

a twisted titanic story

unapologetic obsession

DRETHIA.

UNAPOLOGETIC OBSESSION

A TWISTED TITANIC STORY

TALES OF OBSESSION
BOOK THREE

DRETHI A



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AUTHOR NOTE

This book contains themes that some readers may find distressing, including non-consensual sexual content, stalking, power-imbalanced relationships, discussions of suicide, mental health struggles, and substance abuse. Reader discretion is strongly advised.

Please note: This is a work of fiction. The actions and relationships portrayed are not intended to be romanticized or seen as models of healthy behavior.

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*To my readers who waited more than a year for this book,
Who held onto the story even when the pages were paused—
Thank you for your patience, your loyalty, and your quiet faith in me.
This book exists because you never stopped believing it would.*

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BLURB

Tabula Rasa—A clean slate.
Everyone deserves one, no?

Whether I want it or not, that's exactly what I receive—a reset.

My name is Rose.
No last name.
No family to anchor me.
No one to claim me as their own.

I woke up behind a dumpster with no memories, just nightmares surrounding a faceless man. My life has been erased like chalk dusted on a blackboard. Desperate and hungry, I sneak onto a boat, only for the owner to catch me red-handed.

His name is Dr. Caledon Maxwell.
He looks as regal as his name suggests.
Arrogant.
Unattainable.
Drop dead gorgeous.
Drop dead rich.

I'm both terrified and fascinated by him. I tell him I set out to uncover my past, but Dr. Maxwell has other ideas.
Forget the past.
Look forward to the future.

With each passing day, I'm losing control around him. As the boat sails further away, I stop caring about the past as long as I have a future with him.

That is, until my past comes crashing back, and I realize the man from my nightmares might be closer than I thought.

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CHAPTER
ONE

ROSE

Karens ignore trigger warnings, only to complain about said warnings.

Don't be a Karen. This book is intended for readers exploring their fantasies in fiction while exercising sound judgment in real life. This isn't a fairy tale romance. It contains nonconsensual sexual scenes and mental health issues. Please don't read if that triggers you.

I WAS on the verge of death—I was certain of it. My stomach growled loudly, a hunger so consuming that it was painful. I didn't know when I last ate; in fact, I didn't know much at all.

A few days ago, I woke up behind a dumpster with no recollection of how I ended up there or *who* I was. I remembered my name—Rose—and other tidbits such as the year, the capital of France, and the president of the United States. Yet my last name and family members remained a mystery. The street sign suggested I was on Maple Avenue, and another sign suggested this was New York City.

I knew how to read. Why could I read but not remember my last name?

Since then, random memories had been popping up, such as a dark-haired girl visiting me at a hospital and being chased by a faceless man. The scattered recollections haunted me.

Who was I running from? Had he put me in the hospital and chased me to the streets?

If only I could piece the images together. The information was somewhere on the outskirts of my mind, I just couldn't reach it.

When I'd first gained consciousness, I was scared out of my mind, searching for a familiar face or a flicker of recognition. A family, perhaps? It ultimately dawned on me that I was lost and in the wrong part of town.

The nearby buildings were boarded up and covered in graffiti. Disheveled people wandered the streets aimlessly, like brain-dead zombies, seeming as lost as I was. Their clothes were tattered, and their gaunt bodies matched their hollow eyes. Discarded needles littered my path, and I instinctively knew to keep my distance.

Luckily, no one wandered into my alleyway, courtesy of the rancid dumpster smell. The putrid stench kept me safe, though I had to cover my nose to fall asleep. Many slept on the sidewalks of the adjacent streets or lived out of their cars. Some of them even had children. I was horrified to see a little girl reading a book in the back seat of an abandoned car. I asked her if she was all right and was chased away by her mother. I couldn't fault her for viewing me as a threat. But it baffled me that she couldn't give up the syringes and take her daughter away from this hellhole.

Did I end up here by indulging in the same nasty habit? Perhaps I went overboard, resulting in my memory loss.

The thought made me recoil. If that were the case, I vowed never to do it again.

After waking up behind the dumpster, I roamed, searching for a hospital. I had no money or phone and had hoped to run into the police. Instead, I ran into a group of men huddled over a dumpster fire. Desperate to keep my hands warm, I joined them and asked for the nearest hospital or police station. One of them looked me up and down; the stench coming from him was fouler than the dumpster. His leering eyes made my skin crawl, especially when they lingered on my bare thighs. My heart rate accelerated, and even in my disoriented state, I knew he meant trouble. I ran when he gave chase and returned to my dumpster to hide behind it.

The next day, I heard a boat horn and deduced I was familiar with boats if I recognized the sound. We were near a pier. Security guards generally patrolled the pier. Maybe they could help.

I went to the docks with renewed optimism to find a boat owner or security guard. To my dismay, the boats had been winterized, which meant none of the owners would return until spring.

There wasn't a soul in sight, though one of the boats was unlocked. I hopped on board, thinking I had won the lottery, when I found a pouch of baby wipes and a granola bar. Wiping my body with the wipes was the cleanest I had felt since waking up. That was when two guards patrolling the docks blew their whistles.

At first, I was relieved to see the authorities—until they hauled me out of the boat and restrained me. I tried pleading my case: I wasn't a criminal. I'd just lost my memories and needed help.

They didn't believe me.

One of them insisted I was *zonked out on crack like the rest of them* and accused me of robbing the boat to buy more drugs. He ended the rant by suggesting they drag me to their shed and take turns with me. They'd get away with it, too, because *no one would believe a crack whore*.

Though I didn't understand the phrase, *taking turns with the crack whore*, they wore a similar lecherous look as the man from the prior night. Bile rose at the back of my throat, and I ripped away from them and ran. Once more, I didn't stop until I reached my dumpster.

Since then, I had been certain of two things—men were bad news, and nothing was worse than hunger. I was in an evil world where both the bad and the good guys were out to get me. It justified my recurring nightmare of a man chasing me. I was on the run, and I shouldn't trust anyone.

Hiding from external threats came with mind-numbing hunger pangs. Soon, my motivation to dig up my identity and get out of here went up in flames. I only had two goals in mind: food and medical attention. I was a mess.

My stomach gnawed at me, and I didn't know how long I could hold out. Last night, I resorted to dumpster diving in a moment of desperation. Swallowing the spoiled food wasn't an easy task, what was worse was keeping it down. I became violently ill from the soured scraps and vomited until there was nothing left in my stomach.

Hopelessness washed over me, but I refused to give in and accept my fate. Shivering, I hugged myself to ward off the cold as I emerged from the safety of my alley. With my arms wrapped tightly around myself, I walked on wobbly legs in search of food.

The daylight was dimming, and the chatter of people was growing quiet. There wasn't anything nearby—no restaurants or fast-food places—and I had no choice but to return to the unattended boats. Hopefully, another

owner forgot to pull up the boarding ramp. If today were my lucky day, I could avoid those guards and find something to eat.

I walked past the first boat and looked through the large window. The lights inside were turned off, so all I saw was my reflection with hollowed cheeks and baggy eyes. My caramel-colored skin was muted, and my dark hair was brittle and dirty. The white-and-blue hospital gown I had woken up in was in scraps from sleeping on the hard ground. The torn-up coat I dug out of the dumpster was three sizes too big. My feet were wrapped in raggy socks someone had thrown out.

I stopped dissecting the horrifying reflection upon sniffing something delicious in the air. Craning my neck, I found an abandoned brown bag on a bench in the middle of the floating dock.

Maybe one of the security guards forgot to throw away his leftovers.

I rushed to the bag and opened it with zeal. My heart leaped to my throat when I saw a half-eaten sandwich and some fries. I grabbed a handful of cold fries and shoved them into my mouth. Happy tears prickled in the corners of my eyes at the first taste of real food after many long days.

It didn't last long. I sensed a sudden shift in the air and stopped chewing on cue. An unmistakable creak from the right side of the floating dock caught my attention. I was no longer alone.

My first thought was that the guards had found me. I had steered clear of the docks in fear of them, but the hunger had drawn me out.

Big mistake.

Gravely, I let my eyes drift to the right. A brown-eyed teenager of fifteen or sixteen stood beside a girl who could have been his twin if she hadn't been much younger. They looked dirty and cold, like me, and probably lived in one of the junkyard cars. I could recite their story as if I had written it myself. Their parents—or a parent—left them with promises of returning with food. Instead, they were out there with glassy eyes and a syringe in their arms. The same hunger that brought me to the dock had called upon them.

The little girl stared at me like she wanted to cry, and the older boy appeared resentful. I knew why. He wanted to feed his sister—even though it looked like he hadn't eaten, either. This brown bag would have belonged to them had they arrived a few minutes earlier.

The girl hung her head because she knew it was too late.

My eyes closed because I couldn't do it. No matter how much my insides twisted from the hunger pangs, I couldn't take away this glimmer of hope from them. I mimicked a smile and held up the brown bag for her.

"Here. You can have this."

The girl's lanky brown hair bounced as she glanced at her brother with probing eyes. He was equally suspicious and had a firm grip on her shoulders. From what I learned on the streets, this dark world was unkind. Neither of them trusted me. They trusted no one.

I placed the bag on the bench and backed away. The boy stood still, eyes roaming my face, until I put more distance between myself and them. Finally, he gave his sister the smallest nod. She ran to the bench and opened the bag.

"Fries!" she screamed like she had struck gold. It forced another stiff smile on my face, despite the heart-crushing realization I'd go another day without food.

Her brother huffed a smile, too, and sauntered to the bench on heavy legs. "Enzo, it's fries," she quipped, popping one into her brother's mouth. He laughed, happily munching on it. She grabbed the leftover sandwich from the bag, split the measly amount, and gave half to her brother.

I was lingering without a purpose, salivating after the scraps of food the kids were eating, and sating myself with the smell. When my stomach howled, they both glanced at me.

"Do you want some?" The little girl held up her half of the sandwich for me, making me want to cry that a spark of light existed in this dark reality. It was quickly extinguished when her brother gently lowered her hand.

"I'll split with you," he offered to my surprise. He held up his tiny portion so his sister could eat her entire share.

Their faces were placid as they waited, giving away what little food they had, even though they had no idea when they'd eat next.

I couldn't do that to them, either. They looked like they hadn't eaten in days. Half a sandwich and some measly fries might be enough to hold them over for a couple more nights, but not if they split it with me. I couldn't take away what little they had.

I plastered on a smile and shook my head, "You know what? I'm not that hungry."

Neither of them believed me, but the boy gave me a curt nod, almost in gratitude for letting them have this one meal. It was probably their first

stroke of luck in a long while.

Without another word, I turned around and took off. I couldn't keep torturing myself by watching them eat. This world was too cruel. I had no idea what my purpose in it was or even who I was, but it couldn't be this—scraping for food.

Not ready to give up, I scanned the pier and found another floating dock stretching deeper into the water. The bigger boats were docked farther away and were impossible to break into. You couldn't easily jump onto a vessel the size of a cruise ship, but something was calling my name. The pier seemed familiar, and I exhausted my limited energy walking to a white boat towering over the rest. The boat—or more accurately, the mega yacht—had multiple levels and endless decks. Large glass windows allowed a glimpse inside the lavish interior. The name was carved on the side in a beautiful font.

“Olympus,” I read out loud, inspecting the luxury yacht with wide eyes.

My stomach growled when I saw a group of men unloading seafood trays and fruit crates from a dinghy and carrying them onto the yacht. Even the platform to hop on board was extravagant, with a large slanted wooden ramp and a red carpet.

None of the guards were manning the entryway as they were preoccupied with the delivery. By now, I knew better than to ask men for help. The few times I tried, it made me wonder whether I was on the run from all the men on earth.

No.

Asking for help hadn't gotten me anywhere. I needed to eat, regain my strength, and regroup to escape my predicament. The loading and unloading of items had everyone engrossed. I had a small window to sneak in. I could run inside and grab a few things, then slip away. It was risky business, but the reward was too damn tempting.

With my head bowed, I crossed the ramp before I could chicken out. Waves crashed against the side of the boat, gently rocking me from side to side as I entered. I barely took in the opulent luxury setting, following the various aromas like a bloodhound.

My mouth watered when I stepped through the sliding doors and into an empty dining hall. Two tables were stacked against the wall to create an L-shape with a chef's nook to serve guests in the buffet line. Trays stacked with delicious food were lined beside the table.

Fruits.
Meats.
Fish.
Pastries.
Bread.

Someone was transferring the trays to the L-shaped tables to set up the buffet. Perhaps they were interrupted, or they went to the kitchen to grab serving spoons. Whatever the case, they'd return soon to complete the setup. Time was of the essence.

I ran to the stands and snatched a muffin from one of the trays. I sank my teeth into it and moaned.

Oh God, that tastes good.

“Hey, you! Stop right there,” a man yelled from behind me.

A burly hand wrapped around my wrist before I could take another bite. I shrieked, knowing I'd be kicked out. At least I had swiped a muffin. It would last me a day, more if I only ate a little at a time.

With a grim expression, the bearded, stocky man squeezed my wrist with his much larger hand. “You thieving bitch. Let go,” he shouted.

“No!” I cried when he managed to dislodge the muffin. It fell on the table with a soft thud. “No, please, please let me have it.” Desperation flared as my last shred of hope slipped through my fingers. Fat tears leaked from my eyes, and I lunged for it.

The man yanked me back with a jerk. “Get the fuck out of here.”

He shoved me, and I fell face-first, hitting my forehead against the hard ground. I twisted my ankle when I fell, the pain ignited like lightning. With my eyes on the floor, I could no longer see him but was mentally prepared for his next onslaught. What I heard instead was a resounding blow, and I twisted my neck to follow the commotion. The stocky man had been thrown against the wall.

“Dr. M-Maxwell?” he stuttered, grabbing onto his chubby belly where he had presumably been kicked. I followed his gaze.

A newcomer had entered the room, though I couldn't make out his face with his back to me. Instead, my eyes leveled with his expensive black shoes, slowly trailing up to a pair of slacks fitted to his muscular thighs and settling on the light blue shirt covering his broad shoulders. He was incredibly tall with dirty-blond hair.

He—Dr. Maxwell—was built like a giant. His shoulders rose and fell from the exertion of hitting someone. Or was it anger? The tense muscles around his neck contracted, his attention lasered on the fumbling fool before him.

“I-I found this stowaway trying to steal food—” the stocky man attempted to explain, but was promptly interrupted when he was hefted higher against the wall. Dr. Maxwell’s next punch was so impactful that the decorative art pieces on the wall fell to the ground.

Oh God.

Perhaps it was best if I left during their brawl. I tried to stand, but putting weight on my twisted ankle hurt too much. I crawled under the table instead and took refuge inside the chef’s nook. Rising to my knees, I watched the two men over the table.

The doctor spoke in a deep voice, reaching inside me to stir up a tinge of familiarity. Because I was busy trying to put my finger on it, his words took a few seconds to register. “I’m going to break the hand you used to touch her. Do we understand each other?”

It was his only warning before he grabbed the man’s hand and twisted it with a ruthlessness I had yet to witness in this world. Two people screamed simultaneously. The man, whose hand was now broken, and the second cry came from me.

My petrified shriek distracted Dr. Maxwell, and his victim scampered away. From under the table, I saw his strong legs marching toward me, and my parched voice gave out in fear.

The doctor squatted on the ground, tilting his head to peek under the table. Before our gazes could clash, I jolted when I caught a whiff of his scent. I recognized the hint of amber infused with something intoxicating. It held a remarkable resemblance to warmth and the outdoors, like cashmere wrapped in wood. Images of large hands roaming my body played on repeat, waking something inside me that had been lying dormant. His essence dwarfed the little alcove, and I huddled in the farthest corner.

It didn’t stop him from locating me. “Found you, you little runaway.”

CHAPTER

TWO

ROSE

HIS INTENSE GAZE pinned me in place, and I reluctantly returned it. An involuntary gasp escaped my lips at the sight of his face. From up close, he was more intimidating than I had expected. His piercing sky-blue eyes stripped me bare, as if he knew all my secrets. He wore a stoic expression, while his full lips pressed in a hard line that gave nothing away.

The air felt hotter with every breath I took, and I almost suffocated under the weight of this man's imposing presence. My palms grew slick with sweat. One look had unsettled me, and I nervously fidgeted, attempting to regain some semblance of composure.

There was a foreboding feeling that our paths had crossed before. How was that possible? From what I gathered, I was homeless and possibly a drug addict. This beautiful stranger—Dr. Maxwell—looked nothing like anyone from the streets. Everything about him was luxurious and posh. Impeccable clothing clung to his sculpted physique, his giant frame mimicking that of a professional wrestler rather than a physician. He seemed too young to be a doctor, though the title was somehow fitting.

He had only one thing in common with the folks on the streets—a tolerance for violence. His knuckles were bloody from the scuffle. There were paintings and broken glass on the ground, but he seemed unfazed by the havoc he had wreaked.

I wondered what the doctor planned to do to me. Would he throw me into deep water for sneaking in? I had no idea if I could swim.

I should have been trembling with panic. Instead, all I felt was undue fascination, and I couldn't tear my eyes from the man. It was impossible not to be captivated by him. Raw masculinity emanated from the man with little effort. Our eyes locked in a silent battle of wills. He scrutinized me with a calculating gaze, and the tension between us grew palpable with each passing second.

He rolled his sleeves to his elbows, revealing defined veins pulsating beneath his taut skin. Since I couldn't predict his intentions, I prepared for fight-or-flight mode. But all he did was grab the muffin I had dropped on the table and extend it to me.

"Was this what you wanted?" Dr. Maxwell asked, dropping his voice to a much softer tone.

I didn't reach for the muffin. Instead, my gaze drifted to where the injured man had escaped. Since the moment I woke up on the street, no one had shown me kindness. It was difficult to accept that a man capable of such violence would be the first.

Silence stretched between us, but he wasn't perturbed. He seemed practiced with patience. The piece of cake taunted me, and my stomach growled for the hundredth time. I could no longer hold out, even if this kindness was a ploy to seize my hand and drag me out to throw me in the water.

I snatched the muffin from his grasp before he could do such a thing, biting into it savagely. When he rose, I waited for the other shoe to drop. My eyes tracked him until he returned with a water bottle, popped the top open, and held it out under the table. With trepidation, I grabbed the bottle and scrambled away. I gorged like a wild animal before the morsels could be taken away.

"Drink slowly and only a little at a time," he instructed. "If you haven't had fresh water lately, too much at once can cause water intoxication."

There it was again. The deep timbre in his familiar voice had my heart in a choke hold. I momentarily neglected my stomach and stared at him.

"Same goes for the muffin. Small bites until your stomach adapts. Otherwise, your body will go into shock."

I forced myself to nod and took a small sip of water. What I really wanted was to down the entire bottle and violently inhale the muffin. But something in his tone made me heed the advice. At this point, I was certain

he wasn't playing a cruel prank. It was the first dose of generosity I had experienced.

Nonetheless, when he offered his hand, I retreated as far back into the nook as possible. He'd have to crawl under the table to reach me, which seemed beneath him. A man like him preferred to coax his prey out rather than engage in tedious labor.

As I suspected, he grabbed a tray from one of the stands and held it just out of my reach. A delicious aroma floated into the air when he removed the steel cover, giving me a glimpse of a saucy stack of flat noodles with golden-brown edges. The sight jogged my memory. It was lasagna, and it had never looked so appetizing. Rich marinara sauce oozed out of the tender pasta, cradling a harmonious blend of fragrant herbs. Melted mozzarella blanketed the top with a sprinkle of fresh basil. The burst of color made it appear more tantalizing.

"I bet you're hungry for more than a piece of muffin." His voice was silky, like a seductive dream. "Why don't you come out of there for a proper meal?"

His offer prompted another memory—a children's story. The images were hazy, but I remembered the book from when I was only a little girl. The story was about two hungry children, Hansel and Gretel. They were lured into a witch's lair with food, only to be prepped to become dinner instead. I couldn't refute the similarities.

When I didn't move, he lowered another tray, tempting me with a platter stacked high with French fries. The pain of the fries I had given away was still too fresh. It seemed fate was rewarding me with a better version. These fries were covered in melted cheese. My mouth watered when some of it seeped further into the potatoes.

Everyone had their limits, and I had met mine. The delicious bait had its intended effect. I abandoned the muffin wrapper, inching toward him on all fours. As soon as I was within reach, he grabbed my arm and pulled me to him.

Every part of my body came alive when I crashed against his chest. My heart pounded violently against my rib cage. Fire erupted from my toes to my fingertips. Blaring alarms sounded in my ears. I gazed at his airtight hold on my arms. The contact set something in motion for me. I didn't know whether it was fear or anticipation. Perhaps it was both.

I tilted my face to see if it had the same effect on him. There was no change in his stoic expression. His eyes lingered on my arms, slowly trailing to my neck, and finally resting on my lips. The extent of his perusal was clinical, whereas I was ready to pass out from the sudden energy shift.

Maybe the effect wasn't exclusive to him. No one had held me against their chest. Physical contact with any human could have triggered such a reaction, though it was hard to imagine it would be so intense. There was something unsettling about his closeness. I tried to pull away, but his hold tightened with a transparent message: he wouldn't let me go.

He led me to a booth set for two. "Stay here," he commanded, helping me shrug off the tattered coat. There was no doubt in his voice, only self-assured confidence. It had an eerie effect, forcing me to obey his command. My butt parked on the seat on its own.

I watched him grab a plate and visit the tray stands for a serving of each food item. When he placed the stacked plate in front of me, I attacked it like a street dog. I ignored the utensils beside me, eating with my hands and without an ounce of class.

"Easy," he cooed. "Remember what I told you. Eat slowly as you reintroduce food into your system." He sat on the bench next to me and grabbed my wrists.

Surprised, I dropped the piece of chicken in my hand. Sitting across from me would've made more sense. Why would he sit next to a dirty stray dog? I smelled foul.

He didn't seem to notice and wiped my hands with a linen napkin. Twirling a strand of pasta around a fork, he lifted it to my mouth.

Flabbergasted, I parted my lips and let him feed me like a child.

"Chew slowly," he instructed before removing the lid from another water bottle. Before I could reach for it, he held it against my lips.
"Remember, drink only a little at a time."

I tipped my head back and let him feed me small sips of water. Satisfied, he set the bottle on the table and wrapped another thin strand of pasta around his fork.

The impatient part of me wanted to face-plant into the food. Eat so much that I would never know hunger pains again. The only thing that stopped me was the strange need to appease him. I was extremely conscious of his every move whenever he picked up the fork and brought it to my lips.

His large hand wrapped around my waist to pull me closer until I was practically sitting on his lap. The hold was rigid, as if he feared I'd disappear into thin air. The intimacy should've alarmed me, but I couldn't find it in me to care. I was finally warm and fed. Nothing else seemed to matter.

Instead, I was more concerned about my pungent odor. With our proximity, there was no way for him to miss it. My only hope was that he had a condition where he didn't have a sense of smell.

"Don't fall asleep," he ordered when I sank farther into his arms. My eyes grew heavy the more he filled my belly with food. "You might have a concussion."

Concussion?

I didn't know the word. Instead of trying to remember it, I focused on staying upright. Unlike the stench coming from me, his smell was intoxicating. I grabbed on to it like a lifeline to stay alert. I inhaled it hungrily, hoping it'd distract me from the oncoming slumber.

It had the opposite effect.

The heady cologne must have been doused in mind-altering substances. It acted like a hallucinogen when combined with the comfort of his warm arms. It made me give in, and I sighed contentedly, hoping against hope this reprieve wasn't a cruel joke.

"Open your eyes," he said huskily when my eyes drooped.

The voice came out of nowhere, and I glanced at him. My head reeled back, startled at how he was watching me. The intensity behind his blue eyes was mesmerizing.

Why was he looking at me that way?

I was nobody. I reeked of garbage, quite literally, since I had been sleeping behind a dumpster with rats.

He looked expensive and smelled so good that it made me dizzy. Yet, he looked at me like I was the prize to be won—like I was already his.

I didn't understand. Why did he want to feed me, let alone hold me? Everything about me was filthy. I stared at his luxurious shoes and realized my dirty feet had soiled the expensive flooring. Swiftly, I withdrew my feet, tucking them under the bench.

"We'll get you cleaned up once you finish eating," he informed me, voice just as rough and certain as before. It gripped my soul and coiled

around my spine. Similar to his features, it was angelic with cruel edges—like a fallen angel.

I must be in heaven, then. Angels and an abundance of food only existed there. Relief flooded me at the thought of not returning to the cruel streets. There were plenty of opportunities to die behind that lonely dumpster, but my survival instincts never faltered. Something innate told me I had to stay alive even when there was nothing worth living for, and tonight was my prize for staying alive.

“I’m Rose,” I suddenly declared.

He paused, as did my food supply. Those were the first words I had uttered to him. Perhaps my voice broke the trance, and it dawned on him that he was hand-feeding a homeless person.

“What?” he asked as if he had misheard me.

Over the last few days, I had gathered that I was soft-spoken. It didn’t come as a surprise that he had a hard time hearing me. I cleared my throat.

“My name is Rose,” I tried again, speaking louder this time. When he frowned, I reverted to my innately hushed tone and added, “Though, I can’t remember my last name.”

Strong hands gripped my nape, forcing me to meet his gaze. The darkness in his blue eyes clashed with confusion. “What do you mean you can’t remember your last name?” he barked.

I flinched at the hostility over a simple introduction. “I-I woke up in an alley one day. I had no idea how I got there and couldn’t remember anything other than my first name.”

He grabbed my cheeks, his gloomy eyes searching mine and trying to dissect the truth. I suppose my story sounded fictional to others.

“What’s your name?” I garbled through my duck lips, courtesy of his tight grip.

For several moments, he said nothing, digesting the monumental information. A fleeting expression of something crossed his face once he processed it, something calculative.

He was impossible to read, but I couldn’t shake the feeling he was forming the first drafts of a loose plan. Like he was cooking up something and considering the logistics.

But how would my memory loss benefit him?

He finally let go and picked up the fork. After I had given up on an introduction, he said, “I’m Caledon Maxwell. But call me Caden.”

