, he was looking at

something on the floor.

My skin immediately flushed and my heart started racing. Crap. I wanted to find him at school earlier, but now that he was right here, I realized I had no idea what to say to him. I couldn't not answer the door though, since my mom already heard the bell ring.

Taking a deep breath and silently praying for strength, I slowly opened the door. Roman's head snapped up, and my mouth went dry when I locked eyes with him.

"Hi," he said a bit nervously.

"Hi." I crossed my arms over my chest. "What are you doing here?"

An image of the last time he was at my house, wearing that ridiculous yellow Mickey Mouse shirt, flashed through my mind, and my mouth tugged up in a small smile, which I quickly erased.

However, he'd already seen it, and it seemed to give him a confidence booster because he cleared his throat and stood up a bit straighter. "I wanted to talk to you. You haven't been answering my calls."

"That's because I don't want to talk to you," I replied simply.

When I saw that hurt expression cross his face again, though, I immediately wanted to take it back. Maybe I'm not as strong as I thought.

"Oh," he said sadly, sounding very unlike himself. "Did you like the flowers at least?"

"They gave me a headache so I gave them away." Roman's face fell, making me feel like a total bitch. I relented a bit, adding, "They were beautiful though."

He brightened up a bit. "I'm glad you liked them."

I sighed, suddenly tired. “Ok, Roman. Seriously, what do you want?”

The nervous expression came back. It was such a departure from the cocky, violent Roman I knew that I was tempted to check his forehead for a high fever. Either that, or he’d been abducted by aliens. Or maybe this was the good Fiori twin.

“I want to court you,” Roman said rather formally.

I burst out laughing, but I couldn’t help it. “Court me? What is this, nineteenth-century England?”

He turned red. “I’m serious, Maya. I know I’ve acted like a huge jerk in the past. I *know* that, but I want to make it up to you.”

I stopped laughing. He actually sounded serious. “Why?”

Roman’s violet eyes flashed as they held mine in a near trance, and my heart did a series of small flips. I don’t know why, but now *I* felt nervous.

“I’m going to be honest with you,” he said softly. “In the beginning, when I first met you at Stan’s party, I pretty much despised you. I was so upset that this girl I’ve never even heard of dared to stand up to me like that. Even after all the other students’ harassment, though, you didn’t break down, and that pissed me off, or so I thought. Now, though, I realize I wasn’t actually pissed. I was just confused because you made me respect you, and honestly you’re the first person I’ve ever really respected besides my friends. Still, I didn’t like you all that much, but after you started dating—well, fake dating—Parker, I got to know you better, and I realized how smart, and funny, and sweet you are.”

My head was spinning, and I had to clutch the door so I didn’t collapse right there on the floor. What was he trying to say? That he didn’t hate me like I think he did?

“So what does all that mean?” My voice was hoarse.

Roman looked frustrated. “It means—“ He sighed. “You know all those things I did? The flowers, the chocolate, everything? Let’s just say I’ve never done that before. I’m not exactly an expert on that kind of stuff.” His face was bright red at this point. “I wouldn’t do that for just anyone.”

I felt like there was a huge lump in my throat. “So what? Are you just playing a game with me? Trying to see if you can get me to go out with you or something?” I didn’t even know what I was saying, but my voice came out way higher than I expected or wanted.

Roman shook his head, looking even more frustrated. When he looked at me again, I saw sadness flickering in his eyes. It was all I could do not to throw myself in his arms and try to take that sad look away.

“I know the other night you said you never liked me.” The sadness deepened, making my own heart hurt. “Not even as a friend. And I know there are probably lots of other boys out there who want to be with you.” Roman swallowed. “But I guess I’m just here because, um, well, I would like it if you could at least consider me whenever, you know, you feel like you’re ready to date.”

I just stared at him, unable to comprehend what he was saying. No way. My pulse roared in my ears, and my face felt hot and prickly. I wouldn’t be surprised if I had a heart attack right then and there.

“I know I’m not exactly the ideal boyfriend,” Roman added quickly. “But I can try to change, you know? And you don’t have to answer me now. Just take some time to think about it, or you know, even date other people. If you want.” His voice cracked a bit at “other people.”

“So let me get this straight.” I had trouble getting the words out. “Are you asking me to be your girlfriend?”

Roman nodded, staring at my forehead like it was the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen.

Holy crap. Was he serious? I wanted him to be serious, more than anything else in the world, but how could I be sure he wasn't just playing some sick, twisted game with me? I wouldn't put it past him. He wasn't even acting like himself right now.

"What about Solange?"

He frowned. "What about her?"

"Aren't you together?" I asked bitterly, thinking about their kiss at homecoming.

"No, we were never together."

"You certainly looked like you were at homecoming," I said rather nastily, all the hurt I felt that night rushing back and making my heart ache painfully at the memory.

Roman looked embarrassed. "I only did that to make you jealous," he said quietly.

"Right. That makes so much sense," I said sarcastically.

He glared at me a bit, looking more like the Roman I knew. "What else did you want me to do? I wasn't going to sit there by myself like an idiot while you were having so much fun with *Carlo*."

I shook my head. "Roman. I don't want to play any more mind games with you, ok? You have no reason to want me as your girlfriend or to make me jealous, so just—just stop with all this. The flowers, the chocolate, I don't want any more gifts."

I thought I heard him murmur something that sounded suspiciously like "Too late," but it was in such a low voice I couldn't be sure.

Roman ran a hand through his hair as he stared hard at me. "I'm not playing mind games. I wish—" He stopped, then sighed. "Can I ask you something?"

That night in Hawaii, in our suite. Was it all just ‘practice’ for you, or did you feel something?”

I felt myself turn white. No. There was no way. He couldn’t know. A strange buzzing sound filled my ears while my stomach clenched uncomfortably. It was all I could do to not slam the door in his face and run up the stairs to lock myself in the safety of my room.

Yeah, that wouldn’t be suspicious at all.

“N-no,” I stuttered, nearly choking on the words. I am such a bad liar.

Roman’s eyebrows drew together, and his eyes darkened so much they were almost black. “No?”

I shook my head frantically, but my hands were trembling, and I was sure he noticed.

“No.” This time sounded more confident than before.

“That’s a shame,” he murmured, as he took a step towards me.

I automatically stepped back, not liking the look on his face. There was fierce determination there, but also something else. Roman he grabbed my wrists and held me still as he closed the distance between us until—well, until there was no distance between us.

“What are you doing?” I squeaked, panicking. My wrists burned under his touch, and I could feel the impending heart attack looming ever closer on the horizon. “My—my parents are here, you know.”

“I don’t care.” Roman’s jaw was tense, and his whole body seemed to be emitting a strange sizzling heat that enveloped me like a blanket. He was so close...“You don’t seem to understand what I’m trying to tell you, so I’m just going to have to show you.”

Show me? What was that supposed to mean?

I didn't have a chance to ask, because at that moment, Roman crashed his lips down on mine, causing my knees to buckle and strange colored lights to explode behind my eyes.

And that was when I knew my life would never be the same again.

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CHAPTER 24

I stood there, frozen, while the colored lights which I soon recognized to be fireworks continued to explode in the background, and my knees continued to tremble like they had suddenly turned into Jell-O or something.

Holy crap. I've imagined what it would be like to kiss Roman so many times that it felt surreal for it to be *actually* happening.

Of course, this was about a million times better than my imagination.

Roman seemed to have taken my not moving away as encouragement, because he deepened the kiss, causing my heart to splutter and my knees to give out.

I yelped in alarm, breaking away and grabbing his arms just before I collapsed in a heap on the ground.

"Whoa." He grasped my wrists and hauled me back into a standing position. "Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," I muttered, humiliated. I stared at him. "What was that?" My voice was barely above a whisper.

Roman stared at me in disbelief. "You still have to ask?"

I swallowed. "I just—I don't understand." Even though I did. I just couldn't believe it.

He sighed, looking pained. "Fine. Maya, I'm just going to be straight-up honest with you, ok? I—" He hesitated, then continued. "I like you. *Like* like you. Even though you don't like me back." He swallowed. "But you could, right? If you just give me a chance. I'll make it all up to you, I promise. I really will."

“I need to sit down,” I said faintly, sinking down on the armrest of a nearby sofa while he stared nervously at me.

It was all starting to sink in. Roman Fiori liked me. *Me*. Maya Lindberg, the girl who, up until two months ago, most Valescans didn’t even know existed. I actually believed he was telling the truth now. I mean, he is not the type of person who would humble himself like that just for a joke.

Still, it was hard for me to wrap my head around it. After I caught my father cheating, I’d all but given up on love in real life. The whole rich boy falling for poor girl cliché? That only happened in books and movies, but here it was, happening to me.

“Maya?” Roman’s eyes searched my face. “Can you say something, please? Even if it’s ‘I hate you.’ I just need to know.”

And as I sat there, staring at him, taking in the tousled dark hair that was always a bit messy, the violet eyes whose intensity could set a room—or a girl—on fire, and the lean, sculpted face that usually wore an arrogant or disdainful expression but which seemed so vulnerable now, I knew what I had to do.

Still in a bit of a daze, I slowly walked over to where he was standing, and I could see the nervousness increase on his face. At the same time, there was a spark of hope in his eyes.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm my own nerves. *Are you sure this is what you want to do?* a voice whispered in my head.

One look at Roman’s face gave me my answer.

Yes.

And then I slapped him. Not a hard slap, mind you, but it was still, you know, a slap. Plus, the room was so silent the sound actually reverberated.

Roman stared at me in shock.

“I hate you,” I said, my voice trembling slightly.

And just like that, that small hopeful spark died right then and there. “Oh,” Roman said, his voice cracking. He looked like he wanted to cry. “I guess—I guess that’s it then. I’m sorry for wasting your time,” he mumbled, turning to leave.

“Wait.” I stopped him. “I’m not finished.”

He stared at me, confused.

“Don’t you want to know *why* I hate you?”

Roman didn’t look at me. “Not really,” he muttered.

I continued anyway. “I hate you because yes, you have been a major jerk to me. But you know what? I hate you even more because you were a jerk to me even when you knew you liked me! I hate you for not seeming to care, I hate you for not telling me earlier and making me cry, I hate you for kissing Solange, I hate you for putting me through all of that!” I was nearly crying by this point as I pounded a fist against his chest, trying to vent all of my pent-up frustration. “You’re such an idiot!”

By the time I was finished, I was almost out of breath. I fully expected my parents to come running into the room any minute now, but they didn’t.

Roman, I could tell, was absolutely stunned, because he didn’t say a single word. Instead, he just wrapped his arms around me. At first, his touch was hesitant, like he was afraid I was going to pull away or slap him again, but when I didn’t, he grew more confident, pulling me close to his chest. He remained silent, just holding me, and I had a sudden flashback to the night I ran into his room and held him just like he was holding me now.

I closed my eyes, pressing my cheek against the soft cotton of his T-shirt and inhaling that intoxicating woodsy scent of his. Without even thinking, I

wrapped my arms around his waist. It just felt so right, being there in his arms, and I didn't want to think about anything else, not the past, not the future—I just wanted to enjoy the moment.

But like everything else in life, it couldn't last forever, so when my breathing had steadied and I'd gotten my emotions (relatively) under control, I pulled back, chilliness replacing the warmth of his arms.

Roman examined my face, his own inscrutable. "So, uh, what does that mean?" he asked rather nervously.

I couldn't help it. I started laughing at his utter cluelessness, so for once I actually followed his lead, grabbed his face, and kissed him.

This time was even better than the first, because now that I'd gotten all of that off my chest, I could actually *enjoy* it. The softness of his lips against mine, the slightly minty taste of his mouth, the softness of his hair as I ran my hand through it, and the undeniable thrill that fizzled through me when Roman finally got over his shock and started kissing me back.

He kept one arm firmly wrapped around my waist while the other cupped the back of my head so he could kiss me harder, and if he hadn't been holding me, I'm pretty sure I would've floated right off the ground.

Yep. This was definitely the best idea I've ever had.

I can't say for sure that things will end up the way I want them to in the end, but I honestly couldn't hide my feelings anymore. I'm sick of playing it safe. Besides, what was life without a little risk?

I'm not sure how long the kiss went on for, and I was surprised neither my mom nor my dad had interrupted yet. It probably would've went on for quite a while longer, had a small yelp not made its way through the fogginess of my mind.

"What was that?" I pulled away, breathing heavily.

“I don’t know.” Roman stared at my mouth, obviously wanting to continue where we off.

Someone—or rather *something*—yelped again, drawing my gaze to the box on my doorstep. I’d been so caught up in, er, other things that I hadn’t even noticed it earlier.

My heart sped up in excitement. No freakin’ way. Was that what I *think* it is?

“I think it came from that box.” I pointed shakily at the object in question. “Roman? You didn’t happen to have, uh, bought me another gift, did you?”

“Oh, that.” Roman stared at the box like he’d just noticed it himself. “Well...yeah. I wasn’t expecting you to give in before you saw.”

I frowned. “Who says I gave in?” I huffed, though I wasn’t really angry.

He just gave me that slow, languorous smirk of his, and I melted a bit. Ok, so I gave in just a *little*.

“Here.” Roman picked up the shaking box and handed it to me. “Open it.”

I held my breath, slowly opening it and hoping it was—

A puppy. “Oh my god!” I squealed, when I saw the tiny brown-and-white puppy staring up at me, a neglected expression on its face. It obviously didn’t like being stuffed and forgotten inside a box for so long. “You are so cute!”

I picked it up, marveling at the silkiness of its fur, as its neglected expression morphed into a happy one. It let out a happy bark and licked my face with its little pink tongue.

“I thought you’d like it.” There was a small smile on Roman’s face. “I just picked it up this morning.”

I hugged the puppy to my chest, swallowing hard. “It’s for me?”

“Well, yeah.” Roman wrinkled his nose a bit. “I’m not a huge fan of animals.”

At that, the puppy’s ears perked up, and he growled menacingly at Roman. I giggled. Even when he growled he was cute.

“Although...” Roman kept his eyes on mine. “You can only keep it on one condition.”

“Which is?” I squeaked.

“I want you to tell me the truth. Be as honest with me as I was with you. Do you like me?”

All the air whooshed out of my lungs, making me feel like I was free-falling. I took a deep breath, absentmindedly stroking the puppy to calm my nerves. “Yes,” I whispered. “I’ve liked you for a while now.”

And just like that, Roman’s eyes lit up. He smiled. Actually smiled. It wasn’t a smirk, and there was no condescension or disdain behind it. It was just a normal, happy smile, but on him, it was devastating, like the sun finally coming out after a long, angry storm.

He closed the distance between us with two long strides, the look in his eyes taking my breath away. Again. For the first time ever, it was completely open, sincere, and vulnerable, and I could see everything he was feeling. Honestly, though, I didn’t even need to look at him to know, because I was feeling the exact same thing.

“I guess there’s one thing left to do,” he murmured.

“What’s that?” I asked a bit shakily.

Roman stared at me, like he couldn’t quite believe he was there. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

I half-laughed and half-cried. “After all that, you still have to ask? Yes!”

I was just about to throw my arms around him when I realized I was still holding the puppy. Roman seemed to notice at the same time, so he compensated by wrapping his arms around me instead, drawing me into another kiss until the puppy let out an indignant yelp.

“Jeez. He’s just as feisty as his owner,” he said dryly, shaking his head at the animal.

“We should give him a name.” I frowned. What was a good name?

“Feisty,” Roman said blandly.

I rolled my eyes. “That’s a dumb name.” I smirked as the dog tried to nip at his fingers. “I don’t think he likes you very much.”

“He’ll come to his senses soon,” Roman bragged, giving me a sly look. “Much like someone else I know.”

I blushed. “Whatever. But be serious. What should—oh, I know!” I snapped my fingers as a thought hit me. “Let’s name him Mickey!”

I giggled at the look on his face.

“Seriously?” Roman glowered at me, obviously remembering the time my grandmother chased him out of the house with a broom because he’d been wearing a Mickey Mouse shirt.

“Yep,” I chirped. “It’s fitting. Right, Mickey?” I cooed.

Mickey let out a loud, happy bark, snuggling closer to me.

“Fine. But put Mickey down.”

“Why?” I clutched him tighter to his chest.

“Just do it. Pay a little more attention to your new boyfriend, why don’t you?” Roman actually pouted.

I laughed, setting Mickey on the floor. Looks like someone was jealous of the dog.

Mickey’s paws barely hit the floor before Roman grabbed me and really kissed me, only this time neither of us was surprised. Our first kiss as boyfriend and girlfriend.

I sighed happily, my heart actually fluttering. Taking risks? So not overrated.

* * *

My best idea ever? Kissing Roman and telling him how I really feel.

My worst idea ever? Telling everyone else we were dating. Each reaction was worse than the last.

Carlo:

“I’m so happy for you, Maya. *Smirks* Seriously, though, am I good or what? I told you my plan would work.”

Zack:

“Oh My-My! I’m so proud of you! *Tears up a little* Our little My-My’s growing up! *Hugs me tightly, then stops crying* Can I see the puppy now?”

James:

Gives me a hard, disappointed look “I hope you know what you’re doing. I don’t want you to end up hurt.”

Adriana:

“Finally! It’s about time. I’m so glad you guys are finally together, because it’s a bit exhausting trying to play Cupid with people as dense and stubborn as you two. Now I can finally enjoy my spa sessions in peace. Oh, by the way, do you want to go lingerie shopping again? Cosabella’s having a sale.

And I know you like to read, so if you want to borrow the *Kama Sutra* just let me know and I'll bring it to you. Just a warning though, you might want to do some yoga before trying anything in that book."

Parker:

"Are you on the pill? No. Ok, well, here are some condoms. Let's see, there's Trojans, ribbed, strawberry-flavored, lubricated, non-lubricated... why do you have that look on your face? Seriously, Maya, protection's very important. *No one* wants a bunch of mini-Romans running around. And oh! There's a glow-in-the-dark one too! That's my last one, by the way. You should feel special I'm giving it to you."

My mom (who eavesdropped on our whole conversation in the living room two weeks ago):

"Oh, you finally got a real boyfriend! That's great, sweetie. By the way, I hope you don't mind but I accidentally told your grandma yesterday. I don't think she's very happy, since she keeps asking about someone named Pee-Wee and why I would let you date someone who likes mice. *Sighs* You can expect a call from her soon—Maya! Don't you dare throw your phone in the garbage disposal!"

My dad (who had been about to come in and punch Roman if my mom hadn't held him back):

Attempts to give me the birds and bees talk, even though my mom fully gave me that talk when I was thirteen Luckily, he failed, seeing as how I walked out of the room after about ten seconds because a) that's a highly awkward and traumatizing conversation and b) I still haven't really forgiven him yet.

Venice:

"Aaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!! You're dating *Roman Fiori!!! Oh my god!* That's amazing! How did you do it? Tell me about the kiss! He got you a puppy? He did?! Aaaahhh!" *Carries on this way for ten minutes before fainting*

That last one was how I ended up in the emergency room, since I wanted to make sure my best friend didn't get a concussion from fainting on a tile

floor. Luckily, she didn't. Unluckily, she still remembered why she fainted.

When I told Roman what happened, he laughed. *Laughed*, like the whole thing was hilarious.

"I don't see what's so funny," I grumbled, reaching down to pet Mickey good-bye. He let out a low whine, staring up at me with those sad puppy eyes. "Oh, don't look at me that way, baby," I cooed. "I promise I'll be back soon. If you're a good boy I'll even bring back *lots* of doggie treats for you."

He stopped whining and stood up on his hind legs, pawing my leg adoringly.

I grinned. He was so *adorable*! I'm so glad I managed to convince my parents to let me keep him. I picked Mickey up, waving one of its paws at Roman. "Say 'bye, Roman." I smiled mischievously at my boyfriend. Boyfriend. Just the word caused my heart to flutter.

"Rome, say bye to Mickey."

Roman rolled his eyes, looking annoyed. I think he seriously regrets ever buying me the puppy. "He's a dog. It's not like he understands."

I gave him my own puppy dog face.

"Fine," he finally grouched, glaring at Mickey. "Bye, Mickey."

In response, Mickey stuck up his nose and turned his head away.

I burst out laughing at the look on Roman's face. "Come on, let's go." I set Mickey down on the floor and pushed a highly offended Roman out the door.

"Talk about ingratitude. I was the one who bought that little mutt," he grumbled angrily, fishing his keys out of his pocket.

“He’s not a mutt,” I defended. “Besides, I’m the one who feeds and bathes him.”

“Whatever.” Roman yanked open the passenger side door. “Just get in.”

Despite his gruff words, I couldn’t help but smile. “You’re such a gentleman.”

After two weeks of officially dating, I was beginning to see how much of a softie he really was under that cold, icy façade, a façade which was slowly melting, much to everyone’s delight.

“Don’t think that came for free,” Roman said with a smirk as he slid into the driver’s seat.

“Oh really?” I raised a challenging eyebrow, but I can feel anticipation coursing through me.

Luckily, I didn’t have to wait long, because at that moment he leaned across my seat and gave me a soft kiss on the lips. Even after half a month, I was surprised by how tender he could be. Of course, he did threaten to take Mickey away if I ever breathed a word about his “softer” side to other people.

I went along with it, although I highly doubt he’d be able to wrest Mickey away. That dog was too doggone smart (pun intended).

“Where are we going?” I asked as his Ferrari flew through Valesca’s streets to some unknown destination.

“You’ll see,” he replied mysteriously.

Hmm. Well, color me intrigued.

An hour and a half later, we were two towns over, parked in front of a... carnival, only this time, it wasn’t filled with celebrities. There were just regular people: couples on dates, families with laughing kids, all running

around eating cotton candy and waiting impatiently for their turn at one of the many popular games.

“I thought that since I, er, cut your last carnival experience short, I’d make it up to you,” Roman said sheepishly, turning off the engine. “I know this is a bit different than Hawaii, but it’s probably better than just dinner and a movie, right?”

My heart swelled so much it nearly burst out of my chest. He could be so darn thoughtful sometimes. “This is way better,” I agreed softly. “This is perfect.”

Roman smiled happily at that, and he got out of the car to open the door for me, grasping my hand firmly in his as we wandered through the carnival.

Honestly, I liked this better than the Hawaii one. The Perrys’ over-the-top birthday party had been amazing, but this carnival was more down-to-earth. More real.

After we’d stuffed ourselves with cotton candy and popcorn and went on almost every ride twice (and rode the Ferris Wheel three times) we decided to try and win one of the giant stuffed animal prizes at what seemed to be the most popular booth. At least, I decided and Roman had no choice but to tag along.

It turned out to be an utterly classic carnival game: the plate toss. If you tossed a dime and it landed in the center of the plate, you won a prize.

Since my hand-eye coordination was somewhere south of zero, I turned to Roman with pleading eyes.

He sighed and held up a hand. “Don’t even ask,” he grumbled, as the booth operator handed him a dime with a toothy smile.

Everyone had three tries, and the first two times, Roman struck out. The third time, though, the dime landed squarely in the middle of the plate.

“Yes!” I jumped with delight, eyeing all those big, fluffy stuffed animals that just screamed “take me home!”

“Which stuffed animal would you like?” the operator asked, his smile growing even wider as he looked at me.

“Um.” I pursed my lips in concentration. “The frog. No! The unicorn... wait, no! Is that a horse?”

“Maya, just pick one. There’s a line,” Roman said rather impatiently.

His personality may have improved a bit but he still had a ways to go.

“This is a very important decision,” I insisted, torn. “Fine. I’ll take the...” My eyes landed on the adorable pink animal. “I’ll take the pig!”

I beamed as the man plucked the giant pig from where it hung and placed it in my arms. I sighed, hugging it happily. It was so soft and cuddly.