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CHAPTER

THREE

CADEN

SHE WAS PERFECT THIS WAY.

Complacent and nestled in my arms, Rose fought the food coma. Exhaustion settled on her features once she finished her meal. The comfortable setting only added to her fatigue, and she drifted in and out of her slumber.

I stroked her cheeks periodically to keep her awake, but otherwise, I let her rest, staring at the little stowaway with an intense hunger burning inside me. She was unkempt in a torn hospital gown, the cotton fabric marred with mud and soil. There was dirt under her nails, and her skin was speckled with scrapes and bruises.

But fuck, if she wasn't the most beautiful thing I had seen.

She seemed filthy and smelled rancid, but I couldn't find it in myself to care. The man who demanded proper hygiene of everything was suddenly unperturbed by uncleanliness. Even in this state, Rose was better than any runway model or pageant beauty queen. Brown, almond eyes I wanted to dive into, hair so fucking long she might as well be Rapunzel, and miles of caramel skin. Everything about her made me feral and scream one thing on repeat.

Mine.

The possessive word reverberated through me, sending a shock wave of confusion through the staff on this mega yacht.

I bought this boat with my cousin, Xander, as part of a joint venture. Although we delegated the day-to-day operations to a general manager, we

hand-selected and approved everyone who worked for us. The staff knew me well enough to be shocked that I had assaulted our deliveryman over a thief.

The flabbergasted crew stared at us from afar, confused as to why I would let a homeless girl on my luxury yacht. She was far from the target demographic. Their disapproval was evident when I texted them, instructing them to open the main dining hall only after I took Rose to the infirmary. I didn't want nosy passengers prying into my business, whereas the staff was concerned her ragged condition would scare away the other passengers.

I inspected the marks on her arms and face. They were either from sleeping on concrete or rodent bite marks. Antiseptic should do the trick for the superficial scratches, but she may need a tetanus shot for the rest.

My main concern was her ankle and the bruise on her forehead. The darker it got, the more my blood boiled with the need to find the deliveryman and break his other hand. On second thought, I texted my head of security to track the man down. If she had a concussion, I would finish what I started.

Luckily, Rose hadn't exhibited signs of impaired coordination. I'd still prefer to take her to the medical room for a closer inspection.

Before I could lift her in my arms, a brave crew member interrupted us with an anxious gaze. Todd, I think. "Good evening, Dr. Maxwell. We have completed boarding and are all set to depart in the morning. Have you decided if you'll be joining us?"

Cruises were among the most profitable travel ventures, and luxury voyages were an untapped market. Though we left the details for Olympus to our team, the captain insisted that one of the owners join them for the first voyage. Instead, we compromised on a stamp of approval before they set sail. Xander was preoccupied, so I begrudgingly agreed to the task. My little fugitive was the last thing I expected to find at the final inspection.

The crew had asked me to join them. On top of being one of the owners, it didn't hurt to have a doctor on board. Most cruises hired a few nurses, the larger ones opting for a physician. I didn't deem it necessary since we had fewer than one hundred passengers.

My jaw clenched with a swift change of heart. "Yes," I announced, surprising both of us. "I've decided to join after all." No sooner had I said it, I knew it was the right decision.

“Very well, sir,” he said without missing a beat. “I’ll get the Owner’s Suite prepared.”

I nodded, making a mental list of everything I needed. I texted my chauffeur to swing by the house for the items and drop them off.

When Todd lingered, I glanced at him. “Anything else?”

“Um. Your guest,” he spoke in an undertone, surreptitiously glancing between me and Rose, whose legs were draped across my lap.

The blood in my veins pounded, and I covered her thighs with possessive hands to shield them from his view. I didn’t rip his eyes out because he was an older man with a daughter the same age as Rose. However, he was examining her for a different reason, which was no less infuriating.

“Would you like us to show her out?” he asked.

I arched a brow and suppressed the rage I was finding harder to control with every passing second. Over my dead body. She’d never be out of my sight because...

She.

Was.

Mine.

I expected him to be somehow privy to the information, as if it were common knowledge and everyone should know it.

“Are you calling the shots about when my guest needs to depart?”

He gulped. “No, of course not, sir. I just don’t want her to get stuck on the boat. I assumed she would want to disembark before we pulled the gangway.”

I glanced at the girl in my arms, drifting in and out of sleep. “She’s coming with us.”

“What?” he asked, unable to mask the shock. He examined her tattered clothes with doubt but wised up under my steely glance. “B-but we’re setting sail for international waters. The cruise ship officers will be required to see her passport.”

My eyes twitched. Passport? Of all things, bureaucracy had put a damper on my spontaneous plans. Unfortunately, Todd was right. The officers monitored everyone on international waters, and it wasn’t a five-thousand-passenger cruise ship where she could blend into the crowd. She’d be found out within our smaller group.

“Have the cruise ship officers meet me downstairs. Oh, and ask Amelie to open the medical suite.”

He remained uncertain but didn’t argue. “Very well, sir.”

I grunted, dismissing him.

I didn’t have proper documentation for Rose, but I also couldn’t risk the cruise ship officers informing the police about her. What was the going rate for smuggling humans? I hoped the officers quietly accepted the bribe instead of posing an ethical dilemma. Ethical men bored me, and I wasn’t in the mood to be bored.

As Todd left to do my bidding, I studied Rose. The trivial act of resting her head on my shoulder made me feel downright savage. My cock strained against my slacks, consuming me with this need for her like a tidal wave, untamable and wild.

She was in no condition to endure what she woke in me. The odd thing was she hadn’t done anything to evoke this beastly response other than merely exist. The bone-chillingly exhilarating feeling was frenzied. Unstoppable. It told me I had made the right decision by taking her.

She belonged with me. Always.

Rose sighed against my neck. Before she could fall asleep, I maneuvered her in my arms and rose from the booth, mindful not to hit her head against anything. She stirred but didn’t try to move.

I made my way to the upper deck. None of the guests ventured this way. The only people passing by were the crew, who watched us curiously. Gossip among them spread like wildfire. The word had already reached them, and they likely thought I was crazy for taking her in. They could think whatever the fuck they wanted as long as they didn’t interfere or look her way. I tightened my arms around her as the urge to hide her from the world nearly suffocated me.

Amelie, the ship’s resident nurse, was already waiting for us in the medical suite. The spacious room was unlocked, moonlight flooding through the large windows.

The guests on this boat expected luxury even while sick. Everything in this room was handpicked with them in mind, with necessary medical equipment as the only clinical touch. Fresh flowers on the side tables counteracted the smell of disinfectant. There were no posters of human anatomy or diagrams of medical procedures. Instead, the walls were decorated with paintings. A diffuser emanated lavender and salty ocean

scents to remind visitors of Bali. The bed, in case someone had to be monitored overnight, resembled one at a luxury hotel with crisp white sheets, fluffy pillows, and a plush comforter.

Most medical equipment, such as stethoscopes and blood pressure cuffs, was stored in drawers. Supplies and drugs were locked up in cabinets and out of sight. Even the examination table was tucked into the wall like a Murphy bed. Everything about the room was inviting, down to the heated floors.

Rose roused once I stepped inside the suite. She blinked with heavy lids. If she had been outdoors all this time, it would have been too cold to sleep more than a couple of hours at a time. No wonder she was passing out. She was finally warm enough to rest.

“Where are we?” she asked, voice thick with sleep.

I didn’t answer or look at her. If I did, I wouldn’t want to leave her side. Fury festered inside me at her state and the fact that she had been living on the streets. It made me want to set everything on fire, but now wasn’t the time to indulge my anger. I had to meet the officers and ensure they wouldn’t do something stupid like call the authorities. Amelie was the only person reliable enough to tend to Rose while I tied up loose ends. But she wouldn’t play ball until I explained the stowaway in my arms.

“Who do we have here... Oh my god!” Amelie gasped upon seeing Rose’s face, which was scratched and bruised.

“Not a word in front of her,” I hissed. “We’ll discuss this outside.”

“Y-your face,” Amelie stuttered.

Rose stared at the nurse blankly.

“Get it together,” I snapped. “You’re scaring her.”

“But—”

I gave her such a venomous look that Amelie swallowed her next argument. “Outside,” I repeated.

Wordlessly, she exited to wait for me outside the room. Rose watched our exchange passively and only jolted when I set her on the bed.

“Who is she?” she whispered so only I would hear.

“Nurse for this boat.” I kneeled in front of her. “Amelie will run a few tests on you while I’m gone.”

She grabbed my shirt collar. “You’re leaving?” she asked, horrified.

Satisfaction warmed my blood at how tightly she gripped my collar. I expected her to gradually warm up to me instead of this immediate

separation anxiety at the thought of my absence. It took everything in me not to smile.

“I have to attend an important meeting.” Or rather, I only had a few hours to turn two ethical officers dirty. Hopefully, cash would do the trick. Resorting to blackmail would require procuring dirt, and there wasn’t enough time for that. “I’ll be back later. Okay?”

She nodded as I kissed her temple. The last thing I had expected was the amenability, especially given how feral she appeared. I stood and walked out of the room, my footsteps heavy with discontent at parting with my stowaway.

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CHAPTER
FOUR
ROSE

I CRANED my neck to listen to their conversation. Their argument was inaudible, but Dr. Maxwell's harsh assertions told me he was winning.

I lay on the comforter, aware that my dirty feet were ruining the lavish covers. They felt soft, unlike any luxury I had known. Until today, I didn't even know what it was like to be warm. Who knew heat felt so good?

Tears sprang to my eyes. How many times had I hoped someone would douse me with this type of kindness or look at me the way he did? It was the first dose of compassion I had experienced, and I was beyond grateful to him for restoring my faith in mankind.

Abiding by his instructions was a no-brainer, and I dutifully waited for the nurse. I melted against the soft mattress while awaiting her return. The elegant scents and the silky linens called to me, and I shut my eyes.

“Rose?”

My eyes fluttered to make out a figure. It was the nurse, Amelie. I didn't remember introducing myself to her. Dr. Maxwell must have given her my name.

She sat on the bed, poring over me with concern. “Don't fall asleep until I can rule out a concussion.”

For a moment, I was struck by her beauty. Rich golden-bronze skin and soft pink cheeks. Not a single visible pore on her face, which was framed by charcoal hair. Her deep brown eyes were striking. Even the shapeless blue scrubs couldn't camouflage her perfect hourglass figure.

“You're beautiful,” I said stupidly before I could think better of it.

Her stunning eyes rounded as if I had grown three heads. Dr. Maxwell had reacted the same way when I spoke for the first time.

She shook it off and shone a penlight into my eyes. I squinted but tried my best to follow her instructions. It was a while before she retracted the light and showed me to the bathroom.

The bathroom boasted a luxurious marble countertop and golden faucets with a fancy bathtub in the middle. I relieved myself, then hobbled to the sink, taking full advantage of the mini mouthwash bottle. Sitting at the edge of the tub as it filled, I dipped my feet inside to relieve the ache in my ankle. It was hard to rinse off from this position, and I couldn't find soap or a loofah. Still, running hot water was a commodity, and cleaning my privates was a godsend.

Amelie eventually knocked on the door, insisting I return to the room to continue the tests. She held small prints from an arm's length, moved them closer, and asked me to read out loud. She froze every time I looked her in the eye and gave her an answer.

Initially, I considered there might be something wrong with my voice. Soon, I realized she was awed that I met her gaze at all whenever I spoke. She was even more shocked when I didn't react after she absentmindedly touched my ankle to examine it. She had immediately retracted her hand, almost as if she had crossed some serious personal boundaries.

I internally shrugged. Perhaps she had expected me to be a meek thing that couldn't make eye contact while speaking or too timid to be touched.

Amelie scribbled notes, ultimately declaring, "I think we can rule out concussion, but Dr. Maxwell will want to confirm for himself."

"When is he coming back?" I asked like a loyal puppy. Could you blame me? If someone fed a stray dog and showered it with love, it would wag its tail at the thought of its new owner.

"Soon." She hesitated before busying herself with a tray full of supplies. "H-he mentioned you're suffering from some memory loss." She studied me skeptically.

I nodded, dissolving into the mattress. There was no point in convincing her I was telling the truth. Amnesia was a telenovela plot, even I retained that much recollection. Any normal human being would think I was making it up.

I closed my eyes. After all, she said I could sleep if I didn't have a concussion. I hissed when something unpleasant grazed my cheek. Amelie

tsked when I moved away from the burning sensation.

“These will get infected if I don’t treat them with antiseptic,” she insisted, chasing my face with a cotton ball. “Dr. Maxwell scheduled for vaccine vials to be dropped off before we set sail. You’ll be out of the danger zone after a tetanus shot.”

I didn’t know what a tetanus shot was, but it sounded unpleasant. Something else she said niggled at my mind.

Before we set sail.

But I couldn’t leave on this boat. The plan was to regain my strength and find my way home. My family probably lived in New York. Sailing away meant I was going in the wrong direction. “I can’t leave,” I mumbled. “Can you let me know before the boat sets sail?”

She ignored the request. “Let’s get these cleaned up,” she said, lifting my arm to inspect the wounds. “How about I grab some toiletries and run you a warm bath? You can go back to sleep once I’m done.”

A bath sounded amazing, but I couldn’t fathom lifting my body off this soft bed. “I’m so tired,” I said apologetically, feeling like a diva for making her job difficult.

She smiled kindly at me. “It’s okay, Rose. You’ve gone through a lot.” She headed to the door, then paused to speak over her shoulder. “It was good to see you again.”

What?

Despite my best attempts, I couldn’t muster the energy to ask her what she meant. The plush pillows called to me, and I drifted to a slumber.

When I opened my eyes next, the room was dark, illuminated by the dim moonlight streaming through the windows. A hazy figure had taken Amelie’s spot, and I knew instantly it was him. The air smelled like the outdoors and cashmere with a hint of amber. If the unique cologne didn’t set him apart, his physique did the job. He was the largest man I had met—both in height and bulk. Even through the mist, his shadow was unmistakable. I glanced at the nightstand to find a basin filled with water. Steam rose from it as if it were boiling. His signature smell, mixed with the foggy haze, was too much to handle. The heady stuff could put a person in a coma.

Once my eyes adapted, I watched him in the moonlight, which cast a warm golden glow on his features, especially his chiseled torso. He was shirtless.

Holy shit.

He held a sponge in his hand, his muscular arms glistening with water droplets. It made him appear rough, like a brute working man rather than an educated doctor.

Dumbfounded, I stared at his bare chest. I had no idea why he took his shirt off. Didn't even think to ask. I savored as much of the visual as the dimly lit room allowed, tracking the hard ridges of his abs, dazing over the way they dented inward.

My breath quickened when he caught me ogling. If he wondered whether I had seen a half-naked man before, the answer was written right there in my stupefied face. Perhaps I saw one before losing my memories, but I couldn't recall.

He didn't comment on the gawking and remained entirely expressionless. He merely dipped the sponge in the bowl, slowly wringing it out before placing it on my collarbone. I expected it to be boiling and was pleasantly surprised by the lukewarm water. The slight pressure of his calloused fingers caressed my skin, soothing it. The water trickled down my collarbone, disappearing between my breasts.

I frowned.

Slowly, I lifted my head to glance down. My filthy hospital gown was gone. I was naked under a soft white sheet. The sheet was pulled down to expose most of my chest except my nipples, and it was hiked so far up he could see my vagina if he stood by my feet.

"What the—"

"Sponge bath," he cut me off mid-panic.

Was that why he was shirtless? He didn't want the water ruining his posh clothes. God, I hoped Nurse Amelie undressed me instead of the doctor.

Noticing my mortified expression, he added, "I can't dress your wounds without cleaning them properly."

His tone was clinical, and the logic was there, but my panic was real. I didn't know what sex entailed—and by God, had I tried to remember—I only knew it was an intimate exchange, something akin to my current predicament. I had overheard many crude things while living on the streets; numerous references, such as pussy and cock to suggest one's privates, and fucking when referring to sex. Although I hadn't received a demonstration of sex yet, I was suddenly extremely aware of his closeness.

I swallowed. "You don't have to do that. I can take a shower."

“You’re exhausted, and you can’t stand on your bad ankle long enough for a shower.” He lifted my arm to glide the sponge on the underside.

Although he held up my arm like a drumstick, going along with it robotically required excruciating effort. There was no denying that I wouldn’t last in a shower stall. Still, this was too embarrassing.

“There’s a tub in the bathroom,” I pointed out.

He dropped the sponge in the basin. “Okay, I’ll give you a bath if you’re up for it. It’ll be good for your ankle.”

I immediately warded him off with two resisting hands. “Oh. No, thank you. I meant, I could take a bath. By myself. Alone. I bathe alone. I can bathe myself,” I rambled.

With a head shake, he reclaimed his previous seat. “You are too weak. You might fall asleep and drown if I leave you in hot water.”

With hands that might’ve been slightly trembling, I reached for the sponge. “Then let me finish up.”

He paused without letting go of the sponge. “No,” was his curt reply before he moved the sponge to my arm, breaking my hold on it as if I were a pesky fly.

It suddenly dawned on me that I knew nothing about this doctor. What if he stole organs from homeless girls like me to sell on the black market? Whenever someone went missing on the streets, it was believed they had been trafficked.

As I stared into his unforgiving eyes, I realized a career in crime was plausible for this man. He concealed his emotions with ease, was prone to violence, and the only time he expressed empathy was for me—his potential merchandise. Was he caring for me so I wouldn’t be too scuffed up for the upcoming auction? This ended up being a Hansel and Gretel story, after all. He was fattening me up to sell me.

“Calm down,” his commanding voice said gruffly. “You’re spiraling and thinking the worst. I can see it on your face.”

I nodded, suppressing my anxiety.

Somehow, he knew I was faking the complacency. With an eye roll, he pulled out a phone from his back pocket. The sounds of swiping and tapping were faint as he navigated through the device.

“My license,” was all he said as he thrust the phone in my face.

It was a picture of a document stating he was licensed to practice medicine in New York. There was a click as he scrolled to the next photo.

“My lab.”

He showed me pictures of a lab with white and beige colors and fellow research assistants looking professional and serious. He continued showing me photos of his respectable life.

“I’m not lying about who I am. You’re safe with me,” he said reassuringly.

Something on my face must’ve clued him in that I was unconvinced. With a curse, he withdrew the phone. The fresh tapping of his fingers was constant with a rhythmic beat as he pulled up browsers on the screen for various magazine sites.

It turned out that our resident doctor was a celebrity in New York. His hands moved quickly, scrolling through the tabs of several articles he had published in the scientific field. The journals crediting him as the author seemed legitimate, even to my untrained eyes. A magazine called *Forbes* featured him in a segment, 30 Under 30. According to the article, his list of achievements was never-ending: graduating from college at seventeen, becoming one of the youngest doctors, only to pivot to research.

The article said he was about to turn twenty-six. How the hell did he accomplish so much already?

He had also been featured in magazines that seemed less reputable, something called tabloids, which mostly speculated on his latest conquests. I realized why he showed me the articles. Unlike the journals, these articles were coupled with candid photos of him around New York. Many of them featured him with women at various functions and fundraisers. They were all incredibly beautiful, like Amelie, further establishing that he was untouchable to someone like me.

Nevertheless, he was telling the truth. Considering his public stature, auctioning humans would be impossible.

What was wrong with me? The doctor had been kind to me, probably the first to do so. Why did I jump to the worst possible conclusion?

I realized he was waiting for the same explanation.

Lifting my face and looking him in the eye was excruciatingly painful. “I’ve had a little trouble with trust,” I said apologetically. “Since my rebirth behind a dumpster.”

My amnesia humor might have been a hit had he not been tense. He eventually relented. “That’s to be expected.”

He went back to being silent, though I was still beyond horrified. My shame doubled when I realized that, of all things, I was conscious about what he thought of my body. He was probably used to pretty women with perfect skin like Amelie, whereas my body was marred. As if all the minor injuries weren't enough, large, ugly scars stretched from my midsection to my hips. There were many of them, and vulgar enough to terrify grown humans. I once lifted my hospital gown to relieve myself, and another woman doing the same caught sight of my scars. She ran like her ass was on fire. People on the streets had lived through the worst. You knew something was terrifying when it frightened even them. At least they looked old, so those couldn't have been the reason why I lost my memories.

He was thorough, leaving no stone unturned until the section he worked on was squeaky clean. First, he used a soapy sponge, then a wet one to rinse off the soap, and finally, a towel to dry. I counted the seconds he spent polishing every part to dissuade the awkwardness and distract myself.

One hundred and twenty seconds.

Whether it was calculated or an innate timer, our resident doctor had an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The fact that he was a human being with flaws made me feel better. He was more relatable this way. I stopped arguing with him and recalled a saying fit for the moment.

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth.

The doctor had done nothing other than feed me and provide me with medical attention. Wasn't that what I had hoped for—food and medicine? There was no need to overreact if this was a part of his medical care.

The pep talk lasted until he started on my chest. The thin white sheet barely covered my breasts, especially once he bypassed it to clean my belly and the underside of my boobs. I crossed my arms across my chest with a lame attempt at modesty. Though my nipples were obstructed from his view, his methodical effort left little to the imagination.

The sheet was drenched by the time he finished. I pulled it over my breasts, but the white linen was unforgiving. It was wet, see-through, and lewder than before. My pointy nipples stood out like little hills, and I internally groaned.

He was blissfully unaware, wiping off the excess water with a towel. His thumb grazed over my nipples every so often. They reacted ten times harder than before until it was damn near painful. I had no idea if he felt

them erect under his thumb, and I sagged against the mattress when he deemed I was dry enough to stop.

He lifted me with one strong arm to work on my back before drifting south with a couple of sponges and washcloths in hand. I clamped my thighs shut when he scrubbed my grimy knees and calves, down to my feet. Just when I thought the nightmare was over, he coasted next to my hips and sank to his knees. The wet sponge scrubbed my thighs, which he pried apart whenever I tried closing them. When he reached my inner thighs, I stared at the ceiling as he did more of the same to my most intimate part. The evidence of my heated insides must show on my flushed skin.

To his credit, I had reacted blatantly to his bare chest while he seemed oblivious to my nakedness. Perhaps he was repulsed by it.

Why wouldn't he be?

Without the gown as armor, my terrifying scars were on full display.

To my shock, the doctor nonchalantly continued with the circular motions, as if the ugly welts were the most natural thing on a person's body. If he had a reaction to spare, he didn't let it show. He had appeared more stunned when I made eye contact to speak to him for the first time than by my ungodly skin mutilations.

Why?

Distracted by his lack of reaction, I didn't notice when his fingers slipped between my thighs. Much after the fact, I realized what the washcloth was for—the sponge would've been too rough for what he intended.

My eyes were about to bug out of my sockets, and suddenly, my past wasn't the only thing to disappear from my memory. Words left me, as I forgot how to speak.

He meant to—oh God.

It's okay, it's okay, it's okay.

He was OCD and wanted to clean *everything*. A man who looked like him, and a doctor no less, had no interest in someone like me, at least not like that. He was extremely out of my league. If anything, I'd made googly eyes while he had maintained professionalism, concerned only with patient care.

The mantra helped soothe me, and I relaxed with each affirmation. With my eyes closed, I convinced myself that nothing existed besides the sound of the waves and his inebriating scent. I relaxed and let the wet washcloth

slide between my thighs. Once I forgot everything else, I realized the warm towel caressing my skin felt good. Too good. Especially each time his thumb accidentally brushed against my lips. My senses heightened, my thighs trembled, and I kept wishing he'd linger at the spot for a little longer.

What was wrong with me?

I was a pervert for reveling in a sponge bath. It was supposed to be a part of my medical care. I had no clue what his touch had evoked, only that this reaction was inappropriate in front of a doctor.

An embarrassing moan bubbled at the back of my throat, and he had barely started. He focused on each area for two minutes. You could do anything for one hundred and twenty seconds, even suppress an involuntary reaction, right?

One hundred and twenty seconds turned out to be a lifetime.

The washcloth rubbed between my lips with meticulous precision. Back and forth, then in the same circular motion as the sponge had on the rest of my body. Soapy water from the soaked towel gathered between my thighs, the slippery mess working against me.

My eyes were screwed shut as I held my breath. He removed the soapy towel and restarted the torture with a wet one meant to rinse me off. Water droplets from the washcloth ran a line from my lower abdomen to my sex. The swipe of a cool, wet sensation glided over the skin to erase the traces of water, leaving a trail of goose bumps in its wake. It was too soft to be a towel. Something inside me screamed it was him licking the water off, and it was the feeling of his lips setting my skin on fire.

I squeezed my eyes even tighter. No. This was crazy. He wasn't leaning over to taste my soapy, salty skin.

The pressure from the cloth continued, inducing an unbearable throbbing between my thighs. I bit into my fist to hold back the scream that wanted to break free. My heart pounded. This time, I didn't fear my embarrassing reaction. I feared he'd stop before whatever wished to break through could do so.

He pressed the washcloth against me, pushing farther inside to rub and clean. A wave of intense bliss pulsed through me, and my thighs convulsed. I didn't know what was happening, but I never wanted it to end.

My mouth opened in a silent scream, and my back arched slightly off the mattress. A jolt of electricity in my veins made me shudder and gasp for air in shock. It consumed me, leaving me breathless and trembling in its

wake. My ears pounded as if everything in the world had gone quiet. I was in a dark vacuum without vision or sound.

After an eternity, my eyes snapped open, cheeks heating with humiliation.

What the hell just happened?

More importantly, did he notice? How could he not?

Maybe he thought I fell asleep and experienced a sleep-induced seizure. Anything. I was grasping at straws.

I eyed the doctor, who had finished toweling me dry. He was cool as a cucumber. Even he couldn't act so aloof if he heard me. No way. Perhaps I had nothing to worry about after all.

As he covered me with the large comforter, I noticed a Band-Aid on my left arm. He must've administered the so-called tetanus shot while I was asleep. Apparently, it wasn't enough. He inserted a needle into my vein, securing it with tape. I knew it wasn't the same as the needles I had seen on the streets, especially when he ran a line and attached it to an IV bag.

I thought it'd hurt. It was painful when Amelie merely dabbed me with antiseptic. However, I barely felt a pinch while he poked and prodded, went over my wounds with antiseptic, and covered them with bandages. He used gauze to wrap the angry-looking ones, taking his time with each injury as if it required the precision of brain surgery.

Was he always this gentle with his patients, or was he taking his time so I wouldn't feel an ounce of pain? I stopped trying to decode his intentions and passed out long before he started on my ankle. I only knew one thing for certain—the doctor was a godsend with the patience of a saint.

CHAPTER
FIVE
CADEN

Past



“FOR GOD’S SAKE, Caden, exercise some patience for the first time in your life. It’s a virtue for a reason.” My twin, Damon, stared me down with exasperation.

“Consider me virtue deficient,” I muttered, leaning against the steel lab counter.

“If you just give the students a chance, things might work out in your favor.” Damon punctuated the air with a finger pointed in my direction. “The university won’t let you keep this lab if you refuse.”

I arched an eyebrow, arms folded across my chest. “They aren’t in the position to make demands of me. Last time I checked, I’m the one bringing in millions of dollars in donations with my work.”

“Which can move a hell of a lot faster if you let students assist you,” Damon shot back.

“They won’t survive a week in my lab.”

“They might if you exercise some patience and take the time to teach them,” he countered, his hands splayed wide as if presenting an obvious solution.

“They’re too incompetent,” I replied dismissively.

“That’s the same excuse you used when the university asked you to hire a lab manager.”

“I’m just waiting to find a qualified candidate.”

“Except you never think anyone’s qualified.”

“It’s not my fault that most people are dimwitted.”

Damon shifted uncomfortably. “Come on, man. You’re this close,” he pinched his fingers nearly together, “to finding something that could change millions of lives. Our mother—”

“Don’t,” I drawled out the warning.

I hated it when people mentioned my mother, even if the person doing so was her other son. She was weak and didn’t care about anything other than her next fix until she succumbed to her addiction.

“Fine,” Damon conceded. He dropped his voice and whispered, “But just think what a team of minions could accomplish under your guidance. They’re eager to learn from the great Professor Maxwell.”

I scoffed and turned away to refocus on the maze of notations and equations on the various whiteboards. Flattery would get him nowhere.

My papers on revolutionary non-addictive pain medication had generated buzz within the scientific community. I needed a reputable lab to conduct my research, and the best equipment existed at NewTech University, things money couldn’t buy and could only be sourced or built. The work required ongoing experiments and a large team. However, before signing a contract with NewTech, I stipulated doing all the hiring. I was particular about my assistants and thoroughly vetted each candidate.

The asshole board members of NewTech insisted my hiring process was too slow and wanted me to solidify the formula for the drug before another lab picked up the project. They went over my head, claiming the contract stated nothing about free help, and they had selected the top students in the chemistry department to become unpaid assistants. I had to teach a class in exchange for help I didn’t want.

Absolute waste of time.

The students on campus were rich and entitled. They could barely survive dormitory life without their personal chefs and didn’t know how to do a hard day’s work. They were unteachable, and I didn’t want them destroying my lab.

When I refused to follow the university’s arbitrary process, they called in the big guns—Damon. He glanced at the table in front of us. The surface

was covered with lab equipment and notes scribbled in handwriting that only I could decipher.

A touch of concern was laced in his voice when he spoke again. “You’re working yourself to death. Just think about it. You’ll have fifty of the best students at your disposal, they’ll receive lab credit in exchange for their help, your TA will do the grading, and you’ll be on track for tenure. This is a win-win from every angle.”

I said nothing.

Damon sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “You don’t have a choice, Caden. Either teach the class or lose your position.”

Regretfully, he was right. I had to cave if I didn’t want the last few years of my research going down the drain. It didn’t mean I wouldn’t put up a good fight. “They’ll compromise the research.”

Damon threw his hands up and stated the obvious. “You can’t exactly stay on as a professor if you refuse to teach students.”

“But they are such unteachable idiots.” Maybe I sounded petulant, but why must I interact with inferior creatures? NewTech University housed rich kids whose nannies never told them *no*. Half of the female students ogled me or hit on me, and most of the male students thought dropping their last names would guarantee them a good grade. It boiled my blood, especially since I was financially and intellectually superior to them.

Damon slanted his head uncomfortably. “Stop calling them names,” he hissed, his expression a mix of frustration and embarrassment.

“I’m just calling it as it is. I could teach monkeys faster than these incompetent brats.” I thought about my statement for a moment. “If I’m being honest, that comparison is an insult to monkeys.”

“Um... Excuse me, Professor.” The interruption echoed off the lab walls. The voice sounded indignant, as if they had every right to breathe the same air as me. “Can you please stop talking about us like we aren’t here? Also, we have names and prefer not to be called lower primates.”

I gritted my teeth while Damon tried to suppress his laughter. Forcing my eyes away from my twin, I glanced at the brunette who had phrased the question, along with the rest of the class—the aforementioned students and the banes of my existence.

“You’re refusing to teach us without knowing anything about us,” the brunette continued, her bravado rising when a few other students nodded in agreement. “If you give us a chance, you’ll see we are not so incompetent.”

A sea of young faces stared at me, their lips pressed tightly to contain the fear of my retaliation. As much as I tried to forget their existence, they were incessantly present like pests. They had been sitting at their desks for the last fifteen minutes watching me argue with my brother, their eyes bouncing between us.

They were the other reason Damon came down to the university. Yesterday was the first day of classes, and I chased them away when I found them in my lab. I should've known they wouldn't be easily dissuaded. The university offered them six credits—instead of the usual three—to entice them into signing up for my class. They complained to the administrators when I refused to teach, unaware this curriculum was too advanced for their feeble minds.

I raised an eyebrow at the brunette. "If you don't like how I conduct myself, there's the door," I suggested, opening my arm toward the exit, my tone flat.

If possible, she appeared more indignant than before. She sat amid three of her peers, her notebook open and ready to take notes on a lecture I would never give.

But it was the person beside her who grabbed my attention. Eyes timid and tinged with apprehensiveness, she glanced at me, then quickly looked away.

Rose Ambani?

I turned to Damon and raised a brow, patiently awaiting an explanation.

"It was the other thing I needed to discuss with you," he muttered. "I found out that Rose enrolled in your class."

Few things in life surprised me, and this was one of them. My family loathed hers. The Ambanis owned an investment firm, just like us. The business rivalry between these two companies had spiraled into personal attacks and grievances over the years. It didn't help that both families were legacies at this university, and the campus was plagued with them. I had never paid attention to the notoriously shy member of the Ambani clan, but Rose had suddenly piqued my interest.

Why would she sign up for a class taught by me?

I wasn't involved in the feud, and as far as I knew, Rose was neutral. She was even friendly with Damon. While coexisting wasn't a problem for me, accepting an Ambani as a student was a step too far and a mortal sin

where my father was concerned. I didn't need him breathing down my neck, too.

"I'm not here to field our family drama," I replied bitingly. "Get rid of her. Not interested in whatever she's playing at."

He shot me a warning look, the corner of his mouth turning into a frown. "Rose isn't like the rest of them, and I doubt she has ulterior motives for taking your class. Do me a favor and play nice. I don't need more drama with her family," he whispered.

More like he didn't want drama with a specific member of her family. Damon didn't fuel this feud because he was interested in Rose's cousin, Poppy, though he would never admit it out loud. "How's that my problem?"

"The bad blood's affecting my business."

I quirked an eyebrow. "Your business or personal life?"

He pretended not to notice the jab. "It's gotten to the point where clients are avoiding both companies."

Damon and I owned a fair share of our family business, but he was the one who ran the day-to-day operations and became the co-CEO alongside my uncle. The job—and the girl—meant something to him. I may not care about the students, but I didn't want to give Rose ammunition to impact my brother negatively.

"Fine," I conceded sullenly.

His shoulders visibly sagged. "Thank you. And do me one more favor. Let the students stay."

I groaned out loud.

"Need I remind you, no teaching, no lab? It's not so bad to mold young minds." His tone held a hint of amusement that fed my annoyance. "They might surprise you."

"Your optimism is delusional." I spat out the word as if it tasted sour.

Damon pushed off from the counter with a huff. "We both know you don't have a choice in this matter."

I glared at the fucker, who seemed to take immense pleasure in my misery.

With a toothy grin, he moved toward the door. "I'll see you later. Oh, and try not to scare Rose away," he reminded me.

I stared at his back with a steely gaze as the traitor left me to face the roomful of enemies. The notion of sharing my carefully curated laboratory

with these novices was grating on my last nerve. My gaze swept over the crowd of students sitting upright, awaiting my instructions.

Unwillingly, my eyes returned to the shy Rose Ambani, who still couldn't find the courage to look at me. She was a small thing, easily lost among the rows of students, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. She looked like fucking Bambi with long lashes framing her brown doe eyes. On second thought, her smooth caramel skin and generous pink lips made her look like a doll. Though her most prominent feature was the long, chocolate-colored hair that overtook everything else.

Clearing my throat, I glanced away. "Okay, then," I started, reclaiming the silence with the sharpness of my voice. "Since I can't discourage you from taking this lab, who's ready for a pop quiz?"

The eager faces fell simultaneously. It was the first thing today that brought a smile to my face.

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CHAPTER

SIX

ROSE

MY HEART DANCED a dangerous tango as I watched Damon stride out of the lab. I was just a kid when I met him. It didn't stop me from falling in love with him. I had always hoped he would recognize the depth of my feelings one day, but Damon made it clear he would never return my affections. It didn't help that our families hated one another.

At least, his brother didn't concern himself with our family drama. Professor Maxwell was harsh, but he was also known to segregate personal matters from the professional ones. I signed up for this class, hoping he wouldn't tamper with my grades because of my last name. I needed these science credits to graduate, but if I could shoot for the stars, what I really wanted was to work for the elusive professor. A position in his lab—or even just a recommendation letter from him—could set you up for life. He was notoriously stingy with both, nor had he ever given out an A.

I felt a trace of hope as I read the questions he posed on the board. Thanks to the administrators at this university, I knew the answer to four out of five of them. They recommended a textbook for this lab, written by the man himself, and I read it cover to cover. By the looks my classmates wore, they didn't expect a test without so much as a lecture. Frantic whispers surrounded me, followed by wide-eyed exchanges. Professor Maxwell ignored their grumbles and returned to his workstation as if he had done his part for the day.

The room hummed with tension once Miles, the teaching assistant, collected the answers to the pop quiz. The lab was three hours long.

Professor Maxwell spent the first fifteen minutes arguing with his brother and the next fifteen minutes quizzing us on a lecture he never gave. Everyone stared at him, dreading what else he had in store for the remaining two and a half hours.

My nerves fluttered like trapped birds against their cages when Miles cleared his throat for the hundredth time to grab the professor's attention. Professor Maxwell finally lifted his head from the microscope. The TA nodded at us pointedly, silently asking for further instructions.

Professor Maxwell sighed heavily. "It seems you are in need of a task. Wipe down the cabinets and counters. Then, dispose of the biohazard trash. Miles can show you where it goes."

"Um," Miles started awkwardly. "We can't force students to clean—"

A scathing glare from our resident grump silenced his protests. "I thought students signed up for this class to learn. The first thing you should learn in a lab is proper hygiene, which includes cleaning up residues and disposing of biohazard materials. It's so simple that I could train a *monkey* to do it."

I stifled a smile at his backhanded comment. I would have been fazed if I hadn't had ample practice dealing with people like him. He reminded me of my cousin, Poppy. She also preferred solitude and regularly pushed others away, but her bark was worse than her bite. Breaking through her walls was worth it because people like them were fiercely loyal. It was the reason I found Professor Maxwell's grouchiness endearing.

He faced us then and pointed a thumb at the door. "If you consider cleaning beneath you, then there's the door," he added, his voice cutting through the whispers like a scalpel. There was a wishful longing in his tone, hoping we would take the bait.

Everyone glanced at Amelie expectantly when she rose from our shared lab table. She stood up to the professor when he called us monkeys, and there was hope she'd come to the rescue again. To their surprise, she merely flipped her long, dark strands over her shoulders and picked up a paper towel roll. Stunned, I watched her wipe down the counters.

Amelie had been my roommate since our freshman year of college. She was an heiress to a multimillion-dollar company before her family lost their fortune. She attended this university on a scholarship and didn't share the snobbish mindset of the general student body. After her family went destitute, she got a job at the university hospital as a nursing assistant to pay

for the things her scholarship didn't cover. She planned on becoming a registered nurse upon graduation and had a good head on her shoulders. If she believed the professor intended to teach us hygiene, so should I.

Following her lead, I grabbed another paper towel roll and watched in awe as the heirs of tycoons at this elitist university reluctantly joined us. The shuffle of footsteps filled the lab as my classmates busied themselves with chores. I held my breath, watching Professor Maxwell out of the corner of my eye. He was a tempest, his presence commanding attention, though he paid us no mind.

For the next hour, we polished his lab until it sparkled. The menial labor urged solidarity among my three lab partners, assigned by Miles. Other than Amelie, there was Sean McCarthy, a spirited redhead whose father owned a high-end fashion brand. Matt Doyle was the all-American golden boy with an equally rich father. He was overtly helpful and clung to my side. A pit in my stomach settled at his proximity, and despite my subtle letdowns, he dusted the cabinets next to the ones I was cleaning. I was merely glad there were other people in the group so his attention wasn't solely on me.

Everyone in the group boasted well-known last names, and though Amelie was the only one who no longer had an inheritance, it was evident she was our pack leader. Her magnetism drew people in, and the ordinarily snobby elites forgave her humble circumstances. My gaze flitted between her and the counter, admiring her extroverted nature while I fought to keep my thoughts safely locked behind a demure smile.

What was it like to possess the charisma to pull everyone into your orbit?

I dismissed the thought as quickly as it entered my mind. In my experience, watching as an outsider was better than participating. There wasn't much time to ponder the missed opportunities anyway. Professor Maxwell made us wash beakers and organize the supplies as soon as we finished the first task. I tried to convince myself there was intent behind his stern exterior and sharp words. After an hour of sweating and grunting, I begrudgingly admitted he didn't care about teaching us hygiene. He was merely running out the clock. He hadn't even glanced up from his microscope.

The other students had also had enough of him, and I sensed the attitude shift in their disgruntled murmurs. The spark of leftover optimism waned in

the classroom, and soon, my group bonded over a common enemy instead of a common purpose.

“Can you believe this asshole?” Sean whispered under the clinking of beakers. “If he doesn’t want to be a professor, why not resign?”

I couldn’t have agreed more. As much as the professor reminded me of my cousin, and I wanted to be on his side, teaching wasn’t his calling.

“He probably gets off on this shit,” Matt muttered so only the four of us would hear. He pried the wet glassware I had washed out of my grasp. “Let me dry that for you,” he said with a charming smile.

Amelie rolled up her sleeves, dipped a dish brush into soapy water, and scrubbed a beaker with more force than necessary. “Why are the hot ones always such jerks?” she asked absentmindedly.

We turned to her in unison and found her cheeks burning bright. She hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“What?” she said defensively. “The man is ripped. Like, seriously, dude, pick a struggle. Don’t be a jerk and a male model.”

Male models are often jerks, I couldn’t help thinking.

There had been gossip about female students’ infatuation with Professor Maxwell; it was one of the reasons why he didn’t like teaching. During orientation, Miles indirectly warned us of the professor’s zero-tolerance policy for misconduct and pointedly stared at the female demographic. That was before he arrived and chased us away.

When the boys shook their heads at Amelie for forgetting the rule so quickly, she tried to justify herself. “It’s not just me.” The pitch of her voice was high in protest. “We all know the girls at this university are crazy about him. The nurses at the hospital, too.”

My eyes widened, brows rising toward my hairline. The others were similarly surprised by the news.

“You work with him?” Matt asked, his hand freezing in midair before reaching for the soap.

Amelie scoffed. “No one works with Dr. Maxwell. More like we work around him.”

Sean and Matt exchanged confused looks.

“He does rounds at the hospital once a month,” she explained. “But we aren’t allowed to speak to him.”

My mouth hung open slightly in disbelief. They worked together, but Professor Maxwell had no idea because Amelie wasn’t allowed to approach

him. What a jerk.

Never mind. It was impossible to get through to someone like him. Most of the students would drop this class if he continued to use them as free labor, and for the ones who didn't, he would make their lives hell. What if he refused to teach us for the rest of the semester and determined our grades based on more arbitrary tests? I needed six science credits to graduate at the end of the semester. If I dropped this class, I could say goodbye to my dream of graduating early. My mood dipped at the sudden unpredictability. I couldn't believe my future hung at this man's mercy.

I peeked at him through my lashes, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

Amelie elbowed me. "Are you insane? Don't look directly at him. He'll bite your head off if he catches you."

She was right. Despite going toe to toe with him and calling him hot behind his back, she wisely refrained from ogling him for good reason. Rumor had it, Professor Maxwell had reported eight female students—and one colleague—for misconduct. It was natural for the female demographic to become somewhat enamored with a hot, young professor in a sea of older ones. But Professor Maxwell loathed the adolescent attention and demanded that the dean make an example out of them to discourage such inappropriate behavior in the future. The dean was eager to bask in the glory of his star faculty member. He feared the professor would terminate his contract on the grounds of sexual harassment and brought the students under strict disciplinary action. Some were expelled. A prestigious university naturally brought in big donors and was worth more than the contributions from the students' families. Other than forcing student assistants onto him, the dean would go to any lengths to pacify Professor Maxwell, and the thing he hated the most was lovesick women at his workplace. Even perceived transgression would result in getting kicked out of his class and facing expulsion.

I looked away from the professor, examining the vial between my fingers.

"She wasn't looking at him like *that*," Matt said defensively. His blue eyes flitted between me and Professor Maxwell, unsurely. "Right, Rose?"

I quickly shook my head, and Amelie threw her head back, a cascade of curls falling over her shoulders as she chuckled, her soft laughter tinkling like wind chimes. "Every girl's looking at him *that way*," she said.

Sean groaned while my lips twisted into a reluctant smile, carefully wiping down the wet glassware.

Rookie mistake.

Amelie bumped shoulders with me, taking it as a sign that I was ready to come out of my shell. She often correctly deduced when I was comfortable speaking in a group, but, at times, missed the mark.

She turned her big brown eyes on me expectantly, hoping I would chime in with lighthearted banter. “Don’t let them think I’m some thirsty bitch. I can’t be the only one who made out his biceps under the lab coat,” she pressed.

A familiar panic fluttered in my chest when all eyes landed on me. If only my voice could leap from my throat as fearlessly as hers. Instead, it remained locked away, a prisoner of my own making. So far, I got away with shrugs and noncommittal grunts within the group, but now, the focus was on me. It made me feel like I was standing naked in a snowstorm.

I shrugged, a silent language spoken with my shoulders. With a timid smile, I focused on the residue stubbornly clinging to the glass. I sighed in relief when she took the hint and moved on. She turned her attention to the others, her attempt to include me fading with the buzz of the conversation.

Unlike Amelie, I preferred to navigate the world invisibly. I was a shadow, flitting on the edges of interaction, seen but seldom heard. The only time I was comfortable speaking in groups was after getting to know the members intimately or after several drinks. That was why I steered clear of classes with tons of group work, but six science credits were too good an opportunity to pass up.

I regretted my decision when Professor Grump assigned our group another useless task—organizing the supply closet. Damon’s image flickered in my mind as my hands moved robotically to measure solvents.

How could twins be so different?

Damon was approachable, whereas Professor Maxwell was guarded; no one was good enough to live up to his impossible standards.

Damon had an easy smile, while his brother only wore cruel smirks.

Damon’s blue eyes were kind; Professor Maxwell’s looked like they belonged to the devil.

Damon wore his wavy hair loose while his brother slicked his back like a Disney villain.

If it weren't for our families, I would have a beacon of hope in pursuing Damon. But after what happened to Rayyan, I feared our differences were irreconcilable.

My cousin, Rayyan, fell off a cliff a few months ago. According to the autopsy results, he was high as a kite when he plummeted to his death, and though the news gutted me, I never questioned the legitimacy of the findings. After all, Rayyan was impulsive with a debilitating drug addiction. The rest of my family wasn't so convinced and insisted Damon Maxwell was behind the accident. Grief had a way of blinding people and making them deaf to logic. If they found out I held a torch for Damon or I was taking his brother's class, I would face consequences for going against them.

"Shit!" Amelie's voice snapped me back to reality. "I think I fucked up."

What?

I shook my head to break out of my haze and glanced at the tube in Amelie's hands. My eyes rounded. It seemed she had plunged the dropper into the wrong solvent jar. I pried the dropper out of her fingers and held it up to inspect it. Just as I did so, another voice cut through the chatter.

"What the hell are you doing?" Professor Maxwell's voice boomed from across the room.

My heart skipped a beat, then started beating erratically. Hope whispered its siren song in my quiet world, and I listened, daring to believe that maybe, just maybe, he wasn't speaking to me.

To my dismay, he strode toward us purposefully. His footsteps sounded aggressively loud since everyone else had piped down, scared to breathe in case it redirected his wrath toward them instead. "Did you just mix PMU with methanol?" Icy blue eyes zeroed in on me—accusing, unforgiving.

Amelie opened her mouth to say it was her mistake, but I kicked her in the shin before she could admit to it. She was on a scholarship, one she would lose if she got kicked out of this class. Better me than her, though the knowledge didn't make it any easier to shoulder Professor Maxwell's wrath.

"Do you know how rare PMU is?" he barked. "It's impossible to find."

My mind came up with a flurry of excuses, but they remained caged behind lips that refused to part. Words were like butterflies inside me—beautiful but impossible to catch when needed. I murmured an apology in my head, the words catching in my throat.

Amelie opened her mouth again, and I pinched her under the table.

“Ow,” she hissed, rubbing her swollen side. This time, she looked pissed enough at the physical assault to let me take the fall.

I glared at her, too, silently telling her to keep her mouth shut. If she lost her scholarship, she wouldn’t be able to finish her senior year. Her family was relying on her future income, and she had a lot more to lose than me.

I caught a glimpse of Professor Maxwell, wondering if he could hear my heart drumming frantically. My palms were sweaty, and I felt faint.

He was furious. He slammed his hand on the counter before him, and the rest of the class jumped at the impact. “You put us back by at least a week,” he shouted, then faced the rest of the class. “This isn’t your daddy’s office, where you can play pretend and someone else will clean up your mess. Your mistakes here matter.” Professor Maxwell returned his attention to me. There was a flicker of something—surprise, perhaps—before his expression settled into ire, and he roared, punishing everyone for my mistake. “I’ve had enough of this charade. None of you is fit to be taught. Get out of my lab, all of you!”

CHAPTER

SEVEN

CADEN

MY BROW FURROWED as I watched Rose. Student chatter was a dull hum in the background. Most of them thought I was an asshole for yelling at poor, harmless Rose Ambani. I had lost my temper, and it bothered me, not because I cared about her feelings, but because her subsequent reaction was unexpected.

Most students would have either crumbled or shot back a retort. She was shy, so I expected her to fall to the ground after I punished the entire class for her mistake.

Sure, she looked scared, but it was because I had drawn attention to her. She feared the spotlight, not me. She didn't shed a single tear or run out of the room with her tail tucked between her legs. It starkly contrasted with the humiliation that should be swirling around her.

What an unsatisfactory outcome.

Why didn't my words shatter her? Female students generally burst into tears when I reprimanded them. The spoiled ones would say, "*Do you know who my dad is?*" The braver souls hit on me to "fix" things.

Imbeciles.

Rose's reaction was a first, and it had me at a loss for words. She didn't cry or threaten me with her family's status. Her quietness threw me for a loop. It was a void, neither absorbing nor reflecting any emotion I threw at it.

Perhaps she'd try to seduce me if she got me alone.

I hope not.

For the first time, I was caught off guard by someone's reaction—or lack thereof. I secretly wanted one student to set themselves apart from the rest of the gullible idiots and prove me wrong about this university being filled with entitled snobs.

I leaned against my desk, arms crossed. Her annoying friend gave her a long look while Rose packed a book I recognized as my own. The administrators recommended the textbook I wrote. The intelligent thing to do with a difficult professor was to study the recommended reading list, yet no one else thought of it since it wasn't mandatory.

As I said, they were idiots.

Just when I thought I might've chased away my one sensible student, Rose languidly continued cleaning the rest of the beakers.

Was she completing the tasks I assigned instead of leaving?

The rest of the class ran out like their asses were on fire. Why was she in no rush to leave after suffering public humiliation at my hands?

Her friend also stayed back for moral support against the big, bad teacher, occasionally throwing daggers at me with her eyes. But my attention was only on one person.

I returned to my workstation, watching Rose out of the corner of my eye. The laboratory's silence pressed against my perked ears as I zeroed in on their conversation. If I concentrated solely on them, I could make out what they were whispering about.

"You shouldn't have covered for me. You could've gotten into serious trouble," her friend said softly, eyes laden with concern. "Are you okay?"

Rose took the fall for her friend. Interesting. But why?

I wondered if she would explain herself, but I had a feeling she preferred nonverbal methods of communication. I had noticed her throughout the day, rarely contributing to the conversation with her lab partners. Though if memory served me right, I had heard her speak before at random events we had both attended.

Rose nodded, sifting me with her eyes.

"He's an ass. Don't let him get to you," her friend added.

I didn't. That was the problem. My fingers closed around the neck of a beaker. I poured and measured, the cool glass a silent ally in my effort to appear unruffled.

Something about the ennui behind Rose's brown eyes unsettled me, as if being yelled at in front of a classroom full of people was chump change

compared to her past. She had suffered so much pain that scathing remarks were music to her ears. Her demeanor hinted at layers to be uncovered, with secrets hidden beneath each surface, and despite my usual indifference, I was intrigued.

I didn't like it.

I preferred to unsettle people, not be unsettled by them.

The lab was empty, save for Miles, my research assistants, and the lingering presence of the two girls quietly cleaning and putting things away. I watched Rose move between tasks. It dawned on me that her methodical scrubbing had a rhythm. She cleaned each item for a specific amount of time.