“Out of all the animals, you had to choose the pig?” Roman shook his head in disbelief. He glanced at the pig then looked at me. “Although I guess it makes sense, considering how much it resembles you.”

I gasped. “Take that back!”

“I don’t think I will,” he replied nonchalantly, walking ahead of me. “I think I’m going to get some more popcorn instead.”

I ran to catch up with him. “So you’re really not going to take it back?”

“Nope.”

“Fine.” I shoved the stuffed animal in his arms, a small smirk on my face. “You’re holding this for me the rest of the night then.”

“Uh, I don’t think so,” he said scornfully, staring with disdain at the stuffed porcine. “There’s no way in hell you can make me carry this around.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Do it or I’m not kissing you again,” I threatened.

Fifteen minutes later, I was happily munching on a new bag of popcorn while Roman trailed after me, the pig in his arms and a scowl on his face.

I looked back at him, grinning at how adorable he looked, even though he looked like he wanted to murder me. A group of girls passed by, bursting into giggles at the sight of a hot, leather-jacketed guy carrying a big pink pig.

“I’m going to make you pay for this,” Roman warned me, his face red. “For real, this time.”

I was unfazed. “Yeah, yeah. Are there any more games you want to play?” I was getting a bit tired. Boy, carnivals can really wear a girl out.

He immediately shook his head, obviously not wanting to be embarrassed any further. “You want to go?”

“Yep.”

We were halfway to the car when I accidentally bumped into a passing, older couple. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry!” I cried, while Roman chuckled behind me, obviously amused by my klutziness.

“Just watch where you’re going next time,” the woman snapped, turning away from the distinguished gray-haired man she was with to face me.

My heart stopped when I saw her. The long blonde hair, the sharp features, the petite body. Even though I’ve only seen her for about five minutes max in the past, I could never forget that face.

It was Lexi. The woman my dad cheated on my mom with.

CHAPTER 25

My blood ran cold even as anger heated up my stomach at the sight of Lexi's smug face.

I was so shocked and furious I was literally shaking, but my feet were rooted to the ground as she turned to walk away with the man by her side.

Probably another happily married man she's seduced, I thought, clenching my hands into fists.

"Want me to go scare her a little?" Roman's voice broke through my thoughts. "I can't hit her, obviously, but I can be quite intimidating if I want to."

I looked up at him, cracking a tiny smile at the serious expression on his face. "Thanks, but I can handle it," I said, my voice hard.

Without waiting for a reply, I stormed over to where she'd stopped at a food vendor. Resisting the urge to yank her around and bitch slap her, I settled for a rough tap, almost a push, on the shoulder instead.

Lexi whipped around, looking annoyed. "Oh, it's you again. What do you want?" she asked.

"Why?" I demanded.

She stared at me like I was crazy, while her date just looked confused. She didn't recognize me. Not that I expected her to, considering I've only seen her once and she probably hadn't gotten a good look at the crazy crying girl running out of the restaurant that night.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said coolly.

I crossed my arms over my chest. *Bitch slap. Now!* my mind yelled at me, but I held back. I felt Roman come up behind me, his scent calming me down a little, but to my surprise, the man Lexi was with broke out into a smile.

“Roman! How are you?” he asked jovially, holding out one hand.

Both Lexi and I turned to stare at Roman, who now had a polite smile on his face. It looked jarringly out of place next to the giant pink pig in his arms. “Mr. Henderson, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” he said, reaching out to take the man’s hand.

Wait. He *knew* him?

“How is your father? I haven’t spoken to him since we had that business summit in Switzerland,” Mr. Henderson said, shaking Roman’s hand.

“He’s doing well, thank you for asking, although he’s busy as always.” Roman flicked his eyes toward me. “As a matter of fact, he wanted to ask you about the Wyatt-Triage merger last week...”

He led Mr. Henderson to a bench out of earshot, talking about some business concerns the whole way. Huh. I didn’t even know Roman knew anything about his father’s business dealings.

Nevertheless, gratitude seeped through me. It was obvious he wanted me to speak to Lexi without an audience.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea who you are,” Lexi said, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

Right. Back to the task at hand.

I leveled her with a glare that could’ve slain a hundred dragons, had they actually existed. “No, but I know who you are. Lexi, right?”

She suddenly stiffened, narrowing her eyes at me as recognition spread across her face. “Ah. Arnold Lindberg’s daughter, I’m assuming. I should have guessed. You have the exact same eyes.”

This time I was the one who stiffened. How did she know automatically who I was? Maybe she really did recognize me and had just pretended not to.

My question must’ve been written all over my face, because Lexi rolled her eyes, twirling her hair around her fingers. I couldn’t believe my dad had cheated on mom for *her*. She acted like some stupid, ditzy teenage girl!

“I suppose I can tell you part of the truth now, just because I’ve already gotten paid, and I certainly don’t need you complicating my relationship with Thomas,” she said in a bored voice. I assume Thomas was Mr. Henderson’s first name.

“What’s there to tell? You seduced my dad, knowing full well he had a wife,” I hissed, the rage boiling up inside me like a volcano about to erupt.

Lexi didn’t even blink. “True.”

I’ve never been a particularly violent person, but at the moment, I wanted to smack that smirk off her face.

“I have to say, though, it wasn’t necessarily my idea.”

A cold, penetrating chill slid down my spine. “What are you talking about?” I demanded through gritted teeth.

She eyed me almost pityingly. “I never really worked at your father’s company. I was a temporary intern there, and I only took the internship to get close to him.”

I felt dizzy as my mind scrambled to make sense of her words. “You said it wasn’t your idea,” I accused.

Lexi rolled her eyes like I was a particularly dumb child. “It’s not. Someone made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. It was simple. Seduce your father, shake up his marriage a bit, and I get paid.” She shrugged. “The fact that you saw us that night at Masa only made things easier.”

That was when I snapped. All the pent-up anger I’ve been feeling towards my father and Lexi fueled the loud slap I delivered across her face. I could hear it even over the cheesy carnival music, and several passersby had stopped to gawk at the drama.

Roman and Mr. Henderson, however, didn’t seem to have noticed yet.

“Wow, so you’re a prostitute. Why doesn’t that surprise me?” I spat, feeling sick to my stomach. How could there be people in the world who were callous and greedy enough to break up someone’s family for money?

Although I lived in Valesca. That sort of stuff shouldn’t even surprise me.

To my ire, Lexi didn’t look particularly put out by my slap or accusation. It was like she was used to it, which she probably was.

“Au contraire, my dear, I’m not a prostitute,” she drawled, reaching up to touch her face lightly. “I just hit some hard times and like I said, someone made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. Honestly, you shouldn’t be taking this out on me. I’m not the one diabolical enough to come up with the plan. I was just carrying out orders.”

I stared at her, trying to discern if she was lying or not. She stared right back, her eyes not leaving mine. She looked almost bored by our conversation, but a horrible gut feeling told me she was telling the truth.

“Who was it?” I demanded. “Who was the person who paid you?”

Lexi just shrugged. “Sorry, hon, but I’ve told you all I could. Besides, you think I’ll tell you after that little slap?” She smirked. “Word of advice though? Be careful who you let into your life.” She flicked her eyes over to

where Roman and Mr. Henderson were seated. “Not everyone has your best interests at heart.”

With that, she turned and started to walk away, but after a few steps looked over her shoulder and added, “If it makes you feel better though, I didn’t sleep with your precious father. Actually, you can commend him for holding out so long. I’m very good when it comes to men.”

I just stood there, stunned, as I watched her and Mr. Henderson say their goodbyes to Roman and disappear into a waiting Town Car. Roman walked over, a concerned look on his face, but I couldn’t move.

My mind was spinning faster than the carousel I was standing next to, and the carnival music was jumbling up all my thoughts. *Breathe...just breathe...*

“What’s wrong? What did she say?” Roman asked, a frown creasing his brow as he touched my shoulder.

It wasn’t until then that I noticed I was shivering.

“Nothing.” My voice sounded far away. “Nothing at all.”

Nothing except something that had thrown yet another wrench into my life. Who could possibly have hired her? I felt nauseous at the thought that it might be one of my friends, someone I trusted. Out of everything else, that would devastate me the most.

* * *

For the next week and a half, I couldn’t push Lexi’s words out of my mind, but I didn’t mention them to anyone else. Not Roman, not Carlo, not even my father. I mean, the whole thing was just unbelievable, like something in a movie.

Could someone hate my family that much? It was hard to imagine. Up until a few months ago, I was practically invisible. My parents didn’t have any enemies that I knew of. It was just baffling.

Still, with Thanksgiving just around the corner, I was determined to push those negative thoughts out of my mind for at least one night. Actually, with the exception of my run in with Lexi, everything else in my life was falling into place.

My relationship with Roman was going fairly smoothly. Sure, we had a few minor arguments here and there, because honestly, he could be a huge idiot sometimes, but he was also a lot sweeter and more thoughtful than I ever thought he could be. We went out on dates several times a week, from dinners at expensive restaurants to more low-key outings to the park.

Can you believe he's never been to a public park? That boy had no idea what he was missing out on, but now, I can't tear him away from the swings. The park was also a really good place to walk Mickey, which we did together sometimes. Mickey and Roman still have their differences, but at least the former has stopped peeing all over Roman's Armani shoes.

When I told Roman it was out of love that Mickey did that, because "isn't peeing supposed to be marking your territory? You don't mark things you don't love," he glared at me and told me in no uncertain terms that he was not a "thing" and that if Mickey peed on his custom-made shoes one more time, he was going to use him to make a dog fur coat and give it to his animal-hating aunt in Milan as a Christmas present.

Of course, that prompted Mickey to bite down on Roman's finger, which didn't help matters. But that's another story.

I've continued my friendship with James, because, much to Roman's chagrin, I am not the type of girl who will stop being friends with someone just because her boyfriend said so. Roman will just have to get over it.

By the time actual Thanksgiving night rolled around, I was a nervous wreck, but for an entirely different reason than you might think.

"Mom? Mom! Have you seen my pearl earrings?" I asked, bursting frantically into my parents' room. I studiously avoided my dad's gaze as he finished knotting his tie.

“Ah, I have them right here.” My mom held up the pearl drop earrings my grandmother had given me as a birthday present last year. “I thought you didn’t like pearls.”

“I don’t.” I quickly clipped them on. “But it looks classy, right?”

She smiled knowingly at me. “You look beautiful. You shouldn’t be nervous.”

“Nervous? Why would I be nervous?” My voice was high-pitched as I smoothed down the front of my simple black dress with a shaking hand. “I’m just meeting the wife of the richest man in the world.”

Yep. I was meeting the parents tonight. Apparently, it was tradition for everyone to have a huge Thanksgiving dinner at Roman’s house. According to Adriana, he has “the best cooks,” and this year, since I was dating the heir himself, my family was invited.

Personally I think my parents are slightly relieved. We’ve never been huge celebrators of Thanksgiving, and my mom hated making turkey.

“I’m sure she’ll love you,” my dad said, gazing at me hopefully.

I didn’t meet his eyes. “Thanks,” I mumbled. Things have been less frigid between us since I now knew he told the truth about him and Lexi having never slept together, but still. He *did* cheat on my mom, even if the person he’d cheated on her with had been hired to seduce him.

No. don’t think about that now, I instructed myself as we piled into my dad’s SUV. *Just think of happy things.* I rested my head on the back of my seat, trying to focus on nothing other than the soft classical music piping through the speakers. My mom was a huge classical music fan.

By the time we arrived at the Fioris’ estate, I had calmed down somewhat. My parents, on the other hand, were gushing over the Versailles-like structure in front of them, especially my architect dad.

“Whoa. Is this a house or a palace?” my dad muttered, getting out of the car and handing his keys to the valet.

When we stepped into the giant foyer, two impeccably groomed women came over to take our coats, and I saw my friends milling about, talking quietly. Among them were several well-dressed older couples who were clearly their parents.

“Maya! You’re here!” Venice bounded over, her eyes shining happily as she hugged me and greeted my parents. As my best friend, she also received a dinner invitation. “I can’t believe I’m celebrating Thanksgiving with the Fioris,” she whispered excitedly. “I think my mom’s actually proud of me for once.”

I glanced over her shoulder to see her mother, a willowy redhead who’d maintained her body from her modeling days, speaking with a couple who had to be Carlo’s parents, since they shared his exact same coloring and had similar features.

To my dismay, I saw that Rico was also there, though everyone was avoiding him like the plague. That didn’t seem to faze him at all. He was leaning against a wall, dressed not in formalwear but in a plain blue T-shirt and the type of ratty jeans you bought at Barneys for \$500. He caught my eye and lifted his beer bottle in a silent toast before taking a swig, never taking his gaze off me.

Goosebumps erupted on my skin, and I purposely turned my back to him. The moment I did, I sucked in a deep breath. Roman was standing right there in front of me, even more dressed up than he’d been at homecoming, and he looked absolutely devastating.

“Hey,” I said softly, my heart fluttering.

He smiled slowly at me. “Hey.”

“Oh, I see Zack,” Venice chirped. “I’ll be right back.” With that, she beat a hasty retreat.

“You look...” Roman’s eyes swept over me, and I felt my heart speed up at the look on his face. “Ok,” he finished.

I snapped my head up with a frown as he burst out laughing. “So not funny,” I huffed, even as a small grin made its way over my face. “At least I don’t look like a penguin playing dress-up.”

“Trust me, no penguin’s ever looked this good,” he said cockily. He leaned down, placing his hands on my hips and brushing his lips softly over mine. “I was just joking, by the way,” he whispered. “You look beautiful.”

I smiled, looking up at him underneath my lashes. “You don’t look too bad yourself, penguin boy,” I admitted, causing him to laugh again. “But we should save the kissing for later. Everyone’s watching.”

“They’re too busy kissing each other’s butts to watch us.” Roman’s grip tightened. “Besides, who cares?”

And as he crashed his lips down on mine again, I have to say I agreed whole-heartedly. Who cares?

Turns out, that thought came a little too soon, because a small “ahem” interrupted our embrace. My eyes flew open and I immediately stepped away, my face turning scarlet when I realized it was Roman’s father, whom I recognized from newspapers and the oil portraits that hung on the wall.

He was a tall, imposing man, with deep-set dark eyes, olive-colored skin, and a handsome face that would’ve been a whole lot handsomer were it not for the hard, serious set of his mouth.

“Oh, hello,” I blurted, blushing furiously. “I mean, good evening, Mr. Fiori.”

He stared at me disapprovingly. “Good evening, Miss...?” He raised one eyebrow.

Roman grabbed my hand and glared at his father. “Father, this is Maya Lindberg. My girlfriend,” he said coolly.

“I see.” A flicker of interest appeared in Mr. Fiori’s eyes. “Of Lindberg Chocolates, I’m assuming?”

My throat closed. “No,” I answered quietly.

The flicker of interest disappeared. “I’m sorry, my mistake.” From his tone, it was clear he wasn’t sorry at all. “Are your parents here tonight?”

I nodded mutely, but the last thing I wanted was for him to meet my parents. He would eat them alive.

“Actually, dad, I saw Thomas Henderson the other day,” Roman cut in swiftly. “He wants to speak to you about the Wyatt-Triage merger.”

Mr. Fiori frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“You weren’t exactly around for me to tell,” Roman said stiffly.

His father sighed. “That’s what secretaries are for,” he snapped. “Never mind. I’ll go give him a call now.” He paused. “And please do try to refrain from your earlier...activities. It is quite un-ladylike to engage in that type of behavior in front of other guests.”

Though he was looking at Roman while he said it, it was clear he was addressing me. I turned even redder as Mr. Fiori strode across the hall and disappeared behind a set of double doors.

“God, I’m sorry, Maya,” Roman said quietly. “My dad is just a huge ass.”

“It’s ok.” I tried to smile. “We shouldn’t have been doing that anyway.” I hadn’t exactly expected his family to accept me right off the bat, but his

father's snub still stung.

"Roman, dear! Who's the lovely girl?" a gorgeous dark-haired woman trilled as she sailed towards us. She would've been the epitome of elegance and sophistication were it not for her slightly unsteady gait, the flush on her cheeks, and the intoxicated sparkle in her eyes.

Roman's grip tightened even more. "Mother, have you been drinking again?" he hissed.

She shook her head, patting down her shining hair. "It's a holiday. I just had a few sips, that's all." She smiled at me and held out her hand. "I'm Giselle, Roman's mother," she all but sang. "Are you Maya? I've heard Gloria talking about you."

I remembered Gloria was the housekeeper. Great, so now I was a gossip topic among the household staff.

"Yes, I am. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Fiori," I answered politely, reaching for her hand with my free one. I let out a startled yelp when she pulled me into an unexpected hug.

"It's so good to meet you!" I winced, my eardrums hurting a bit. "But please, call me Giselle. Mrs. Fiori just sounds so old!" She pulled back, swaying a bit. "I don't look old, do I? If I do, I need to take it up with my plastic surgeon!" She laughed a little too loudly.

I laughed weakly in response, unsure what to do.

"Jesus, mom, get it under control," Roman said angrily, pulling me back to his side. "We have guests."

Giselle shook her head, clucking her tongue. "Roman, my dear boy, you always were too serious," she sighed. "Just like your father."

I swear Roman's eyes turned almost black at that moment, and legitimate fear entered my system at how angry he looked. "I'm nothing like my

father,” he hissed. “Maya, let’s go.” With that, he all but dragged me away to the other side of the foyer, leaving his mother behind as she snagged a champagne flute from a passing tray.

“Roman—“ I began.

“Don’t,” he said in a clipped voice. “I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

I fell silent until we joined the rest of our friends, who had set up camp near the stairwell.

“Woman of the hour!” Parker cried when he saw me. “You look ravishing, honeybee.” He winked at me.

Ridiculous as always, but it eased some of the tension.

“My-My, where’s Mickey?” Zack asked excitedly, peering around me like Mickey was right behind me.

“At home. I couldn’t bring him here.”

His face fell. “Why?”

I laughed. “Zack, I’m beginning to think you love my dog more than you love me,” I teased.

Zack shrugged and grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, but Mickey’s cute and fluffy and while you’ve got the cuteness down you’re a bit lacking in the fluffiness department.”

The others laughed. Even Roman cracked a small smile.

“It’s good to see you,” Carlo said, smiling at me while the others started chatting about the best breed of dog to have as a pet, which segued into who owned the most horses. So far, it seemed as though Adriana’s seven

Arabians beat everyone else's collection. "I haven't spoken to you in a while."

"I know," I said guiltily. I haven't had a real conversation with him in at least a week. He always seemed distracted, and I was just so busy with college applications, school, and Roman. "How've you been?" I hesitated, then added, "Are you and Rico getting along better?"

The moment I said Rico's name, I couldn't help but think about what James told me. I've never asked Carlo if it was true. I just couldn't think of how to bring it up.

Carlo stared at me for a moment, his dark eyes searching my face. "You know." His voice was matter-of-fact.

I blinked. "Know what?"

"About Rico."

My jaw dropped. How did he *do* that? "H-how did you--?"

Carlo chuckled, looking a bit sad. "Your face is like an open book, Maya. I'm assuming someone told you?"

I nodded.

"And you want to know if it's true." It was a statement, not a question.

I nodded again.

He sighed, fiddling with his flute of champagne. "Honestly, I don't even know. Rico was definitely involved with a gang, and they definitely participated in some...unsavory activities. However, I can't tell you for sure if he personally engaged in anything more serious than the occasional fight with a rival gang, maybe some grand theft auto and robbery."

I swallowed. Gang fights. Grand theft auto. Robbery. Wasn't that bad enough?

"He had to leave though, because he was accused of—" Carlo hesitated. "Of raping somebody, but I suppose you know that. Rico's always denied it. He said he was framed by the gang's leader—who conveniently disappeared soon after—but there was no hard evidence. It was enough for my dad to send him out of the country though, it was too much of a scandal."

"And now he's back." I couldn't quite believe it.

Carlo nodded guiltily. "I shouldn't have let you stay at my house, it wasn't safe. It's just—" He sighed. "I may not like him very much, but he's still my brother. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt." He paused, a concerned look sliding over his face. "Did he—"

"No! No." I shook my head. "He didn't do anything to me."

Nothing beyond creeping me out, anyway. "So you guys still aren't talking to each other?"

"Oh, we are, if you call the occasional jab and insult 'talking,'" Carlo said wryly. "He's here tonight, you know."

I looked around. Rico had disappeared. "I know. I saw him earlier."

"Saw who earlier?" Adriana had stopped talking about her horses and was tuned in to our conversation. The others gazed at me curiously.

"Rico," Carlo said casually. Judging from the looks on their faces, the others already knew all about him.

"Ah." Adriana looked at me. "Who told you, if you don't mind me asking?"

I cleared my throat. "Um, James."

Roman snorted and looked away. Even Parker and Zack looked a bit disturbed.

“James what?”

“Holtzman.”

Adriana tilted her head, a thoughtful expression on her face.

“Holtzman? That sounds familiar.”

“Probably. His dad is in business too, you’ve probably heard about him that way,” I explained.

She pursed her lips. “Maybe.”

Before we could dwell on it any longer, the butler announced that dinner was ready.

Everyone filed into the dining room, and when dinner was served, I couldn’t help but gape at the lavish spread in front of me. According to the calligraphed menu in front of me, it was a French gourmet dinner, with winter fruit and nut stuffing, herbed potato gratin, the juiciest turkey I’ve ever seen, and several other dishes I couldn’t pronounce.

Dinner went fairly smoothly, although Roman was still a bit tense from his earlier run-in with his parents.

To my chagrin, I found myself seated directly across from Rico, who kept shooting me suggestive looks the entire time, but he disappeared somewhere—again—in the middle of dinner. He was still gone by the time dessert was served.

I shifted in my seat, wishing I hadn’t drunk so much wine. At least I wasn’t as tipsy as Venice, whose skin color nearly matched her hair after several glasses of Bordeaux.

“Where’s the bathroom?” I whispered to Roman.

“Go out the doors, make a left, and it’s the third door on your right,” he answered quietly.

I smiled, then stood up and quickly excused myself. I followed his instructions and was about to pull open the door to the bathroom when Rico stormed out, a pissed-off look on his face. He was clutching his phone so tightly I was surprised it didn’t crack.

I let out a small squeak of terror, remembering what James said about the possibility he might have murdered someone, but for once, Rico brushed past me without even looking at me.

I stared after him, stunned, but then darted into the bathroom before he could change his mind and come back to rape me or something, even though the chances of that happening was very slim.

Call me paranoid, but I wasn’t taking any chances.

Shaking a bit, I used the facilities, washed my hands, and was drying off on one of the monogrammed guest towels when I caught sight of something on the floor, wedged between the sink counter and the wall. It looked like a... picture?

Curious, I bent down to pick it up. It was folded in half, and when I opened it, it felt as though someone had dumped a bucket load of ice down my back. My hands trembled as I stared at the photo. I couldn’t believe it.

In the photo, I saw Rico and several other boys, some of them smiling, some of them scowling. They weren’t what caught my attention though. What caught my attention was the blonde standing front and center, a small smirk on her face.

Lexi. Rico knew Lexi. Lexi knew Rico.

I sank down slowly on the closed toilet seat, my knees feeling weak. What the hell did this mean? Was Rico the one who'd hired her to seduce my dad? But why would he do something like that? I didn't even know him! Plus, I hadn't met him until after I caught my dad in New York.

Was it just a coincidence? *That would be a pretty big coincidence.*

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to breathe. Whatever was going on, I needed to figure it out, and fast. Otherwise, I had a feeling things might spiral even more out of control than they already were.

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CHAPTER 26

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

I tapped my pencil against my notebook, jiggling my foot even though my superstitious mom had told me a million times that it was bad luck.

Could this class period go any slower?

After five more torturous minutes, the bell finally, blissfully rang, and I jumped up so fast I banged my knee against the underside of my desk. Wincing a little, I shoved my books into my bag and joined the crush of students battling their way out the narrow doorway.