I tapped open my phone and pulled up the stopwatch. When she picked up a glass flask and a dish brush, I started the timer. She moved the brush with a grace that was all her own, navigating the world without a word wasted. An automatic timer seemed to go off in her head, signaling her to put the brush down. I hit the stop button instantaneously.

One hundred and twenty seconds. Not a second more or less. It was rehearsed to perfection because she had done this hundreds of times and didn't need the help of a stopwatch.

She stocked the items on the shelf afterward. When one of them was out of sync with the rest, she pushed it back with a slight tap of her finger so it would fall in line perfectly.

Phenomenal. Shy, little Ambani had obsessive-compulsive disorder.

As they finished, Rose reached up to close the cabinet latch. As she did, her ivory blouse lifted to expose her stomach.

I froze, my gaze landing on her skin. Her abdomen was littered with an intricate web of scars. They were deep and faded—at least a decade old—stretching in jagged lines across her skin. The healed but visible knife marks suggested stabbings, not once or twice, but too many to count.

Impossible.

I froze, not believing my eyes. Rose hadn't just astonished me today, she had pulled the rug out from underneath me.

I had never heard of an attack on Rose Ambani, let alone such an aggressive one. Her family was high-profile and must have gone to great lengths to hide it from the public.

The gruesome images that would churn a normal person's stomach had me mesmerized. It was then that I understood why Rose had stumped me.

No wonder she didn't cry. Humiliating her in front of a classroom full of students paled in comparison to her past. There was nothing I could do to her that was as bad as what had already happened to her.



Rose's name echoed in my mind long after I dismissed my team, and Raoul, my chauffeur, drove me home. Damon teased me relentlessly and called me a diva for having a driver, but I preferred the convenience. I could review notes in the back seat while being driven around and save precious time instead of looking for parking in New York City. Raoul stayed with the car and saved me time. Time was the most precious thing in the world because every minute wasted could be spent in my lab.

The chill of the evening air bit at my skin as I trudged up the walkway to my apartment on the fifteenth floor. Even as I unlocked the door and stepped into the silence of my living space, Rose's uninvited image lingered on my mind. Her stoic face when I rebuked her, staying behind to finish her task, and, of course, the unforgettable scars.

They haunted me.

The radiators hissed in welcome but couldn't warm the cold curiosity that had settled in my chest. Shedding the layers of my day, I turned on the shower. The water cascaded down, steam rising, but it didn't wash away the fixation.

When I stepped out of the shower, I found the meal my chef had left stove-side. He had been instructed to cook my meals right before my arrival and immediately leave. This way, the food would still be warm, and I wouldn't be bothered by the nuisance of others. I hated company, especially in the privacy of my home.

I scrolled through my phone as I half-heartedly consumed my dinner. A text from Damon reminded me of some obligatory fundraiser. I silenced the device when his name appeared on the screen. The thought of engaging in idle chatter tonight grated on my last nerve. Everything else seemed trivial compared to unraveling the mystery that was Rose Ambani.

I tapped open the contact for Alex. Once upon a time, he used to be a private investigator with a reputation for digging up dirt on the rich and

powerful. It was a valuable skill to have in your arsenal, so we offered him the job as the head of security for our family. While Damon used his services regularly, I preferred to keep a low profile. It was understandable that he was surprised to hear from me.

“Hey.” Alex sounded half asleep.

I glanced at my watch—nine p.m.

“How’re you doing?” he drawled.

I hated small talk and got straight to the point. “I need you to look into someone.”

He didn’t bother keeping up with the pleasantries, either. “What’s going on?” he sounded awake, alert. It wasn’t lost on him that I had contacted him late at night, and I had summoned his special skills for the first time.

“Can you get me a police report filed for Rose Ambani from about ten years ago?”

“Erm—”

“The records were concealed, so dig deep.”

“You’re getting involved in the family drama, too?” he asked, with a touch of disbelief in his voice. He assumed I was digging up dirt to barter with the Ambanis despite having stayed away from that absurd feud.

“Can you look into it or not?”

He sighed deeply into the phone. “Consider it done.”

“I need you to find out who did it.”

I told him everything I knew about the attack, which wasn’t much. I gave him the scopes, shapes, and sizes of the scars, admitted to myself they had made me furious. Livid, in fact. I couldn’t stop thinking about them and needed to make someone pay for them; I just didn’t know who.

The thought stayed with me even as I returned to work later that night. I preferred working after hours because there was no one around to bother me. The campus was quiet when I pushed open the door to my lab. But at a closer look, I realized something was amiss. A sense of intrusion settled on me when shadows played tricks under the hazy lighting. My pulse quickened, not from fear but from the adrenaline of an unexpected variable in my controlled environment.

It was then that I saw the mysterious figure. The intruder didn’t notice me approaching, engrossed in their clandestine task. Their movements were precise, not the frantic actions of a thief but something else. As I edged closer, the faint light from the hallway illuminated a feminine figure.

My eyes narrowed as she stepped toward the supply closet. She pulled something out of her bag with meticulous care, though I couldn't see what it was from this angle. Her delicate hands moved through the shelves with an unfamiliar certainty. Her breath hitched when she sensed my looming form behind her, and she turned just as I grabbed her elbow.

"Caught you, you little thief—" I faltered mid-thought when I saw the face of the culprit.

Rose.

Why did it have to be her?

A deer in headlights, little Bambi stared at me with comically round eyes. She held perfectly still. The moonlight cast shadows across her face, making it difficult to discern her expression.

Extending my hand, I reached for the wall switch to turn on the lights. She was in the same ivory blouse from earlier, only now I realized it was intentionally conservative and loose, the sleeves reaching her wrist and the collar sitting high to cover her neck. The jeans were classic blue denim, fitted but not tight.

"What are you doing here?" My voice was clipped.

Her face paled like she had seen a ghost. Demanding an answer from her was equivalent to a death sentence, I realized. Instead of waiting for her to respond, I snatched the bag she held tightly in her fist.

My fingers brushed against hers briefly. It was the only time she dared to meet my gaze. She looked me dead in the eye as if trying to dissect me. The unexpected intensity from little Rose Ambani made me pause. She retracted her fingers—and gaze—so fast I wondered whether I had imagined the fierce exchange. The fleeting touch and eye contact spoke volumes, leaving me as speechless as her.

Did she have an aversion to touch and eye contact? Something about how she evaded my touch didn't sit well with me.

"What's this?" I asked sharply. The unyielding words echoed through the empty lab, a sound that generally sent shivers down my assistants' spines.

Her almond eyes were full of answers, lips pursing. It seemed she wanted to say something but lost her bravado at the last second.

If it had been anyone else who broke into my lab, they would have been expelled by now. But her innocent features did something unexpected, they

made me feel responsible for her. My frosty exterior softened the longer I looked at her.

I opened the brown bag and pulled out the large vial inside it. “PMU?” I asked, forcing myself to take a lighter tone.

She nodded, looking down at her feet. Rose couldn’t meet my gaze or speak when she was scared half to death, though I had hoped lowering my voice would help.

It didn’t. She was tense and rigid, as if she were on the verge of a heart attack.

It seemed she could only speak at times. Was it selective mutism?

Smoothing my menacing glare—so I didn’t scare her to death—I tried again, careful to keep my voice even. “Where did you find PMU? It’s extremely rare.”

Still, she said nothing. The only sound in the lab was the low hum of the fridge and the lab equipment in the background.

Perhaps it was my body language.

I lowered the bag and widened my arms for an open stance. “Were you restocking the supplies?” I asked quietly.

Another nod.

“You could’ve brought it to the next class. How would I have known it was you who restocked the PMU?”

She didn’t nod this time and hung her head, waiting for me to hand out a vile punishment for doing the right thing.

It was the first capable thing someone in my class had done. She tracked down an impossible-to-find product and brought more than what her friend had destroyed. Why didn’t she want credit for restocking the supply, especially since she took the fall for someone else?

Since Rose refused to speak, I had to guess. The most likely answer was that Rose wanted to avoid attention at all costs.

For once, I craved to hear someone’s voice and their reasons for doing things, but she was dead silent. It made me want to push her buttons. “How did you get those scars on your stomach?”

The question landed the necessary shock value. She gasped, her expression a mix of surprise and uncertainty. The vulnerability on her face struggled with the first words she uttered today. “How do you know about my scars?”

Her lips had moved slowly and hesitantly, and the words took a few seconds to register. I stared at her mouth, disbelieving that she spoke. Her voice was husky, and because she rarely spoke, it sounded priceless. It made her delicate features softer.

The astonishment had eradicated her fear long enough to speak and make eye contact. I took full advantage of it to keep the momentum going.

“I saw them today by accident. Are there others on your body or just your stomach?” I nodded at the conservative shirt she was wearing.

Her hand flew protectively to her collar, trying to conceal more than what the shirt already hid. The inappropriate question baffled her into answering. “No. Only on my abdomen,” she replied defensively, her hoarse voice music to my ears.

With all the patience I could muster, I pressed, “How did you get them?”

“I was stabbed multiple times when I was a kid.” She spoke without an ounce of emotion, as if reciting her schedule for the week. There was no anger over the fact that someone had stabbed her numerous times. No sadness. Nothing. She was dead inside.

Her innocence, naivety, and doe-brown eyes dispersed the thoughts. “Do you know who did it?”

She shook her head.

I continued the interrogation because she clearly wouldn’t contribute anything to the conversation. “What’s the long-term care plan for the scars?”

“Huh?”

“If this happened a while ago, your doctors must have given you a care plan to follow.”

She looked at me like she had no idea what I was talking about.

Rose’s family rivaled ours in wealth. Her doctors would’ve provided her with alternate options, long-term care plans, and monthly follow-ups. Most girls in our circle would have visited plastic surgeons by now to have the scars removed, though it wouldn’t be my recommendation. The superficial scars couldn’t compare to recovering from surgery. Rose chose practicality over vanity by covering them up instead of putting herself through unnecessary pain. I didn’t know any other girl who would have selected this route if another option were readily available to them.

The girl stunned me at every turn, and I hated it.

It was too soon to meddle in her affairs, but I did it anyway. “Ask your family whether the doctors assigned you a care plan and bring it to me tomorrow.”

She nodded tentatively and took that as her permission to flee.

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CHAPTER

EIGHT

ROSE

“TURN off your phones and take out your notebooks.” Professor Maxwell’s unsympathetic voice reverberated around the classroom. “I don’t allow laptops, and I don’t repeat myself. Write fast, and if you miss anything, too bad. Don’t interrupt me.”

There was a moment of confusion, followed by a flurry of movement as everyone realized our eccentric professor was gracing us with a lecture. His decision to share his knowledge was a rare gem. We had no idea what changed his mind about teaching us, but no one dared to contradict his orders and rushed to pull out their notebooks.

I turned off my phone and was slow to pull out my notebook. I lined up two pens, unconsciously rotating them three times. The professor’s gaze landed on me, lingering while I performed my odd routine. If I didn’t know any better, I would think he was waiting for me to be fully prepared before starting his lecture.

He looked away once I uncapped my pen. “Let’s start with the basic elements on the periodic table. If you haven’t memorized the chart already, I suggest leaving my classroom.”

I was a slow note-taker and preferred a laptop over writing by hand. However, that option was unavailable in Professor Maxwell’s class. I scribbled as fast as possible, and midway through the most intense lecture of my life, the pen ran out of ink. I grabbed my second pen and realized the ink was also running low.

Are you serious?

I kept more spare pens in my bag, but Amelie had moved our bags to the floor so we would have more space on the table. Before I could hop off my stool to find my bag, Matt gave me an inquisitive look. “What’s wrong?” he whispered.

I shook the pen in my hand.

He gave me a reassuring smile. “Here, I have an extra,” he murmured, extending a rollerball pen.

Professor Maxwell’s gaze landed on the exchange just as I reached for it. “Am I boring you, Mr. Doyle?” he asked, forcing the lecture to a screeching halt.

My back straightened while Matt’s head anxiously moved side to side. “Of course not, Professor.”

I wanted to chime in and explain, but I already knew speaking with many eyes on me would be impossible.

Matt noticed my dilemma, and replied, “Rose ran out of ink and needed a pen.”

Professor Maxwell appeared calm, but it wasn’t the good kind, it was the calm before the storm. “Let’s stop here for the day since Rose is out of ink.”

My face flushed as my classmates’ accusatory eyes sought me out. Ugh. They were pissed that I had ruined this exclusive lecture.

“Rose, I suggest you return the pen since there are no more notes to be taken,” Professor Maxwell instructed in that indifferent tone of his.

It seemed like he was joking until I realized his gaze wouldn’t move until I complied. With trembling fingers and everyone watching, I held out the pen. Professor Maxwell didn’t speak again until the transaction was complete.

“Finish the tasks from yesterday,” he ordered vaguely before walking out of the lab, his deep voice forcing my stomach to do somersaults.

The students would’ve groaned if they had the nerve to express anger. Instead, most of them cast sideways glares at me.

Oh God.

As everyone busied themselves with their respective tasks, someone behind me called out in a clear voice. “Rose.” I turned to find Miles. Our teaching assistant wore a quizzical expression, lips pursed in contemplation. “Come with me.”

What had I done now?

My eyes were full of questions, prompting him to provide a clipped explanation. “Professor Maxwell asked to see you.”

Matt dropped the notebook in his hand, and Amelie toyed with the edge of her silky blouse. “What’s going on?” she whispered.

I shrugged and followed Miles on wooden legs. The other research assistants speared me with peculiar glances as we passed them. One brunette was particularly irked by my presence.

Did they know something I didn’t? Was Professor Maxwell about to punish me for breaking into his lab?

I had called in the big guns, my cousin Poppy, to track down PMU, and she came through for me. Professor Maxwell blamed me for destroying his precious inventory during the first day of class. I didn’t have the nerve to hand it to him in person, so I snuck into his lab to replenish his stock. Technically, it was still breaking and entering.

I expected Miles to ask me to wait at Professor Maxwell’s workstation. Instead, he led me to an adjoining room and knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Professor Maxwell said from the other side.

Miles hesitated, seemingly struggling with a thought. Finally, he confessed, “Professor Maxwell asked that you assist him today.”

Me?

I thought he would kick me out for sneaking into his lab. At best, he would punish me with more terrible chores. Other than his vetted research assistants, no one was allowed to help him with his work. Even then, he chose the most capable ones that didn’t piss him off. No wonder they were all staring at me, wondering how I had caught his attention. A sinking feeling settled into my stomach at all the unwarranted attention. This request was odder than the one from last night to see the long-term care plan for my scars. I didn’t understand this man or his motivations.

“He has never allowed a student to help with his work,” Miles echoed my thoughts. “Especially a female one,” he added pointedly. “For whatever reason, he’s giving you a chance. Don’t blow it by hitting on him,” he stated bluntly as if I were shamelessly flaunting my goods for his attention.

I quickly shook my head, trying to convey I would never do such a thing.

Miles turned the knob and opened the door to the interconnected room. Peering around at what looked like the professor’s office, I found him sitting at the edge of his desk, reviewing something in a manila folder.

Since the lecture, he had taken off his lab coat and undone the top few buttons of his shirt. The sleeves of his light blue shirt were rolled up to reveal his strong, veiny forearms. My eyes bulged. The glimpse of his tanned, muscular chest might as well be soft-core porn. What was he thinking, sitting in his office, dressed like *that*?

“Did you find out about the long-term care plan?” he asked without looking up from his notes.

The question was meant for me, but I peeked at Miles for confirmation.

“Unless he’s your primary care physician, the answer won’t be written on his face.”

I gulped and returned my attention to Professor Maxwell, who was now glaring at me for some undisclosed reason.

“You can go, Miles,” he ordered coldly.

With a nod, Miles shut the door behind him as if he had done his job by delivering the package. I stared after him, silently begging him not to leave me alone in the lion’s den.

When I returned my attention to Professor Maxwell, another flicker of irritation crossed his expression at my seeking out Miles. “Stop staring at the door,” he muttered under his breath. He appeared to exercise immense restraint to keep from barking at me.

Was he trying to be nice?

“Did you find the care plan?” he pressed.

I shook my head.

I was too young when the incident occurred, and I asked my father if my attending physicians provided a long-term plan. It turned out that no one had followed up with the doctors. My family was busy tracking down the assailant. Because, of course, it was more important to deal with anyone threatening the Ambani name rather than taking care of the eleven-year-old who was nearly stabbed to death. I had Professor Maxwell to thank for making me face the harsh reality. It made me wish I could shed the burden of being an Ambani.

“I figured as much.” He held up the document in his hand. “That’s why I made one.”

My body stiffened at the unexpected declaration. He was a world-renowned physician and scientist. Why did he care about some scars on my body or make a medical plan for me?

I didn't dare ask and merely nodded, accepting the folder. He watched me quietly as I studied his notes.

Anti-inflammatory diet plan.

Topical treatments.

"How well do you know Mr. Doyle?"

My fingers froze before I could turn the page and review the rest of his carefully crafted plan. The abrupt question and the accusation in his deep voice were more staggering than the extensive plan he had drawn up for me. My mind blanked, and I asked, "You mean Matt?"

His eyes twitched when I uttered Matt's name. It was the most expressive thing he had done thus far.

More so, we were both surprised that I had spoken at all. Sometimes, he shocked me just enough to speak without thinking.

Professor Maxwell folded his arms across his chest. Everything about him was closed off as he waited for my response. Unlike last night, he exercised more patience. Perhaps because he wasn't pestering me, the words jumped to my lips.

"I don't know him that well," I whispered, focusing on a spot on the floor.

He was quiet for so long that it caught me off guard, even though I thrived in the silence. My lids flew up to look him in the face. His strong jaw moved side to side as if he were grinding the bottom set of his teeth. The five-o'clock shadow he sported today hadn't existed yesterday. It made him look older and gruffer, and my attention lingered on it momentarily.

I internally cursed myself upon realizing I was gawking. How could I forget the one thing everyone warned me not to do?

"He's interested in you," he announced at long last, eyes moving over my face, calculating my reaction to his assessment.

I slanted my head for an, *Oh*. I had no idea where he was going with this or how he wanted me to react.

"But you already knew that, didn't you?" When I said nothing, he followed up with, "You two aren't a good fit." His tone was unwavering, as if he had the final say on the matter.

Were faculty members allowed to comment on our personal lives?

His opinion was beyond inappropriate. Then again, Professor Maxwell was an unorthodox teacher. Should I be surprised he had weighed in on my dating life as if he had every right?

I shifted from foot to foot, unsure what to do.

When I didn't acknowledge his veto on a suitable partner, his brows lowered. "You're wealthy; he is rich," he said in a justifying tone. "It's not a good match."

"Isn't rich and wealthy the same thing?" I asked, confused. He had a way of pushing my buttons, which made me speak out when I was around him.

"No, Little Rose, there's a big difference."

The nickname, Little Rose, was almost a slip of his tongue. It was not lost on me that I was also the only person he called by their first name. He was otherwise formal with everyone else.

Was he taking a personal interest in me so he could butter me up for more PMU? If so, he was wasting his time. Poppy clarified it was a one-time favor, she couldn't procure more.

It was possible he pitied me because of my scars. He was weirdly invested in them, though I wouldn't complain if it garnered me some sympathy with the elusive professor.

As I highly doubted that he cared enough about my well-being, I thought of another plausible theory. Perhaps he was working on an ointment to heal old scars and needed a lab rat. I heard he had run unethical experiments before. The college looked the other way, of course. They would let him get away with murder.

I regarded his posture—seated at the edge of his desk with a hand gripping the ledge—and waited for his explanation.

"Rich people's status depends on an income that can disappear at any time. Wealthy people can maintain their lifestyle without an income." He stood to height. "That's why rich people show off their money, but wealthy people are discreet about their assets. Mr. Doyle is rich, but you, Little Rose," he enunciated with purpose, "You're wealthy." He skimmed my outfit at an exceedingly slow pace.

I crossed my arms over my stomach protectively. With my head bowed, I scanned my outfit as well. It was relatively simple—a cap-sleeve white shirt with a tan jacket, beige linen pants, and low-platform heels. Sure, they were designer brands handpicked by the family stylist, but you wouldn't know it unless you looked at the tag or had an exceptional eye for this stuff. No one in our family wore flashy clothing, and we usually stuck to a neutral palette. Labels had to be discreetly placed because expensive clothing made

you a target. Wealth had to be hidden, and neutral colors didn't attract attention.

I shouldn't be surprised that Professor Maxwell figured it out; his family rivaled mine in wealth. The thought made me do something uncharacteristic—pry unprovoked. "Which one are you?"

"Which do you think?"

I inwardly scoffed. By his standards, our two families were the only *wealthy* ones in this circle. Does that mean my only suitable match was a member of his family? If only he knew of my feelings for Damon.

"Do you always wear white or beige and cover every inch of your body?" he asked from left field. I couldn't keep up with this man.

"My jacket's tan," I protested.

Everyone had implied that Professor Maxwell hated women seeking his attention in the workplace. This outfit should be a white flag where he was concerned. So, why did it seem like he was displeased with my style?

Instead of further engaging in the absurd conversation, I mumbled, "Did you need something from me, Professor Maxwell?"

His eye twitched when I called him Professor Maxwell as if the label was offensive. I thought he would dismiss me, but instead, he said, "Yes, you're working with me today."

He guided me to a workstation in his office, separate from the one outside. There was a table with a few beakers, a sink, and documents, all of which looked confidential and important. I realized it was work he didn't share with his research assistants. So why was he sharing it with me?

He provided no explanations, just instructions on separating a few formulas. I assisted him quietly for the remainder of the class, highly aware of his presence and every small movement he made. Throughout our time together, I kept wondering what I had set in motion.

CHAPTER
NINE
ROSE

Present



THE FACE WAS BLURRY. I could make him out if he were closer, but the last thing I wanted was to be near him. He threw me to the ground. I screamed, crawling backward on my elbows to get away from him.

I sat up with a jolt, dragging in ragged gasps of air. It was the recurring nightmare that had haunted me. My panic subsided upon realizing I was under the protection of a handsome doctor who made me feel safe.

“Dr. Maxwell?” I called out.

The room was dead silent. It was also shrouded in darkness.

My arms were free to move, so he must’ve taken out the IV line. Snippets of flashbacks from last night crept into my mind. My ankle had flared up throughout the night. Every time the pain woke me up, I found him tending to my injuries with dexterity such rough hands shouldn’t possess.

He’d worked on me for hours, treating every wound like the black plague he needed to eradicate and me like frail glass he needed to keep from breaking. He must’ve been exhausted by the end of the night. I was spent simply by watching him.

Finally, he had passed me a new hospital gown, and I had pulled the sheet over my head to put it on. He helped me to the bathroom, and later, administered a shot that took the pain away and let me sleep through the night. The effects must've worn off. My ankle throbbed, prompting me to grope for the table lamp and flick on the switch.

The silky curtains were drawn over the window, but the soft light from the lamp revealed a pretty room painted in soft whites. The details of the room had escaped my attention last night. Everything was a shade of white or beige, even the paintings decorating the walls. The nightstands on either side of the bed, the cabinets, and the armchairs were modern with a clean look. Understatedly wealthy.

A faded memory slipped into my mind about being rich versus wealthy. There was a difference somehow.

Rich people show off their money because their status depends on an income that can disappear at any time.

Wealthy people are discreet about their assets and can maintain their lifestyle without an income.

Whoever said it must've been a snob, though looking around, I couldn't argue with the theory. This room screamed discreet wealth with beautiful, minimalistic items. Rich people didn't fashion rooms like these, only wealthy folks did. Who the hell was wealthy enough to own this boat? It never occurred to me to ask.

I reviewed my surroundings for clues before catching sight of the bed's state. The side I hadn't slept on was marked with dents and creases. It also smelled of the outdoors, cashmere, and warm firewood.

Did Dr. Maxwell sleep next to... No. I wouldn't entertain such preposterous ideas. He didn't do anything wrong. I was the one shamelessly moaning. Ugh!

The door creaked open, and the man in question entered with a cart. Like last night, he was composed and unruffled, quietly surveying my appearance. The intensity in the look nearly unseated me, and I gulped.

This morning, he wore a white linen shirt with chinos. Everything down to his shoes had the same look as the room—classy and understated. The subtlety in his expensive clothes confirmed it for me—the doctor was wealthy, not just rich. Only affluent people dressed so effortlessly.

I noticed my outfit—the new hospital gown. It was softer than the previous one and mimicked a plush bathrobe with ribbons tied together on

the side.

Our class difference was swiftly cast aside when he wheeled the cart closer. I nosily leaned over to see it was full of food. Saliva pooled on my tongue. No matter how much I ate last night, I'd never be full. A part of me would always remember the hunger, yearning for food like a bottomless pit.

"I expect you're feeling better," he said, pushing the cart against the nightstand to feel my forehead with cool fingers.

The touch doused me in vivid images of the sponge bath. Heat crept up my neck, and I timidly nodded, unable to hold his gaze.

He showed no signs of awkwardness, concerned only with my sustenance. He sorted through the cart, explaining the purpose of each item. The delicious dishes from last night had been replaced with flavorless hospital food meant to counteract dehydration.

When he took the lid off an individual serving cup of Jell-O, I knew he meant to hand-feed me again. I didn't protest when he lifted a spoonful. My lips parted to taste the raspberry gelatin. I ate quietly. That was until I realized the ship was moving differently than last night. The boat had rocked back and forth gently on the still water, but today, it swayed like it was being pulled against the current.

"We're moving," I exclaimed.

He studied me curiously over my sudden outcry. Why did my voice always puzzle him?

I didn't have time to dissect the reason because... "We are moving," I pressed. "Why?"

"We left the port earlier today," he replied calmly.

Icy tentacles gripped my heart. "What?"

Casting the comforter aside, I kneeled on the soft mattress and knee-walked to the window closest to the bed. I reached out to draw the curtains.

Bright sun.

Sparkling blue water.

There was nothing other than the endless ocean and the occasional seagull as far as the eye could see.