The minute they saw me, though, they parted like the Red Sea, their eyes wide as I passed by them. Their faces were a combination of awe, envy, and nervousness.

Even in my haste, I couldn't help but suppress a laugh. They were just so predictable. Ever since they found out I was dating *the* Roman Fiori, they either treated me like a goddess or like I was the wife of a mafia kingpin or something.

When I was "dating" Parker, everyone couldn't wait to get a piece of me. They hounded me at every turn, begging me to go shopping, to attend their parties. and I even had a few people ask me for photographs and autographs. Or both.

Now, though, everyone kept a respectable distance, satisfying themselves with just staring at me. It was like they were afraid of getting too close to me in case I decided to smite them with the almighty powers I've gained as Roman's girlfriend. They couldn't even look me in the eyes, the way servants couldn't look royalty in the eyes in medieval Europe or whatever.

I can't say I'm not enjoying the space, though. It's not like I wanted to talk to them.

When I reached my locker, I shoved my books into the narrow space, then ran down the hall and into the parking lot. I didn't even break stride as I yanked open the front door of Carlo's giant Range Rover and slid onto Roman's lap.

Technically, that was illegal, but I couldn't wait to get off school grounds.

"Jeez, it's about time, My-My. I'm starving here," Zack complained from the backseat, where he, Adriana, Parker, and Venice were squished together.

"Sorry, not everyone can come and go from their classrooms as they please," I said, rolling my eyes. I looked at Venice. "How did you get here so quickly?"

"My class is right near the exit," she explained, twirling a strand of red hair around her fingers.

"Oh yeah. I forgot."

I eyed her curiously. She seemed a bit more subdued than usual, almost nervous, but I had no idea why.

"Buckle up, you two. I don't want any accidents," Carlo said, raising his eyebrows at me and Roman.

I smirked, pulling the seatbelt across my front so it reined both of us in. "Yes, Dad."

He grimaced. "Please don't call me that."

"I'll stop calling you that once you stop acting like that."

Carlo gave Roman a pointed look right before he pulled out of the parking lot. "You need to control your girlfriend."

Roman just laughed, wrapping his strong arms around my waist. I smiled, snuggling closer to him and turning my head to give him a kiss.

We kept it a close-mouthed one, not wanting to gross anyone out, but it was all I could do not to grab him and jump him right now. I'm not exactly what you call bold when it comes to stuff like this, but I can't help it. I always felt like I would die if I couldn't touch or kiss him.

God, I'm turning into a pervert.

As Carlo turned up the volume on the radio and everyone began singing along to "Bottoms Up," I stared out the window, trying to ignore the delicious shiver that snaked through me as Roman caressed the bare skin below the hem of my skirt.

I loved it when he did that, not only because of my physical response, but because it kept my mind off that photo I found in his house. A photo that was currently in my bag. I could practically feel it burning into my thigh.

I studied it every opportunity I had, trying to figure out what connection Lexi had with Rico and his gang. Former gang. Whatever. Had she been part of the gang? She didn't seem like the type, but then, people were rarely what they seem.

I was willing to bet whatever connection she had with Rico had at least something to do with who hired her to seduce my dad. I'd attempted to contact her again to get some more answers, but I realized I didn't even know her full name. I called my dad's company, even though she wasn't interning there anymore, but they said that information was confidential. I knew my dad probably knew, but I hadn't worked up the courage to ask him yet. I mean, the last thing I needed to do was remind him of his mistress.

"What's going on in that confusing head of yours?" Roman whispered teasingly in my ear, rapping the side of my head lightly with his fingers while continuing to caress my lower thigh with his other hand.

And just like that, it was ten times easier to push all other thoughts to the back burner of my mind.

“Just thinking about how I can’t wait for winter break,” I mumbled, placing my hand on top of his and intertwining his fingers. I could feel the rise and fall of his chest on my back, which was more soothing than any day at a spa could be.

“Winter break’s going to be so much fun!”

I let out a startled squeal as Zack poked his head between the driver and passenger seats, his eyes sparkling with excitement and his face mere inches from mine.

“God, Zack, give a girl some warning next time!” My heart was still thudding against my chest at the unexpected shout.

Adriana grabbed the back of Zack’s shirt and pulled him back to his seat. “Ignore him. All his good breeding goes out the window when he’s hungry.” She gave me an amused look. “Although we *can* hear everything you two are saying.”

I blushed while Roman chuckled and Parker, Venice, and Zack smirked knowingly. Even Carlo’s mouth curled up into a small smile.

“Whatever. You should be focused on your own conversations and not ours,” I declared, still blushing.

“We can’t help it honeybee, you two just too cute,” Parker drawled. “I never thought I’d ever see Roman whipped.”

“I’m not whipped,” Roman snapped, twisting his head around to glare at Parker. “Besides, you shouldn’t be talking.”

Parker shrugged, a wicked glint in his eyes. “At least I’m getting some,” he sang quietly.

I gasped, Venice choked, Roman turned bright red, and Zack clapped his hands over his ears, looking grossed out. I mean, Parker *is* dating his sister.

The only two people who didn't react were Carlo, who'd just pulled into Il Serrano's parking lot, and Adriana, who was rummaging in her purse for something. I'm not even sure she heard what Parker said.

"We're here!" I announced in an overly loud tone. The car had barely stopped moving before I unsnapped my seatbelt, flung open the door, and tumbled out, avoiding Roman's gaze.

Ok, so we hadn't done *it* yet, but we've only been dating for a little over three weeks. I will say, however, that our makeout sessions have gotten steamier and steamier over time. Still, it's not like I appreciated Parker telling all of my friends about my sex life, or lack thereof.

How did he know for sure anyway? Had Roman told him? Was he getting impatient with me? I mean, I'm not sure I'm ready. Or maybe I am. I don't know. By the time we were seated at our table in the restaurant, my head hurt from thinking so much.

We were halfway through lunch—which I could barely focus on because Roman's leg had been pressed against mine the entire time, sending sharp tingles up and down my body—when Adriana gestured for me and Venice to follow her into the bathroom. When we were safely ensconced in the rose marble room, she got right down to business.

"So." Adriana eyed me slyly in the mirror while she applied another coat of MAC's Prrr lip gloss. "It's almost your one month anniversary."

Venice sighed, fluffing her hair with one hand. "I can't believe it's been so long already. It feels like just yesterday that I fainted when you told me."

I snickered a little at the memory.

Adriana shook her head. "I don't even want to know." She returned her attention to me. "So have you been planning it?"

I frowned, leaning against the wall. “Planning what?”

Adriana and Venice exchanged exasperated glances. “Your anniversary *night*,” the blonde hinted.

“Oh, I don’t know. I just thought we’d go out for a nice dinner or something,” I said honestly.

Venice shook her head, her curls bouncing merrily. “I don’t think she gets it,” she told Adriana.

“I don’t. Can you tell me what you’re talking about?” I was so not in the mood for cryptic riddles.

Adriana tossed her lip gloss back in her bag. “Remember the reason why we went lingerie shopping when you were ‘dating’ Parker?”

I stared at her for a moment, until realization set in and turned my entire body a flaming red.

“Wh-what? We’re not talking about that now,” I stuttered. Or ever. There’s a reason why most people keep these things private, with the exception of porn stars and Paris Hilton.

Unfortunately, Adriana was not “most people.”

“We don’t have much time,” she pointed out, as an elegant, fur-clad woman swept into the bathroom without sparing us a glance. “You’ve only got a week left before your anniversary. You have to put that lingerie to good use.”

I shifted my weight, trying to ignore the woman’s now disapproving glare. “I don’t know if I’m ready,” I mumbled, wishing the floor would just open up and swallow me right then and there.

This was even worse than the last discussion they had about my sex life, because back then, I knew I wasn't going to sleep with Parker. Now, though, the possibility of Roman and I, you know, doing it, was a lot higher—especially considering how close we'd gotten to the act lately.

Not that I was going to tell anyone that.

“So you want to wait?” Venice asked curiously.

I shrugged. “I'm not sure. I just—I don't know. The right moment hasn't come up yet.”

For some reason, I thought back to that night in Hawaii, when I'd been “teasing” Roman as part of Carlo's plan. The moment the images played out in my mind, my skin warmed up so much I'm sure you could've fried an egg on my forehead.

Adriana raised an eyebrow as the fur-clad woman finally swished out of the bathroom, brushing past me huffily and muttering under her breath about “kids these days.”

“Well, it's your decision, obviously,” she finally said. “Don't let anyone pressure you, not even me.”

I cracked a smile at that.

“But if you *are* ready—“ Her aqua eyes were knowing. “Don't be scared. Like I said all along, Roman's really a good guy underneath that grumpy exterior of his, which you should know by now. If you like someone, you should take a risk. Grab the bull by its horns, so to speak.” She smirked. “Besides, Parker provided you with plenty of protection.”

I groaned. “Your boyfriend sucks. That's so embarrassing!”

“He's just looking out for you. *Honeybee*.” Adriana winked at me. “Come on, let's get back to the boys before they think we died or something.”

I was just about to follow her out of the bathroom when I realized Venice hadn't moved.

"V? Are you ok?" I asked, concerned. She had a pensive look on her face, but she also looked a little green, like she was nervous about something.

She nodded once. "I'm fine." Her voice shook a little.

"Are you sure? I have some Advil—"

"No." Venice shook her head. "I'm fine, really," she insisted more clearly, even though she grabbed my arm for support as I led us out of the bathroom.

We walked slowly down the hall back to our table, and Venice's grip tightened.

"Ok, you can do this, you can do this," she muttered under her breath.

She was freaking me out. "Do what?"

But she just shook her head.

When I slid into my seat, she remained standing.

"Venice? Aren't you going to sit?" Zack asked, blinking his big blue eyes in confusion.

She shook her head, a determined look sliding over her face. "No." Venice lifted her chin up. "I'm not. I have—I have something to say."

Roman shot me a questioning glance, but I just shook my head, as baffled as he was.

We all waited patiently, but it seemed as though Venice was losing her nerve. She got paler and paler with each passing, silent second.

“You wanted to tell us something?” Zack prompted, looking at her like he was afraid she was going to pass out.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Yes. Well—I—I—“ Venice stuttered. Then she just shook her head, mumbled something that sounded a lot like “screw it,” stormed around to the other side of the table, and, as the rest of us watched with open mouths, grabbed Zack’s face between her hands and planted a kiss right on his lips.

* * *

Roman and I were half-naked on his bed.

I’m not sure how we ended up here, actually. After Venice and Zack’s shocking kiss earlier, she’d ended up fleeing the restaurant, mortified, before anyone had a chance to say anything.

Zack just spent all of lunch sitting there like a cardboard cutout of himself, the shocked expression never leaving his face, until we had to physically haul him out of his chair and back to school.

Honestly, I wasn’t all that surprised. I always suspected Venice had a crush on Zack, and I was willing to bet his feelings for her weren’t purely platonic either.

After school, I went over to Roman’s house just to hang out. His father had apparently left for a business trip again, and while his mother was still here, he never talked to her. I knew it must be pretty lonely being all alone in that big mansion, so I usually went over to keep him company.

We ended up just talking about anything and everything we could think of, before we decided to take a little swim in his indoor pool. The little swim turned into a makeout session in the attached hot tub. The makeout session turned into...what we were doing now.

My breath caught as Roman trailed his fingers up my bare thighs, lighting every nerve ending on fire.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered huskily, skimming his hands over my stomach, gently over my breasts and up my neck before cupping my face and pressing his lips to mine.

Sharp jabs of pleasure pricked my skin, and I moaned involuntarily into his mouth, eagerly shifting my position so I could press myself even closer to him. He was in just his swim trunks; I was still in my bikini, which I’d borrowed from a guest closet. We originally came upstairs to shower, but that had fallen quite low on the priority list.

I remember the sensations that had almost burned me with their intensity in Hawaii. What was happening right now made those look like child’s play.

It was hard to believe only a few hours had passed since my earlier conversation with Adriana. Had I really said I wasn’t sure if I was ready? Because at this moment, I was nothing if not ready.

Judging from a certain part of Roman’s anatomy, he felt the exact same way.

He pulled back, only to trail kisses down my neck, causing a series of heart palpitations that could not be good for my health. I whimpered slightly as he stopped right above the strap that held the two cups of my bikini top together, his lips just touching my skin.

Every fiber of my being ached for him, and suddenly that bikini top seemed heavy. Suffocating.

“Oh my god.” I sucked in a deep breath as Roman gently nipped at the area between my neck and shoulder.

Ok. I was going crazy here. I couldn’t even think straight. I honestly couldn’t even tell you my name right now.

Spurred on by adrenaline and certain other feelings, I pushed Roman off slightly and flipped around so he was pinned down under me.

“Whoa. Someone’s eager.” His voice was teasing, but his eyes had darkened so much they were almost black. His perfect, chiseled chest rose and fell rapidly.

I smiled seductively (I hope), trying to curb the anticipation bubbling up inside me and failing miserably. It was a completely new feeling. Roman was the only person who had ever made me feel like this. I was kind of glad we hated each other so much at the beginning. That passion had morphed into something quite useful for other...activities.

Roman groaned, an agonized look on his face, but his eyes didn’t leave mine. “It might be a good idea to stop now,” he said in a pained voice, trying to lift me off him.

I didn’t budge. “Why?” I couldn’t even believe this was me talking right now. Where did the boldness suddenly come from?

He blinked, a stunned and amazed look crossing his face. “Maya, are—“

“Shh.” I leaned down, covering his mouth with mine once again. So much heat radiated from our bodies I was surprised we didn’t set the sheets on fire. “We’re doing too much talking right now,” I murmured, nipping gently at his bottom lip.

Roman resisted for about two more seconds, before groaning and reaching around to slide his hands up my back. My stomach fluttered when I felt him stop at the ties that held my bikini top up. He gently tugged at the strings, causing a wave of warmth of crash over me. We were so close.

And then the door to his room banged open.

I immediately shot up, a surprised yelp escaping my mouth. When I turned, I was horrified to see Giselle, Roman’s mother, standing there with a bemused look on her face.

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?” she asked, squinting slightly. Ok, she was definitely not sober.

Hopefully that meant she won't remember the sight of me, half-naked, straddling her son.

"What are you doing in here?" Roman's voice was clipped and angry as he got off the bed, grabbing a towel from a nearby armchair and sliding it over my shoulders.

I smiled gratefully at him, which he returned briefly before glaring at Giselle.

"Can't I just visit my son?" she trilled, coming towards us and stumbling a little. "I've barely seen you all week!" She reached out to hug Roman but he stepped away, a disgusted look on his face.

"I can't believe you're drunk already," he spit out. "Though I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Giselle blinked, then threw her head back and laughed. "Oh Roman, if you wanted to be alone with your girlfriend, you can just tell me. I'll leave you two to do whatever you were doing."

She winked at me, causing me to blush.

"Um, maybe I should come back another time," I said quietly, sliding off the bed and reaching out to grab my clothes.

"You don't need to leave. You can stay." Roman's gaze was hard. "Mom. You need to go. Now."

Giselle looked hurt. "You never have time for your mother anymore."

"Well, an eye for an eye, right?" Roman's jaw worked. It seemed all of his passion from our earlier makeout had transformed into anger towards his mother. "It's not like you ever acted much like my mother."

“Roman!” I was appalled. I mean, I know his mom hadn’t always been there for him, and she had serious alcoholism issues, but she was still his mom.

And right now, she looked like she was about to cry.

None of us said anything for a while. We just stood there, Roman pissed, Giselle near sobbing, and me shocked and uncomfortable.

Finally, I gently guided Giselle towards the door. “Maybe you can come back to talk to him when—at another time,” I suggested. I was about to say “when you’re sober,” but caught myself just in time.

She looked back over her shoulder at Roman, who hadn’t moved. “I suppose you’re right,” she muttered. She looked at me. “Thank you, Maya. Roman needs someone like you in his life.” She actually sounded sincere, even though she was still slurring her words a bit.

My heart seized. Maybe she wasn’t as incoherent as I thought.

When the door closed, I turned back to Roman. “Hey, are you ok?” I asked, gently touching his arm.

It’s strange, how fast the mood of a room can change.

“I’m fine.” Roman sighed, pushing his hand through his hair. “I’m sorry you had to see that. I just—she pisses me off so much.” He grimaced.

I shifted, wishing I was in more than a towel and swimsuit. “She’s still your mom, though.”

“Well, if that’s what having a mom is like, I’d rather I didn’t have one.”

I gasped softly. “You don’t mean that.”

“Yes I do! Stop acting like you know so much about our relationship!”

I flinched, and Roman's face immediately softened. He reached over, placing his hands on my shoulders. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled at you. But seriously, Maya, just drop it, ok? My relationship with my parents is...complicated. And I know you have a good heart and want everyone to get along, but that's not going to happen. So just let it go." There was chagrin in his voice but his eyes were steely.

I clenched my jaw, wanting desperately to argue, but I don't think that would be wise at the moment, so I merely nodded.

Roman relaxed. "Ok. How about we go grab a snack or something?"

I shook my head. "I think I should go home. I need to get some homework done." I grabbed my clothes from the armchair. I really wanted to continue the conversation about his mom, but I figured I should give him some time to cool off.

"Oh. Right." He sounded disappointed, but the sound of his phone ringing cut off what he was going to say after.

As I pulled on my skirt and buttoned up my blouse, I couldn't help but be intrigued by Roman's end of the conversation.

"Hey. No, I haven't...wait, what? Maybe he just went somewhere for a trip or something. No. No. Do you really think so?" Roman sounded almost panicked. "Ok. Look, I'll talk to some people. I'm sure it'll be fine. Ok. Sure. Talk to you later."

"What happened?" I asked, as he ended the call with a disturbed look on his face.

He just looked at me. "Rico's missing."

CHAPTER 27

“I don’t know where he could possibly be.”

Carlo’s brow was furrowed, his face was lined with worry, as he clasped his hands in front of him and tapped one foot on the floor. I’ve never seen him look so nonplussed.

“Maybe he’s at one of your vacation homes,” Parker suggested, tossing his golden-brown hair out of his eyes. “Did you try the beach compound in Bermuda?”

We were actually eating lunch in the DC for once, and we had spent the entire time talking about Rico’s disappearance.

“He’s not there.” Carlo’s voice was curt. “And we’ve also tried the houses in Vail, L.A., Tuscany, Hong Kong...everywhere. He’s at none of those places.”

“Well, this *is* Rico we’re talking about,” Adriana reasoned. “He could’ve disappeared just because he felt like it. I’m sure he’s not in any trouble. The boy can more than take care of himself.”

“It’s not him getting hurt that I’m worried about,” Carlo said flatly.

The room fell silent, and we all stared at each other nervously. Well, this was just about the most awkward lunch I’ve ever had.

“Anyway.” Carlo cleared his throat and put on what was obviously a fake smile. “Let’s talk about something else. Winter break, perhaps?” He turned to Roman. “The plan is still on, right?”

“What plan?” I asked.

Roman grinned wolfishly at me. “The plan where we continue where we left off the other night,” he said.

I turned bright red while the others erupted into hoots and catcalls. “Roman!” I hissed, mortified.

That was it. He is so not getting any action over break.

“What were you guys doing the yesterday night?” Adriana asked with a small smirk, her gaze knowing.

“None of your business,” I immediately answered.

“Feisty.” The blonde popped a sushi roll in her mouth, chewing delicately and swallowing before she spoke up again. “That’ll probably come in handy later.” She winked at Roman, who just laughed and pulled me to his chest.

“Think she’s right?” he murmured in my ear, his breath tickling my skin. I could feel the warmth of his body heating up my own, more thoroughly and effectively than any fireplace or coat could hope to do.

“What makes you think you’ll ever find out?” I retorted, still red, only from something else other than embarrassment this time.

Roman just smirked, squeezing my hip briefly before letting go. “Just a hunch.”

I rolled my eyes. “You are so arrogant.”

“Like he’s never heard *that* one before,” Parker joked, sliding his own arm around Adriana. “Hey, by the way, where’s Venice?”

I saw Zack, who’d been unusually quiet thus far, perk up a bit, and I had to stifle a grin.

Zack Perry, I am so getting you back for those little matchmaking schemes you put me through, I thought wickedly.

Yep, Parker had totally filled me in on the Perrys-as-Cupids situation.

“Oh, I think she’s having lunch with some guy,” I answered casually. “Grant? Her homecoming date? She was so excited about it.”

Zack scowled. It was not a look I was used to seeing, since he was just about the most happy-go-lucky person on the planet. However, I wanted to jump with joy at the sight of that scowl, because that scowl confirmed what I’d suspected all along.

“Is that even safe? I mean, what does she really know about him?” he sniffed. “He looks dangerous.”

“I’ve seen him around, he seems like a good guy,” Carlo commented casually. “He’s the editor of the school newspaper.”

“Yeah, how dangerous can he be?” Parker rolled his eyes. “Do you think he’s going to kill her with his pocket protector or something?”

“Pocket protectors are very dangerous,” Zack snapped. “Besides, it’s the quiet ones you have to look out for.”

“Why do you care so much anyway?” Roman stretched out his legs. “Afraid you won’t get another kiss?”

I burst out laughing at the look on Zack’s face, which was the color of the mound of ketchup on his plate. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he huffed, even as the red spread to his neck.

“No offense, but I think he’s a better match for Venice. I don’t think she can be with someone whose face matches the color of her hair,” Roman drawled, his lips twitching slightly as Zack sputtered, at a loss for words.

I turned my face away, burying it in the crook of his neck. “You are so bad,” I whispered, grinning.

He smirked, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Maybe you should punish me later,” he said suggestively.

I flushed all over again as some interesting images sprung up in my mind. I tried my best to push them away, but it didn’t work at all.

Lord, I really am turning into a pervert.

* * *

“Are you sure you’re ok?” Though I unbuckled my seatbelt, I remained in the car and fixed Carlo with a concerned expression. “I mean, if you want to talk about Rico or...whatever, I’m here.”

He smiled, more weakly than usual. “Thanks, Maya, but I can handle it. Adri’s probably right. With his personality, he probably just ran off somewhere without telling anyone. I’m sure it’s harmless.”

Even I could tell he didn’t quite believe it.

“Has he ever done something like this before?” I questioned, fiddling with the buttons of my shirt.

“Once or twice, before the whole...gang situation.” Carlo grimaced. “Anyway, like I said, I’m sure it’ll be fine.” He cut off the engine and raised an eyebrow at me. “What about you? Are you fine?”

“What do you mean?”

“Rome told me you ran into someone at a carnival you guys went to,” he hinted.

Sweat immediately coated my palms, and I wondered if I could ask him to start up the car again so we could put on the A/C. It was too hot in here.

“Oh, that.” My voice came out squeaky and high-pitched.

“Yeah, that.” Carlo’s mahogany eyes searched my face. “What happened?”

I licked my suddenly dry lips, unsure of what to say. I hadn’t told anyone about what Lexi said, not even Roman. I wanted to figure it out on my own. On the other hand, it would be a huge relief to hash this out with someone, especially someone like Carlo. He was smart, he keep a secret, and I trusted him.

As I wavered back and forth, he waited patiently, not saying anything.

Finally, I took a deep breath, and relayed to him what Lexi told me.

When I finished, there was a stunned look on his face. “Wait, wait, wait.” He held up one hand. “You’re telling me someone paid her to seduce your dad?”

I nodded miserably.

“Why would they do that?”

“Wish I knew.” I sighed. “I just don’t get it. I can’t think of anyone who’d have that type of vendetta against my family.”

Carlo frowned. “She didn’t tell you who did it?”

I shook my head, then remembered the picture I saw of her and Rico. If she knew Rico, did she know Carlo too? I didn’t know if now would be the right time to bring that up though, what with Rico missing and all.

“Maybe you should ask your dad for her name. You know, so you can try and get more answers,” he suggested gently.

“I know.” I twisted my hands in my lap. I really, really didn’t want to do that, but I supposed I no longer have a choice.

Not if I wanted to get to the bottom of this.

* * *

“Are you sure she’s going to like it?” Roman demanded, nestling his phone between his ear and shoulder as he pulled up in front of his house. “It’s not too cheesy or anything?”

“Um, excuse me, but I’m the one who came up with the idea. Are you calling me cheesy?” Adriana huffed.

He rolled his eyes but knew better than to respond. “Well, I just wanted to make sure. It *is* our one-month anniversary, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. I’m deaf. That’s why I didn’t hear you the first, oh, *fifty times* you told me.”

Roman scowled. “You need to watch your tone. No one talks to me that way,” he growled, stepping into the foyer.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry, King Fiori,” Adriana said sarcastically. “Gee, you seriously need to get some. You’re getting grouchy.” There was a twinge of laughter in her voice.

He flushed, thankful she couldn’t see him. “Shut up, Adri.”

“Very mature.”

Sometimes, Roman wished Zack was an only child. “I’m hanging up on you now,” he snapped, slamming the door to his room behind him.

“You know it’s not hanging up on someone if you tell them, right?” She was definitely laughing at him. “By the way, do you know what’s up with Maya? She’s not answering her phone.”

He frowned. “No. Carlo drove her home today because I had to sort out the anniversary stuff. I’ll try her and let you know.”

Clicking off, Roman dialed Maya’s number. One ring. Two. Three. It rang and rang, until voicemail picked up.

A surge of unease jolted through him. She always answered her phone.

Calm down, she's probably in the shower of something. Just try again later.

Roman ended the call, pacing his room. One Mississippi, two Mississippi... that counted as later, right?

His stomach was a bundle of nerves as he called her again. Nothing had happened to her, right? Carlo would make sure she was ok. The nerves increased, and he was just about to panic when she finally picked up.

"Hello?" Her voice was quiet.

Relief filled his veins. "Maya? Are you ok?"

"Yeah. I'm just...I'm at home."

"Oh." Roman blew out a breath, sinking down into an armchair. "Adri said she was calling you but you didn't answer."

"Oh. Yeah. I was—well, I was talking to my dad."

He immediately sat up in concern. "How did it go?" His tone was sympathetic.

Maya sighed. "It was, you know, awkward. But things are getting...better between us. Roman—"

"Hmm?"

A pause. "Um, I think I'm going to go take a shower. I'll talk to you later, ok?"

"Oh. Ok." Roman couldn't help but be disappointed. He wanted to talk to her a little more. "Wait. One more thing. Our anniversary this weekend—"

“Find something nice to wear?” Maya laughed, the sound warming his insides.

He grinned. “How’d you know?”

“Just a hunch,” she replied blithely, throwing his earlier words back at him. “Don’t worry, I won’t embarrass you, Grumpy.”

“I’m *not* grumpy,” he said grumpily, then stopped as she laughed again. “Whatever. If I am, you just make me that way.”

“Sure,” she sang. “Good night, boyfriend.”

Roman’s face softened. “Good night, Maya.”

As he got off the phone though, he wondered why there was still some unease left in his stomach.

* * *

“Mickey, not now. Be a good boy.” I fastened my diamond studs to my ears and fixed what I hope was a stern stare at the puppy.

It was the night of my one-month anniversary with Roman, and I was more than a little nervous. I was all dressed up, and underneath my dress, I was wearing the sexiest bra-and-underwear set from the stash Adriana bought me months ago.

I’m still not sure I’m 100% ready to go all the way yet, but it didn’t hurt to be prepared.

My heart fluttered as I thought about the fact that Roman and I had been dating a month already. Honestly, it was kind of a miracle.

I glanced at my watch. Half an hour left before he was supposed to pick me up.

Ok, I guess I was a little eager when getting ready.

I sat down on the couch, and Mickey immediately trotted over, pawing my legs with a, well, puppy dog look on his face. He let out a series of small barks.

“What is it?” I asked, absentmindedly patting him on the head. “Why are you so hyper tonight?”

He barked again, unable to keep still. His barks grew more and more frantic, echoing throughout the house.

My parents had gone out to dinner tonight, which was probably a good thing. I don’t want my mom whipping out her camera and taking a thousand snapshots of us like it’s prom night or something.

Mickey barked again, chasing its tail in a circle, then stopped gave me a look like “you should *know* what’s wrong.”

I blinked. I’ve already fed him, so he shouldn’t be hungry. I even played a little fetch with him earlier. What—

“Ugh!” I slapped my forehead. “I forgot to take you for a walk today, didn’t I?”

Mickey rested on his haunches, and actually nodded once.

I groaned. I’m such an idiot. I should’ve known. He always got unbelievably hyper and restless and loud when he didn’t get his walk.

“How about I take you out for two walks tomorrow? I have a big date tonight,” I persuaded, feeling a bit silly for negotiating with a dog. I swear he understands what I’m saying though.

Mickey’s tail swished back and forth as he whined again, then growled.

I sighed, looking at my watch again. “Fine. I’ll take you for one very, very short walk. Ok?”

He barked happily.

I shook my head, as I went to get his leash. “You’re going to be the death of me one day,” I joked, leading him out to the front yard and locking the door behind me.

I probably had just enough time for a quick walk around the block before Roman got here.

“You should be glad I love you so much,” I added sternly. Mickey yelped, pawing me again with an adoring look in his eyes.
“Come on, Mr. Diva, let’s go.”

As we made our way down the sidewalk, I shivered a bit. I should’ve grabbed more than a flimsy shawl to protect me against the chilly late fall air. I could feel the goosebumps erupting on my flesh, and I quickened my pace a bit, both to warm me up and to hurry our walk so I could return to the warmth of my home faster.

Mickey trotted happily down the street, as well-behaved as always, giving me time to reflect on my conversation with my father earlier this week.

It had been awkward, to say the least. When I’d finally broached the subject of Lexi, I swear he turned so white he could’ve passed for Casper, the Very Guilty Ghost. Needless to say, he had been more than a little suspicious about why I needed Lexi’s name. I was more than happy to tell him, because a) it definitely bruised his ego, which he deserved, and b) perhaps he could shed some light on why someone would hire her to seduce him.

My father had been understandably stunned, but unfortunately, he had no clue why someone would do that, although he *did* manage to tell me Lexi’s full name: Alexa Weston.

Not that it had been much help. I couldn’t find anything on her online.

Mickey barked again, the sound echoing in the silent night, and I suddenly realized all my neighbors seemed to be out. None of the lights were on in

the surrounding houses, and the whole scene was actually a bit creepy.

A shiver snaked down my spine, and I couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching me.

Stop being so paranoid, I tried to console myself. *There's no one here. Valesca is one of the safest towns in the US.*

Still, the feeling didn't go away. I was about to reach into my pocket for my phone when I realized I didn't have any pockets. I also didn't have my phone.

I groaned. Wow, I'm an idiot. I stopped, yanking lightly on the leash.

"Sorry, buddy, it's time to go home," I whispered to Mickey, who cocked his head at me quizzically. I'm not even sure why I was whispering.

I just knew I didn't want to be outside any longer.

As we made a U-turn back to the house, I heard the soft roar of a car in the distance, and without even thinking, I quickened my step. It wasn't quick enough though, because a moment later, a discreet black SUV came into view, and it seemed to be driving awfully slow.

My heart now in my throat, I gripped Mickey's leash tightly, just as he erupted into a series of loud, panicked barks.

"Mickey! What's wrong?" He wasn't helping my nerves.

Mickey just kept barking, and finally, I decided to just screw it. I broke into a run, my heart pounding with adrenaline. I heard the distinct slam of a door behind me, and I let out a scream when I felt someone grab me.

Before I could even attempt to fight back, though, pain ripped through my head, and Mickey's barks gradually grew fainter as I fell into oblivion.

CHAPTER 28

My head was pounding. I swear I could feel my brain hammering against my skull, desperate to burst out of its confines, which didn't exactly ease the nauseous feeling in my stomach.

I slowly opened my eyes, disoriented, and was nearly blinded by the bright strip of fluorescent lights overhead. I winced, but once I got used to the harsh lighting, I realized I wasn't at home.

In fact, I was sitting tied to a wooden chair in the middle of what looked like a warehouse.

The events of last night crashed into my mind at full force, and my body tensed as fear flooded it. My heart beat erratically against my chest, and I looked frantically around at my surroundings, trying to find something, anything, that could help me.

There wasn't much. The entire room was gray, the floors cracked, the paint on the walls chipped. There was no other light save for the ones above my head, and the only exit I could see was the giant, forbidding steel gate at the other side of the room, the kind used in industrial buildings.

"Well, lookee here. The girl's awake."

A shiver snaked down my spine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up as a skinny, tattooed guy with messy brown hair came into view, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. He wore a dirty stained beater and ripped jeans, and his dark eyes were hard and cold as he gazed at me.

"Who are you?" I tried to keep my voice and stomach steady. "What am I doing here?"

He snorted, his lips twisted in amusement. “You do talk an awful lot, don’t you? He was right.”

“Who?” My voice rose. “Who are you talking about? Answer my question!”

The amusement fell from his face. “You’re not the one making the demands here, *Maya*,” he sneered. I tried not to retch at the sound of my voice coming out of his mouth. “In fact, I would be very, very careful about what I say if I were you.”

“I don’t even know you!” I gave up trying to be calm. There’s no being calm in a situation like this. “Why are you doing this?”

He blinked. “It’s a pity.” He clucked. “You honestly don’t know who’s responsible for everything? Guess you’re not as smart as everyone thinks you are.”

“There’s no one out there who has anything against me,” I said, wriggling my wrists discreetly behind my back and hoping the ropes were at least a little loose.

No such luck.

“Maybe you have the wrong person and this is all just one big misunderstanding. My name’s not even *Maya*,” I lied.

Tattoo Guy snorted again. “Nice try, but I know for sure who you are, thanks to some first-hand identification.”

I stared at him, confused. Then, a side door I didn’t notice opened, the sound echoing in the empty room, and my stomach dropped when I saw someone else walking towards it.

It was definitely a guy, but I couldn’t make out his features until he neared.

When I did finally realize who it was, the blood froze in my veins.

No way. There's no freakin' way it could be him.

And then, unable to hold it back any longer, I quickly turned away and threw up right next to my chair.

* * *

The vase—an antique worth tens of thousands of dollars—shattered into a million pieces on the marble floor, but the tall, scruffy-looking man standing in the Fioris' grand salon didn't even flinch.

“What the hell do you mean you don't know?!” Roman roared, his face red with fury as he glared at the private investigator. “What kind of fuckin' P.I. are you anyway?”

The man's face was as placid as ever. When he spoke, his voice was low and scratchy. “You called me yesterday morning. While I can assure you I've been looking into the matter the best I can, twenty-four hours is not enough time for me to turn up any clues.”

A vein throbbed dangerously above Roman's temple. “Fine,” he spit. “But if I don't get results soon, you won't have to worry about finding any clues for anyone ever again, because your career will be over!”

“I'll be sure to keep that in mind,” the man replied calmly. “If that's all, I'll return to my task at hand.”

When Roman didn't say anything, he turned and quietly exited the room.

Roman clenched his fists together as he stared out the window. His family's tennis courts, swimming pools, and gardens were spread out in front of him, but he barely saw any of it. He tried his best to hold on to his anger, because he knew that once it was gone, he would just feel the way he'd felt for the past two days—worried, panicked, nauseous, terrified, and helpless.

And Roman Fiori did not like feeling any of those things, particularly the helpless part.

A basketball lodged itself in his throat as he thought back to what was supposed to be an amazing night. His and Maya's one month anniversary. He'd had everything set up and ready to go, but that night, even as he drove to pick her up, he'd sensed something was wrong.

When he arrived at her house and saw all the lights were off, dread had washed over him, and it had only intensified when he realized both Maya and Mickey were missing.

Roman had called all of his friends, hoping one of them had spirited her away somewhere as a joke, but of course, none of them had.

Now, two days later, he wasn't any closer to finding out where she'd gone. There was even a chance that she might be—might be—

No. Don't think about that. She's alive. She is. Roman drew in a deep breath, trying to relax his hands, even though he felt like he was going to throw up. He couldn't afford to lose it now. Maya was counting on him.

His back pocket vibrated, indicating an incoming call.

He immediately whipped it out, thinking for the briefest moment it was Maya calling, but it was only Carlo.

"We're almost there." The Colombian sounded exhausted. "Open the gates."

Roman ended the call with a curt "Ok," and ten minutes later, Carlo, Adriana, Zack, Parker, and Venice were all situated in the salon. Their faces were tense and drawn, even Zack's, but Carlo looked the worst out of all of them.

Clearly, the disappearance of both his brother and one of his best friends had taken its toll on him.

"I just don't understand what's going on." Venice's voice was small as she curled up in a brocade armchair, her green eyes wide and frightened. "I

mean, where could she possibly have gone? She—she—“ A sob escaped her, and she couldn’t continue as the tears leaked from her eyes and she buried her face in her hands.

“Shh. It’s ok.” Zack was perched on the arm of her chair, and he ran his hand soothingly over her back. “We’ll figure it out. Between all of us, we’ll find out what happened.”

“Her parents were no help, right?” Adriana asked quietly, directing her question at Roman.

His jaw tensed. “No. They were out.” He pressed a hand to his throbbing temple. “Turns out practically everyone in her damned neighborhood was out at some exhibition. No one saw or heard a thing.”

Adriana’s brow creased. “Do you think they’re connected?”

Roman didn’t have to ask her what she meant. He flicked his eyes over to Carlo, who hadn’t moved, but it was clear he was listening to every word.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Suddenly a cold feeling swept over him. “You don’t think that Rico...” His voice trailed off, and everyone in the room stiffened as they looked at one another.

No one wanted to voice what the others were thinking.

Finally, Carlo spoke up. “I don’t know.” His tone was flat. “He said he’s changed, but with him, who knows? He did seem pretty interested in Maya when she was staying at my house.”

Roman practically saw red. “I swear, if it’s him, I’m going to rip his guts out,” he spat, his hands curling into fists again. “Damn it, Carlo, if you hadn’t brought her to your house, this probably wouldn’t have happened!”

Carlo glared at him. “Well, if you weren’t acting like such an ass, then I wouldn’t have had to get her out of here!”

“Are you saying it’s my fault?!”

“I—“

A shrill whistle interrupted their argument. Parker and Zack flinched while Roman and Carlo fell silent, staring guiltily at an incensed Adriana.

“Seriously, guys? Are you *really* going to do this right now?” she demanded, sparks flying from her aqua eyes. “Arguing is not going to get us any closer to finding Maya. Honestly, you two should be ashamed of yourselves!”

Roman and Carlo both flushed, neither used to being upbraided.

“I’m sorry, Adri, you’re right.” Carlo sighed. “And sorry, Rome. I shouldn’t have taken out my stress on you.”

“It’s ok. I guess I was at fault too,” Roman admitted grudgingly.

They were all silent again.

“What if we come up with a suspects list?” Parker suggested out of the blue. “I mean, let’s say she really did get kidnapped—“

At this, Venice started crying again, and Zack shot Parker a death glare, which he ignored. “Valesca isn’t exactly a crime hotspot,” Parker continued. “I’m willing to bet this isn’t a run-of-the-mill kidnap. They know her. Which means she must know them too. Who would have a motive for kidnapping her?”

Roman’s brow knit in thought. Parker had a point.

“But what if it’s a ransom thing?” Zack ventured. “It’s public knowledge now that she’s dating Roman. Maybe the kidnappers want money or something.”

“That would make sense, except I haven’t gotten a ransom, or any communication from the kidnappers, for that matter.” Frustration mounted inside him. He almost wished he’d gotten a ransom. At least then, he’d know what the hell was going on. The uncertainty was killing him.

“Maybe—maybe we should call the police.” Venice’s voice trembled. “Isn’t that what they’re here for?”

“Please.” Roman snorted. “Trust me, if my PI can’t get the job done, then the rinky-dink local police certainly won’t come close, especially not with all the extra paperwork and red tape and their damned procedures.”

“Ok, ok. Let’s not go off on tangents.” Carlo held up his hands. “Let’s do what Parker said for now. Can we think of anyone who has anything against Maya?”

They all looked at each other.

“Well, considering the fact she’s dating Roman, basically every girl in Valesca,” Adriana said flatly. “Which isn’t helpful.”

Roman groaned, kicking the leg of a nearby side table in an effort to vent his anger. The delicate wood wobbled dangerously before steadying itself.

Adriana ignored his mini-fit. “Let’s open it up a bit. What about people she knows?”

“She doesn’t hang out with that many people,” Venice pointed out. “Mostly just us.”

Everyone exchanged uneasy glances.

“Rico, I guess,” Carlo said gruffly. “They’ve met a few times, and I can’t say my brother’s the most trustworthy person on the planet.”

“Ok. Who else?” Adriana stared at them. “Think, people! I’m sure Maya interacts with more than half a dozen people in this town. Any past crushes,

friends, boyfriends?”

Suddenly, Roman’s shoulders tensed. He opened his mouth to speak, but Zack and Venice beat him to it.

“James.”

Silence fell.

“James.” A sour taste filled Roman’s mouth at his name. “Maya does hang out with him sometimes. But he’s not from Valesca.”

Adriana narrowed her eyes. “Wait, what did you say his last name was?”

There was a short pause. “Wasn’t it—Henderson? Or something?” Venice tried. “Something beginning with an H, I’m sure.”

“I think she said Holtzman at Thanksgiving,” Carlo said quietly.

“Holtzman. Holtzman, Holtzman.” Adriana’s face screwed up in concentration. “*Why* is that so familiar?” She looked at them. “Am I the only one who thinks so?”

Roman racked his brain but came up with nothing. “I don’t remember hearing it.”

“Actually...” Carlo said slowly. “It does ring a bell, but I don’t remember when I heard it.”

“Is it really important, though? I mean, James is really nice. I don’t think he’s the kidnapper. We’ve probably just watched way too many detective movies,” Venice insisted.

“No, I need to figure out where I’ve heard that name.” Adriana’s mouth was set in a stubborn line. Suddenly, she gasped, all the color draining from her face. “Oh my god.”

Roman's head snapped up. "What?" he nearly shouted, his heart in his throat.

She didn't answer him. Instead, she whipped out her phone and furiously typed something into it.

"Adri! Answer me!" He was full-out shouting by now. "Now's not the time to text!"

Adriana's hands stilled as she stared at something on the screen. Then slowly, ever so slowly, she held her phone up.

"You guys. I think you need to look at this."

They immediately crowded around her phone. There was a picture of Rico two years ago, walking out of the courthouse after he'd been acquitted of rape charges. It wasn't the picture that was chilling, though, it was the headline that accompanied it: *Tevasco Heir Found Not Guilty in Toni Holtzman Case*.

* * *

"Well, that looked painful." James' face was half-amused, half-disgusted as he eyed the vomit on the floor. "It's a good thing I brought some water." He turned to Tattoo Guy. "How long has she been up, Carson?"

"Not too long." Carson's own face displayed one hundred percent disgust. "She's quite a chatty one."

I barely heard the rest of their conversation through the loud buzzing in my ears. It was like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room.

James. James. James. James was the one responsible for this? Was this some kind of sick joke? Why would he do this? He was supposed to be my friend!

My breath was shallow and labored as a cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

“Why?” My voice was weak, but it did cause the other two to stop talking.

“Why what?” James asked, unscrewing the bottle cap and holding it to my mouth like I wasn’t tied up and kidnapped. I ignored it, my eyes burning into his face.

“Why did you do this?” I asked through gritted teeth.

He sighed, lowering his arm and capping the bottle again before tossing it carelessly into the plastic bag dangling from his arm. He nodded at Carson, who shot me one last disgusted glance before exiting through the side door James came through in.

James pulled up a chair and sat right across from me, too close for my liking. If I’d been able to move, I would have flinched away.

“Maya, Maya, Maya.” His eyes searched mine. “It’s really your own fault, you know.” He sounded almost sad.

My own fault? Was he kidding me? He was insane! My thoughts must’ve reflected on my face, because James just shook his head and clucked his tongue.

“I honestly thought we were going to be good friends. When I saw you at Stan’s party, you were like a breath of fresh air. I especially admired the way you stood up to Roman—” His voice soured a bit. “If you’d kept that up, we really could’ve been great friends. But then you had to go and date Parker.” James’ face darkened. “As if that wasn’t bad enough, you started being *friends* with the Scions. You lived in Carlo’s house. You dumped Parker for Roman.” He laughed humorlessly. “Turns out you’re more of a social climber than I thought.”

I could literally feel my blood boiling. “I am *not* a social climber,” I hissed. “Not that I need to explain anything to you, but Parker and I weren’t really dating, and I’m dating Roman because I actually *like* him.”

“Right. Because there’s so much to like,” James said sarcastically. “Please, Maya, spare me. Although I suppose it’s all for the best, because it seems as

though that arrogant little scumbag has really fallen for you, which certainly makes my plan that much easier.”

His words left a horrible taste in my mouth. Although that could also be because I’d just puked my guts out earlier.

“What plan?”

He sighed. “You really aren’t as smart as I’d imagined. It was all part of the plan. All of it.”

All part of the plan? What was he—

Suddenly, I froze, and it took all I had not to throw up again. “You. You’re the one who hired Lexi.” My voice was flat.

James didn’t even blink. “Yes.”

“Why?” That seemed to be the question of the day.

He sighed again. “Well, I think I’ll just answer your questions in the order they were asked, if you don’t mind,” he said almost merrily. “I was the one who placed Lexi at your father’s company. I got her that internship. Not hard, considering my uncle works in the human resources department—that just so happens to be a stroke of luck on my part. She’s very good at her job, as you must have noticed. Although she never did get him to sleep with her.”

James smirked. “That would’ve been so much more entertaining. “Then, lo and behold, I found out you were going to New York that day. Did you really think I bumped into you by accident there? Out of all the stores in all the world—“ His mouth twisted. “You should’ve figured it out. Barneys isn’t my type of store at all. But I was there, keeping an eye on you. I heard you were all planning to go to Masa, so I called Lexi and let her know. She convinced your father to take her there for dinner and, well, the rest is history.” He chuckled.

I was seeing red. He should be glad I'm tied up, because if I wasn't, I would've made damn sure he'd never be able to have children ever again. We didn't need any more sick, twisted people like him again. And to think I'd considered him my friend.

My face burned at the humiliation of having been so easily duped. "Is this a family vendetta thing?" I demanded, wishing I could move my leg so I could kick him right in the groin. Since I still had stilettos on, that would've hurt. A lot. And there was nothing I wanted more than to see James in pain right now. "Why did you hire Lexi?"

James ran a hand through his sandy hair. He had the nerve to look chagrined. "It was collateral damage, really. If you hadn't started dating Parker—"

"We weren't dating!"

He ignored me. "If you hadn't started dating him, none of this would've happened." He stared at me. "You see, I wanted revenge. Unfortunately, the Scions—" He spit out the name. "—are a tough group to crack. I knew I couldn't attack one of them directly. It wouldn't work, not with the devastation I needed, and I would lose the element of surprise. I needed to find some sort of alternate way to get to them, and what better way than to destroy one of their girlfriends? Although you have to believe me when I say I wish it wasn't you. I wish Roman wasn't in love with you. But—" He shrugged. "C'est la vie."

Inanely, I actually felt my heart skip when James said Roman was in love with me, but now is so not the time to focus on that. How would he even know?

Then again, he knows a lot of stuff about you that you didn't think he knew. The thought brought me back to the present. "Revenge for what?"