My goal was to regain my strength, then find out who I was. I was no longer starving or in desperate need of medical attention, but the chance of finding my way home had faded into the distance like the port.

On top of that, I had accidentally become a passenger on a luxury boat. I couldn't afford their cheapest room. How would I pay for all this?

The shock of the endless blue wore off. “I can’t leave New York,” I whispered, glancing at him with desperate eyes. “I have to go back. Please!”

His expression clouded. A shadow fell over his face, his lips pressing into a thin line. His eyes appeared stormy gray instead of deep blue. “Why?”

Images of several worried faces flashed through my mind—an older man, a pretty woman in her thirties, and a dark-haired girl with a gloomy mien. She was my sister, I was sure of it. Last night, I dreamed I was finishing my last semester of college before being ripped out of my world. “I-I think my family lives in New York, and I might go to school there, too.”

“So?”

“So?” I echoed his cavalier word slowly. “My family might be looking for me.”

He glowered, irritated. “They weren’t the ones looking out for you when you were starving and knocking on death’s door. I was the one who took you in and saved you.”

I closed my eyes, I hadn’t meant to come off as ungrateful to the first person to show me kindness. “That’s not how I meant it. Thank you for saving my life. I don’t know what I would have done if we hadn’t met. It—it’s just, I-I...” I grappled with words. “I hadn’t expected to sail away.”

“Next time, clarify that before you sneak into someone else’s boat.”

Well, damn.

Karma was a bitch. I had snuck in to steal food, and now I was trapped. “H-how do I get back to New York?”

Broad shoulders lifted and dropped with an air of indifference, the relaxed posture of his large body giving off a sense of unconcern. “The only way is to jump into the freezing water and swim back.”

My eyes burned with unshed tears. “But what if my family is looking for me?”

My heart palpitated when he sat beside me on the bed, his body enveloping mine to pull me closer. I think he meant to comfort me.

I shouldn’t have trusted myself around a man this gorgeous. It made me stupid and careless. But he was just so damn tall. And beautiful. Even now, the amber and cashmere scent made me dizzy.

A more disturbing thought popped into my mind. What if I had a boyfriend or husband? What I did with the doctor, would that constitute a betrayal?

I unconsciously pushed away from him, but he moved with me instinctively. It felt choreographed—as if we had done this song and dance before, where I ran, and he chased after me. I trembled, pulling at the gown to hide more of my body. It only drew his attention to my bare knees. His gaze rested there as if he had the unapologetic right to see every inch of my body.

“It’s just frustrating that I can’t remember what happened, and I think the answers are back the way I came,” I admitted. “I want to know who I am.” I stared at my midriff, the hospital gown covering the scars. “And I want to know who put those marks on my body.”

His generally collected demeanor was suddenly replaced with a tight-set jaw. My meager explanations placated him enough to pick up the Jell-O, though. The spoon scooped up more Jell-O before it was pushed past my lips, making a soft, squishy noise.

“I put out feelers on the mainland before we left,” he told me. “If anyone files a missing person report for someone named Rose, the police will contact the captain. In the meantime, it’s best if you vanish from New York.”

I glanced at him, puzzled, but he was back to being inscrutable. “What do you mean?”

“If you woke up in a hospital gown, you were at a hospital when something—or *someone*—spooked you enough to run away. I’ll go out on a limb and say someone’s after you, and they might still be looking for you.”

I’d had a similar thought. I would’ve been dressed differently had I been discharged from the hospital. I didn’t even have shoes or a coat. I was in a rush as if running for my life.

That was when I told him, “I-I had been dreaming about a man chasing me. Except, I don’t think they’re dreams. They feel like memories. I think the man came for me at the hospital, and I ran from him.”

His face was emotionless as he asked, “What did he look like?”

Shoulders slouching, I tried to dig deep. “The dreams are fuzzy. No matter how hard I try, I can’t make out his face.”

He maintained a stoic expression. “Why do you want to return if you don’t even know who you’re running from?”

I couldn't argue with the logic and weighed my options. As much as I wanted to find out about my past, whoever tried to hurt me was still out there. Until my memories returned, I was at the mercy of the universe.

With reluctance, I admitted, "You're right. It isn't safe out there."

His eyes finally softened. "You're safe here as long as you're with me."

There was no denying it. Until yesterday, I was on the verge of death. I probably wouldn't have made it past the week. If the hunger hadn't killed me, the untreated injuries would have. I was grateful to him more than he knew.

I glanced at the doctor to find him watching me. "When will we return to New York?"

"In a couple of weeks."

I sagged. I could do a couple of weeks. It would give me a break from the constant survival mode. I could spend the time recovering physically and trying to remember the unnamed man's face.

"Have you remembered anything else?" he asked, placing another slimy bite of Jell-O on my bottom lip.

I shook my head.

"Did you know you had stitches here?" He tapped behind my ear. "I took them out last night. It seems you were recovering from a recent surgery."

I frowned, touching my ear. I had felt them but couldn't remember what they were called until now.

"You likely suffered an accident, perhaps a fall," he continued.

"How can you tell?"

"You were treated for internal bleeding. A fall would also explain the memory loss, as the impact would've damaged your hippocampus. You seem to have retained a great deal of your semantic memory, such as your name, and general knowledge, like reading and writing. But you're having difficulty with episodic recalls. Of course, I can't confirm any of this without a CT scan."

I let his words seep in, focusing on the important ones—*semantic memory, name, reading and writing, and episodic recalls*. "Real-life amnesia," I mumbled.

He gave me half a smile. "It's not as dramatic as they make it out to be on TV."

"Will I remember who I am? Will I remember my past?"

“Perhaps with time.”

“So, it’s possible that I’ll never remember?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

A calloused hand rubbed my shoulder. I barely noticed when he rose to settle against my pillow, and he wrapped an arm around me. I sank into his hold, feeling the weight of exhaustion pressing down on me. His presence brought a natural sense of peace.

It was abnormal to seek comfort from a stranger while on the run from an unnamed threat. I was fully aware of the danger men posed. Believe me. A faceless man was trying to kill me, and every man I had come across treated me like a piece of meat. Even the authorities, the guards at the pier, had scared the crap out of me. Compared to Dr. Maxwell, they might as well be prepubescent boys. Dr. Maxwell was the largest, most intimidating man I had encountered. How was it that this mammoth of a man made me feel safe, and the tiny guards at the pier still gave me the creeps?

It defied logic. The elementary concept of stranger danger didn’t exist with him.

“Where’s this boat taking us?” I asked out of the blue.

His eyes moved over my weary face. “To the Bahamas.”

It sounded like a warm destination. “But I don’t have anything to wear.” Or any worldly possessions for that matter.

The slight quirk of his upper lip told me he was amused. Reading his body language was the best I could do since he was stubbornly expressive. It was crazy, I had to predict his moods from a minimal lip flicker. I suppose it was comical to be worried about inconsequential dilemmas, such as clothing, given my other predicaments.

“Everything you need will be provided for you,” he assured. “The boat is stocked with essentials for guests.”

There was still one problem Dr. Maxwell had overlooked. “I don’t have the money to be a guest on this boat.”

“We’ll work something out.” His voice sounded convincing as he restarted his efforts to feed me. The clinking of silverware filled the space between us as he reached for utensils, and in the silence, I listened to the waves crashing against the boat rhythmically.

This boat looked like a million bucks, and renting a room probably cost just as much. It would take the rest of my life to work off the debt.

“Maybe I can get a job on the boat and work off the debt,” I offered, though I had no idea what skills I possessed, and if I had to guess, even the maids’ quarters on this boat were a luxury commodity.

He shook his head. “Your only job is to get better.”

My shoulders hunched. I had nothing to offer without a job. I didn’t even have clothes on my back to trade for a room, and I had no right to expect a free ride. The doctor had already been too generous. He had given me room and board and free medical care in exchange for what?

The verbal diarrhea started before I could pump the brakes. “Why are you doing this for me? Why take care of me when I have no way of repaying you? Why did you break that deliveryman’s hand when I was the one who snuck in? I was in the wrong. Why not dispose of me instead of hurting one of your own guys?”

“Because.” With his eyes fixed on my mouth, his thumb glided across my bottom lip to wipe away excess juices from the gelatin. His deadpan face was softer than usual, a rare glimpse into an unguarded moment, as he said, “You’re the furthest thing from disposable.”

The words tugged at something deep inside me, simultaneously breaking and mending me. Since waking up, he had been the first to show me I wasn’t disposable. The realization burned like a hot blade, closing the wounds in my soul. Something terrifying dawned on me as he continued to feed me.

I believed him—I was the furthest thing from disposable to him.

CHAPTER
TEN
ROSE

AFTER I ATE EVERY BITE—JELL-O, fruits, a yogurt, and a blueberry muffin—he left to put away the cart. I considered everything we had discussed.

The good news? I was safe from harm unless I was the most unfortunate person on earth and the man chasing me had also boarded this boat. Roaming the cold streets with unbearable hunger and a killer on the loose was unappealing.

The bad news? At some point, I would have to evacuate the medical suite for paying customers who may fall ill. Without money or a job, it was impossible to rent a cabin on this luxurious boat. I only had a place to sleep as long as Dr. Maxwell vouched for me. The way he had said, “*You’re the furthest thing from disposable,*” made it sound like he wouldn’t get rid of me, but what motivation did he have to keep me around? It wasn’t like he was romantically inclined toward me or anything. Right?

He would be out of my league even without another woman in a five-hundred-mile radius. On a scale of one to ten, the doctor was a twenty. And that was *before* he took his shirt off last night. If those magazine articles were any indication, women knew it, too. He had endless choices. The class distinction between us was vast, and we were nowhere near being equals.

“Good morning, ma’am.” A cheerful voice stopped my emotional spiral.

An unfamiliar man stood at the doorway. He was young and dressed like one of the crew members from yesterday.

“I brought toiletries for your bath,” he said with a kind smile.

Amelie mentioned she would order toiletries for the room, but I assumed she had forgotten about it since I never saw her again.

“I didn’t receive a list, so I included one of everything.” He stashed a white shopping bag on the nightstand, listing off all the items inside: shampoo, conditioner, bodywash, face wash, lotion, deodorant, toothbrush set, shaving kit, sunscreen, comb, cotton swabs.

“Thank you,” I murmured, marveling at the bag. It was made of thick material with a glossy finish. Olympus was carved across its belly in gold font, and the handle was adorned with a fake butterfly. I never knew a shopping bag could be so beautiful.

“If you need anything else, my name’s Jace.”

“Jace,” I echoed.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, his shirt crisp and perfectly tousled golden-brown hair framing his pleasant face. Was everyone on this boat required to look a certain way? As if good looks weren’t enough, they were also the epitome of professionalism.

The fact that he kept calling me *ma’am* made me giggle. “I’m not a ma’am.” I laughed. I think I was in my early twenties, and there was no way he was much older.

“My apologies, ma—miss,” he corrected himself.

“Please, call me Rose.”

“Yes, Miss Rose.”

I shook my head. “Just Rose,” I insisted.

He gave me a conceding smile. “May I get you anything else?”

A thought came to me. “Actually, yes. Do you know whether this boat is short-staffed?”

“Um—”

“I need a job,” I explained.

His mouth gaped as if I had made the most impossible request. “B-but you’re with,” he paused, unsure how to end the thought. “You’re a guest.”

“A guest who needs a job.”

“But you’re Dr. Maxwell’s guest,” he emphasized as if there was a difference.

This conversation was the last thing he expected. A guest asking for a job was uncharted territory, but I couldn’t tell him that calling me a guest was a reach; I was more like a stowaway. The owners would make me walk

the plank once they discovered I had boarded their luxury vessel without paying their zillion-dollar entrance fee.

“I-I am Dr. Maxwell’s guest.” Technically, it was the truth. “But I don’t want to be in his debt, and I can’t afford to pay him back without a job. Can you help me out?”

Comprehension finally dawned on his face that I was like him and belonged in the third-class cabins. The good doctor had taken enough interest to entertain me for a few days. Sooner or later, I’d be out of luck.

Jace seemed torn, but eventually suggested, “I could ask the kitchen if they need an extra hand.”

I beamed at him. “That’d be great. Thank you, Jace.”

“It’s my pleasure, m—” He cut himself off at my pointed look. “It’s my pleasure, Rose.”

The exchange made us laugh. “The pleasure is all mine.” I extended my hand. “It was very nice meeting you.”

Jace took my hand in a surprisingly soft grip and stared at my face intently for a moment.

“What the hell’s going on here?”

I jumped at the deep voice and pulled my hand back.

Jace immediately straightened. “Good morning, Dr. Maxwell.”

I turned to be met with lava eyes, ready to set the room on fire. Dr. Maxwell’s jaw was tight. In fact, all his visible muscles were tense. The glimpses of danger I had seen in the man had returned.

“Hi,” I started nervously. “This is Jace. He was dropping off some toiletries.”

He wasn’t impressed, and his gaze burned a hole between me and Jace. My heart rate spiked as he strode toward us, his blue eyes blazing with an emotion I couldn’t quite place. Anger? Frustration? Something else entirely? He crowded us until Jace was forced to step away from me.

Damn. What had Jace done to provoke such a reaction?

“No one other than authorized personnel is to have access to this section,” he breathed with venom in his voice.

Why was this section blocked off? Surely, the medical floor should be accessible in case of an emergency.

“I asked *Amelie*,” he emphasized the name, “to drop off the toiletries. I was very clear in my instructions.” Dr. Maxwell looked ready to kill Jace. All he had done was drop off a bag. Whatever the reason, I wanted to de-

escalate the situation. After what happened with the delivery guy, I didn't want anyone else to lose a hand.

"H-he was dropping it off because Amelie didn't know where the toiletries were stocked," I stammered, unconsciously leaning back. Whether it was the truth, I had no idea. It sounded convincing enough, and I hoped Jace would play along.

Dr. Maxwell's lips curved into a sardonic smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Is that right, Jack?" he asked in a steel voice.

"It's Jace, sir," Jace corrected mildly.

"Your point?" Dr. Maxwell gave him a look that said his name had no significance or bearing.

Heat crept up my cheeks. I opened my mouth again, but his sharp voice cut through the air like a knife.

"Tell me, Jack, do you often make a habit of breaking the rules on my boat?"

His boat?

Jace was wise enough not to argue about the intentional name slipup. "Someone at housekeeping told me to drop them off. I didn't think—"

"You don't get paid to think," he interrupted sharply.

I glanced between them, my stomach twisting into knots. This was awful. Why was Dr. Maxwell acting like this? And why did it feel like there was more simmering beneath the surface of his anger? "I think there has been a misunderstanding—"

Jace stepped forward like he wanted to take the heat for me. "I apologize, sir. It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't, or you'll be getting off the boat at the next stop," Dr. Maxwell barked. "Make sure everyone else on this ship knows it, too."

"Yes, sir." Jace walked away, throwing me an apologetic glance over his shoulder. But I should be the one saying sorry. He got chewed out because of me.

I found myself alone with the doctor. The air was thick with tension, and I couldn't shake the feeling this was about more than Jace accessing the restricted section.

His gaze cut to mine, making me shrink back. "Never, ever, lie to me again, especially to protect another man," he demanded, his voice low, almost a growl. "Are we clear?"

"What!?"

It was the wrong thing to ask because he was ready to hit the fan. “I know every detail about things that belong to me, including this boat. That boy came here to spy because the staff was curious about you. Amelie didn’t send him, she would never defy my direct order.”

There was a lot to unpack there, but only one thing stood out. “Why would the staff be curious about me?” I was nobody.

He ignored my question, courtesy of the anger festering in his eyes. “What were you thinking, talking to a stranger?”

I frowned. “Stranger? He works here.” *Apparently, he works for you,* I added internally. Dr. Maxwell owned the boat and didn’t think to mention it.

“So what?” he snapped. “There’s a man out there trying to hurt you. You said so yourself. Do you think it’s wise to be friendly with strange men at a time like this?”

The words stung because he was right.

I wanted to defend myself, explain that I wasn’t a fuckup who put myself at unnecessary risk. However, I’d woken up on the streets, roaming the wrong part of town, and I spent the better part of the night with a man I had just met. Granted, I felt incredibly safe with him for reasons that defied logic. Probably because I was on my last leg and would’ve been dead without his help.

Nonetheless, Dr. Maxwell was an anomaly. After experiencing dangerous men firsthand, the last thing I should’ve done was let my guard down around unknown men. Perhaps he had a point. I didn’t have the best track record.

Nurse Amelie’s perky voice pierced through the awkward tension. “Rise and shine! How are we feeling today?”

I forced a weak smile, turning to face the bubbly nurse.

Her brow furrowed as she approached, sensing the tension in the room. Her gaze bounced between us. “Dr. Maxwell. You have a phone call in Exam Room Two,” she said cautiously.

“Tell them I’ll call back,” he snapped, eyes never leaving my face.

“I tried,” she said in a whisper, handing him a note. “I can’t hold them off any longer. They’ve been calling all morning.”

He straightened, his expression unreadable. I wanted to ask him to stay and squash the silly argument. But the words died on my tongue as I gazed into his detached eyes. He marched toward the door, pausing beside Amelie

to whisper something. He glanced back at me for a final time. For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of something in his eyes—concern? Regret over the conversation? But then the mask of indifference slipped back into place, and just like that, he was gone.

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CHAPTER

ELEVEN

ROSE

“WHO IS READY FOR A GIRLS’ day?!” Amelie chirped, clapping her hands together. “Dr. Maxwell gave us full access to the spa staff. Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

My eyes darted to the exit after the man who had just stormed out.

“I’ll call the spa and tell them to send over a team,” she added.

I thought no one was allowed on this floor.

It turned out *men* weren’t allowed on this floor. I peeked into the hallway and saw two female security guards monitoring it.

Who were they keeping out?

There was no way these guards were here for my benefit, right? The boat probably had limited security measures. Siccing two guards on me because I might be on the run from a lunatic seemed unlikely.

Amelie ushered in a small army of beauty professionals—a petite nail technician, a stylist with purple hair, and an aesthetician.

The aesthetician directed me to the tub to wrap me in seaweed, and Amelie insisted on helping because of my bad ankle. The stylist followed us to the bathroom as she’d rather shampoo and wash my hair while I was in the tub. The nail technician used a similar logic.

Amelie settled into the chair beside the tub. “This will be so much fun,” she quipped.

I awkwardly tugged at the strings when the aesthetician asked me to shed the hospital gown. “Sure.” I managed a weak smile, my eyes darting nervously because I knew what came next.

Cornered, I had no choice but to shed the gown. I saw the flicker of shock in everyone's eyes as they caught sight of the angry scars crisscrossing around my midriff. I should have saved them from being exposed to this horror.

"Oh," the aesthetician breathed, quickly averting her gaze. Revulsion hit her hard when she saw the scars up close, but one stern glance from Amelie had her acting like they were invisible.

"How about some cucumber water to go with our spa day?" Amelie said brightly, trying to dispel the tension.

I felt my cheeks burn with shame, and I wanted to sink beneath the bubbles and disappear. But I had to be extremely careful not to get the dressings on my arms, neck, and chest to touch the water. Luckily, Amelie removed the bandages on my legs to soak my ankle.

Everyone else busied themselves with their preassigned tasks. "Such beautiful hair," the hairstylist cooed, fluffing my strands. Her thick accent sounded vaguely familiar, though I couldn't place it. As she washed my hair, I sank deeper into the tub, relishing the hot water. The rich had no idea how good they had it. A bath was a luxury.

Amelie returned with cucumber water and a stack of glossy magazines. She reclaimed her seat, and somehow, it was normal for three people to watch a grown woman bathe.

I didn't know much about my former self, but I had an inkling that I was a reserved person. Yet, I was the center of attention today and found myself enjoying the whole shebang. They spoiled me, and the lonely homeless girl in me was starved for the coddling.

The beauty team—Maria, Ying, and Lisa—spent the better part of the day polishing my body while Amelie molded my mind into a twenty-first-century woman. She introduced me to all sorts of technology, gave me the lowdown on pop culture references, and played Korean dramas and music videos on the bathroom television. Girls' day also consisted of gossiping about your coworkers and friends.

The girls discussed the blossoming romances between crew members, fielded rumors about the current couples, and made predictions for future breakups and hookups. They talked about the other passengers, too. There was a big group on the boat celebrating a bachelorette party. A few of the women were single, and at this morning's boozy brunch, they daringly admitted to having their eyes on the prize—Dr. Maxwell.

It seemed too many women wanted him. The competition was fierce, and I had no chance whatsoever. There was little solace in the other women being just as insecure about their odds. According to the beauticians, the rules of his boundaries were abstract, and initiating physical contact was a no-go.

Amelie chided the beauticians for gossiping about the boss and redirected the conversation to a new territory—sex. The other three seemed initially reluctant to share but eventually started swapping stories of their wildest sexual encounters.

I tried to recall my sexual escapades when I couldn't decode some of their references. They talked about where they did it while leaving out the sordid details of *it*. The basic lingo about body part references was clear, but the act itself eluded me. I needed a sex education—a demonstration or a play-by-play.

The conversation stilled once they exchanged stories of how they lost their virginities, and Lisa declared it was my turn to share. It seemed only Amelie was informed of my memory loss.

I didn't know whether I was a virgin. Scratch that, I didn't even know what a virgin was. I thought about asking them before realizing I was in too deep. I'd look like a fool who had been nodding along with their tales.

Luckily, Amelie came to the rescue and said I couldn't stay in the hot tub any longer. Doctor's orders.

The aesthetician dressed me in a fluffy white spa robe and guided me back to the room. A cleaning crew finished making the bed and wordlessly swapped places with us to tidy up the bathroom. They were so quiet in their efforts that I had no idea they were scrubbing the room clean while the aesthetician did the same with me. She tugged on a handle and pulled out a table tucked into the wall for space management. It was one of those examination tables found in doctors' offices. It doubled as an aesthetician's bed. She had me hop onto it to wax my underarms and legs. The beauty session ended with something called a Brazilian bikini wax. By the time I realized what she intended to do, it was too late to chicken out.

Who knew beauty was so intrusive and painful?

Amelie flipped through her latest magazine as the hairstylist put the finishing touches on my hair. "Oh, look!" she exclaimed, holding up a page. "Dr. Maxwell was featured in *Time* magazine again."

I peeked at the image, my breath catching in my throat. Underneath, it said, *Dr. Caledon Maxwell, NewTech University*.

The photo was similar to the others he had shown me, though this one lacked any women clamoring for him. Of the articles he had shown me, each one featured him with a different breathtaking woman. I felt something inside me deflate at the thought. It was barely reassuring that his recent pictures were solo shots.

I couldn't focus on what it meant, feeling faint from the fumes coming from my hair. When I sat at the vanity, I suddenly recognized the strong odor.

"I have highlights." I stared at the mirror. My dark strands had lighter, shimmering strands. The strong smell turned out to be the chemicals from the hair dye.

"You don't like it?" The hairstylist asked, face ridden with anxiety. It had been clear from the beginning that English wasn't her first language. She'd struggled with it while sharing her stories. The highlights transpired somewhere between the entertaining stories and our lost-in-translation communication.

It was hardly her fault, as I wasn't paying attention, either. Plus, I didn't entirely hate it. I looked better than I had yesterday. Unrecognizable. The vitamin C peeling mask had wiped away the dirt and brightened my face. My nails were pretty, with a fresh coat of light blue polish. The seaweed wrap had left my skin soft like a baby's butt.

I shook my head, wanting to put the poor woman out of her misery.
"No, no. I like it," I said perkily.

Despite my reassurance, she hung her head.

"I'll take it from here." Amelie grabbed the brush from her unsure hands and steered the beauticians out of the room. She arranged and rearranged my hair, enhancing my face with face moisturizer, under-eye cream, and lip balm. There was a sense of *déjà vu* in the way Amelie fussed over me, like we had done this many times, though I had met her less than twenty-four hours ago. It settled me enough to get used to the hair, even though I looked like an entirely different person.

Once more, I reveled in the spotlight. I knew the old me hated attention, it was an instinctive realization I had upon waking up without my memory. But the new me? I loved being pampered like a princess, having friends, and being included in conversations. I vowed never to give up this part of

myself. I wanted to be a part of the group rather than watch others live their lives as an outsider. Like Dr. Maxwell, who happened to be the center of everyone's world.

"Why is Dr. Maxwell photographed so often?" I asked Amelie. Granted that he was devastatingly handsome in tailored suits, but shouldn't the paparazzi photograph boy bands instead of doctors?

Her eyes lit up, delighted at the opportunity to boast about her boss. She held him in high regard, but it didn't feel romantic. Rather, she took pride in his accomplishments. "Why *wouldn't* he be photographed? He's a brilliant doctor and one of the most accomplished scientists of our time." She picked up a *Time* magazine, turned a few pages to find a picture of him, and shoved the article in my face. "Besides, look at his face!"

I couldn't argue with her there.

"He's also heir to one of the richest families in America. That can generate a lot of public interest in you."

That tracked. I knew he was wealthy, not rich.

"If the paparazzi sees him or his brother around New York, they're like a moth to a flame," she added coyly.

"He has a brother?" I asked, surprised.

She nodded. "A twin."

Two of him. What must that be like?

I read the article aloud for her benefit while she primped me. Some stuff I already knew about him, and the rest I learned from the article. Graduated early from boarding school and finished medical school at the top of his class at only twenty years old. By the time he completed his residency, he was already bored with being a doctor. He changed course and took over a lab for experimental drugs at NewTech University. According to Amelie, he was required to teach one class per semester, which he hated, but he had complete autonomy over his lab, which he loved.

"But he still practices medicine?" I pondered out loud.

"He takes on shifts at the university hospital once or twice a month," Amelie replied as if it were nothing. "Just to keep his skills sharp, you know?"

The man worked at the hospital just to keep himself sharp. He was one of those people who wanted to learn for the sake of it, not because it was required. He seemed beyond intelligent and impressive.

What had I been thinking, imagining something between us? I caught my reflection in the mirror. Underneath all the seaweed, highlights, and Brazilian bikini waxes, I was covered in scars. I was damaged goods, and he was... Well, he was Dr. Caledon Maxwell.