Maybe if I kept him talking, I could stall whatever else he had planned. I'm not sure what he did have planned, but it definitely couldn't be good.

James' eyes narrowed, and I suddenly felt more afraid than I ever had. "For what they did to my cousin."

Now I was confused. "Wait. Wh-what? Who's your cousin?"

He gripped his chair. "Toni. My cousin. My best friend in the whole world. She was the sweetest girl, but that was before he raped her and left her for dead."

The breath whooshed out of my lungs. "Who?" I whispered, afraid to know the answer.

"Rico Tevasco." James' lips curled up in disgust. "That fucking bastard. It was him, no matter what his fancy lawyers said. I *know* it was him. But he got off scot-free, didn't he? Flew off to another country, leaving the people he ruined to pick up the pieces."

I was too shocked to say anything for a minute. I remembered him warning me about Rico that night at Carlo's house. The girl—she was his *cousin*? My head spun. This was all too much.

"But he doesn't have anything to do with Roman and the others," I blurted. "I mean, he's Carlo's brother, but they don't even get along!"

"Please." James laughed bitterly. "They all helped him. The Remingtons, the Tevascos, the Fioris, the Perrys. They've all been friends for generations. You really think they're going to let one of their own go to jail, even if he was guilty?" There was fire in his eyes. "Yes, Maya, your precious little boyfriend helped Rico get away with rape and attempted murder. How does that make you feel?"

"That's not true," I whispered, feeling sick. Roman wouldn't do anything like that. He had his faults, but he wouldn't do that. Carlo wouldn't do that either. "You don't know for sure Rico did it."

"Who else could've? Do you know, after he was proclaimed innocent, Toni *killed* herself? Did you?" James shouted, anger erupting out of him like a

surprise volcano. A vein bulged in his neck. “And I couldn’t do anything about it! Rico was gone! Gone! The Scions were the only ones left, and when I stood over her grave, I promised her I would get revenge if it was the last thing I did!”

I couldn’t help but whimper a bit. Angry James was, honestly, terrifying.

He stopped, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them again, he seemed to have regained some control. “Luckily, my uncle was more than happy to help. That was his daughter. And Lexi—“ He took another breath. “I probably could’ve gotten her to help even if I didn’t offer to pay her.”

Suddenly I flashed back to the picture I’d found in the Fioris’ bathroom. “But—but she and Rico knew each other,” I stuttered.

Surprise flitted across James’ face. “So you found out.” He smirked, doing a complete one-eighty. I was beginning to think he was bipolar, on top of being utterly and completely psychotic. Fantastic. “I’m guessing you don’t know they had an affair?”

My jaw dropped. *What?*

“That’s right,” he continued. “Lexi was dating the gang leader, but she was carrying on with Rico behind his back. Of course, once she found out what Rico did, she was sickened. Broken-hearted. She wanted revenge almost as much as I did.”

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

This was too much information. Too much. Spots danced across my vision, and I felt like I was going to faint. But I couldn’t. God knew what he was going to do to me if I ever passed out.

“So you weren’t ever really my friend.” My voice trembled. “You were just using me. plotting against me.”

James stared at me pityingly, a slightly sad look in his eyes. “Like I said, I’m really sorry it had to be you.”

Then he reached into his bag again, only this time, instead of pulling out a bottle of water, he pulled out a large, gleaming butcher’s knife.

My heart stopped.

“It’s nothing personal. But you have to understand. I have to keep my promise.”

I couldn’t speak. Couldn’t move. Couldn’t breathe. All I could focus on was that knife. I pictured him bringing it down, the sharp blade cutting through my flesh, the life slowly draining from me as I bled to death, morbid thoughts that were overtaken by flashes of my life so far.

My first time riding a bike. My twelfth birthday party. My parents’ faces. Venice. Carlo. Adriana. Parker. Zack. Roman. My throat closed up and tears stung my eyes as I pictured his face. I couldn’t believe I wasn’t going to ever see him again.

James raised the knife, and I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the pain.

But it never came.

The sound of the door slamming open burst through the air, followed by a startled shout, and more than a few angry ones.

My eyes flew open, and I gaped at the scene in front of him. Tattoo Guy was back, only this time he was being pinned and beaten down by Carlo and...holy shit, was that Rico?

I guess martial arts greatness ran in the family.

To the side, Parker was speaking frantically into his phone, while Zack held a wriggling brown-and-white ball of fluff in his arms. I realized with relief it was Mickey.

However, most of my attention was focused on James and Roman, both of them intent of killing the other.

I watched in horror as James managed to throw Roman onto the ground and raised his knife once again.

“No!” I cried, attempting to stand but failing. Then, a mass of dark hair flew past as both Carlo and Rico tackled James to the ground, but not before the knife lodged itself into Roman’s chest.

Forgetting once again that I was tied down, I lunged out of my chair, only this time, I actually managed to get out of my seat. Dimly, I realized Zack and Parker must’ve untied me without me even realizing it.

I ran over to Roman’s side, clapping a hand over my mouth at the blood pouring out of his wound. His face was drawn and pale, and he looked more vulnerable than I’d ever seen him.

I could hear the others shouting around me. I could hear Mickey’s barking. I could hear sirens in the background. But all I could focus on was Roman.

Roman, who was currently unconscious. His lip was split, and there was a giant bruise on one side of his face, not to mention more than a few smaller cuts. I couldn’t even see them all clearly thanks to the thick tears blurring my vision.

I could hear someone calling my name in the background, but I ignored them. I didn’t move. When the police and ambulances finally arrived, that was how they found me, kneeling by Roman’s side, clutching him desperately, and unable to let go.

CHAPTER 29

I've always hated hospitals.

I know it's a pretty cliché thing to say—after all, who actually *likes* hospitals?—but there's something about the smell, the sterile halls, and the jaded attitudes of nurses and doctors that creeped me out.

Plus, hospital food sucks. Although, it can't really suck if someone isn't awake to eat it.

My heart squeezed at the thought, and I drummed my fingers nervously against my thigh as Carlo pulled into the hospital's parking lot. The car barely had a chance to come to a stop before I flung open the door and raced across the parking lot, through the lobby, and up to the fifth floor, where Roman's room was.

Carlo didn't bother to tell me to slow down. After a week, everyone knew it was useless.

When I reached the familiar, blindingly white hallway, I was startled to see everyone was already there. We all visited, of course, but rarely at the same time.

Venice was curled up in an armchair in the waiting area, her red hair tousled. She was half-asleep, her head resting on Zack's shoulder, while the blond chugged from a bottle of Frappuccino. Half a dozen identical bottles littered the table next to him.

Parker was sprawled out on the couch, and for once, the playboy looked scruffy and unkempt, a five o'clock shadow darkening his sculpted chin. He was staring at the floor with a depressed look on his face. Beside him, even Adriana was as dressed down as I'd ever seen in her. She wore a T-shirt, jeans, and almost no makeup, and was staring off into space.

The person I couldn't help but focus on, though, was Giselle. Roman's mother, usually so elegant (even when she was drunk), was pacing the floor outside his room, her face pale and drawn, etched with lines of worry. I've never seen anyone so frazzled, and my heart went out to her.

Despite what Roman said, I knew she really loved him. He was, after all, her son.

Although the same couldn't be said for his father. A sour taste crept into my mouth as I thought about Mr. Fiori. He'd made a brief appearance the night Roman was stabbed, then promptly flew to China for a business merger that was, apparently, more important than a comatose son.

"Any change?" I asked, making sure to keep my voice low. This was the type of environment where everyone spoke in whispers.

"No." Parker sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I swear, if that fuckin' James wasn't in police custody, I would—"

"Parker." Adriana's tone was a warning, and I saw her flick her gaze towards Giselle, who looked even more distraught at the mention of the person who'd stabbed her son.

"Well, it's true. I would've loved to give him a taste of his own medicine," Parker muttered darkly. "If it wasn't for him, Roman would be awake right now, and probably yelling at us for something."

I cracked a small smile at that, as I felt Carlo come up behind me. He placed his hands on my shoulders comfortingly. "Do you want to go in?" He tilted his head towards the closed door.

I swallowed. I did and I didn't, but I couldn't very well give him that answer. Instead, I just walked over, gave Giselle a comforting squeeze, and quietly opened the door to his private room.

Even though I've been here every day for the past week, the air still whooshed out of my lungs at the sight in front of me.

I walked over to the bed, my knees so shaky I probably would've collapsed were it not for Carlo's firm grip on my arm. Tears blurred my vision as I stared down at the bed where Roman lay. His eyes were closed, his usually bronzed skin pale and waxy, and his chest rose and fell shallowly.

I've always thought of Roman as a larger-than-life person. Even when I hated him, his presence filled a room, and you couldn't help but be drawn to him. I guess in my mind I always thought someone that arrogant and powerful was invincible. There had definitely been times when I wanted to cut him down to size, but now, I hated how frail and weak he looked in that hospital bed, hooked up to IVs and beeping monitors when he should've been out there in the real world, hanging out with his friends and laughing—or, in his case, scowling.

A sob escaped my throat as I grasped his hand in mine, squeezing it tight. Of course, he didn't squeeze back. I hadn't expected him to, but I crushing disappointment still filled my stomach at his lack of response.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, smoothing a lock of dark hair back from his forehead. "I'm so, so sorry. This is all my fault. I shouldn't have gone out. I should've just stayed in my house, and then none of this would've happened, and we would've had our one-month anniversary, and you wouldn't be—be—" My throat closed up, and I was unable to finish as the tears fell down my cheek.

I held my breath, trying my best to quiet my sobs. I couldn't get hysterical here, what with everyone outside the door. Besides, I didn't need to make his mother any more worried.

But what if he never woke up? The thought sent chills through my body, and my heart spasmed painfully. I squeezed Roman's hand tighter, like the action might keep my worst fears from coming true.

"Maya."

I jumped at the unexpected sound of my voice, and when I turned, I could make out the tall, leather-jacketed shape through my tears.

Rico.

Even though he'd helped save me the other night, a shiver of apprehension snaked through me, especially when I realized Carlo wasn't in the room anymore. Although I now knew James was more than a little psycho, I still couldn't forget what he'd said about Rico raping his cousin.

"H-hi." I shifted in my seat. "Did you just get here?"

I've never seen Rico around here much, but then again, he didn't exactly strike me as the camp-out-in-front-of-a-hospital-room type.

"No. I went to get something to eat." He crossed his arms over his chest, and for once, I didn't see the sly gleam in his eyes that told me he was checking me out. "Do you want to grab some food? Carlo said you hadn't eaten yet."

"No thanks. I'm not hungry." I returned my gaze to Roman. It was an automatic response, but unfortunately, my stomach rumbled loudly, sounding like an angry lion.

Rico chuckled. "Right. Come on, the others will look over him. The food here's not so bad, and we need to talk."

I blinked. We did?

In the end, curiosity won out, and I reluctantly released Roman's hand, casting one last glance at his prone form before following Rico out into the hall.

"We'll call you if he wakes up," Carlo assured me quietly.

I nodded, my smile small but grateful.

Luckily, the cafeteria wasn't too far from Roman's room, and I was surprised by the wide array of foods they had here. As I halfheartedly picked up a sandwich, I was aware of Rico's gaze on me.

I felt a little more comfortable around him now, but that was mainly because I knew he wasn't stupid enough to do anything in a crowded place. If he was going to do anything. Besides, if anything happened, at least I was in a hospital.

"So what did you want to talk to me about?" I asked, avoiding his eyes while I paid for my food.

"I figure James told you about Lexi."

I froze, then looked at him, my eyes wide. "H-how did you know that?"

Rico smirked lazily. "He kept ranting on and on about how he was going to ruin us, and he mentioned her quite a few times."

"You two were having an affair." It wasn't a question.

He blinked. "You sound awfully sure of yourself. You still believe everything James said?"

I lifted my chin up. "Well, I saw the picture."

Rico's eyes sharpened. "What picture?"

I gulped at the look on his face. Uh-oh. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it. Well, it was too late to back down now.

Slowly, I reached into my bag and pulled out the picture I'd picked up from the Fioris' bathroom floor.

Rico immediately snatched it from me, a scowl taking over his face. Roman's signature expression. My heart panged at the thought.

“Where did you get this?”

I took a small step back, almost causing a passing woman to spill her soup. “In the bathroom at—at Thanksgiving.”

He stared at it for a moment, then shook his head. “Of course. I’m such an idiot,” he muttered. “I should’ve guessed.”

Since he didn’t look like he was going to kill me, I ventured asking him the question I was dying to have answered. “Where were you?”

Rico didn’t look up. “What?”

“Where were you?” I repeated. “You just disappeared, then you came back just as suddenly. Were you...I mean, everyone was so worried.”

He snorted. “Right.” He caught my gaze again, and I saw that sly gleam again. For some reason, it actually made me feel better, because at least it was something familiar. “So you know about how Lexi and I had an affair.”

I was slightly caught off guard by how bluntly he put it. “Yes.”

“And I assume you know James thinks I raped his cousin.”

I coughed. “Yes.” A pause. “Did you?”

Rico narrowed his eyes. “What do you think?”

I was so not in the mood for guessing games. “If I knew, I wouldn’t be asking you,” I answered flatly.

He smirked again. “No wonder Roman likes you.” He flicked his eyes over me. “For your information, no, I didn’t. Victor—my gang leader—did and pinned it on me.” His voice hardened. “He found out about Lexi and I and decided that was the best way to punish both of us. Since I was forced to

leave the country, I couldn't take care of her—though he actually did me a favor, considering she turned out to be a bit of a..."

"Bitch?" I offered. "Slut? Gold-digger?"

Rico startled me by bursting into laughter. It wasn't quite as warm and velvety as Carlo's, but it was nice nevertheless. Huh. Who woulda thunk it?

"I suppose there's no love lost between you two."

"Uh, well, she tried to seduce my dad and break up my family. I'm sorry if I don't feel all warm and fuzzy towards her," I said flatly.

"Right. I'm sorry about that." Luckily, there was no pity in Rico's voice.

"Thanks." I shrugged, staring down at my stomach. "So you never answered my question. Where did you disappear to?"

Rico leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "Victor disappeared around the same time I left the country, and no one could track him down. I came back because a buddy of mine told me he saw him in New York, but on Thanksgiving, the people I sent to tail him lost him again."

"Which was why you were so mad," I realized.

He nodded. "Right. I kind of threw a fit and I suppose that's when this fell out." He waved the picture in the air.

I smirked a bit at the idea of this tough ex-gang member throwing a fit in the bathroom like a child.

"Then one of my contacts said they found Victor in Acapulco," Rico continued. "I didn't want anyone following me, so I booked a plane under a fake name and flew there."

I bit my lip. “Did you find him?”

Rico’s eyes gleamed. “Yes. And let’s just say, James is a lot better off than he is right now.”

Considering James was currently facing many, many years of prison for kidnapping, assault, and attempted murder, I didn’t even want to know.

I realized with a start that I believed everything Rico told me. Even though he seriously creeped me out in the past, I had to admit he didn’t necessarily give off a rapist vibe to me. Just more of a sexual harasser vibe. (I’m only half joking). Besides, if he had done all the things James said he did, I’m sure Carlo would *not* be ok with him being anywhere near Valesca.

“Oh.” I fiddled with the edges of the Saran-wrapped sandwich.

“By the way, I’ll be collecting my payment now,” Rico added casually.

I snapped my head back up. “For what?”

“For finding you.” His tone was matter-of-fact. “I came back just in time to hear my brother and his little friends freaking out about how James must have kidnapped you. Once I heard that, I gave Lexi a call and, uh, persuaded her to tell me everything she knew. She mentioned James always talked about some warehouse where he met up with his partner, and bingo, there you were.” Rico shook his head. “That was a major slip-up on his part. Guess he didn’t think Lexi would be smart enough to remember that.”

“Oh.” A funny feeling washed over me when I realized I technically owed Rico my life. “I, uh, I guess I’ll treat you to dinner sometime.”

Rico laughed again. “Dinner? I save your life and you offer me *dinner*?”

“Well, what else do you want?” I asked crossly, then immediately regretted my question when his eyes raked over me suggestively.

“I think you know.” A sly smile broke out over his face.

I crossed my arms over my chest, which only served to amuse him more. “I don’t think so. I have a boyfriend. One who’s in a *coma* right now,” I hissed, instantly sobering up.

Rico didn’t look fazed. “Please. This is Roman we’re talking about. He’ll pull through.”

“I certainly hope so,” I mumbled. “We should head back.”

“Fine. But I’m going to be taking you up on that dinner offer.”

I rolled my eyes. Maybe Rico wasn’t as bad as I originally thought, but boy was he perverted. Still, I was glad I had a chance to talk to him. He certainly answered a *lot* of questions.

* * *

Another week passed, with no change on Roman’s part. I was getting more and more worried. At least it was already winter break. There was no way I could concentrate on school with him still in the hospital. I barely managed to finish my college applications, though luckily, I started so early there wasn’t much left for me to do by the time Roman was hospitalized.

And then, four days before Christmas, the call came.

“Maya! You need to get to the hospital, now!” It was Zack, and he sounded more frantic than I’d ever heard him. That in itself terrified me.

I didn’t even bother to ask what was wrong. Instead, I grabbed the keys to my dad’s car and sped towards the hospital.

My parents had been absolutely horrified and shocked when they found out about everything that had happened, but on the upside, my relationship with my dad was gradually mending. It would still be a while before we were back to the way we used to be—if that’s possible—but it was an improvement.

However, the only thing on my mind right now was Roman. Why did I need to go to the hospital so quickly? Did he wake up? Or did he—

My chest constricted so fast I almost blacked out right there in the driver's seat. No. I wasn't going to think about that. I needed to stay positive.

Nevertheless, a cold sweat broke out my forehead, and my palms were so slick they kept on slipping on the wheel. Miraculously, I managed to get to the hospital and up to Roman's floor without incident.

When I reached his room, though, I almost wished I hadn't. Everyone was there. And they all had the same look on their face. Devastation.

I froze, my entire body turning numb when I took in Zack's uncharacteristically somber face and Giselle's loud wails. Even Adriana's eyes were rimmed with red.

Carlo and Parker stood on either side of the door like sentries, their eyes downcast, shoulders tense.

When I neared, though, Carlo looked up, his eyes filled with sadness and sympathy.

He looked like he wanted to say something, but I just shook my head and opened the door, my heart in my throat.

The first thing I noticed was that the monitors were no longer beeping. Instead, the entire room was silent. Dead silent.

And there Roman was, in the exact same position as the last time I visited him. He was unnaturally still.

I walked over, feeling like a zombie, and stared down at his face, my heart pounding an ominous drumbeat against my ribcage. "Roman?" My voice trembled.

Silence.

"Roman?"

Once again, silence.

I sucked in a deep breath, refusing to believe it. This couldn't be true. A deep pressure weighed down my chest, and I grabbed Roman's hand, digging my fingers into the flesh. "Roman! Roman, please wake up!" My voice broke. "Please! Just open your eyes, for your friends, your family, for me. Please!"

Not even a twitch. The pressure increased, and hysteria bubbled up inside me as I grabbed his shoulders. I didn't think about hurting him. All I could think about was getting him to open those eyes, so I could look into those violet orbs once again. I didn't care if he yelled at me or cursed me out or even forgot me completely, as long as he was still alive.

"You can't just leave me like this." My voice came out in shallow gasps, and I could barely see through my tears. "I know we've—we've had our differences but I—I can't—" Oh god, I couldn't breathe. "*Please* wake up. Please, please, *please*. I need you!" I laid my head on his chest, suddenly too exhausted to keep myself upright, while my shoulders shook. "I love you. You can't be—" I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to get a hold of myself, but it didn't work.

I couldn't believe I was never going to hear his voice again. Never be able to kiss him again. To hold him. To see him scowl at me and tell me what an idiot I am.

I chuckled, my chest heaving as I struggled for breath. But wait. That wasn't right. I definitely didn't chuckle.

I slowly lifted my head, then screamed when I saw Roman gazing down at me with a half-annoyed, half-amused expression on his face.

"You know, you're really loud when you cry," he said, rolling his eyes affectionately. "It's kind of annoying."

I just gaped at him, too stunned to speak. Was I daydreaming? Or delusional? Was he a ghost or something?

And then I heard it. The laughter.

Parker, Zack, Venice, Giselle, Rico, Adriana and even Carlo all burst into the room. Adriana and the guys were doubled over, tears of mirth streaming from their eyes. Venice's face was red as she shot me an apologetic look, though her mouth twitched suspiciously. Giselle just looked sheepish.

I immediately stood up, narrowing my eyes. "What the hell is going on?" I demanded, whipping my head around and taking in Roman's smirking face.

"Oh, you should've heard yourself," Parker gasped. "Please, please, *please*. I need you!" He pitched his voice higher in a poor imitation of mine.

"You guys *lied* to me?" I sputtered, clenching my hands together. "Are you kidding?"

"Oh, come on, Maya, don't be mad. It was just all in good fun," Roman coaxed, taking my hands.

I scowled at him, even as relief coursed through me. He wasn't dead. He was alive. And awake. Nevertheless, I whacked him across his arm, causing him to wince.

"Hey! Just because I'm awake, that doesn't mean I'm not still injured, you know," he protested. Then he grinned. "Is that any way to treat someone you love?"

That sent the others howling once again, and I felt a mortified flush take over my entire body. Oh my god. I'd just told him I loved him. And he heard me.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I snapped, trying to pull away. "I—you must've heard wrong."

Roman smirked, a *yeah, right* look on his face.

“Besides, that was a horrible joke! When did you wake up?”

“Right before I called you.” Zack seemed to have calmed down a bit, but he was still laughing. “Aw, don’t be mad, My-My! Isn’t this so much better than just telling you he’s awake?”

“By letting me think he was *dead*? Are you out of your mind?” I blurted. “Wait. Don’t answer that. I already know the answer. You are. You all are! And you—” I jabbed a finger at Roman. “I am so not bringing you any more get-well presents.”

His violet eyes sparkled, and an incredible wave of happiness swept over me. I’d thought I would never get to see those eyes again. Still, I tried to maintain my angry expression.

“Well, how about a get-well kiss?” He raised a suggestive eyebrow.

“Seems like you’ve gotten plenty well,” I huffed. “Well enough to trick me.”

Roman sighed, closing his eyes. “Can’t we just call it even? I got stabbed, you got tricked.” He opened one eye to look at me.

“I can’t believe you’re playing the guilt card.” Nevertheless, my mouth twitched a bit. The whole situation just seemed so ridiculous now.

“See? You want to laugh!” Roman declared triumphantly. “Can I get that kiss now?”

I immediately quashed the semi-smile, but it remained on the inside. “Nope.”

His face fell, and I had to stifle a giggle.

He had so, so much more making up to do. And I had a few ideas on how he could do just that.

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CHAPTER 30

“Oh, come on, you can’t still be angry with me. It’s Christmas! Get in the spirit,” Roman encouraged, trailing after Maya as she headed over to the fireplace to take down the stockings.

“Um, it’s the day after Christmas,” she corrected him, placing the stockings into a cardboard box. “And yes, I can still be angry with you. That was an absolutely horrible joke.”

“But I’m an injured man!”

“You’re healing.” She gave him a flat look. “And you’re a boy, not a man. Get it straight.”

Roman scowled, offended. *I get stabbed in the chest rescuing you and this is what I get?* Of course, he wisely chose to keep that little complaint to himself.

Ok, so the joke the other day might have crossed the line by an inch or so, but it’s been five days, and he hadn’t gotten a single real kiss. That was not ok.

Suddenly, a small bark caught his attention, and Roman looked down at the floor, an exasperated expression crossing his face.

Mickey stared up at him, his big brown eyes swimming with adoration. Ever since Roman and the others saved him and Maya from that psycho James, he’d been following Roman around like a, well, like a puppy.

Mickey padded over and nudged Roman’s leg with his nose.

Roman sighed. “What do you want?” he asked grumpily. “I’m kind of busy here.”

Mickey nudged him again.

“What?”

Mickey’s ears flattened in annoyance before he backed up a few steps. He crouched down on his front legs, a determined look on his face, and began to paw the floor with its left paw.

“What the hell is he doing?” Roman asked, exasperated. He seriously rued the day he ever decided to buy Maya a dog. He should’ve just gotten her a fish. Much more manageable, and much easier to ignore.

Plus, they didn’t pee everywhere—or, more specifically, everywhere on *him*.

“You’ll see.” Maya’s jade-green eyes gleamed mischievously, just as Mickey tore across the floor and head-butted Roman’s leg. The tiny ball of fur immediately flew back a little from the unexpected force and landed on the rug with a thump.

Roman’s jaw dropped. What. The. Fu—

“Oh, Mickey.” Maya laughed as she picked up the puppy, who gazed at Roman with big, eager eyes. “He just wants to play with you,” she explained.

“Great,” Roman said flatly, glowering as Maya kissed the top of Mickey’s head. Oh, so she could kiss the dog but not him? It was time to try another tactic.

“So...” He leaned casually against the fireplace. “How scared were you when you thought I was dead?”

The smile fell off Maya’s face and she glared at him with a you-did-not-just-bring-that-up expression on her face. “Who said I was scared?” she huffed, deliberately turning her back to him.

“You did.” A small smirk made its way onto his face. “In fact, I distinctly remembered you using the *L* word.” The smirk grew as Maya whipped her head back around, her face scarlet.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Her eyes darted nervously around the room.

“Yes, you do. Don’t bother trying to deny it.”

“Uh, if by *L* word you mean ‘loser’, then yeah, I know what you’re talking about.”

“Somebody’s in denial,” he sang under his breath.

“Shut up!” Maya actually stomped her foot, and he grinned at the childish antic. She was so cute sometimes.

And such a stubborn, pain in the butt the other times.

“Well, even if you won’t admit it, we both know you said it.” Roman moved closer to her and plucked Mickey out of her arms, setting him on the floor. The puppy let out an indignant yelp, but Roman shot it a stern glare. Surprisingly, that seemed to do the trick, and Mickey laid down on the floor, a doleful look on its face.

“So...don’t you think we should kiss and make it official?” He lowered his voice, gently gliding his fingers down her bare arms and suppressing a triumphant smile when he felt her shudder.

“I know what you’re doing.”

“What am I doing?” He leaned even closer, his breath causing the wisps of hair around her face to flutter softly.

“You’re trying to get me to forgive you by seducing me,” she declared, but he was gratified to hear a tremble in her voice.

“Is it working?” Man, she smelled good. Like lavender. And pumpkin. He liked pumpkin.

“Hmm...you tell me.”

Roman’s eyes widened at her flirtatious tone, just before Maya pulled him closer to her, so that their entire bodies were pressed together. Desire uncoiled itself inside him, flooding his veins with warmth. Or maybe that was just body warmth. Either way, it didn’t matter. He had absolutely no idea what inspired the sudden one-eighty in her attitude, but he sure wasn’t going to complain.

“Roman?” Maya locked her arms around his neck, leading him backwards toward the couch.

“Yeah?” He eyed the cushions. They looked soft. And comfy. They would do.

“Do you think it’s working?”

Roman somehow found himself sitting on the couch, while Maya stood in front of him, the light from the flickering fireplace outlining her slender curves. In his position, he was at eye level with her chest.

Whoever invented V-necks, you are my hero.

“Uh, is what working?” He was finding it hard to speak. Or think. His mind had gone all hazy, which was actually a bit disturbing, but he forgot all about that too once Maya climbed into his lap. Another bolt of lust surged through him.

Maya laughed softly, slipping her hands under his shirt to caress his bare stomach. Roman sucked in a deep breath, tiny pinpricks dancing over his skin. “The seduction.” Her eyes gleamed with amusement and something else. “Is it working?”

“Mm-hmm.” Roman groaned as she nipped at a particularly sensitive spot right above his collarbone, and he suddenly wished they were back in his bedroom, or at least her bedroom. Thank god her parents had gone out to give them some “alone time” tonight. Of course, they probably wanted Roman and Maya to have a nice dinner, not engage in rapidly-bordering-on-rated-R activity on the living room couch.

He slid his hands up the backs of her thighs, enjoying the satiny-smooth feel of her skin.

In the corner, Mickey raised his head to look at the scene on the couch, then whined softly and plopped his head back down on the floor, covering his eyes with his paws.

In the back of his mind, Roman realized maybe they were going a bit too fast, especially considering Maya didn’t have a lot of experience in this department. Not that her inexperience showed.

“Uh, maybe—we should—um—“ He tried to get the correct words out while Maya planted a kiss on his jaw. He felt like he was drowning in her delicious scent. “Bedroom?” was all he could manage. He didn’t necessarily relish the idea of her parents coming home to find them like this.

Maya stopped what she was doing so abruptly it took him a few seconds to process the change. When he did, he nearly screamed with frustration. Why did she stop?!

She pulled back to look at him, but kept his legs pressed firmly between her thighs. One of the straps on her dress had fallen down to expose her tanned shoulder, causing certain mental images to pop up in his head when she spoke again.

“And what would we be doing in the bedroom?” There was a teasing lilt to her voice.

A lot of things. “I can show you instead of tell you,” he suggested, his head marginally clearer now that there was a bit more space between them.

“Will it include whipped cream and handcuffs?” she asked, blinking at him innocently.

Roman just stared at her, too shocked to respond, even as some very interesting ideas crept their way into his mind...

“Wh-what?” Then, catching himself, he cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. “You’ll just have to wait and see. But I guarantee you’ll like it.”

“Well...” Maya dragged the word out, and the anticipation was killing him. Couldn’t they walk and talk at the same time?

Although maybe it was a good thing she was still straddling him, because if she moved, she would definitely see why he felt as though his jeans suddenly felt several sizes too small. Then again, she could probably feel it right now.

Her lips curved up into a small smile, and Roman realized she still hadn’t given him a kiss yet. Something that needed to be remedied, and soon.

“I don’t think so.” She slid off his lap, fixing her strap and smoothing down the front of her dress like nothing out of the ordinary just happened.

Roman just gaped at her.

Maya smirked, stepping closer to trail a finger down his chest and resting it right above the waistband of his jeans, which still felt painfully tight.

“You know, I do like whipped cream and handcuffs,” she whispered in his ear. “But you’re still on probation from that little prank you pulled in the hospital.” She stepped back again and grabbed her clutch off the table. “I guess I’ll just have to find someone else to show me what you were talking about earlier. Luckily, I have a dinner date with Rico in—” She checked the clock. “—half an hour. If you’re hungry, there’s some frozen pizza in the freezer. Good night!”

With that, Maya blew him a kiss and flounced out the door, leaving a very angry, confused, and frustrated Roman in her living room.

* * *

“Do you really think this is going to work?” I whispered over my menu, trying my best not to move my head in the direction I so desperately wanted to.

Rico smirked, dabbing his mouth with his napkin. A surprisingly refined move for someone whom I’ve always considered to be a bit of a hooligan up until a few days ago. Then again, I always forget the fact that he was still a Tevasco, which meant he was used to fine dining and its accompanying etiquette.

Not that the restaurant we were at was particularly stuffy, thank god. Yes, it required reservations, and the dining room was elegant, but the outdoor patio, where we were currently seated, was much more casual. It was a large, open wooden deck, set over a gleaming pond. I kind of felt like I was on a ship.

“Of course it will,” he said in response to my question. “Trust me. Adri did her part. Now we just have to sit and wait.”

“I suppose.” I settled back in my chair and took a sip of water.

Surprisingly, I was enjoying the dinner I’d promised Rico. He was still perverted but a lot less scary than he’d been a few weeks ago, and besides, our “date” had a bigger purpose than “thank you” on my part.

Although, the look on Roman’s face when I left him sitting in the living room earlier had been hilarious.

Warmth suffused my skin as I flashed back to the events that had led up to that moment. I’d thought of the seduction thing off the cuff, in response to his own attempt to get me to forgive him. Of course, I’ve already forgiven him, but *he* didn’t need to know that yet. I was determined to make him

sweat a little, even though it took all of my willpower and then some to refrain from kissing him every chance I got.

The warmth increased as I remembered the scene on the couch, the way he smelled, the glazed lustful look in his eyes, how his taut muscles felt under my hand...

“Ahem. Do you need a moment alone?” Rico cast a pointed glance in my direction.

I turned bright red. “What do you mean?”

“You look like you were thinking some pretty X-rated thoughts over there.” He gazed at me suggestively. “Of course, I can always help you out if you’re feeling particularly hor—“

“No, thank you,” I swiftly interrupted. “Sorry, but you’re not my type.”

“Are you a lesbian?”

I almost coughed up my water. “*Excuse me?*”

He shrugged. “I’m every girl’s type.”

Oh my god. I think I found someone who’s even cockier than Roman. “No! Not that I have anything against them, but I’m—I have a boyfriend!”

“So? That doesn’t mean anything.” Rico brought a piece of fresh yellowtail to his mouth. “You know what’s weird? None of my brother’s friends ever dated seriously in the past, and then, you come into their lives and everyone’s paired off. You and Roman. Parker and Adri. And, if things go according to plan, Zack and—“

“Venice!”

I whipped around just as a loud splash interrupted the quiet atmosphere. My jaw dropped when I saw Zack standing at the only part of the patio that

wasn't guarded by a railing. At least, he was standing for about two seconds, before he whipped his shirt over his head and dove into the pond.

Rico and I exchanged baffled glances.

That was definitely not part of the plan.

* * *

"I can't believe we're stalking her. Again." Venice hid her face with the side of her menu as she glared at Zack.

"We're not stalking," he insisted. "We're...acting as bodyguards."

"Against who? James is in jail."

"Well, you never know. Rico did use to be a gang," he mumbled, trying to make out what Maya and Rico were saying. Why were they on a date on the first place? Wasn't she dating Roman? Was she so mad at him about the hospital prank that she'd broken up with him? Or was she cheating on him?

Zack felt a bit dizzy from all the possible reasons running through his mind. He also felt more than a little terrified at the thought of Roman's reaction if any of those reasons turned out to be true.

"You're always dragging me into this," Venice complained. "I was supposed to go to the movies tonight!"

He returned his gaze to her direction. "With who?" The question came out a bit sharper than he'd intended.

"With Grant." Venice's eyes lit up. "You know, I got an A on my calculus test because of him? He's so smart. It's amazing."

Zack frowned. Grant. That stupid skinny kid with the stupid skinny name and the stupid skinny glasses and the stupid—

“Zack?” Venice gave him an odd look. “Why do you keep saying ‘skinny’?”

He blushed. “No reason. What’s so amazing about that kid anyway?” He sniffed. “I could’ve helped you get an A on that test too.”

“But you don’t even take calculus.”

“How do you know that?” he challenged.

Venice’s cheeks turned pink. “I don’t know,” she mumbled. Then her face brightened again. “Puppy!” she cried.

He groaned. Not *this* again! “Venice, no!”

But it was too late. The tiny redhead jumped up to follow the tiny dog who had jumped out from an elegant older woman’s handbag. The woman didn’t seem to notice.

Zack couldn’t believe it. Did she have a *disease* or something? Because that type of fascination and blind following of puppies could *not* be normal.

Suddenly, he realized with horror that Venice was racing straight towards the section of the deck that had no railing.

Zack jumped up, forgetting about spying on Maya and Rico for the moment. Hadn’t Venice said something about not being able to swim? Crap. “Venice!” he shouted.

Too late. He watched in horror as she tipped over the edge and...onto the dock. But his sigh of relief was cut short when Venice stood up, only to slip and fall into the pond with a splash, just as he reached the dock.

Without even thinking, Zack pulled his shirt off his head, jumped onto the dock, then dived into the water.

Within five minutes, he'd pulled Venice out of the water and back onto the deck, where the other diners had gathered, gaping at the scene in front of them—including Maya and Rico, who had concerned looks on their faces.

“Zack! What happened?” Maya exclaimed.

“She fell!” *Obviously*, his mind whispered, unusually sarcastic.

“Oh my god, she’s not conscious.” Maya’s eyes were wide. “Does anyone know CPR?”

“I got it.” With those three words, Zack leaned down and covered Venice’s mouth with his.

* * *

I had hoped Zack and Venice would end up kissing after tonight, but this was not what I had in mind. Plus, I’m not sure CPR qualified as kissing.

I instinctively gripped Rico’s hand, my heart thudding nervously. I knew Venice couldn’t swim, and though I doubted she was in mortal danger, considering the short amount of time she’d been submerged, I was still worried.

Therefore, when her eyes blinked open and she began to cough up water, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Wh-what happened?” She struggled to sit up, water dripping down her face.

“You were chasing a puppy and fell in the water,” Zack explained.

Beside me, Rico snorted at the ridiculousness of that statement.

“Are you ok?” I asked, concerned.

Venice nodded, brushing a limp red curl from her face. “Uh, I think so.” She looked around, her face turning the color of her hair when she saw

everyone staring at her. “Oh my god, this is so embarrassing,” she squeaked.

“It’s ok.” I turned to the onlookers. “There’s nothing to see here anymore. Go back to your dinners.” Everyone actually did what I said. I guess hanging out with Scions gave me a bit more confidence than I used to have. “And have a good night,” I added. I couldn’t be *quite* as imperious as Roman and the others were. Not that I wanted to be.

“Can you explain to me what you two are doing here?” Rico asked.

I stifled a grin. We knew exactly what they were doing here. We had set it up, telling Adriana to tell Zack she was afraid I might be leaving Roman for Rico and to urge him to “keep tabs on us.” She’d told me about how Zack and Venice had trailed James—I shuddered a bit at the thought of his name—and I at the amusement park, and figured he would bring her along this time too, since he apparently “couldn’t do anything by himself.”

I guess she was right, as always.

“Well, we, uh—” Venice stammered, looking guilty.

“We’re on a date,” Zack blurted.

She turned so fast I was afraid she might’ve gotten whiplash.

“Really?” I grinned. “Aw. I should have guessed. You know, he’s the one who gave you CPR, V,” I added casually.

Just like that, she flushed red all over again, only this time, she was joined by Zack.

“Yeah, you should give him a thank you kiss,” Rico added, playing along.

But they were no longer paying attention. Instead, they were staring at something over my shoulder with frightened expressions.

A moment later, my hand was ripped out of Rico's. I'd completely forgotten I was still holding onto it.

My stomach dropped when I turned to see Roman standing there, his face like thunder. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded, a vein pulsing angrily in his forehead. "Why are you holding his hand?" His voice grew louder and louder with each word.

"Calm down, Rome, I was just nervous," I said soothingly. "It didn't mean anything."

"I can't believe you left me to go on a date with—with—" The vein was throbbing even harder now as he glared at Rico, who just looked amused. "—with a *criminal*!"

"A criminal who helped save me," I pointed out, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I helped save you!" Roman roared. "I was the one who got stabbed!"

"Are you really going to use that as your trump card now? Come on, Rome." Rico rolled his eyes. "Besides, it's not like you're traumatized. You definitely recovered enough to joke around with her at the hospital." He slung an arm over my shoulders. Roman's eye twitched dangerously. "I hate to break this to you, but Maya told me that she's beginning to have feelings for me." He sighed. "It's been a long time coming, really. Ever since we first saw each other that night at my house...we knew. And her near death experience only confirmed it." He gazed pityingly at Roman, even though I could tell he was struggling not to laugh. "She didn't want you to find out like this, since you just got de-hospitalized and all, but...she doesn't want to be with you anymore." Rico squeezed my shoulder. "She wants to be with me."

I couldn't help but giggle a bit at his horrible acting skills. No wonder he'd been in a gang. He sure as hell wouldn't have made it in Hollywood.

However, my smile fell away when I saw Roman's face. His cheeks were drained of color, and his eyes were wide with...hurt?

Wait. He didn't actually *believe* what Rico said, did he?

"Is that true?" he whispered, staring at me with a pleading look that broke my heart. As insufferable as an angry, possessive Roman was, I would've much preferred that version than this one.

"What? No!" I blurted, trying to wriggle out of Rico's grasp, but he was too strong. I glared at him, and he just gazed back with a mischievous look in his eyes. "Don't listen to him. He's just joking."

"It's ok, baby, there's no need to keep acting anymore. Tell him the *real* reason why you haven't kissed him since he left the hospital."

If looks could kill, Rico would be six feet under right now. I *cannot* believe he just said that. I stomped on his foot, and he let out a sharp yelp. I took the opportunity to escape his grasp and moved over to Roman, who hadn't moved an inch.

"So that's why you haven't kissed me." He crossed his arms defensively over his chest, which rose and fell heavily, like he couldn't get enough air into his lungs. "When did this really happen, Maya? When did you decide you didn't want to be with me anymore?"

My face felt hot and splotchy. Was he serious? How stupid could he be? How could he really think I would leave him, especially since he *knew* I'd said the *L* word to him in the hospital!

"I do want to be with you—" I began.

"Since the first time she saw me, probably," Rico cut in blithely. "Honestly, Rome, it's much better this way—"

"Shut up." Roman's voice was tight.

“—and hey, now you’ll be free to go date those models you like so much, while Maya and I get it on—“

The sound of a fist connecting with a face ripped through the air, causing more than a few people to scream, including myself. All I saw was a red-faced Roman throwing Rico onto the ground, but even in my shock, I was stunned to see Rico wasn’t really hitting him back. I flashed back to the carnival in Hawaii. Talk about déjà vu.

“Roman! Stop!” I grasped the back of his shirt and desperately tried to yank him off to no avail. He didn’t even budge. “Zack! Help!” I gazed pleadingly at the blond, who didn’t seem to hear me as he gaped at the scene on the ground.

“Why do you even care so much?” Rico asked tauntingly. “You can find another girl in a second. Just leave Maya to me.” He smirked, even though blood was smeared on his face. I suppose it’d take more than a little bleeding to faze an ex-gang member. “I’ll take good care of her.”

“I said, shut up!” Roman roared, pulling back his fist to punch him again.

At the last minute, Rico threw Roman off of him, and I squeaked as he stumbled back into me.

“Why are you getting so worked up?” Rico’s voice hardened. “You’re probably going to dump Maya soon, aren’t you? Right after you get what you want.”

Roman’s face was drawn in the most terrifying scowl I’d seen yet. “You’re delusional,” he spat.

“Am I? You just want one thing from her. You don’t really want to be with her.”

Roman’s hands clenched into fists. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Then enlighten me.”

That seemed to make Roman snap. “Of course I want to be with her! I’m in love with her!”

The entire deck fell silent. Rico smirked, giving me a smug, you-owe-me-yet-again look Venice squealed happily. Zack’s jaw grazed the ground. But all I could focus on was Roman, who suddenly looked like he wanted to disappear.

Was—what—did he just say he loved me? No. Not even that. Did he just say he was in love with me?

And then, as if the night couldn’t get any more dramatic, I pulled a Venice and fainted.

CHAPTER 31

Well, this was awkward.

Zack hovered uncertainly on the deck, clutching his shirt in one hand as he watched Roman disappear through the doors into the dining room, carrying a still-passed-out Maya in his arms princess-style.

Meanwhile, everyone else was completely silent. All the other diners were gaping, open-mouthed, at what had just transpired, while the waiters wrung their hands, probably wondering what do. While this wasn't a five-star restaurant, it wasn't exactly McDonald's either, and if half the people involved in the drama didn't own this town, the manager surely would've already called the police by now.

"That was interesting," Rico drawled, seemingly unfazed by the situation. He pulled out a cigarette and quickly lit it, blowing a smoke ring straight into Zack's face.

Zack coughed lightly, scrunching up his face. He hated cigarettes.

"You're a terrible person," he scolded, giving Rico a very disapproving look. "You made My-My faint!"

Rico rolled his eyes. "My-My? Jesus, what is this, Sesame Street?"

"I think it's a cute nickname," Zack defended himself, feeling slightly hurt.

"You would." The other boy sighed. "My brother's friends..." he muttered under his breath. Then, in a normal voice, he added, "Besides, I didn't make her faint. That's all your precious Roman's doing. It's not my fault he's a stubborn, jealous asshole."

Zack's jaw dropped. "You—you—"

"Um. Sorry to interrupt, but can someone help me up?"

The blond stopped glaring at Rico long enough to see Venice still sprawled on the wooden floor, looking not unlike a drowned, redheaded rat.

"Oh, of course," he exclaimed, his attitude doing a one-eighty as he held out his hand and hauled Venice to her feet. Her palm felt soft and tiny in his. And wet.

Well, duh, she just fell into the pond.

Unfortunately, Zack pulled her up with slightly more force than necessary, causing Venice to stumble straight into his chest.

"Sorry!" they cried simultaneously, as they both turned scarlet. Zack quickly stepped back and pulled his shirt back over his head.

Rico rolled his eyes in disgust. "My job here is done," he declared. "I didn't sign up to watch this puppy love shit. Literally. You kiddies have fun." He blew one last smoke ring into their faces, then turned and sauntered away.

"What does he mean, his job here is done?" Venice's brow furrowed adorably as she held her soaked T-shirt away from her skin. At least she was wearing black, so it wasn't see through.

"Who knows? It's Rico. He's kind of weird." Zack gazed at her in concern. "We should leave though. You might catch a cold if you don't change out of those clothes."

He placed a hand on the small of her back to lead her out of the restaurant, and was secretly pleased to see Venice turn even redder at his touch.

They climbed into his Porsche and Zack was halfway to her house when she decided to turn on the radio. Guess who was on?

Yep. Taylor Swift.

Venice brightened. “Oh my god! I love this song!” she cried, her bubblyness coming back in full force as she sang along to “Love Story.”

Zack flinched at her caterwauling. “I guess you didn’t start taking singing lessons sometime between the amusement park and now,” he commented, a shudder rippling through him as Venice completely destroyed the song beyond all recognition. She sounded like a dying cat trying to sing opera.

“Are you making fun of my singing skills?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

Zack snorted, turning into her driveway. “What singing skills?”

Venice stuck out her tongue. “Well, sorry, not everyone can be a musical genius.”

He immediately perked up. “You think I’m a musical genius?”

Having realized her mistake, Venice slunk down in her seat and stared at her shoes. “Come on, everyone knows you are,” she mumbled, sounding embarrassed.

Zack beamed. He wasn’t exactly arrogant, but he knew he was good at music. It always made him happy to hear other people say it though.

“We’re here.” He stared at the house in front of him. It was pretty big, though not as vast as his own family’s 45,000 square foot abode. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

“Ok,” she squeaked.

Zack went around to open the car door for her, and the two of them climbed up the brick steps in silence. When they reached the front door, they stood there a bit awkwardly, neither knowing what to say.

“So, uh, I just want to thank you. For saving me tonight,” Venice clarified shyly, not looking him in the eyes. “That was really, um, brave of you.”

Now it was Zack’s turn to blush. “Don’t mention it. It’s not a big deal. It was just a pond, not an ocean full of sharks or anything. Although you should stop chasing puppies,” he added sternly. “It always seems to get you, and by extension me, into trouble.”

She laughed. “I’ll try. But they’re just so darn cute! Puppies...” A dreamy look took over her eyes.

“No!” Zack grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “Stay with me! Don’t think about the P word! Think about...Humpty Dumpty!”

Venice cracked up. “Humpty Dumpty? Why?”

“Because he’s cool,” Zack declared. “Even if he did fall off a wall.” He paused. “He did fall off a wall, didn’t he?”

She giggled. “You are so cute.” Her eyes grew wide and she immediately slapped a hand over her mouth, but it was too late.