“He sounds...dedicated to his craft,” I murmured lamely.

Amelie snorted. “That’s putting it mildly. The man’s a workaholic. This is his first vacation in forever, and his research assistants are running around like chickens with their heads off. Do you know how many calls we received since this morning? He’s probably spent the day putting out fires and finding a substitute to teach his class for the next month.”

I frowned.

Why wasn’t a substitute professor picked out in advance to account for his absence? Surely, he gave his assistants ample instructions before leaving on a preplanned trip. The doctor seemed responsible and not the type to leave things to chance.

Amelie didn’t notice my confusion. “And don’t even get me started on how shocked the staff members are, they haven’t stopped gossiping about it all day. Todd nearly had an aneurysm last night when Dr. Maxwell decided to join us on the cruise.”

“What?” My head twisted so fast that the brush in her hands hit my eye. “Ow.” The soft bristles prickled my eyeball, and I slapped a hand over it.

“Oh, sorry,” Amelie gushed, running to the mini refrigerator to find a cold compress for my injured eye.

But I caught her panicked look before she busied herself with the ice pack. She hadn’t meant to tell me about the doctor’s last-minute decision to join the cruise. It was a slip of the tongue.

Amelie tried to steer the conversation in a new direction, resorting to gossip about the other staff members and passengers. The high-spirited effort failed to distract me, though I smiled at the expected pauses.

But I could only focus on one thing. I had assumed Dr. Maxwell was meant to be the onboard physician. It turned out that something happened last night that changed his mind, and the only thing that came to mind was the homeless girl he caught sneaking into his boat.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

ROSE

Past



“THANK GOD YOU’RE HERE!” Sophie screeched, clawing at my wrist as soon as I walked through the front doors of the Student Banquet Center. “I’ve been waiting forever. I thought you bailed.”

She paused upon noticing my outfit, quizzically eyeing my red lips and cocktail dress. My outfit for the annual Alumni Fundraiser was ordinary when compared to the bulky rose-gold snake chain wrapped around Sophie’s neck and her sequined black dress. It accentuated every curve of her body, putting mine to shame. Nonetheless, my knee-length dress was racier than usual. Whatever she thought of my choice, she chose to keep it to herself.

Sophie was one of my childhood friends. Although I was still not a regular chatterbox, I felt comfortable speaking around her and my cousins.

She grabbed my wrist and pulled me into the crowd. “I would’ve been pissed if you didn’t come tonight. What took you so long?”

I glanced at my phone. “It’s four fifty-five. The fundraiser doesn’t start for another five minutes.”

Despite what people—and Sophie—thought, I never missed the chance to attend big functions. At intimate gatherings, there was pressure to engage

in conversation, but at large affairs, you could get lost in a sea of faces. These events were perfect for someone like me. I could socialize without the pressure to converse.

Sophie didn't hold these events in the same reverence. "Kill me, now," she groaned. "I can't believe my parents make me organize this stupid event every year. Like, do they think we want to party with our parents?" The moment she said it, she remembered my parents, who were MIA. She watched me warily out of the corner of her eye. "Is your dad coming tonight?"

Tonight's fundraiser was organized by the Alumni Committee, though Sophie seemed to confuse it with a party. The event was held on campus, and the attendees were NewTech alumni, such as Sophie's parents. While most parents were involved in the planning process, my father had no idea this event was even happening. His assistant generally sent a check on his behalf.

I studied the mushroom-colored linens on the round banquet tables and the muted insignias. The committee had gone all out this year with fall decorations, giant bamboo leaves as centerpieces, and servers dressed in taupe colors. "Nope. He's in Barcelona for work." Or was it London?

Since I was old enough to remember, Papa had always been pulled away on important business trips. But ever since my attack, he actively sought reasons to stay away. It started a string of fights between my parents. Papa blamed Mom for not keeping an eye on me. How else could I have been attacked in our backyard? Mom blamed him for not being around more. The scars on my body wouldn't let them forget the gruesome day, and they weren't on brand with our aesthetic home and perfect lives. They had begged me to consider plastic surgery, but I was terrified. I couldn't do it, and they couldn't bear to look at me. People didn't have the stomach to look at the new me, and I learned it was best to cover up.

In the end, my parents separated, though they never got divorced. My father took every opportunity to leave town, and my mother returned to her first love—acting. The extent of our relationship was the sporadic weekends she came around for a mother-daughter yacht trip.

"I'm sorry," Sophie offered with genuine sympathy laced in her voice.

She didn't have to feel sorry for me. The years had numbed the pain of my lukewarm relationship with my inattentive parents. I was apathetic toward them.

Sensing a dip in the festive mood, Sophie changed the topic. “Hey, how’s your hot cousin, Poppy?”

“Still only eighteen.” Sophie was bisexual and had harbored a crush on my cousin for months. I told her Poppy was too young for her, but she was relentless in her pursuit.

“I don’t see the problem. Eighteen is legal, and you said that she likes both boys and girls.”

“Doesn’t matter. Poppy is super focused on school. She only expresses interest in romance during winter or summer breaks when school’s out of session.”

“That’s odd.”

“That’s Poppy.” I narrowed my eyes. “But whatever she’s into, leave her alone. She’s too young for you.”

“No promises.”

“Rose! Hey! Wait up.”

Our conversation stopped when another voice called out from across the room. We turned to find Matt jogging toward us, looking incredibly handsome in slacks and a midnight blue jacket with a polo shirt underneath. It was the universal attire for the younger men at these events.

I raised my head once he reached us since he was so much taller than me.

“Hey, Sophie.” He gave her a polite smile before turning to face me. “Rose, you look great.” He gestured at my champagne-colored cocktail dress, his eyes fleeting to the curve of my waist.

I couldn’t get past Professor Maxwell’s comments about my clothes. I had ransacked my closet to disprove him, but that failed miserably. Every article I owned was too conservative and neutral for someone my age. This dress came the closest to contradicting him. Though it had a high collar, the see-through sleeves made it feminine and somewhat sexy. In case the look wasn’t outlandish enough for me, I paired it with red lipstick and an emerald necklace that stood out.

“I haven’t been to one of these events in forever,” he added. “My parents practically blackmailed me into it.”

I smiled tentatively, and he returned the gesture with a million-dollar megawatt one. I was grateful when Sophie took over the conversation.

“Ugh. Be grateful. Mine forces me to organize it every year. As if we want to drink with our parents.”

“Right?” Matt slanted his face toward me. “Are your parents here, too?” he asked, stepping forward.

I shook my head, hastily retreating. He noticed, though he didn’t comment on it.

“That means you can get drunk without hearing a lecture. Let’s hit the bar.” Matt led me to the bar with a hand on my waist.

I hurried ahead, letting his arm fall away. He was more forward than he had been in class, standing closer than necessary in an intimate way.

When we reached our destination, Sophie craned her neck over the massive crowd. She tried to get the bartender’s attention, who was being hounded by at least twenty others. “Are you kidding me? You’re telling me I can’t even get a drink at a party *I* organized?”

It was a fundraiser, not a party, I mentally corrected.

She huffed. “This thing blows.”

Matt laughed. “You’re the one who organized it.”

“Don’t remind me.”

When it was finally our turn, the bartender handed us three champagne flutes. The drinks lasted less than five minutes, and soon Sophie was trying to get his attention again. After our fourth drink, Matt stepped up to the plate.

“I’m bribing the bartender and getting us a bottle. Meet you ladies outside?” he suggested.

Sophie and I gave him appreciative glances. “I could use a smoke,” she announced, and linked arms with me. We strolled toward the terrace, and once we stepped outside, she cut right to the chase. “What’s going on with you and Matt?”

I frowned, almost stumbling on my high heels. “Absolutely nothing.”

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from her purse, borrowing a light from a passerby. “He has been staring at you all night.”

“He’s just not used to seeing me this way,” I explained, glancing down at my formfitting dress.

Her eyes moved over the chiffon fabric. “I am not used to seeing you dressed this way. What’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

Sophie twirled the cigarette between her fingers, using it to draw an imaginary line over my outfit. “You’re showing skin.” She pointed at my nails, which I had painted red on a whim to match my lips. “You’re wearing

colors.” She reached out and touched the large emerald necklace around my neck. “And you’re wearing a statement piece. This is so unlike you.”

She had long teased me for being allergic to color and avoiding bold jewelry. Simple had always been my style, but I couldn’t resist when I found an unopened bottle of red nail polish and the never-before-worn emerald-encased necklace on my jewelry stand.

My head was foggy after the last glass of champagne, mixed with the haze from the cigarette smoke. The alcohol clouded my mind, and I spoke without thinking. “You can blame this on Professor Maxwell.”

Her eyebrows nearly hit her hairline. “Caden? What’s he got to do with anything?”

Sophie was a couple years older than me and a couple years younger than the Maxwell twins. While we met in elementary school, she had known the twins her whole life. I had never shared my feelings for Damon with her or about enrolling in Professor Maxwell’s class, fearing my family would be angry if the word got out.

“I signed up for Professor Maxwell’s class,” I admitted in a small voice.

“Oh.” Her voice went up an octave. She watched me closely before asking, “And I’m guessing your family doesn’t know?”

I shook my head. It was best to come clean. Sooner or later, she would find out through the twins. Luckily, she was among the few neutral parties in this drawn-out rivalry. She would understand this was purely about academics, nothing more.

“What must it be like to have Caden as a professor?” she mused.

The cigarette between her fingers swayed with each puff, the tip pulsating with the beat of her breath. It reminded me of Damon. He smoked, too, and I whirled my head in search of him. He generally attended these things and must be here, somewhere. Damon graduated from NewTech and recently returned for his MBA. Ironically, he was a student again while his brother had become a professor.

“It sucks,” I mumbled distractedly, to which she chuckled. “He thinks we are idiots, makes us clean his lab, and makes fun of how I dress.” Well, not really. More like he looked down on how I dressed.

Now that I thought about it, I wasn’t sure he had done that, either. It was more like an observation. I had no idea why his opinion had bothered me enough to ransack my closet.

Sophie took a drag of her cigarette, her cheeks hollowing slightly.
“Ignore Caden. He was born a grouch.”

Her words concocted an image of a young Professor Maxwell in a serious-looking outfit, doing math on a whiteboard twice his size. The visual made me smile, but it also sparked my curiosity. “What was he like as a kid? I’m guessing he was super serious and never laughed.”

“Hm. Kind of,” she replied thoughtfully.

My smile dropped when her face contorted at the thought of Professor Maxwell’s childhood. “What was that look?”

“What look?”

“You made a face when I asked about his childhood.”

“That’s just what my face looks like.”

I pinned her with a *fess up* expression, and Sophie relented with an eye roll.

“If you must know, Caden didn’t have the best childhood. It’s a weird thing to say since his twin had a great childhood and a set of loving parents. But Caden had different parents from Damon.”

I knitted my brows. “Now I’m confused because twins have the same parents. Biology and all.”

The terrace of the Banquet Center appeared blurry since I was officially tipsy. But I saw Sophie make another face. This time, it was closer to a grimace. “Technically.” She weighed the word as if wondering how to approach the topic. “But their parents acted completely differently around Caden. The way they ignored him.” She shook her head. “If they weren’t twins, I’d think he was adopted.”

I stared at her curiously. “Why would their parents be indifferent only to one child?”

The end of her cigarette slowly burned out, and she put the stub out on a nearby ashtray. “Did you know Caden and Damon were born on different days?” she asked, sidestepping my question.

I nodded. “Damon was born first. By the time Professor Maxwell was born, it was after midnight, so their birthdays fall on different days.”

Sophie appeared perplexed over the extent of my knowledge of Damon’s childhood. Thankfully, she didn’t read too much into it. “When they were born, labor lasted less than an hour for Damon. He was the golden child right from the start, and growing up, he was the perfect angel.”

She inhaled deeply, parking her butt against the ledge of the terrace railing.
“He still is.”

Once more, I nodded knowingly. Damon was a renowned philanthropist with various charities to his name. Was it any wonder I fell in love with the man?

“But.” Her tongue darted out and pressed against her bottom lip. “Caden’s birth was difficult, and the doctor opted for an emergency C-section. There were a ton of complications and blood loss, and Mrs. Maxwell nearly died. After regaining consciousness, she treated Caden like her nemesis and only wanted to hold Damon.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I blurted defensively. “It wasn’t his fault that his birth was difficult.” I had never heard this version of the story and was shocked by what Sophie had disclosed. I couldn’t believe a mother would refuse to hold her newborn. To face a mother’s rejection on the day you were born was downright sadistic.

Sophie lifted her right shoulder. “He had offended her just by being born, and she never forgave him for it. From what I heard, she refused to nurse him. Everyone thought her attitude would change with time, but she only seemed to dislike him more. Growing up, she’d beg him not to appear before her. It didn’t help that he wasn’t as easygoing as Damon.” She slanted her head. “My parents are pretty close with the Maxwells, and we used to vacation together in the Hamptons. Every time we went away together, Mrs. Maxwell would make all of Damon’s favorite treats and write little notes telling him he was the best son ever. She never did that for Caden. I think she was scared of him, and that fear stopped her from loving him.”

Something in my chest twisted so sharply that standing became physically painful. How could a mother not love her child? What Sophie shared was too sad.

Suddenly, my absentee parents didn’t seem so bad. At least I didn’t witness them showering another child with love while I was actively deprived of it.

Sophie lifted her eyelids, pensively deliberating something. If I had to guess, she was considering whether she would share the next bit.

I waited.

“Not many people know this, so keep this between us.”

I nodded.

“Mrs. Maxwell was addicted to painkillers. She insisted it was because she needed a crutch to deal with a difficult child such as Caden.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I couldn’t help repeating. It was preposterous to not only blame a child for being born but for her addiction, too. “She turned him into the fall guy for everything that went wrong in her life.”

She held up a hand. “I know. I know. She said his eyes were cold, and it unsettled her. One time, she caught him experimenting on rats and lost her shit. Caden was a gifted kid with endless curiosity. She didn’t see it that way and decided he was evil from the get-go. Nothing could convince her otherwise. After hearing it so many times, I think Caden started believing it, too.”

“How do you mean?”

“I processed all the checks for this event. This payment came from Caden’s account.” She pulled up something on her phone and turned the screen to me. It was a receipt slip for a large donation, signed by Damon Maxwell. “He donated money but signed it under Damon’s name. He has been doing this since we were kids. Whenever he does something nice, he credits Damon for it.”

My jaw dropped. “That’s so fucked up.”

It was awful that Professor Maxwell didn’t want credit for his good deeds because someone had ingrained it in him that he was bad. I couldn’t help but notice the similarity in our situation. My family thought I resembled a monster after seeing my scars and begged me to consider plastic surgery. Meanwhile, Professor Maxwell’s family had convinced him he was a monster because of his unconventional personality. We had more in common than I realized—we were monsters in the eyes of others.

His situation was worse. I could cover up the superficial marks on my body, he couldn’t cover the ones scarring his soul.

“Okay. So, Mrs. Maxwell decided that Caden was the devil. But what about his dad?”

She gave me a small smile. “Damon was also Mr. Maxwell’s golden boy. He did everything asked of him and agreed to join the family business. He was groomed to take over the company, but Caden had no such aspirations. He was interested in medicine. It caused a lot of tension in their relationship, and Mr. Maxwell often told Caden his mother was right about him being evil.”

“Oh God.”

Was it possible for your heart to shatter for a person you barely knew? His parents labeled him as a monster since birth. There was no one to protect him or tell him otherwise. Sophie's story made me want to reach out and comfort the curious, lonely young boy.

"How did Professor Maxwell react to all this?" I asked weakly.

"He was hard to read, even as a little boy. But everyone assumed he brushed off his parents' rejection."

"Do you believe it?"

She sighed. "Every year, Mrs. Maxwell went all out for Damon's birthday and bought him buttloads of gifts. One time, she even rented an amusement park and invited everyone they knew. Caden's birthday was the next day, but he already knew she'd never make such a fuss over him. I remember seeing him that day. He was sitting on a bench, watching Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell drag Damon to one of the rides. She never included him in their family moments, and he never tried to fit in. He just watched from afar. I always wondered if it bothered him." Sophie maintained a half smile. "Does that answer your question?"

This was more painful than Mrs. Maxwell's refusal to hold her newborn. I staggered over to a nearby cocktail table and perched myself on a stool. Sophie followed suit, settling onto the stool beside mine.

"His mother was a bitch." The words slipped out before I could catch them.

Sophie seemed amused that I had said the word, *bitch*. To the best of my memory, I had never used that term, but she deserved to be the first. Making your son feel unwanted was bad enough, but flaunting how much love you had to give and deliberately withholding it was a new level of cruelty. How do you come to terms with a mother who never loved you? I hated her for it, even though she was long deceased.

"Why didn't Damon ever call out his mother for being so mean?" I asked.

"Honestly, Damon didn't see the cracks in their so-called happy family because Caden never voiced his complaints. He thought everything was fine when Mrs. Maxwell was still alive."

"But he must've noticed that no one celebrated his brother's birthdays. Why didn't he, or even you, organize something for him?" I tried to keep a neutral tone, but a hint of accusation slipped through. Sophie claimed she

was close to the twins. If she noticed the disparity in how the parents treated the boys, why didn't she do something nice for Professor Maxwell?

She scoffed. "Have you met Caden? He's not exactly approachable. Still, Damon rounded us up one year later to surprise Caden for his birthday. We showed up at his bedroom at midnight with gifts and a cake. And what did he do? Slammed the door right in our faces."

"Why would he do that?"

"Would you want to be on the receiving end of a pity party? He might've been young, but he wasn't stupid. He knew his parents didn't care for him and nearly bit our heads off for trying to supplement that affection. In any case, he never seemed like the kid who wanted or needed a party. Can you blame us for letting it be?"

I nodded in understanding. I had encountered similar instances with Poppy. Those two were cut from the same cloth—reserved and guarded. It was challenging to do nice things for people who reacted poorly to it.

"So, every year, only Damon had a birthday party?" I asked, feeling defeated.

"Pretty much." She rotated her head from side to side. "Mrs. Maxwell would exhaust her resources on Damon's birthday, and the next day, she'd make endless excuses about being too tired to celebrate Caden's. She'd insist one party sufficed for both boys. She never even baked Caden a cake, and instead, served him leftover slices from Damon's party."

I couldn't bear to hear more and stood from the cocktail table, surprising Sophie with the sudden movement.

"What're you doing?" she asked, perplexed.

"I have to go."

She frowned. "What?"

"I have to go," I repeated. "I'll see you later." I turned to leave but bumped into Matt. He held a champagne bottle with a hopeful look on his face.

"Rose, where're you going?" He grabbed my shoulders to steady me, but I stepped away so fast that the stool behind me knocked over.

"Whoa! Be careful." Sophie jumped as the metal stool hit the ground.

"Are you okay?" Matt sounded equally puzzled by my frantic nature. He tried reaching for me again, but I was already halfway to the door.

Their concerned voices followed me out. Their confusion made sense. I was confused, too, and couldn't explain my urgency to leave. Something

inside me screamed that even if it were impossible to break through Professor Maxwell's hard exterior, I couldn't let the matter rest.

I had to get home and bake the best cake of my life.

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CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

ROSE

THREE HOURS LATER, I balanced a round cake box in my hands as I walked down the hallways of the chemistry building. My conversation with Sophie and the three glasses of champagne had put me in a daze. After the fundraiser, I found myself in my apartment, putting my baking skills to use with a showstopping dessert.

I didn't know what I expected to accomplish, only that I couldn't get Sophie's story out of my head. Suddenly, I needed to bake every treat Professor Maxwell's mother had refused him. Hell, I would even write notes with them if it revived some of his lost innocence.

Feeling particularly proud of my creation, I straightened the box to display its contents through the clear plastic window. This was my masterpiece—two layers of yellow cake with strawberry jam filling, hazelnut frosting, and a chocolate ganache finish. It was decorated with macarons, sugar crystals, and swirls of white chocolate. It took me hours to bake and smooth the edges to perfection. I even tied a creamy ribbon around the bottom.

According to my phone, it was past nine p.m. If Professor Maxwell were still at the lab, I could act like a teacher's pet—a suck-up trying to get on his good side with home-baked goods. If he wasn't in the lab, I could drop the cake off with an anonymous note. Either way, he would get the birthday cake he was denied as a child.

However, I hadn't accounted for a third possibility.

I froze as soon as I walked through the lab doors. Professor Maxwell was at his station as expected...and so were all his research assistants.

Shit.

I never expected the rest of his staff to be working after hours. So much for work-life balance.

The brunette, who had stared me down yesterday, was the first to notice me. Her hair was pulled back in a chic bun, and though she was well dressed under her lab coat, the tight black skirt and white blouse were wrinkled from the day's wear. The exhaustion was probably why she was staring daggers at me.

Miles was the second person to sense my presence. "Rose?" he asked, confused. The fatigue on his face was reflected in his rumpled lab coat, a few stray dirt specks dotting the fabric.

Professor Maxwell, who seemed to have blocked out the world with his concentration, lifted his head from the microscope at the sound of my name. It was so rapid I wondered if he had been waiting for someone to utter it. Our gazes clashed, though he was otherwise unmoved.

My bravado faded at his unreadable expression. Suddenly, I felt incredibly self-conscious and started second-guessing my decision.

What was I thinking?

Even his brother and childhood friends didn't bother with sentimental gestures because they were terrified of his reaction. Yet here I was, trying to tear down his walls with a birthday cake.

The worst part—it wasn't his birthday.

"What are you doing here so late at night?" the brunette asked harshly, the corners of her mouth turning downward with deep lines of disapproval.

The other staff—there were at least thirty of them—stared at me expectantly, some open-mouthed and others wide-eyed. My unanticipated arrival had shocked the hell out of them. No one dared to enter Professor Maxwell's sanctuary, and I had done it twice.

"What's going on?" one of the research assistants whispered to a colleague.

"Who's that?"

"One of the students," someone responded.

There were snarky whispers, too. "Semester has barely started, and female Casanova here is trying to get into Professor Maxwell's pants. When will they learn?"

I wanted to die of embarrassment. Worst of all, I couldn't give them an explanation, not with this many people staring at me. The inability to speak at will had become my lifelong companion. I accepted it and adapted accordingly. However, at this moment, frustration filled me as my throat constricted from the unwanted attention. I so badly wanted to give Professor Maxwell something he had been deprived of for his entire childhood. Instead, I had become a vixen with a plan.

The longer I went without speaking, the more curious everyone appeared. Some leaned forward, some had their eyebrows raised, while others stood with their arms crossed, studying me to see what I would do next.

My heart started hammering loudly at the unprecedented attention, and my gaze inadvertently landed on Professor Maxwell. I couldn't deal with another bout of his anger right now. Not while the blood in my veins ran cold from being the center of attention.

I needed to get the hell out of here.

Before he could blast me for showing up unannounced, I lifted the box in my hands. His brow furrowed when I carefully placed it on the steel counter.

“Erm—” Miles started, but I didn’t wait for him to speak, either.

Spinning on my heel, I ran out of the lab. I sprinted down the hallway and took the first left. I could barely see in the dark hallway and shoved past a set of double doors to end up in another deserted corridor. I came to a screeching halt, trying to catch my breath now that I had distanced myself from the mortifying situation.

With my back against the nearest wall, I pressed a hand over my mouth. “Kill me,” I groaned loudly and closed my eyes. “Kill me now.”

“Did you bake that cake for me?”

My entire body froze because I recognized the deep voice.

No.

The universe couldn’t be so cruel as to have Professor Maxwell follow me after I had made a fool of myself in front of all those people. I wanted to run from the cringeworthy moment, not relive it.

I kept my eyes closed to block out reality and did the only rational thing possible—I pressed two fingers against my temples, telepathically convincing him that I was invisible. When I didn’t hear anything, I slowly pried one eye open.

To my great disappointment, I hadn't harnessed the gift of mind control. Professor Maxwell stood at the end of the hallway. He had shed his white lab coat and was in a pair of jeans and a plain gray T-shirt. The casual clothes made him look more like a student rather than a teacher.

His gaze dropped to take in my outfit as well. In my eagerness to bring him the cake, I had forgotten to change out of my semi-provocative clothes. Maybe it was my imagination, but I could have sworn he glanced at my chest twice before closing in. It was covered, but the tight dress made it seem like my rack was being offered up on a plate.

Mortified, I crossed my arms over my breasts, which only pushed them up in the formfitting outfit. I was relieved when he stopped an arm's length away. His self-awareness was unexpectedly accurate. I generally had to step away before people acknowledged my invisible bubble.

"Did you bake that cake for me?" he asked again.

Realizing that I never gave him an answer, I opened my mouth. Nothing came out, but at least he didn't rush me like others did when I couldn't speak within their expected time frame. His patience helped me to manage a curt nod.

"Why?"

I couldn't reveal the truth—I felt sorry for his terrible childhood. Sophie was crystal clear that Professor Maxwell didn't react well to sympathy. But if I didn't come up with a good reason, he would believe his staff's gossip—I was here with nefarious intentions. Why else would someone wear a sexy dress and deliver baked goods late at night?

I tried but failed to maintain eye contact. "To apologize for breaking into your lab," I responded quietly, and braced myself, fully expecting his wrath at my audacity.

"You do realize the irony, right?" He sounded amused. "You're apologizing for breaking into my lab by doing the same thing a second time."

I twiddled my thumbs and waited for my chance to escape.

"It's a big cake," he added after neither of us had spoken in a while. "I can't finish it alone."

"Huh?" My head jerked up at the hint of an invitation. He didn't sound angry at all. If anything, he was trying his damnedest to downplay his scary demeanor.

I stared at him, encouraged by the lightheartedness in his tone. Up close, he looked different than he had yesterday. The five-o'clock shadow had turned into a defined stubble.

"Have a slice of cake with me," he said with a smile, or it was as close to a smile as Professor Maxwell could muster. It was more of a smirk.

I gaped at him. He wanted to eat cake with me.

Why was he entertaining my presumptuous gesture?