“You think I’m cute?” Zack asked giddily.

“Uh. N-no,” she stuttered. “I-I mean...I think a lot of people are cute. You know. Uh, Maya’s cute. Mickey’s cute. Um, Rico’s cute—well, actually, he’s a little scary, but if he shaved a little and cut his hair and—“

“Venice.”

She stopped. “Yes?”

“Can you stop talking please?”

Venice flushed, looking like she was going to start crying. “Oh, o-ok. I’ll—I’ll just go then. Sorry.”

She turned to open the door, but in that moment, Zack made a quick decision and grabbed her arm, pulling her around to face him again.

Confusion filled her features. “What—“

And then Zack stopped her from talking again. Only this time, it was with one long, deep kiss on the lips.

After a few seconds, when Venice got over her shock and started kissing him back, he smiled against her mouth. She tasted like strawberries and maybe marshmallows, just like he remembered.

This was even better than getting a puppy.

* * *

I was sleeping on a cloud. At least, I think it’s a cloud, because honestly, whatever I was lying on was too soft and fluffy to *not* be a cloud. I sighed dreamily and nuzzled deeper into the fluffiness. This was awesome.

Just as I started dreaming about Roman and I floating through a rainbow-colored sky in pink heart-shaped bubbles, my body started vibrating. Wait, no. Not vibrating. Shaking. That’s it. I was shaking back and forth like a rag doll, and let me tell you, it was not a comfortable feeling.

“Stop,” I whined, batting at the air. “Please stop. That’s annoying.”

“Maya? Maya, wake up!”

Huh. That voice was awfully familiar...

“Maya, can you hear me?”

After a few more seconds, I finally, reluctantly blinked open my eyes, glad that the room we were in wasn’t all that bright. It took me an extra five seconds to orient myself, and when I did, I found myself staring straight up into a very handsome, very concerned face.

“Oh, thank God.” Roman sighed. “I thought you got a concussion from hitting that wood floor.”

“What happened?” I croaked, struggling to sit up. Roman helped prop me against a mountain of goosedown pillows, covered in fifteen-hundred-thread-count cases (no wonder I thought I was on a cloud). “My head hurts.”

“Of course it hurts.” He looked both annoyed and relieved. “You fainted. Actually, that seems to be a habit of yours.”

“I *what?*” I exclaimed, now wide awake. I ran through the night’s events in my mind, trying to piece together what happened.

Slowly, it all came back to me. Mine and Rico’s dinner at the restaurant. Venice falling into the pond. Zack diving in to save her. Roman storming in. Rico goading him. And then...

My eyes grew to the size of saucers as I remembered what happened right before I fainted. Holy crap. Did Roman really say that? Or was had I become delusional from my fall?

Trying to quell the backflips my heart was now doing in an apparent attempt to qualify for the US Olympic gymnastics team, I stared at Roman, taking in every inch of his face. The high, chiseled cheekbones. The strong jaw. The full lips. The deep, mesmerizing violet eyes fringed by long black lashes that could make any girl jealous.

And I’m not sure what made me ask what I asked next, but in a small, timid voice, I posed what could end up to be one of the most important questions in my life thus far. “Roman. Did you, uh, did you say you were in love with me?”

And he froze. I swear, I’ve never seen anyone stay so still for so long. He didn’t even look like he was breathing. In fact, were it not for the tomato-like redness creeping slowly up his neck and face, I wouldn’t have been sure if he was even alive or not.

“Roman?” I shifted uncomfortably in my bed after a good five minutes passed by, with nary a sound on his part. “Did you hear me?”

He blinked. “Yes.” I’m not sure if he meant yes, I did say I was in love with you, or yes, I heard you.

He just stared at me, causing me to panic a little. Oh my god. What if he *hadn’t* said it? That would be absolutely mortifying, especially since I’d already blurted out the L word in the hospital.

My cheeks burning, I threw off the covers. “Um, I should, uh, I should go. Now,” I blurted, avoiding his gaze as my heart pounded against my chest. “My parents are probably, uh, worried.” My voice cracked a little on “worried,” but my feet didn’t even touch the floor before Roman grabbed my wrists, stilling me.

“Why are you leaving so soon?”

“I told you. My parents are going to freak,” I mumbled.

“No, they won’t,” he corrected calmly. “I already called them. I didn’t mention the fainting part, of course, but they know you’re here.”

“Oh.” I sank down on the bed again, turning my back to him. “I kind of want to sleep, though, so can you just—“

“Maya. Can you look at me, please?”

I really, really didn’t want to, but I couldn’t help myself. I looked at him.

Roman’s brow furrowed. “You’re mad at me.”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are. Why?”

I glared at him. I have the stupidest boyfriend in the world. “I told you. I’m not mad.”

He groaned. “I swear. Maya Lindberg, you are the most stubborn, hard-headed, prideful, confrontational girl I’ve ever met—“

I scowled. *Way to tell me how you really feel.*

“—which is why I have absolutely no idea how I fell in love with you.”

Stubborn, hard-headed, prideful, and confrontational, huh? Well, you are arrogant, insufferable, ego—wait. What?!

I bolted upright, my eyes wide. Did he just say what I thought he did? “You—you’re in love with me? Really?” I squeaked, the pounding coming back full force.

Roman’s cheekbones were tinged with pink, and he looked more uncomfortable than I’d ever seen him. To his credit, though, he didn’t try to change the subject.

“Do you really need me to tell you? I thought it was pretty obvious.” He held my gaze, his face softening. “Look, I’m not really the mushy, emotional type of guy, so if you’re looking for one of those romance movie declaration scenes...I’m sorry. So I’m just going to come right out and say I love you. Actually—“ His mouth quirked up a little. “I think I may have secretly loved you since you slapped me across the face that day in my kitchen.”

To my horror, I felt my eyes well up with tears, and when I spoke, I half-sobbed, half-laughed through my words. “That’s a strange time to fall in love with someone.”

Roman’s mouth quirked up at the corners. “Do you really think our relationship is a normal one?”

He had a point.

“But, well, I just never thought that, you could, you know—“ I babbled incoherently.

“Maya,” he cut in. “Shut up and let me kiss you.”

And so I did.

In the past few months, I’ve found my dad committing adultery, skyrocketed from anonymity to infamy to popularity, been kidnapped multiple times (some more serious than others), almost been killed, and thought my boyfriend had died. I’m actually glad all of that happened, though—to an extent—because those things had led to this one moment, which was even more perfect than I could’ve imagined.

* * *

“Remember, don’t make any plans for next Saturday,” Roman reminded me, wrapping his arms around my waist as we stood on my front porch. Since it was nearly two in the morning, my house was dark and completely silent. “We’re having a do-over of our anniversary.”

“So it’ll be our one and a half month anniversary.” I shook my head. “We really aren’t normal at all.”

He shrugged. “Normal is overrated.” He flicked the tip of my nose. “Just try not to get kidnapped this time, ok?”

I heaved a deep sigh. “I’ll try my best,” I agreed faux reluctantly. “Although I have to say, I’m very curious as to what you have planned.”

Roman smirked. “You’re going to love it,” he bragged without a trace of modesty. “After all, I did plan it myself.”

I rolled my eyes. “You should be glad I love you so much, or I might just slap you. Again.”

He grinned. “I don’t mind. It kind of turns me on.”

I turned bright red, causing him to chuckle. “What a perv,” I huffed. “You better pray my parents didn’t hear that.”

Roman glanced up at the second floor. “They’re asleep. Don’t worry. We can have sex right here and they probably wouldn’t hear.”

I smacked him on the arm. “Roman!”

He laughed and held up his hands. “Ok, ok, I’ll stop.” He paused, a more serious look crossing his face. “How are things with your dad?”

I fiddled absentmindedly with my purse strap. “They’re...better. I mean, we haven’t really talked about it since, you know, I was kidnapped, what with all the other things that have happened...”

“You should talk to him,” Roman suggested gently. “Clear the air. I know how close you guys were, and things are never going to be the same if you don’t.”

I sighed. I knew he had a point, but I absolutely dreaded confrontation. “I know,” I mumbled. “I know. I’ll do it soon.”

“Why don’t you do it before Saturday?” He examined my face. “I want everything to be perfect that day. Nothing hovering over our heads.”

I couldn’t help but smile at the sweetness of his words. Roman Fiori, sweet? I half-expected to see some pigs floating by at that moment.

“I will, as long as—” I hesitated.

“As long as?”

“As long as you promise to talk to your mom.”

Roman grew rigid. “I don’t have anything to say to her.”

“Rome, come on. She’s your mom,” I pleaded. “Besides, she’s been so much better lately. She was there for you at the hospital, she even went along with that stupid prank you pulled...like you said, we shouldn’t have anything hovering over our heads on Saturday.”

He was silent.

“Please?” I grabbed his hands. “Look, I’ve learned in the past few weeks just how much we take things—and people—for granted, and you wouldn’t want anything to happen while you’re still on bad terms with your parents, do you?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be on good terms with my dad,” Roman said in a hard voice. “Not without turning into a jackass like him.”

“Ok, not your dad,” I amended quickly. I knew better than to push it. Besides, he was right. His dad was kind of a jackass. “But your mom, ok? Please just try to talk to her?”

He blew out a breath and gazed up at the sky for a moment, before returning his eyes to mine. “Is it really that important to you?”

“Yes. And I know it’s important to you too, no matter what you say,” I ventured gently.

Roman shook his head. “Fine, I’ll do it,” he agreed reluctantly, resting his forehead against mine. “You better give me a big, fat kiss right now.”

Without a word, I grabbed him and pressed my lips against him, enjoying the explosion of tingles that erupted inside me at the familiar, delicious sensation. Even though there was no tongue, it was so long and lingering and filled with emotion that it was actually more passionate than any French kiss could be.

“That good enough?” I breathed, when I finally had to break for air.

Roman's eyes were glazed over. "Um...I'm not sure, can you do that again?" he mumbled, causing me to giggle.

And so we kissed again. And again. And again, until I finally, reluctantly pulled away. As much as I wanted to spend the whole night kissing him, I had to wake up early tomorrow for my family's weekly Sunday morning brunch.

"Good night," I whispered against his lips, not wanting to let go.

"Good night." He gave me one last peck. "I love you."

I stifled a smile. For someone who didn't do the emotional, mushy thing, he'd been quite emotional and mushy tonight, at least in Roman world. Not that I was complaining.

I looked up at him, feeling like I was going to burst from happiness. "I love you too."

CHAPTER 32

The last time Roman went into his parents' suite was when he was eight. He had been playing hide-and-seek with Carlo and Adriana—Zack had been sick and Parker out of the country—and accidentally stumbled in on his father with a woman who was most definitely not his mother. His father promptly kicked him out, after threatening him with a beating if he ever told Giselle, and also fired the nanny—who'd been his favorite so far. That, combined with the mental scarring that came from watching your parents (or at least one of your parents) do *it* was enough for Roman to give the master suite wide berth for the next ten years.

Now, as he approached his parents' wing of the house, his nerves were stretched taut, and he was half-tempted to turn back and go to the basketball courts, which always calmed him down. But he couldn't, since he'd promised Maya.

Roman took a deep breath, trying to picture her face, and after a few more seconds, his heart rate slowed down to normal.

He stared at the closed double doors, before finally, tentatively knocking on the custom wood.

A brief pause, then "Come in!"

Roman turned the knob and stepped into the vast, hushed suite, which was decorated in pale cream and rich burgundy. His mother was lying on the canopied bed in a silk nightgown, skimming through a thick, glossy magazine.

When she saw him, she immediately put down the magazine and sat up, the range of emotions on her face flitting from surprise to pleasure to nervousness.

Was she actually sober? He found it a bit hard to believe.

“Oh, hello dear.” Giselle reached up to fiddle with her diamond pendant. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too.” The fact they were talking like polite strangers was not lost on Roman as he dutifully gave her a cheek kiss. “Are you busy?”

Translation: Are you drinking?

“No, no,” she replied quickly. “Come, sit next to me.” She patted the space next to her.

Instead, Roman took a seat in the chair near her bed. He felt awkward and uncomfortable, and judging from the look on Giselle’s face, he wasn’t the only one.

They descended into silence.

“So, how are you and Maya doing?” she finally asked.

“Good.” Roman wished he’d brought along his phone so he’d have something to do with his hands. He settled for gripping the chair’s armrests, digging his fingers into the delicate brocade. “We have our anniversary Saturday.”

“That’s good.” Giselle smiled. “She’s a wonderful girl. I take it she’s forgiven you for the hospital prank?”

Roman cracked a smile. “You could say that.” More like she’d gotten him back good, so they were even. “You did a good job the other day. With the prank,” he said spontaneously, feeling a bit more generous for some reason.

Her eyes lit up. “Really?”

He nodded, shifting uncomfortably, but Giselle looked like she was about to burst into tears of joy.

“I figured it was the least I could do,” she said quietly, her eyes swimming.

He really hoped she wasn’t going to cry. He did not deal well with crying people.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed so she was facing him head-on, her diamonds blindingly bright even in the soft lighting. “I know we haven’t...talked much lately,” she ventured hesitatingly, like she was afraid he was going to up and leave if she so much as uttered a wrong word. “But...I really missed you.”

Roman’s knuckles turned white. “Yeah, well, I would’ve thought it’d be pretty hard to miss someone when you’re drugged up or boozed up all the time,” he said flatly, flashing back to the string of missed birthdays, ruined holidays, and cancelled family vacations over the years.

Giselle’s face was now the color of his knuckles. “I know.” Her lower lip trembled. “I know I haven’t been a good mother, or much of a mother at all, but I’m trying to change, I really am. It’s—it’s going to take some work, and I can’t promise I’ll be perfect. I’ve just depended on alcohol and pills so much that I can’t...” She took a deep breath. “But since your... accident... I just realized how much I wanted to be better. For both of us.” Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “You’re so grown-up now, and I haven’t been there for any of it...and you’ll be off to college in the fall—”

Roman’s own throat felt tight. After so many years, he’d thought he was immune to anything his parents could say or do, but hearing her speak brought back a flood of earlier dreams and wishes, ones where he belonged to a normal, loving family who ate dinner together every night and talked about their days, where his mother would take care of him when he was sick and his father would take him camping and teach him about sports and girls.

Even though he hadn’t had any of that, Roman thought he’d done pretty well for himself. His friends became his family, but deep down there had

always been something missing. No matter how great Carlo and Parker and the Perrys were, he supposed nothing could quite replace maternal love.

At the same time, he wasn't sure if he could believe her. It was certainly easy to say you wanted to change, but actually changing? That was a whole different ballgame. But the scary part was, Roman really, really wanted to believe her.

"Do you really think you can change?" He stared at her, trying to feel the way a normal son would when faced with a crying parent. He couldn't quite do it. He hadn't thought of her as his mother for a very, very long time, and it would take a while before he could do so again.

"I can try." Giselle sounded earnest. "And I will try my hardest. But—" Another deep breath. "—but I'm going to need the support of my son."

The tightness in his throat intensified. Roman knew the ball was in his court. He could either accept what she was saying and try to mend things between them, or he could just leave, go back to his safe place, and save himself the hurt that would come if everything fell apart again.

"I--" He stopped. Giselle looked like she was about to pass out. "I suppose." He smiled weakly but it probably came out as more of a grimace. "We both need backup if we're going to deal with my asshole of a father." That came out without thinking, and Roman winced a bit, expecting her to berate him for using foul language or talking about his dad like that.

To his surprise, Giselle laughed, a rich, creamy, genuine laugh he hadn't heard in ages. Warmth suffused his insides at the sound, and his own smile strengthened a bit.

"He is quite an asshole, isn't he?" Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

Roman stared at her in shock for a moment, before joining her in laughter. "The biggest," he added truthfully.

“I’m so glad you came to see me,” Giselle said after their mirth died down. “I really am. So...well, I don’t want to ask for too much but...how about a hug?” She gazed at him so hopefully he didn’t quite have the heart to turn her down, so he stood up slowly and walked gingerly into her hug.

Giselle beamed, and Roman tried to adjust to the strange sensation of her arms wrapped comfortingly around him. It was completely foreign, but for once he had hope—however small—that it might become much more familiar in the future.

His lips unconsciously tugged up into a smile. He supposed he needed to give Maya one big, fat thank-you the next time he saw her.

* * *

“You bought me lingerie *again*?”

I stared at the crisp white shopping bag Adriana had thrust at me. LA PERLA was stamped on the front in simple black print, and I could see a sliver of lace amidst all the tissue paper.

“Of course. I’ve decided that the lingerie you got months ago is bad luck,” she declared. “Since we bought it with Parker’s card and all. Now that you’re dating Roman, you need some new stuff, bought especially for him. I mean, don’t you remember what happened during your last anniversary celebration? Or rather, lack thereof. You got kidnapped. Thus, bad luck.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I hate to break it to you, Adri, but I was kidnapped because James is psycho, not because of the kind of underwear I was wearing.”

“That’s what *you* think.” Adriana pulled a bra and thong set out of the bag. They were so much skimpier than the ones I already had that I immediately blushed. “Now, go put these on. We only have two hours left to make you even more beautiful for tonight.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “I’m not wearing that,” I declared defiantly. Nope. No way in hell was I going to put that on.

Then Adriana gave me her special, withering look, the one she usually reserved for people who wore sandals with socks or pleated pants or—gasp!—both at the same time.

“Ok,” I said weakly, taking the flimsy scraps of cloth from her. “I’ll be right back.”

Don’t judge me. She can be really scary sometimes.

But as I locked myself in the bathroom and reluctantly pulled off my shirt and pants, despite Adriana pointing I could just change in the room with her because we were both girls and had the same body parts anyway, I couldn’t help but grin giddily. This was it. Tonight, Roman and I would *finally* be able to celebrate our anniversary, and I couldn’t wait.

I felt more excited than ever, now that I’d finally gotten my “talk” with my dad out of the way. It went much better than I expected, and it sounded a lot like the talk we had right after I saw him and Lexi in New York. Lots of tears and emotions and promises, but this time, I actually believed him. I even forgave him, for the most part. He is, after all, my father, and one I loved very much.

Honestly, after the whole James incident, I figure I should just let bygones be bygones. Besides, tonight happened to be New Year’s Eve, and I wanted to start the year off on the best foot possible.

Thankfully, my family could care less about New Year’s—thanks to my mom, we usually only celebrated Chinese New Year—which meant I could go out with Roman while the rest of the gang enjoyed champagne and fireworks on the boat he got Zack for his birthday.

After I put on my brand-new designer underwear and pulled my lounge pants and shirt back on, excitement fluttered through me. I wondered what Roman had planned. I’d spent the entire week trying to guess, but of course, Roman, being the huge meanie he was, refused to tell me if my guesses were correct or not. He even outright laughed at some of them.

But seriously, judging from all the extravagant things he's done, a hot air balloon trip over Austria followed by a private concert is not out of the realm of possibility. Not that I really wanted a hot air balloon trip over Austria. The whole Arnold Schwarzenegger scandal pretty much ruined Austrian accents for me, and besides, I'm afraid of heights.

But it would've been cool anyway.

"So, have you decided what you're going to wear?" Adriana asked, once I exited the bathroom.

"Yeah." I walked over to the closet and pulled out a simple, elegant black silk dress. "I don't know what we're doing, but this seems like a safe bet."

She tilted her head, fingering the material. "Hmm."

"What?" I looked at the dress. It was one of the nicest items of clothing I owned. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know if you should wear silk, it...might not be a good idea."

I paused, then nearly jumped with excitement. "Wait! You know what he has planned, don't you?" I shouted.

Adriana winced at the volume of my voice. "Let's see." She rifled through my closet, evading my question. "This is nice." She held up a draped white jersey dress I'd worn for my parents' ten-year anniversary dinner.

"That kind of looks like my homecoming dress," I murmured.

She shrugged. "It'll be fine. Trust me, this will work better."

I took her word for it. Adriana had exquisite taste, and considering she probably knew what Roman was up to, I should probably take her advice.

For the next two hours, she helped me primp, pluck, moisturize, exfoliate, and depilate in preparation for the big night. In fact, she did so much I'm a

little scared of how crazy she's going to get once our one-year anniversary rolls around.

I bit my lip. Hopefully, Roman and I would still be together in one year. After all, we were both seniors, and college can change a lot of things...

"Don't do that, you're messing up your lip gloss," Adriana scolded, spritzing me with her own Chanel perfume.

Normally, Venice would be here too, but she was probably off in la-la land with Zack, chasing puppies or something. I smiled at the thought. Those two were too perfect for each other.

The doorbell rang, causing me to nearly shoot out my chair. "He's here!" I squealed.

Adriana pressed her hand firmly down on my shoulder. "Your mom will get it. We need to finish getting ready."

"Yes, m'am," I joked.

I guess she was right after all, because Roman stopped ringing the bell, and I could hear the low hum of conversation float up the stairs. When Adriana finished, I stared at myself in awe. This was even better than homecoming. I swear, that girl is a genius.

"Where did you learn to do hair so well?" I marveled, touching my perfect waves.

"Boarding school," she answered matter-of-factly, tossing her Mason Pearson brush back into her giant bag, along with her Hot Tools curling iron, Bumble & Bumble hairspray, and various other products from brands I couldn't pronounce. "One of my best friends there is the daughter of a famous hairstylist."

I was so startled by this nugget of information I almost fell out of my chair. I've never heard Adriana talk about boarding school before, but now I was

more than a little curious. What made her leave her elite Swiss campus and its international princes and whatnot to come back to Valesca?

“Wow. She must be really good, if she can afford the tuition on a hairstylist’s budget.”

“Yeah.” Adriana shrugged. “She’s nearly impossible to get an appointment with, booked five years in advance. She charges something like \$1000 per highlight. But anyway, she doesn’t pay for tuition. Chantal—that’s my friend—her father is a huge media mogul. He pays for almost everything.”

She didn’t offer any more information, and I didn’t ask, because at that moment I heard Roman’s laugh float up the stairs, and I was suddenly itching to join him.

Adriana must’ve noticed, because she grinned and shooed me toward the door. “Go to your lover boy,” she said, rolling her eyes good-naturedly. “I have to get ready for the boat get-together anyway. Have fun, and be safe.”

I blushed. Little did she know, what I planned to do tonight was quite dangerous indeed.

* * *

“Are we almost there yet?”

“Just wait. You’re so impatient,” Roman teased.

I pretended to pout, but secretly, I loved the mystery. When I saw Roman in my living room earlier, my eyes nearly fell out of my head. He’d looked absolutely amazing in a perfect black tux, and he’d handed me a single, perfect red rose—after greeting me with a kiss (kept chaste for my parents’ benefit). He’d whisked me into a private jet for a very short ride and then into a limo, where proceeded to blindfold me. I assume that was so I wouldn’t know where we were going.

Like I would know anyway. I didn’t even know what town or city we landed in.

Suddenly, the limo rolled to a stop, and I heard the distinct sound of a car door slamming shut.

“We’re here?” I ask-squealed, sounding like a little girl.

Roman laughed. “Yes, we’re here.” I felt him move off the seat, and a moment later, he grasped my hand with his strong, warm one. “Watch your step,” he warned, as I slowly swung my legs out the door and stood up hesitantly. He wrapped an arm around my waist to steady me.

And that was when I smelled it. The tangy, salty scent that could only indicate one thing—we were near the ocean. And if that didn’t give it away, the sound of waves crashing against the shore certainly did.

“Can I take off my blindfold now?”

“In a little bit.” He began guiding me closer to the waves. “And...stop.”

I stopped.

I felt him lean closer to me to whisper in my ear, his breath tickling my skin. “Are you ready?”