I suspected it had something to do with my scars. Had I attempted this before he saw them, he would have ruthlessly shut me down. But ever since he had laid eyes on them, something had shifted between us; I just couldn't put my finger on what it was. If I believed Professor Maxwell was capable of empathy, I would think he felt sorry for me. However, I doubt he felt compassion for me.

He held out a hand, motioning for me to walk.

I shook my head. I couldn't return to that lab, not with all those judgmental eyes waiting to see how this would play out. "Um. That's okay," I whispered. "Feel free to share the cake with your team." I skidded past him, but he had other plans. He stepped in front of me, stopping me in my tracks.

"I sent them home," he informed me. Without touching, he guided me by walking behind me. If I didn't want to bump into his massive frame, I had no choice but to march ahead.

This was beyond odd. They were clearly in the middle of a project when I walked in. Could the abrupt dismissal have something to do with a simple cake?

No way. Professor Maxwell didn't look like the boss who would dismiss his employees in favor of late-night sweets.

We strolled down the hallway in silence, and once we approached the double doors, he held them open for me. He did it again when we reached the lab. I had no experience with dating and had never been escorted by a man in this manner—holding doors, motioning for me to go first, walking leisurely beside me even though his strides were longer. He was a busy man, but the patience he exercised around me was...sweet.

Ugh.

Why was I referring to my dating life in the same thought as a professor? The two weren't related. It was as if my mind had been jumbled since Sophie told me about this man's childhood.

The lab looked like a ghost town when we returned. The cake box was on the same steel counter, the microscopes were left unattended, and the beakers were in the same spots as before. It seemed the staff were chased out before they could put the equipment away.

Did he kick them out immediately after I ran away, and then track me down?

Professor Maxwell grabbed the cake box and led us to the break room attached to the lab. He motioned for me to sit while he fetched plates and forks.

I sat at a booth, marveling at the sophisticated room. Although small, it was chic with three tufted booths and a marble island in the middle. The surface of the island was filled with amenities: a microwave, toaster, coffee machine, mini fridge, soda machine, and a caddy with all types of snacks. There was also a lounge area with two sofas. Every crevice was designed for use. Shelves were smartly built into the walls and stacked with plates to eliminate the need for a cabinet. There was no entertainment center; instead, the television was hung on the wall.

Professor Maxwell opened the box to cut the cake. Not knowing what to do with myself, I did the thing I wasn't known for—I babbled. "I didn't know what type of cake you liked." It dawned on me that I didn't know his preferences and whether he liked desserts, let alone this flavor. "I picked a generic flavor—yellow cake with hazelnut frosting and chocolate ganache on top. It also has a strawberry jam filling."

The knife stopped midway. "Oh."

"Something wrong?"

Clear, blue eyes found mine. He stared at me for a beat before replying, "No."

He served us each a slice and then claimed the seat next to mine. I watched as he took a bite. He was impassive as ever with no reaction to spare.

I took a few bites of the cake, too, though I couldn't taste anything over my hyperactive brain. I had an obnoxious fantasy that I would somehow heal his childhood trauma with one simple gesture. But now, the cake seemed ostentatious, and I thanked my lucky stars for not writing, *Happy Birthday!* in big, bold letters.

"Am I in trouble?" I finally blurted.

Another illegible expression crossed his face. “Why would you be in trouble?”

“Because...” Unsure how to voice the question, I trailed off and gestured at the spread in front of us—plates, forks, knives, and the giant cake.

Why was he indulging me? I had crossed major student-teacher boundaries tonight. I internally cringed, remembering how his research assistants had reacted when I walked through the doors.

“Breathe, Little Rose. You’re not in trouble.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled with a heavy sigh.

“You’re thanking me?” He sounded charmed. It warmed my heart, and I could only hope he would behave this way more often. Maybe then his friends wouldn’t be too scared to surprise him on his birthday. “Shouldn’t I be the one thanking you?”

For once, Professor Maxwell was being easygoing and chummy, teasing me even. This carefree version of him was so rare that all I could do was stare and bank the memory. He looked younger when he joked around. And he looked beautiful when he smiled.

My back straightened as soon as the thought popped into my head. His assistants already thought I was trying to seduce him. The cake, the late hour, my inappropriate outfit—the evidence was piling up against me. The last thing I should have done was stare at him or entertain inappropriate thoughts. Professor Maxwell loathed attention from female students. If he had the slightest inkling I was coming on to him—which I wasn’t—he would force the university to expel me like he had done with many before. I needed to excuse myself before I became another cautionary tale.

I dabbed the corner of my lips with the napkin he had laid out. “It’s getting late. I should get going.”

His eyes drifted to my exposed legs when I stood, lingering there for a few seconds.

This had to be in my head. None of this could possibly be real. My overactive imagination was making me think he was flirting with me and checking me out when it couldn’t be further from the truth. Everyone knew Professor Maxwell turned off his libido at work. Any woman to try and turn it on suffered his wrath.

Still, he seemed reluctant to end the night. “Let’s have another slice.”

I glanced at his plate. He had barely eaten the first one. “I’m full.”

“Then I’ll take you home.”

Oh, God no.

I was mortified by my actions and overactive imagination. All I wanted was to hide from him, not extend our time together. “That’s okay, I brought my car. Good night, Professor Maxwell,” I said quickly and turned on my heel, desperate to get away from him.

The universe had other plans. The break room door refused to open when I pulled on it. After a few seconds of struggling with the door, I realized I had to push to open it, not pull.

As if the night hadn’t been humiliating enough, I was now the stupid girl who couldn’t open a door in front of the smartest human being I had ever met. I felt his eyes burning a hole in my back, probably laughing at me.

With a sense of urgency, I burst through the door. When I turned to shut it, I caught him staring at me through the door lite.

It turned out that I was wrong. He wasn’t laughing at me. No, Professor Maxwell didn’t seem the slightest bit amused.

Instead, he was staring at me with such intensity that I had to consciously remind myself to keep breathing.

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CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

ROSE

THE WARM SUNRAYS felt good on my face the next morning. The lively campus matched the weather, and chipper students passed out flyers for Friday night parties. It was the perfect autumn day, but no amount of sunshine could wash away the memories of my mortifying night.

I couldn't imagine facing the research assistants today. The gossip must have gone viral after they were sent home on my account.

Chemistry 405 was bound to be the end of me.

My long hair, curled in big beachy waves, bounced loosely over my back. Thick eyeliner and pink lip gloss went with my outlandish outfit choice—a white maxi dress with a brown belt and thick wedges. I had never been so dressed up at ten in the morning, but the outfit, makeup, and hair combination made me feel like I had protective armor against what was to come.

Skipping class wasn't an option as attendance was mandatory for my grade. The research assistants worked at the lab, so I couldn't avoid them, either.

Then there was Professor Maxwell.

I had no idea what to make of our odd encounter. His staff probably assumed he kicked them out to deal with my inappropriate behavior. By now, they must have found out I had emerged intact from the confrontation.

Why, oh why, did I get involved in Professor Maxwell's personal life? Our association outside of the normal student-professor dynamic had

dragged me into the spotlight, and I had no tools at my disposal to navigate the public eye.

My tote bag gently brushed the side of my ribs as I drew in a long breath and walked through the lab doors with my shoulders squared. The bravado was painfully anticlimactic. The research assistants were swamped at their stations, probably making up the work they had left behind last night. When the other students arrived, they busied themselves with exchanging notes from the last lecture and conversing in low voices. No one spared me a glance...except Matt. Amid my embarrassment, I had forgotten all about running out on him and Sophie.

“Hey.” He raised his hand and grabbed the empty stool beside mine.

I nodded before glancing at the seat he had claimed. It was Amelie’s, but she hadn’t arrived yet. I looked up at his hopeful face and his all-American smile. He was perched at the edge of the stool, sitting as close to me as possible. I leaned away inconspicuously so his knees couldn’t brush against mine. Suddenly, I wished we had assigned seating.

He has been staring at you all night.

Sophie’s words matched the strong signals Matt was sending. No matter how many invisible walls I put up, he was getting increasingly aggressive with his efforts. My subtle letdowns were no longer effective.

“Where did you run off to last night?” he asked with a strained smile.

I shrugged, fishing into my tote bag for my notebook and a pen.

“I assumed it was some sort of big emergency,” he prodded.

Had he not realized I only spoke when I felt comfortable around someone? The only exception to this rule was when I was intoxicated enough not to care.

I shook my head, opening my notebook to an empty page. I lined up two pens perpendicularly and rotated them three times.

Matt watched me, patiently waiting for the truth about last night.

It hit me then.

He thought I had run off to be with a man. He wanted an explanation but didn’t know me well enough to demand one.

Perhaps it was best if he thought I was involved with someone else. It gave me an out and saved us both from an uncomfortable conversation.

Unfortunately, Matt wasn’t discouraged. “If you aren’t busy today, maybe we can hang out again—”

I muttered a prayer when a purse slammed on the table, cutting him off.

“Thank God,” Amelie gushed, trying to catch her breath while simultaneously sorting through her bag. “Can’t believe I made it to class on time. Can you imagine what Professor Maxwell would say if he caught me walking in late?”

“He’d say we’re all useless, and he could train monkeys to arrive on time,” Sean joined the group and the conversation without missing a beat.

I smiled. I had never been happier about being paired with extroverts. Not only could they carry the conversation, but they were also the perfect distraction from awkward moments. Matt looked annoyed by the interruption.

“Why were you late?” Amelie asked Sean.

“Was talking to the boyfriend over the phone and lost track of time. You?”

“Missed my train.”

The conversation lulled when we heard purposeful footsteps walking into the lab. Such confident strides could only belong to one man. Professor Maxwell marched to the front of the class, stopping in front of the whiteboard. Today, he wore chinos with a button-down shirt and glasses. No lab coat.

Despite being a workaholic, he always appeared posh and well-groomed. For the first time, dark circles had shadowed his eyes, suggesting he’d had a rough night. A sinking feeling gnawed at me, hinting that something bad had happened to him. I retraced the evening in my mind, but nothing pointed to the source of his physical distress.

At least, the casual wear made him relatable, and the girls ate it up. Several eyes lingered on the shirt hugging his broad chest and shoulders. You could almost hear the collective sigh of the female demographic because, dressed up or down, the Maxwell twins could stop traffic. Girls giggled in the back, and I had a feeling that despite repeated warnings, more infatuated students would find themselves in trouble by the end of the semester.

While others were distracted by his taut muscles and sexy clothes, I was focused on something else entirely. I had never seen him with his black-framed glasses. The frames were square with two small blue diamond studs above the hinge screws.

Hm. The diamonds were barely noticeable; still, he never struck me as a person interested in embellishments of any kind.

His unsmiling eyes locked on to me right away. It took a couple more seconds for him to realize that Matt had sidled up to me. “You changed seats.”

I looked around—as did the entire class—and realized Professor Maxwell was addressing Matt. He called him out in front of the class without so much as a *good morning*.

Matt raised a hand to scratch the back of his neck, embarrassed by the blunt accusation. “Erm. Yeah.”

“Why?” Professor Maxwell asked, though it was more of a bark.

Matt was flabbergasted by the follow-up question. “I-I...just grabbed an empty seat. I didn’t think it mattered since we don’t have assigned seating—”

“We do now. How else do you expect me to remember your unremarkable names? Change back.” When Matt didn’t stand immediately, Professor Maxwell’s face morphed into the scariest version of it I had seen. “Did I stutter?”

Matt moved out of the seat so fast that he knocked over his notepad. Professor Maxwell glanced at me and tried to subdue some of the angry lines on his face. He had been going to great lengths to repress his demonic personality around me. He didn’t want to scare me, though I hadn’t figured out why he cared what I thought of him. My guess kept returning to my scars because I was the only person he handled with kid gloves.

Once Amelie and Matt switched seats, I chanced a glance at our ever-morphing professor. He was already staring at me.

I gulped.

Throughout the lecture, his gaze kept finding its way back to me. This wasn’t just a one-time thing—Amelie noticed it too, confirming I hadn’t imagined it. She glanced between us, clearly trying to decipher the meaning behind these strange looks.

I felt my cheeks flush, and I desperately hoped no one else noticed the sporadic ogling. I was so focused on the thought that I could barely hear the lecture. I tried my best to jot down his words, but I already knew I had to borrow Amelie’s notes after class.

By the time the buzzing in my ears subsided, the lecture had concluded, and he was assigning homework.

“Select a topic for your term paper by next week. You’ll have until the end of the semester to conduct your research and submit a paper based on

your theory. All the research must be done in the lab. If you don't have enough time during class, do it after hours."

I reached up to tug my ears, convinced I had heard him incorrectly. The man who didn't want us anywhere near his lab just a couple of weeks ago was now providing us with an all-access pass. If pigs could fly.

"This paper will determine fifty percent of your grade. The rest will be based on pop quizzes, attendance, and lab participation. If you have any questions—"

Several hands shot up in the air because it was the first time he had welcomed an interaction.

His icy blue eyes were unmoved as he said, "If you have any questions, don't bother me. Figure it out. You're adults."

With that, he assigned our tasks for the lab portion of the day. I was astonished that the work sounded real.

Before I could collaborate with my group to divvy up our responsibilities, Miles beckoned me over to tell me I would be Professor Maxwell's assistant again. My teammates wore an uneasy look as I walked away, and the other students picked up on the extra attention I was receiving.

Perhaps someone braver would have relished being favored by the aloof teacher. But the weight of his staff's judgmental eyes as I passed them was nothing to envy. I didn't want this, and they didn't want me here, although none of us voiced our desires. After all, we were all here at Professor Maxwell's mercy and hanging on by a thread.

I carefully placed my tote bag beside the professor's workstation and pulled out my notebook to write down his instructions. As I did so, a figure cast a shadow over me. Glancing up, I found Professor Maxwell towering over me. His eyes were on my open notebook. The page was scribbled with my feeble attempt at taking notes.

"You took terrible notes today." He didn't state the sentence as an opinion, but rather a fact of life, and I knew he wanted an explanation for my poor skills.

My mind blanked. I couldn't admit that his attention made me too nervous to focus. When no other excuse came to me, I shook out my right hand, and whispered, "My hand cramped up, and laptops aren't allowed, so..." I trailed off when I saw Miles subtly shaking his head. Admitting I

couldn't keep up with his demanding lecture was a terrible idea. He already thought we were too incompetent for this advanced course.

The brunette from yesterday wore a smug smile. The other research assistants seemingly held their breaths, waiting for the professor to lay it on me thick. Everyone had hounded him to teach, and now that he was doing his job, I hadn't held up my end as a student.

To my surprise, there was no anger in his voice as he called out for his teaching assistant. "Miles."

"Yes," Miles replied like a well-trained soldier.

"Send an email to the class. They can use their laptops from now on."

The thermometer Miles was holding slipped from between his fingers. "Sure thing," he said slowly before his gaze fleeted to me.

The people around us went completely still, waiting for the punch line. There were also some stunned whispers.

"Dr. Maxwell just said he would allow laptops in class."

"But he hates the clicking sound of keyboards."

"I don't get it."

Professor Maxwell didn't react to the background noise as he handed me a task sheet. "Today's assignment. Measure and separate the formulas in the labeled vials. The quantity specifications are noted for each item."

I quickly read through the instructions. It was a straightforward job.

"So, you like to bake."

I stopped breathing. I had hoped he wouldn't bring up last night, but that was wishful thinking. The other research assistants were pretending not to eavesdrop, but I could feel their eyes on us. Their gazes might as well burn a Scarlet Letter A onto my forehead. My anxiety started to spike but it disappeared when I saw Professor Maxwell's easy grin.

"I look forward to your next homemade creation." He was smiling, and the sight was too enticing.

I covered my eyes with my hand, then slowly lowered it. Why was he entertaining me and accepting my gestures when he had shunned anyone else to try, including his own twin? Professor Maxwell was an anomaly.

When his phone buzzed, he pulled it out of his pocket and checked the screen. Raising the phone to his ear, he turned toward his office. He stopped midway, as if remembering something important, and spoke over his shoulder. "By the way, my favorite flavor's red velvet."

I didn't know what type of cake you liked.

I had made the comment in passing, never expecting Professor Maxwell to share anything personal about himself.

I wasn't the only one taken aback by this unusual behavior, his staff was equally bewildered. Throughout the lab, I caught snippets of their hushed conversations and various theories for the sudden personality transplant.

At least it dissuaded their resentment toward me. Professor Maxwell was the law around here, and his team implicitly trusted his judgment. If he endorsed my late-night cake delivery service, they would, too. If he deemed my efforts appropriate, so would they.

Suddenly, I was no longer a vixen, and everyone wanted to be my friend. Many of the research assistants dropped by my station, offering to help with my meager tasks. The amount of interest and the influx of questions were overwhelming. Not to mention, I couldn't provide them with any useful advice as I didn't understand it myself.

Taking an interest in a student, especially a female one, was out of character for Caden Maxwell. They assumed I must be a wonderkid for him to overturn the unwritten rule. Many of them desperately needed an in with the professor and wanted to learn from me. A recommendation letter from the revered scientist, paired with working at his lab, would secure them the brightest of futures. I had dreamed of achieving the same and was just as much in the dark on how to make that happen. I was good at school but nowhere near good enough to meet Professor Maxwell's high expectations. As for gaining his favor, I hadn't done anything other than bake a silly cake and accidentally flash him my scars.

His staff didn't buy it and dragged me to the break room during their lunch. They even brought out the leftover cake from the fridge to try out my baking. The mood was generally jovial. The only people who weren't smiling were the brunette—her name was Shelby—and a couple of her friends who looked more like her cronies. They had the whole *Mean Girl* vibe down to a science.

"I know what you're doing, and it's not going to work," Shelby said snidely after we returned to our stations. The tone of her voice gave her away. She didn't believe the narrative spun by her teammates and wanted to uncover the truth about what was developing between me and the professor.

I gave her my back and kept measuring the supplies. Nothing good would come from engaging with Shelby. Clearly, she had a thing for

Professor Maxwell and planned on making my life hell for catching his attention.

She huffed with irritation when I ignored her. “Just so you know, you’re not the first girl to deliver food to him in tight clothes.”

My heart began racing. It wasn’t Shelby making me nervous, but Professor Maxwell’s whole package. He couldn’t do anything without being watched or revered. It meant anyone in his orbit would also be under a constant microscope.

“You look like a smart girl, Rose,” she continued. “You should know Professor Maxwell sees right through people’s shit. He’ll be livid if he finds out that you made it seem like he encouraged your advances.”

I glanced at her, perplexed.

Her lips pursed as she rolled her eyes. “You obviously ate some of that cake, then stuffed it in the fridge to make it look like he tried out your baking.”

Seriously? She thought I ate a quarter of a cake just to make everyone believe Professor Maxwell hadn’t spurned my efforts. I had to admit, the insight into her thoughts was fascinating. It would be a great way to save face. If only I possessed such a diabolical mind.

Normally, I could barely make eye contact with people or speak at will, but her words made me defensive enough to mutter, “He ate the cake.”

She scoffed. “I’m not falling for your innocent act. I *know* you’re a liar.”

My spine straightened at the accusation. She noticed the tense posture.

“I don’t mean to be harsh, Rose. But you can’t go around making up stories about a teacher with a reputation to uphold. I’m saying this for your own good. Tell the other research assistants the truth before anyone gets the wrong idea and thinks Dr. Maxwell is entertaining your little crush.”

“I’m not lying.” I shouldn’t engage, especially since I didn’t care what she thought of me. For some reason, her insistence that Professor Maxwell thwarted my efforts got under my skin.

“Cut the crap. I know for a fact that Professor Maxwell didn’t try your cake. I know everything about him, and he’s allergic to strawberries.”

What!?

I didn’t concoct what happened last night in my mind, I was sure of it. I saw it. I saw him eat the cake with my own eyes.

Would Professor Maxwell eat something that could kill him just to indulge me? Was that the reason he looked like hell this morning?

Impossible.

Shelby returned to her station after finishing her spiel. As soon as she stopped glaring at me, I dashed to the biohazard trash. If a person ate something poisonous to them but was alive to tell the tale, there must be evidence of the anecdote, and I doubt anyone had the chance to discard the waste, given the time of night I left.

I peeked inside the biohazard dispenser. There was only one item inside. Sure enough, it was an EpiPen, and even from here, I could make out the inscription.

Prescribed to Caden Maxwell.

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CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

ROSE

BY THE TIME Professor Maxwell returned to my station, the rest of the students had cleared out, and I was almost finished.

“You’re leaving,” he observed.

I nodded, shelving the unused vials.

“You didn’t eat with the other assistants.”

This lab was only a three-hour commitment for me, whereas the research assistants were obligated to spend eight to ten hours here. It just so happened that most of them took their lunch break during our regularly scheduled class and dragged me to the break room to interrogate me about Professor Maxwell. However, I didn’t pack a lunch as I generally ate afterward.

How did he know I didn’t eat or have the time to ask about my nutritional intake?

With my eyes trained on the counter, I wiped it down with a paper towel.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

I shook my head. It would’ve been convincing had my stomach not growled at the same time.

The comedic timing made him scoff. “Come with me.”

I stared after Professor Maxwell. I still hadn’t processed the discarded EpiPen. It was only a few feet away from me in the biohazard trash, taunting me with its existence. My stomach knotted. Leaving behind the

paper towel roll, I reluctantly followed him while his staff watched us with interest.

He led us to the break room, where a lone assistant sat at the corner booth. The moment he saw us, he sprang out of his seat and threw away his unfinished lunch. I got the distinct impression that Professor Maxwell preferred to eat alone, and his staff stumbled over themselves to accommodate him. No one wanted to get on his shit list.

“I was just leaving.” The man bolted, but not before throwing a curious glance over his shoulder.

Why was everyone in the world so invested in Professor Maxwell?

He wasn’t bothered by how others fussed over him. He opened the fridge and pulled out a couple of boxes as I parked my butt on a booth.

There was no way Professor Maxwell was about to feed me lunch. Then again, he ate a cake that could have potentially killed him just to spare my feelings. The thought was overwhelming and confusing. It wasn’t like I could interrogate him about it, either. No one questioned him. If I couldn’t ask why he had done such a thing, the best I could do was speculate.

This couldn’t all be about my scars. Perhaps he was doing these things to spend time with me because he enjoyed my company.

Faint noise drifted from the other side of the room. Overcome by curiosity, I glanced his way and found him staring directly at me while plating the food. The raw expression on his face made my stomach dip. I released an unsteady breath and looked away.

Did Professor Maxwell like me?

No. It was impossible.

Our families hated each other with a passion. Not to mention, he would never be interested in a student. The man had many flaws, but philandering with subordinates and students wasn’t one of them. He was only four or five years older than most of the students, but he had put so much distance between himself and us that he might as well be untouchable.

I inwardly groaned for letting my mind wander into dangerous territory. First, I was hopelessly in love with his twin, Damon. Second, anyone who assumed anything about Professor Maxwell always made an ass of themselves. If he knew of the thoughts cruising my mind, I could say goodbye to graduating early and any hope I had for the coveted recommendation letter.

Self-preservation instincts told me not to look too deeply into his actions.

Professor Maxwell placed two bowls and forks on the table. When he sat beside me, the scent of his cologne made me slightly lightheaded. Distracted, I stared at the quinoa bowl with grilled chicken, roasted veggies, and avocado, topped with a drizzle of olive oil.

“Change starts today. This is one of the recipes from the new anti-inflammatory diet I had recommended in your care plan.”

Spoken like a true scientist.

I knew he wanted me to become proactive about my scars, but I didn’t anticipate he would personally administer the anti-inflammatory diet. My stomach growled once more, though it didn’t tamp down my curiosity.

When I didn’t pick up my fork, he said, “From now on, you’ll arrive thirty minutes before class to have breakfast with me, and we’ll have lunch together after class. Keep up the diet for any meals we don’t eat together. I’ll track the progress of your scars throughout the semester and measure the effect of the anti-inflammatory diet.”

It turned out that I was a lab rat, and his interest in me stemmed from a purely scientific standpoint.

Thank God!

No wonder he had been coaxing me; he didn’t want to scare away his guinea pig. I didn’t mind being his test subject. The scars frequently irritated my skin, so this was a win-win situation.

I relaxed a little, feeling stupid for entertaining the idea of Professor Maxwell liking me.

“Thank you. But...” I gulped. “You shouldn’t have gone through the trouble.” My ability to speak around him never failed to astonish me. I hadn’t been able to get these many words out in front of a new person in years. He delivered the shock value required to activate my voice.

“I didn’t. My chef makes my lunches.”

Despite myself, I smiled. Even when he was doing something nice, he did it in the most offhanded way. There was something endearing about it.

Picking up the fork he had placed beside the bowl, I pierced a piece of broccoli and chicken with it. I internally moaned when turmeric and truffle flavors burst inside my mouth. I never knew eating healthy could be so delicious.

“Did you have fun at the Alumni Fundraiser?”

I tilted my head with a furrowed brow. How did he know?

“You were dressed up last night,” he expanded. “I can only assume you were at a party before feeling inspired to bake.”

My cheeks burned. Did he discover that Sophie was the reason why I baked the cake? I avoided looking at him, worried about what he would see on my face. “I could’ve been dressed up for anything.”

“The outfit was too fancy for a frat party or a casual dinner at a nice restaurant. The only event happening on campus with that kind of dress code was at the Alumni Center.”

He was insanely perceptive and had deduced my activity from mere breadcrumb clues and the process of elimination.

“I’m surprised you attended,” he commented. “I heard there were over two hundred and fifty people.”

“Makes it easier to get lost in the crowd,” I countered absentmindedly.

He nodded as if he just figured it out. “Intimate settings create more opportunities for one-on-one conversations. But there are distractions at large events. You can socialize without actually socializing.”

I had heard Professor Maxwell was astute, often discerning his surroundings with precise acuteness. Now I had witnessed it firsthand. He was right. I loved big parties and avoided small settings unless I knew everyone in the group. I had lived through the trauma of being sliced open with a knife, but somehow, conversing with strangers gave me more crippling anxiety.