I nodded eagerly, and then the blindfold fell off. A burst of light replaced the previous darkness, and I had to blink a few times to orient myself. When I did, I gasped, staring at the giant, gorgeous yacht in front of me. It was like a floating mansion, so tall I had to crane my neck to see the top, and it was decorated with strings of beautiful, twinkling lights. That wasn’t what shocked me though. What shocked me was the flowing blue script on the side, which spelled out one very simple name: *Maya*.

“You...you named this after me?” I squeaked.

Roman smiled. “Yes. I got it as a Christmas present, but I couldn’t think of a good name, until I suddenly thought, why not name it after someone I love?”

I turned red with pleasure. We've been saying the L word a lot lately, but I never tired of hearing it. "Wow," I whispered softly. "But—it's your boat —"

"No. It's *our* boat," he corrected firmly. "It's as much yours as it is mine. It has your name on it. Literally."

I laughed but shook my head. "You are too—"

"Handsome? Charming? Perfect?" he suggested.

I rolled my eyes. "I was going to say modest," I joked.

Roman grinned and led me up the ladder onto the yacht. We wound through the massive boat until we reached the top deck, and once again, I was stunned. There was a single table for two in the center, set with a crystal vase of roses, gleaming silverware, and delicate china. There was also a giant banner that read VALESCA HOMECOMING.

I raised a quizzical eyebrow at him.

"Well, I kind of heard that I ruined your homecoming for you," Roman explained rather sheepishly. "So...I guess I'm trying to make it up to you. Obviously, I can't recreate it all the way, and we didn't really have dinner there, but it's the closest I could—"

"Roman," I interrupted, smiling. "You're rambling."

He actually blushed. It was the most adorable thing I've ever seen. "Sorry."

"No, you don't need to be sorry." I looked around, taking in the simple, beautiful decorations, the vast sea stretching out to the horizon, which was still tinged a pale pink and orange from the sunset, and I could feel the emotion welling up inside me. "This...this is absolutely perfect."

Roman's face lit up. "Do you really think so?"

I nodded, drawing him into a lingering kiss that showed him just how much I loved it.

When we broke apart, I could see a mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

“So...are you really hungry? Or can you wait a bit?”

I stared at him curiously. “I can wait a bit. Why?”

“I have one last surprise for you.” Roman gestured to something behind me, and when I turned, I let out a scream that could probably be heard all the way in Asia, because standing at the edge of the floor was a very, very famous British musician. He looked even snazzier in real life, in a white tuxedo and his signature glasses.

“You—you—” I sputtered, unable to form a sentence in my starstruck state.

The singer smiled as the music from one of his most well-known songs started piping through the speakers. As he launched into the opening lyrics, Roman held out a hand. “May I have this dance?”

I was seriously about to start sobbing, but I managed to hold myself together. “Yes, you may,” I breathed, taking his hand.

And even though the song only lasted a few minutes, it seemed to last a lifetime, the most romantic lifetime I could ever hope for.

When he finished, the singer wished Roman and I a “Happy anniversary” and actually kissed me goodbye on the cheek—which nearly caused me to faint—before leaving us to ourselves.

“That was...surreal,” I managed, still unable to believe I’ve just been serenaded by someone who used to be such close friends with Princess Diana, whom I loved.

Roman grinned. “You are so cute like that. And I can’t take the credit for all of it. Adri helped me pull some strings. She mentioned you had a soft spot

for this song.”

I swallowed hard. “I think this is the best anniversary in the history of anniversaries.” I snaked my arms around his neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he murmured, kissing me again.

I pulled back slightly, so that when I spoke, my lips brushed his. “So...are you really hungry? Or can you wait a bit?” I asked, parroting his words from earlier.

Roman raised his eyebrows. “I can wait. What did you have in mind?”

“Well...” My heart was beating so hard my whole body seemed to reverberate from it. “I was wondering...if there were any...staterooms on here.” I gulped.

He blinked. “Yeah, sure. Why? Are you tired?”

Oh god, did I really have to spell it out? “No...but...I will be. After...” I trailed off, hoping he’d take the hint. Wow, this was embarrassing.

“After...?” Suddenly, Roman’s eyes widened in realization. “Wait, are you saying that you—“

I nodded. *Thump, thump, thumpthump*, went my heart.

“Maya.” Roman’s face managed to look concerned, awed, excited, and nervous all at the same time. “Are you...sure? Because I swear, I can wait if you’re not ready. That isn’t why—I mean, I’m not expecting you to do anything, and I don’t want you to until you’re absolutely sure you’re ready. So don’t feel like I’m pressuring you.”

“Would you rather have dinner right now?”

He looked taken back at my question. “Um, uh...” I giggled a bit at the discomfited look on his face. He obviously had no idea how to respond. “I

just..." He looked confused. "No?"

"Good." I looked him in the eye. "Then we're in agreement." Oh god, when did I turn so bold?

I've seriously been hanging around Adriana way too much, but I am not wearing hundreds of dollars of designer lace and silk under my dress just so I could sit here and eat steak. And honestly, I am ready. Absolutely, one hundred percent ready.

"Now..." I bit my lip and tried to look seductive. "How about you give me a tour of this boat?"

Roman stared at me, looking torn. I don't think he fully believed me when I said I was ready, but I swear, I will smack him upside the head if he says no.

Luckily, he didn't. After keeping me waiting for a full minute, he took my hand and led me towards the living area of the yacht.

I took a deep breath, practically shaking from my nerves.

It seemed to take us forever to reach the stateroom, which was as luxurious as the rest of the yacht, but I barely noticed.

Roman dipped his head to plant a soft kiss on my lips. I was just about to deepen it when he pulled back to look at me.

"Maya." His voice was a mere whisper. "Are you absolutely sure?"

I swallowed hard.

I remember reading somewhere once that artists didn't really care if people liked their work or not—they cared about whether their work inspires emotion, whether that be love or hate or anything in between.

There are a lot of guys out there who are cute. There are a lot of guys who are sweeter and less moody than Roman, and there are a *lot* of guys who never kidnapped me or made me feel as though I wanted to tear my hair out. But those were all guys that didn't inspire much in me besides feelings of serene friendship. But Roman? He had never done anything *except* make me feel every emotion in as intense a way as possible. Love, hate, anger, jealousy, passion...it was all there.

"Absolutely, totally, one hundred percent sure," I whispered back, recapturing his mouth with mine.

And when we fell back on the bed and made good use of those foil-wrapped presents Parker gave me, I added any emotion to the list: that of complete and utter bliss.

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EPILOGUE

Six months later

I'm going to suffocate. Seriously. With the way my parents were hugging me, you'd think they would never see me again or something.

"Oh, honey, I'm so proud of you." My mom's eyes glistened with tears as she beamed at me, her face as proud as could be. "You—" She sniffled. "You did great. I can't believe—" Another sniffle. "I can't believe you're all grown up now. And of course, you'll be leaving for Paris tomorrow..."

"Now, come on, Shelly, you're embarrassing her." My dad released me to slip an arm around my mom, who seemed to be on the verge of a breakdown. "And you—" Here he cast a stern look at Roman, who moved closer to me now that there were no parental units in the way. "You better take care of my daughter."

"Of course I will, you don't need to worry about that. I'll guard her with my life," Roman reassured him, giving me a sly wink when my dad turned away.

I blushed. No doubt he was thinking about what we were going to do once we were settled into our hotel in Paris. He was such a pervert. Although I've become a bit of a pervert myself, so I couldn't really say anything.

"Oh no," I suddenly groaned, stepping closer to Roman when I saw who was headed our way. "Here they come."

Roman blanched and pulled me protectively into his chest while both my parents immediately backed off.

"Well, I, uh, I think we're going to go look at the food," my dad blurted, grabbing my mom and dragging her away. "Boy, that ceremony sure made

us hungry.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “Dad, there’s no food here.”

He turned scarlet. “Uh, yeah, well, you know. It never hurts to look. Ok bye now!” With that, he nearly ran across the lawn with my mom.

I shook my head while Roman chuckled. I swear, my parents were like kids sometimes. Luckily, in the past few months, my relationship with my father had strengthened to the point where we were *almost* back to the way we were. It certainly helped that he’d been spending a lot more time with my mom and I, working from home and taking us on random family trips over the weekend. Actually, I thought fishing is just about the most boring thing in existence, but it was nice to spend more time with him.

“Looks like they’ve learned faster than us,” Roman commented dryly, wincing when the hurricane finally hit.

“Mayaaa!” Venice nearly tackled me into the ground in her excitement, her eyes shining and her smile so big I was surprised her face didn’t break. “I’m so, so happy for you! You did it!”

“No, we did it,” I corrected, laughing as I tried to disentangle my limbs from hers.

She sighed happily. “I can’t believe we *graduated*. That’s absolutely insane. Goodbye, school! Hello, world!”

“Um, you do realize college counts as school too, right?” I raised my eyebrows while Roman rolled his eyes, but there was a small smirk on his face. He’d confessed that there were certain times when he just wanted to wring Venice’s neck because of how exuberant she was—which I found funny, considering he’s friends with Zack—but after so many months he’d gotten used to it.

“College, schmollege.” The redhead waved her hand dismissively in the air. “I don’t even want to think about that right now. We have a whole glorious

summer ahead of us, and boy, I can't wait."

Another happy sigh.

I was finally able to stand up again, and I was sure my graduation gown now had a series of grass stains on the back, but I barely managed to straighten fully before I landed right back on my butt.

"My-My! You did so great!" Zack cried, nearly suffocating me with a bear hug. "The way you took your diploma. That was just *awesome!*"

I wondered what he was talking about, since I received my diploma the same way as the other two hundred or so students in my class, but I knew better than to ask. Zack did a lot of crazy things, but one thing he didn't do was make sense.

"Thanks, Zack." I caught sight of Roman's disbelieving face over the blond's shoulder and cracked up all over again.

"Dogpile!" Venice randomly shouted, ignoring the scandalized looks surrounding families cast in our direction as she dove on top of Zack.

"Oof!" I grimaced at the extra weight. Yep, there was no way I wouldn't have grass stains. In fact, my whole back was probably green.

I shot Roman a frantic, help-me look, but he just shook his head and smirked. No doubt he enjoyed my quasi-misery. Ever since Venice and Zack officially started dating, about a week after New Year's, they've been inseparable. The most worrying part about their crazy hyper relationship—other than the fact that those two had taken to randomly chasing puppies together and therefore inspiring desperate fear in almost all dog owners in Valesca, since nothing good ever came out of Venice's canine pursuits—was that they'd become even *more* hyper since they'd gotten together.

Yes, it is possible. Just ask my parents. They now refuse to be within ten feet of Venice and Zack when they were together. I didn't blame them. If

they weren't such good friends, I would've permanently duct-taped their mouths shut by this point.

Although a very, very tiny part of me had to admit they were quite the adorable couple.

"You smell like cotton candy," Zack sighed, twisting his head to sniff Venice's neck.

She beamed. "I snuck some under my robe during the ceremony," she giggled, fluttering her eyelashes.

And then the two proceeded to make out. Did I mention they were still on top of me?

That was it. I take back everything I said about them being adorable—nauseatingly sweet is more like it—and with a superhuman strength endowed on only the truly desperate, I pushed them off of me. They didn't even break contact, and just rolled over on the grass while they continued to kiss and giggle.

"That's absolutely disgusting," Adriana declared, sauntering onto the scene with her signature long, confident strides.

She looked flawless as usual, her blond hair gleaming under the sun and her custom dress hugging every curve. Adriana, being Adriana, had long ago ditched her graduation robe. Beside her, Parker looked pretty flawless himself, in a button-down Thomas Pink shirt and Hugo Boss pants. His signature Rolex shone almost as much as Adriana's hair.

"They really need to stop." Adriana wrinkled her nose at Venice and Zack, who were still making out, except they were now standing up and kind of dancing at the same time.

Don't even ask.

“Ok, that’s it,” Parker announced. “There’s no way I’m letting freakin’ Zack outshine me in the girl category.” He immediately followed up his declaration by laying a kiss on Adriana, who pushed him away and pretended to be uninterested, but finally acquiesced and kissed him back.

I sighed, linking my arm through Roman’s and resting my head on his shoulder as I stared at the scene before me. Everyone was happily coupled up. Well, maybe not *everyone*. At least, not yet.

“Hey, where’s Carlo?” I suddenly asked, looking around to catch a glimpse of the towering Colombian.

“Maybe he’s on his way to Australia right now,” Venice suggested. She’d finally broken out of her makeout session.

Roman and I exchanged a look. “Do you really think so?” I asked cautiously. I found it hard to believe Carlo would make such a huge decision without telling one of us first, but then again, he hadn’t exactly been acting like himself lately. Love did strange things to people. Trust me, I would know.

“You never know with that boy. He’s been in all kinds of torment lately. Go, don’t go. Tell her, don’t tell her.” Parker sounded bored. “I told him to just pick the answer out of a hat but he wouldn’t listen to me.”

“I wonder why,” Roman said sarcastically.

“I can’t believe Daria’s going to Australia for a *year*,” Venice mused. “I’m so jealous.” She pouted. “I wish we didn’t have to split up and go to college.”

“We’re not going to really be spitting up,” I pointed out. “I mean, we’re all within train ride distance. Short train ride distance, at that.”

It was true.

When college decisions finally came out in late March and early April, I was ecstatic to learn I'd been accepted to every school I applied to, including Stanford and Columbia. I was even more ecstatic to learn Roman had also gotten into Columbia, and even though I've always wanted to go to Stanford, I finally decided to go to school in New York with him. It wasn't *just* for him though. Columbia had a great writing program, and I was definitely happy to be so close to home. I wouldn't even have to buy a plane ticket every time I wanted to come back for the holidays and whatnot.

After much debate, crying, pleading, and negotiating, my parents finally relented and decided I could live with Roman in the Soho loft his parents got him as a graduation present, instead of staying in a dorm. They're still not fully comfortable with the idea of their eighteen-year-old daughter living in the big, bad city with her boyfriend, but they trusted me and (sort of) trusted Roman too.

Before we move into our apartment and start classes, though, Roman and I are going a tour of Europe over the summer. I insisted on paying for half of the trip myself, and to my surprise, Roman didn't put up much of a fight. I think he understands that I'm not the type of girl who can keep freeloading off others, even if their families did make billions more than her own.

Speaking of the others, they're all going to college nearby too. Zack was going to be at Berklee, which is one of *the* best music schools in the country. He'd gotten into Juilliard too, but decided it was too stuffy for him. I didn't have a single doubt he was going to rule Berklee. Meanwhile, Venice was going to be at the University of Massachusetts in Boston, which meant she and Zack would still be living in the same city. I'm positive they were going to be highly entertained. I heard Boston has a lot of puppies.

Adriana, who never settled for less than the best, got into as many schools as I did, but her choice was instantaneous: Yale. Parker, on the other hand, followed in his ancestors' footsteps and registered at Princeton, where his great-great-something grandfather had been part of the very first graduating class. Those Princeton girls had no idea what was coming their way, even though the renowned playboy has (gasp) renounced his ways. Part of it was

because he actually loves Adriana. The other part? I'm pretty sure he was slightly terrified Adri would cut his balls off if he ever cheated on her.

And what about Carlo, you ask? Well...that was up in the air. Literally.

He was *supposed* to be going to Middlebury, but after everything that happened with Daria, he might take a gap year and spend it in Australia with her. If they still had a thing. I don't even know. They had a very... complicated relationship, to say the least.

I really did like Daria, though, so I hope they can figure it out. Even though we didn't meet her until the second semester, she had become part of our highly dysfunctional family.

"Maya!"

I immediately tensed, and the exact same expression crossed everyone's face: mild fear.

Taking a deep breath, I turned around and gave my grandmother a big smile. "Hi, grandma! I'm so glad you could make it!"

She frowned at me, not looking glad at all. "Maya, why you wear white? Not your color," she chided. "Your butt look even bigger in white!"

And here we go again.

Luckily, distraction came in the form of a little fur ball called Mickey—or Mikey, as everyone called him in front of my grandmother, since we didn't want to set off another broom incident.

The puppy bounded over with Giselle hot on its heels. I've gotten to know her a lot better the past few months, and was surprised by how funny and down-to-earth she was, considering how much her husband was worth. Of course, the elder male Fiori had only stayed for about a minute before jetting off to Japan or something for business.

I can't say I was sad to see him go.

"Mick—I mean, Mikey, settle down," Giselle scolded as the puppy ran threatening circles around my grandmother, barking the whole time. Giselle had come to view Mickey as her grand-puppy; my grandmother, on the other hand, did *not* have a good relationship with Mickey. My grandmother hated animals, and I think Mickey could tell, because he never stopped growling at her when she was near, and she never stopped trying to swat at him with a rolled-up newspaper like he was a fly.

Needless to say, that was one feud I'm not going to intervene in. I value my life, thank you very much.

"Stupid dog, I ship you to pound if you don't stop bark," my grandmother snapped, eyeing my puppy resentfully.

Mickey crouched down and growled ominously, a challenge glinting in its eyes.

"Peewee! Blondie! Take care of him," my grandmother demanded imperiously, as Parker and Adriana were the closest to her. They both just blinked.

At that moment, Mickey lifted up one leg and peed on my grandmother's shoes.

Holy. Freaking. Crap.

Without saying a word, Roman, Giselle, Zack, Venice, Adriana, Parker and I all bolted from the scene, my grandmother's scream ringing in our ears and attracting much unwanted attention. We managed to make it to safety but ran straight into Carlo.

"Carlo! You're here!" I exclaimed, throwing my arms around the Colombian.

He looked amused. “Of course I’m here. You didn’t think I was just going to grab my diploma and leave without saying bye to you guys, did you?”

The rest of us exchanged guilty glances.

“So, you’ve decided then?” I asked, lowering my voice. “You’re going to Australia?”

Carlo’s face grew more serious and he nodded. I bit my lip. That was such a huge step, but I’m kind of glad he was going to do it. Middlebury would always be there. Love, on the other hand, is one of those things that was definitely worth chasing.

“Have you spoken to Daria?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Briefly, yesterday night. Right after she landed. The school’s going to mail her diploma, but...” He sighed. “She has no idea I’m going.”

I grinned and hugged him again. “I’m really proud of you,” I mumbled, my voice muffled by his chest. And I really was.

If I wasn’t so in love with Roman, I probably would have ended up with Carlo, but I’m not sure that would’ve worked. We were just so similar it would’ve been like dating myself, and besides, I know he he was meant to be with Daria. Everyone had found their other half; I’m glad Carlo had too. They just needed to make it official.

“Well, well, what do we have here? Cheating on the great Roman Fiori right in front of him? It’s a sight for sore eyes.”

The lazy, cocky drawl, which had made my skin crawl all those months ago but now just made me roll my eyes, came from directly behind me.

I turned and cast a disapproving look in Rico’s direction while Roman glared at him, looking like he was going to rip his face off.

“You’re such an instigator,” I complained.

Rico just laughed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Can’t help it sweetheart. It’s part of my charm. Girls can’t resist.” He winked at me. “Including you.”

“That’s it!” Roman was about to storm over to Rico before Zack and Parker held him back.

I laughed at the sight of Roman struggling against their hold, his legs flailing in the air, while Rico just smirked, a smug look on his face. When he looked at me though, I could see genuine pride and amusement in his eyes.

Adriana and Venice, who were also laughing, came up beside me, linking their arms with mine, while Carlo provided a safe, warm presence behind me. My parents also joined us, trailing after my furious grandmother like naughty schoolchildren. Mickey strutted behind them, looking almost as smug as Rico. When he saw me, he gave a happy yip and bounded into my arms.

I beamed at the scene, which may not have been as idyllic as in the movies, but everyone I loved was here, and in the grand scheme of things, they were all happy. And that was all that really mattered.

* * *

“Don’t forget, I gave you a list of all the best restaurants, shopping, and nightlife in every city you guys are going to, so use it,” Adriana instructed, leveling Maya with a stern look as passengers streamed past them to board the plane. “Don’t trust Roman, his taste is...questionable, at times.”

“I’m standing right here, you know,” Roman snapped crankily, putting on his sunglasses. He was not a morning person, as anyone who looked at his face could tell.

Adriana ignored him. “But most of all, be safe—“

“Speaking of safe,” Parker butted in, pulling something out of a small brown Bloomingdale’s shopping bag. “I got you this.” He handed a box over to Maya, who turned the color of a tomato when she saw it. Roman, on the other hand, looked slightly happier.

“Seriously?” Maya shook her head, but there was a small smile on her face. “Parker. You shouldn’t have.”

“I know, I should’ve bought it for myself. Glow-in-the-dark condoms are awesome.” He shook his head. “I really hope you appreciate what I did for you.”

“Boy, it must’ve been hard,” she commented dryly.

Adriana just rolled her eyes, even though she was amused. She probably had the most perverted boyfriend on the planet, and frighteningly enough, she loved it.

The final boarding call was announced over the speakers.

“Oh no! It’s almost time!” Venice pouted, looking like she was about to cry. She picked up Mickey’s paw and waved at Maya and Roman. “Say bye-bye to your mommy and daddy, Mickey.”

Mickey whined sadly and pawed at the air, stretching out towards his owners.

“Oh, baby, we’ll be back soon.” Maya took Mickey from Venice and hugged him close to her chest, planting a kiss on his head. “And we’ll buy lots of doggie treats for you.”

“No we won’t. Like we haven’t bought him enough,” Roman said grumpily, but Adriana could tell it was mostly just for show. He would probably rather die than admit it, but Roman definitely had a soft spot for the dog.

“I hope you have a safe flight, and definitely keep in touch, ok?” Carlo stepped up to slap hands with his childhood best friend and to give Maya a

hug.

His flight for Sydney was going to leave in a few hours, and Adriana couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness. The Scions had never been separated for more than a few weeks at a time, but even though they were growing up and parting ways, she knew they would always remain the closest of friends. Besides, she was happy Carlo was taking the gap year in Australia. He was such a good guy, and he deserved the love everyone else already found.

Everyone said their final good-byes, and a suspiciously bright-eyed Maya and Roman started to make their way onto the plane. Still, their conversation floated into Adri's ears.

"...I can't believe I'm flying freakin' commercial. Why the hell did our jets have to be in maintenance *today* of all days?"

"Stop being so spoiled, Rome, we're in first class. It's not going to kill you."

"I'm not spoiled! Only sissies are spoiled!"

"Well, if the shoe fits..."

"Are you calling me a sissy?!"

Parker chuckled, slipping his arm around Adriana's waist. "Those two are something else."

"They most definitely are," she agreed.

Carlo laughed, shaking his head. "I'm going to miss all this craziness," he said fondly. "But I guess nothing stays the same forever."

"Oh my god, puppy!" Venice interrupted, breaking the slightly somber mood and shoving Mickey into Carlo's arms before she raced after a small golden retriever, Zack hot on her heels.

“Venice! Watch out for the pole—oh. Too late.”

Adriana, Parker, and Carlo cracked up, and in that moment, a bubble of joy rose up inside her. Even though they would all be off to different colleges in the fall, even though they needed to start being more grown-up and start making more adult decisions, Adriana instinctively knew, deep down inside, that the most important thing would never change: friendship. In their case, it was definitely thicker than blood. The Scions, Adri, Maya, and Venice had become a family, and they would always be a family—albeit a highly dysfunctional one—no matter what.

“Come on, guys, let’s go.” Adriana grabbed Parker’s hand and beckoned for the others to follow her, and, with Maya and Roman’s presences right beside them, they slowly moved away from the closed gate.

The future awaits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ana Huang primarily writes Young Adult and Romance fiction. She started writing *All I've Never Wanted* when she was sixteen and originally posted it on Wattpad, a social reading platform, where it has over 17 million views. Besides reading and writing, she also enjoys traveling, Sunday brunch with friends, and shopping for shoes.

To read more of Ana's stories and works and progress, please visit her Wattpad profile at www.wattpad.com/user/ACRL37.

You can also connect with her on her official Facebook page:
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