He stared at me for a moment. “I’m hosting the student-faculty affair for the chemistry department this semester. It’ll be a *large* event.”

My neck nearly snapped at the speed my head jerked back. He lived to shock me, didn’t he?

Every semester, one professor from each department hosted a student-faculty affair. The professors were urged to invite their influential friends looking to recruit talent, while graduating seniors were encouraged to attend. It was a party but also a networking opportunity for cushy jobs and graduate school admission.

Why would Professor Maxwell volunteer to host such an event? He hated joy and other human beings.

A few more moments passed before he asked, “You’ll attend? It’ll be on the second Saturday of next month.”

I racked my brain for upcoming commitments and realized I was busy. “I’m spending that weekend with my mom. We’re cruising the Hudson on a yacht.”

“You like yachts?”

“I love them.” My family went on countless cruises and yacht trips when I was young. Suffice to say, my best memories revolved around water and boat life. The few times Mom came around, she took me on a yacht trip, a tradition I thoroughly enjoyed.

He tapped his phone open. “I made a mistake. I’m hosting the student-faculty affair on the third Saturday of next month.”

But Professor Maxwell didn’t make mistakes, that was his whole premise.

“It’ll be a good opportunity to network,” he added.

It would have been if I had the guts to speak to strangers at the drop of a hat.

“Did I mention it’ll be on a yacht?” he said with a bite to his tone.

My lips parted for an, *Oh*.

He seemed irritated by my lack of verbal commitment, but he was freaking me out again. I admitted to liking boats, and it just so magically happened that his party was on one.

I was relieved when he dropped the topic. We ate in silence for a few minutes before he spoke again. “I read your transcript and the notes by your adviser.” He waited for me to glance at him before he continued. “Does your family know you’re only a few credits short of majoring in organic chemistry?”

Of course they didn’t know. Everyone in my family majored in math, accounting, or finance, and upon graduation, they joined Ambani Corps as investment bankers. I had an anomaly Indian father who would be disappointed if I became a doctor or a scientist.

Investment banking required interpersonal communication, which, let’s face it, wasn’t my strongest asset. In a science lab, it was perfectly acceptable to be an introvert. The idea of creating something that would survive me was also a beautiful thought.

Papa didn’t see the value in science, though. We fought over it numerous times until he finally banned me from pursuing chemistry. I tried to make peace with his decision before realizing I would never be good at

banking. So, I made a quiet exit from my previous major—finance—to pursue what I loved—science.

I hadn't discussed this major life change with many people, so... "How did you know?"

"I didn't. You just confirmed it."

Dammit.

His eyes glazed over my face. "Our families are similar, and if your father's anything like mine, he would view dedicating your life to science as an utter failure."

Sophie mentioned that Professor Maxwell had faced his father's backlash for not joining the business. He had determined the similarities between our families and made a calculative guess—I didn't include Papa in my adviser meetings because he wouldn't approve of my choices.

"I'm guessing you're taking my class because the extra credits will allow you to graduate early. You're hoping to finish college before he finds out that you jumped ship."

The man was erratic but so acutely observant that it was unnerving. I was in a rush to graduate early and secure my next step before Papa discovered I had gone over his head. Dev Ambani would never accept his only daughter not following in his footsteps. He would cut me off financially and have me blacklisted from every graduate program or job until I caved to his demands. He was one of the most influential men in the country with an extensive reach, perhaps second only to the Maxwells.

I nodded at one of the only men in the world who could dig me out of this hole.

The corners of his eyes softened, likely coming to the same conclusion. "You won't get far in this field without at least a master's degree. This university has a great graduate program for organic chemistry. If you're interested, I can introduce you to the department head at the student-faculty affair."

I fell from the sky. He discussed my father's disappointment, stripped me of my defenses, and exposed my insecurities, all so I would attend his party?

"Why do you want to help me?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"Because it'd be a shame if my star pupil didn't get into a decent master's program."

Star pupil? Was it possible that he saw something in me that he hadn't seen in the other students? How could that be? I hadn't done anything to impress the impossibly difficult professor apart from landing myself in a bunch of humiliating situations.

"You're the only one who knew four out of five of the questions in the pop quiz on the first day of class."

I couldn't believe it. This truly was about my academic accomplishments, nothing more. "They won't accept my application," I lamented. "I don't have experience working in a lab, and it's a requirement for the graduate program."

I had spent my summers interning at Ambani Corps to make my father happy. It only confirmed my suspicions: I didn't have the killer instincts to become an investment banker. My cousins, Poppy, Nikhil, and Sam, were also attending NewTech and interning at the company. They were sharks, and their portfolios boasted of their skills. Mine did not. It was so painfully evident that even my cousins admitted it wasn't my calling. They said I lacked the shrewdness of the banking world, and, to be honest, I was fine with it.

I was lost in thought when he suggested, "Then work at my lab for a year and gain the experience."

My eyes widened. No way.

He shrugged. "I need a lab manager, and the position's been vacant for too long. This is where your OCD pays off. I need someone precise."

My ears burned that he had noticed my obsessive compulsiveness. Nothing got past him, did it?

"The pay is good, enough to rent an apartment and save up for graduate school. You can join in January, after you graduate."

The corners of my lips twitched. There was suddenly a flicker of hope for a brighter future. No matter their opinion of him, people around campus praised Professor Maxwell for his accolades and craved to be in his orbit. Because even if he was being terrible to them, they knew it was better to be on his radar for potential lifelong opportunities than not. He could shape my future with the flick of his wrist. One recommendation letter from Professor Maxwell or a semester working for him meant acceptance into any graduate program of my choice. And he had a bigger net worth than Papa. Even if my father blacklisted me from every job and master's degree, he couldn't force Professor Maxwell to bend to his will.

Professor Maxwell had turned over a new leaf within the span of a couple of weeks. The only thing that transpired between him chasing us away and deciding to organize the student-faculty party was one glimpse of my scars.

Did experimenting on them mean so much to him that he would do anything to keep me around?

Or did he truly see potential in me?

Whatever the reason, I counted my lucky stars for this opportunity. This could secure me a future away from my family. The thought was riveting, and the temptation to dive headfirst into the unknown was unparalleled. I tried not to get carried away, but I couldn't help it.

Everything I had ever dreamed of was about to come true, and it was all thanks to Professor Maxwell.

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CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

ROSE

Present



“THE LACERATIONS ARE HEALING TOO SLOWLY,” Dr. Maxwell muttered to himself, inspecting my arms. “But the swelling on the ankle has gone down,” he declared as if someone were jotting down notes, though we were alone.

He had propped up the adjustable backrest of the examination table. I reclined against it and stretched my feet until my toes touched the edge. Dr. Maxwell reapplied my bandages in even, symmetrical layers, not leaving any wrinkles or loose edges to chance. His obsessive compulsiveness was working overtime tonight. Whenever the bandage overlap appeared slightly uneven in width from the wrap underneath, he would immediately redo his work. The way he kept smoothing out even the slightest crookedness, you would think it was for my benefit. As if I were the OCD one and it was my preference that every fold was meticulous so nothing felt “off” against my skin.

It was a far-fetched theory. I was probably overthinking things because of what Amelie let slip earlier today. Was it possible that Dr. Maxwell agreed to this cruise at the last minute because he found me on his boat?

What if he had taken a liking to me and decided to stay on this boat to explore things with me?

Trying to guess what was on his mind was pure torture. The way he carried himself gave nothing away. His expressions were like a doctor's handwriting—unreadable, even though his writing seemed perfectly legible when I peeked at his notes. His stone face was unyielding when he saw my drastic makeover, not even a muscle twitch gave away his thoughts. The only reaction was a fiery gleam in his eyes that was so fleeting I was sure that I had imagined it, like wildfire burning beneath a frozen surface.

I was being ridiculous. According to the beauticians, women weren't even a fleeting distraction for Dr. Maxwell, and I was nowhere near the caliber of women he was used to. A strange sense of grief settled in my chest at the thought, mourning something I could never have. Once he cast me aside, I would be all alone again. Unless I could find my family.

I had won the battle—finding food and regaining my strength—but not the war—finding my identity. I had let myself become distracted by this beautiful man, who would tire of me within a few days. What would I do then?

One of the windows in my room overlooked the deck underneath. Throughout the day, I had observed guests sunbathing and visiting the shops on the boat. Proper attire or a nice swimsuit was required around the ship. While Dr. Maxwell indulged me in a spa day and dressed me in a robe made of the most luxurious material I had touched, he was careful never to provide me with real clothes I could wear to gallivant around. My chance to accrue an income and buy clothes from the shops vanished with Jace, and when I asked Amelie if I could borrow some of hers, she quickly changed the topic after citing that we wore different sizes. The nail technician hinted she had slippers for my freshly painted toes—they were disposable but sturdy enough to walk around the deck—but Amelie's furtive glance made the woman retract her offer.

They were adamant about my recovery, and I was adamant about finding my origins. The doctor mentioned before about putting out feelers on the mainland for any missing person reports filed under the name Rose, and a fleeting hope crossed my mind.

"Has the captain heard anything from the police about a missing person report for me?"

“No,” he answered, not a hint of hesitation or indecisiveness in his voice. Sensing my displeasure, he added, “It hasn’t been very long.”

“Oh. Can we go to the police station once the boat docks and check if anything has changed?”

“I doubt your family reported you to the Interpol if they didn’t report you to the local police.”

I didn’t know the reference, but I figured international water laws and procedures were different. With each passing second, I sailed farther away from the truth.

“Then let’s contact the local police for an update.”

His dark gaze searched mine for several moments, his stethoscope draped around his neck from when he took my vitals. “The police will reach out once they know more.”

“But they probably have hundreds of cases. What’s the harm in following up?”

“Harassing them for an answer is pointless. Let them do their job.”

“We don’t have to harass them. Can we just call them once?” I nodded at the phone, which had been ringing nonstop for him. He had ignored the calls before finally unplugging it. The technology crash course from Amelie was educational. Cell phones only worked on the boat with the help of Wi-Fi, which was spotty, and the internal phone system connected guests from one room to the other. Only one landline on this boat could make outbound calls to the mainland. It was in his office, which I couldn’t access.

“It’s not good for your mental health to keep digging into a past you can’t remember. Just focus on getting better.” His tone was stern, and my fate sounded sealed.

Unable to help myself, I pressed, “There must be something I can do to get back to my family—”

“Drop it, Rose,” he snapped, startling me. “There’s nothing more to be done.” The hand banded around my arm tightened with a suffocating grip while he threw away the bandage he had changed with his other hand. His face hardened with a barely hidden rage.

It was apparent that he had a temper. He was dismissive of everyone, brusque with the lady who dropped off our dinners earlier, then annoyed by another who brought us fruit for dessert. While I had seen him snap at the crew, he had only been truly angry with me after catching me with Jace. My

reasonable request to reunite with a potential family shouldn't trigger him. Nonetheless, I dropped the topic to escape the brunt of his wrath.

I watched him with hawk eyes as he continued to treat my injuries. Thick brows, a shade darker than his hair, framed blue eyes that could be mistaken for the ocean. I had the sudden urge to dive into the sea found within his eyes, and whether I could swim was absolutely irrelevant.

It was absurd to fear this man's temper while simultaneously salivating after him. Rather than being continuously distracted by his ethereal beauty, I tried to find his imperfections. Surely, everyone had them.

Except all I saw was wavy, dirty-blond hair that fell around his eyes like the hot lead singers in K-pop videos. Those eyes were stoic by nature but would occasionally morph into something different, especially when they watched me do mundane things like eat or drink. I had been searching for the right word to describe how they transformed. I was intimately familiar with the look but couldn't put my finger on it until now. Hunger and thirst. He looked at me the same way I looked at food.

This was a dangerous territory. A few more seconds of studying his eyes, and I would be reciting Shakespeare to him. My focus drifted to his Adam's apple, only to be captivated by his masculine throat. His Adam's apple was prominent and pronounced, bobbing as he grabbed a bottle for a sip of water. Up and down, it went on and on, tempting me in imaginary slow motion. Somehow, his throat turned out to be more erotic than everything else. The trifecta—Korean popstar hair, ocean eyes, and that Adam's apple—was in full swing.

I should feel foolish for overanalyzing things between us. Someone like him wasn't thirsty for me, but I couldn't shake the thought. The intense and focused way he watched me was nothing like how he looked at those women in the magazine photos. They clung close to his body while his hands hung limply or were wedged into his pants pockets. He never reciprocated the warmth or touched them, let alone fed them. Why did he single-mindedly focus on me? There must be something he wanted.

"You're overthinking again," he told me as I dipped my toes into the dark pool of uncertainty. I was about to ask how he could tell, but he cut me a knowing glance. "You're easy to read." He sighed. "Stop being paranoid about ulterior motives."

"When you saw me with Jace, you told me I wasn't being paranoid enough," I countered.

He stilled, disbelieving my audacity to bring up the argument over Jace. He thought he had me all figured out. By the look on his face, he hadn't expected me to be confrontational.

Satisfaction ran through my veins. I doubt my thoughts were written on my face, as he claimed. Even in the short time I had known myself, I didn't wear my heart on my sleeve, and his uncanny ability to read me felt more than mere guesswork.

"Let me clarify," he replied smoothly. "Stop being paranoid about *my* ulterior motives. I stand by my statement where others are concerned—don't let your guard down around strange men." There was a possessive glint in his eye, much like the one I had seen when he chased Jace out of the room. "In fact, never talk to other men when I'm not around."

It was my turn to freeze.

When I didn't immediately agree, he grabbed my elbow. "This is nonnegotiable. Is that clear?"

Nerves rattled, I studied his stupid, perfect, impassive face, trying to come up with a clever comeback. I had nothing because I was entirely at his mercy. I merely gave him a quiet nod.

An unbearable silence stretched between us, and I tried to break the tension by changing the subject. "So... Do you like being a doctor?"

He regarded me skeptically for disliking the deafening silence and initiating a conversation.

I rolled my eyes. "Let me guess. You hate small talk." He didn't seem the type to entertain unnecessary chats, or, at least, that was what Amelie told me.

I was stunned when he bothered to provide an answer. "I prefer research."

I sighed in relief. It was our first pleasant exchange of the day, and I wanted to keep it going. "Then why go through medical school and do your residency at one of the best hospitals?"

He smirked. "You seem to have done some research of your own," he remarked dryly.

I dropped my gaze, embarrassed to admit I had spent the day learning about him. How else would I have known the specifics of his education?

He put me out of my misery with another unexpected response. His words were measured as he applied antiseptic to my right leg with a cotton ball. "I was interested in becoming a surgeon but saw an increasing number

of patients getting addicted to opioids post-surgery. Addiction is impossible to cure in most cases, so I didn't see the point of pursuing surgery."

No way.

The doctor opened up to me. These were the most words he had spoken since meeting him. But didn't the women tell me he was notoriously private, and even his so-called twin didn't know the extent of his affairs?

"You pivoted because you didn't want to cure someone only to leave them with a worse disease," I pondered. Having seen the effects of addiction firsthand, I couldn't blame him for losing faith.

He shrugged. "My career would've done more harm than good. Finding a non-addictive pain medication was a better use of my time." His tone was monotone and detached, despite his surprisingly beautiful intentions. He didn't want to cure someone with a bigger evil.

"So, you went into research to find a non-addictive drug?" I asked.

He nodded, leaning over to check my other leg. The whiff of his enticing aroma—cashmere and amber—distracted me entirely.

What were we talking about?

Why did his smell affect me this way? It comforted me while also initiating the first strokes of a distress signal.

My leg bounced nervously, and I tried to steer us back to neutral territory. "Thank you for checking on me tonight. Amelie told me you were busy with work calls. You didn't have to do this."

He paused midway through wrapping the gauze around my calf. "I never do things unless I want to."

My eyes threatened to widen at the explicit meaning behind his words. He wanted to be here with me. This was about more than a doctor's oath to care for the sick.

This man was something else. He flabbergasted me at every turn. He gave up a career for a noble cause, only he made it sound like it was for practical reasons—what was the point of healing the sick only to leave them worse off?

From the beginning, he had a knack for calculating my emotions and drawing accurate conclusions. But I didn't know what to make of him, and suddenly, I wanted to know.

"Will you tell me more about yourself?" I asked.

"What do you want to know?"

I stared at him briefly before boldly demanding, "Everything."

A slight twitch in his eye, a flicker, suggested he was considering something. Maybe how much to share with me?

Just when I thought I had pushed too much and met the quota of how far he was willing to go to entertain me, Dr. Maxwell threw me for another loop. He continued to work on my injuries, as he had done last night, revealing things about himself bit by bit.

He grew up in New York but attended fancy boarding schools abroad with his twin, who was just as gifted in his field. They lost their mother to a drug overdose when they were young. I had expected some change in his tone or expression—a flicker of vulnerability—when he spoke of her death. However, the detached words came out of his mouth as if he were talking about a distant acquaintance rather than his mother.

Dumbfounded, I opened my mouth to express my condolences, but he stopped me. Her death meant nothing to him. They weren't close, and she spent the majority of his childhood in and out of rehab. Because he didn't know her, he never felt the pain of losing her. However, it added to his interest in treating addiction because he saw the turmoil it brought to the families.

His attitude toward her was odd. He didn't have any real emotions toward his mother, or his father, for that matter. Other than his brother and a couple of cousins, everyone pissed him off.

I realized he found consolation in his work because he preferred solitude, so I asked about the specifics of his lab. He never sounded irritated by my excessive pestering. What I appreciated the most was that he never made me feel less smart than him. The man was a literal genius, and the questions I asked were probably elementary, yet he answered patiently, his intense gaze locked on me the entire time.

Why did it feel like he was telling me his life story as an excuse to stare at his heart's content? Only periodically, his eyes shifted to check his work. Otherwise, his gaze remained fixed on me, almost obsessively so, without so much as a single blink.

My heartbeat quickened when I caught him staring at me for the umpteenth time. "Why do you keep looking at me like that?"

An unperturbed gaze moved over his face, and he didn't deny the allegation. "Because I can."

I swallowed as he checked my ankle. The touch was gentle, contrary to the roughness in his voice.

Being the sole focus of this unattainable man's attention was indescribably addicting, and even a genius like him wouldn't be able to find a cure for it in his lab.

Strong hands probed my bruised ankle to examine it, and I bit my bottom lip when his fingers grazed the skin around it. I was immensely distrustful of strangers. Surely, some of these traits existed before my accident. I couldn't have had that much of a personality transplant. Yet, my body welcomed his touch with open arms.

My swollen ankle served as a necessary distraction. He had managed the pain last night with drugs and a cold compression. Soaking in the bath had also helped, along with the medication Amelie had administered. But the numbing sensation had fizzled, replaced with throbbing agony.

He was quick to catch on. "I'll give you something for the pain." He opened one of the drawers to pull out an unused syringe. "This should get you through the night."

"No," I whispered. "I don't want the needle."

He frowned. "It's a small dose, and it's perfectly safe."

Dr. Maxwell told me about his experience with addiction. I also saw what those things did to people with repeated use and couldn't condone it in good faith. "That's not why. I've seen people use those things." I nodded at the bottle with the morphine sulfate label. "They can't seem to think straight afterward."

He stared at me pensively. "I told you why I started my lab; I would never give you morphine long enough to cause dependency. Most people get addicted because no one checks up on them, but I'll always monitor you."

There was an insinuation of an ongoing relationship whenever he said things like, "*Never talk to other men when I'm not around,*" or "*I'll always monitor you.*" It sounded like he would always be around. Did he realize he was leading me on?

I wasn't in the mood to decode his inexpressive eyes or figure out his intentions. I was only concerned with one thing. I had seen too many empty vials to count. It had scared me straight for life. "Please," I murmured. "I don't want morphine."

"The pain will keep you up all night."

I shook my head. "I'll deal with it."

I thought he would insert the needle anyway, but he set it down and grabbed my ankle instead.

What the hell?

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CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

ROSE

DR. MAXWELL SAT on the office chair, rolled it closer, and massaged my ankle. Hot and cold nipped my skin at the first touch; I never knew ankles could be so sensitive.

“What are you doing?” I asked breathlessly, pulling my knees to my chest.

He wasn’t deterred. With firm hands, he straightened my leg.
“Massaging your calf to release endorphins.”

“Why?” I asked between bated breaths.
“Morphine relieves pain by releasing endorphins inside you,” was his unemotional response. “Massages can mimic the same effect to alleviate pain.”

“Oh.”
One of his large hands covered my smaller foot to hold me in place. His composure was infuriating until I saw his heavy-lidded, hooded eyes tracking their way up to my thighs.

Swallowing, I kept the conversation going to distract myself. “What else releases endorphins?” I asked in a trembling voice.

“Everything and anything your body craves, such as...” He paused, building the suspense before saying, “Food.” His thumb kneaded the pressure points to circulate the blood. “Laughter,” he added, his gaze lifting to meet mine. Though he sounded detached while listing the suggestions, his eyes were the furthest thing from cold. They were two glowing embers,

blazing hot and smoldering, ready to consume everything in their path as he finally revealed the last option, “Sex.”

My heart stopped.

Once more, we were discussing one of the biggest questions I had encountered. Did he know the curiosity he had sparked in me? Since the moment he had touched me, I had wanted to know everything about sex. He lit my skin on fire with a simple touch. What he did to me last night... It was so intense it was damn near unbearable.

“Is it working?”

I breathed so harshly that everyone on this ship could probably hear it. Nodding without meeting his gaze was the best I could do to answer his question.

The words hunger and thirst returned to haunt me as his fingers skimmed my bare calf. He was methodical but thorough, as if he were handling the most prized possession. His touch branded me with fire. I imagined it was the equivalent of the ship’s hull scraping against an iceberg —sparks flying with every contact.

I had made the wrong choice. His touch was more addictive than the pain medication. I would be searching the streets for it once he was done with me, not for needles. For the second day in a row, I was mortified by my inappropriate reaction to the man. There was only so much I could take before making more embarrassing sounds.

Losing my patience, I blurted, “What did you do to me last night?”

His fingers paused around my ankle. “Are you referring to the sponge bath?” he asked innocently, though I could almost *hear* the smirk in his tone. “Or are you talking about how I made you come afterward?”

I frowned. “Come?”

“I could explain it or...” He scooted closer, and my knees bumped against his thighs. “I could show you.”

My heart pounded so violently that I thought it might give out. I didn’t have the gall to look at him.

His eyes fixed on my body as he gave me a straightforward instruction. “Look at me, not at the floor.”

My eyes snapped to him, fixing on his blue stare deeper than the ocean. The moment I gave him my attention, his hand reached under my robe, tracing the path to my thighs.

I wasn't given any underwear, and the ones I woke up in were thrown out. I was bare down there, courtesy of the Brazilian wax. I could feel his surprise because he had felt the soft hair there just last night. He didn't comment on it, arranging his fingers over my... The street slang was *pussy*.

He brushed over it several times before parting my lips and pressing his fingers against the same spot as last night. My eyes closed, but they reopened when he tugged at my hair with his other hand.

He wanted my eyes on him.

He pressed against the nub, eliciting a soft sound out of me. He slid lower. The wetness between my thighs had nearly soaked my robe. I knew he felt it, too.

"Fuck." A low groan escaped his lips, potent enough to make my head spin. "Does that feel good?"

My voice trembled as I tried to answer. It wasn't audible, and my hips followed his hand. The tension between my legs coiled around my body, just waiting for the moment it could unleash. When I moaned, he glanced at me as if the sound belonged to only him, as if all of *me* belonged to him.

His lips moved down the length of my neck, trailing soft kisses—sweet and addictive. His tongue darted out—minty and hot—and finally, he latched onto my skin—heady and primal. It activated a response I was unprepared for, lost in the euphoria at the final brink of pleasure.

I didn't care who heard me, and it seemed neither did he. The more vocal I became, the more possessively he sucked on my neck. When I released a strained moan, he sank his teeth into my flesh like he had lost control and was about to suck me dry like a vampire.

"Oh, God," I cried, my body rigid with a hand on his collar. I shuddered under him, trembling uncontrollably. It was more potent than last night, my thighs squeezing to keep myself grounded while he worked me into a frenzy. I erupted a second time and screamed so loudly, you'd think I was being murdered.

His teeth were locked on my neck, devouring me. The spot throbbed from his attention by the time he finally let go of my throat.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. When he pulled back, I almost gasped. My god, he was beautiful, more like a male model than a doctor.

Amelie and the crew had gossiped about how no one dared to touch him without permission, not even the female companions from those magazines.

I assumed it had to do with his OCD; he wanted prior notice to craft the stipulations of any physical contact.

Control freak!

I must have had a death wish because I lifted a shaky hand and placed it on his cheek. I couldn't help it. I needed to know this was real because his icy exterior made him look like a dream—a beautiful statue—eternally out of reach. Unattainable.

A part of me was also curious about touching the untouchable man, though I fully expected him to shove my hand away and scold me. After all, he had reprimanded people for far less.

What I didn't anticipate was for him to close his eyes and lean into my palm with a shuddering breath. "Fuck. You have no idea how badly I needed this." It was low, barely audible, and I would've missed it if I weren't sitting so close to him.

He was what I assumed a classic piece of art would look like. He should be displayed at a museum and never touched by commoners. Yet, he had thawed under my palm, even reveling in my touch.

"Careful, Little Rose," he said huskily, his ragged breaths drawn in with great effort. "I'm seconds away from finishing what you don't even know you started. Any more encouragement, and I'll forget you're still recovering."

I snatched back my hand, holding it over my chest with the other. I had no idea what he meant, but the dark promise in his whisper was enough to ward me off.

My eyes dropped to his pants, the hard outline straining against it like it wanted to break free. I knew then, without a doubt, that he wanted me.

I should have fortified my walls where he was concerned. Hundreds of women—women much more beautiful than me—wanted him. I had seen the evidence of his fan club on and off this boat. The staff were kind enough to point out the women vying for the doctor's heart from my window. They were on display, sunbathing on the deck, their perfect, scarless bodies taunting me. I was nowhere in the same galaxy, let alone league, as those women. However, at this moment, he only wanted me.

With great effort, I met his eyes and caught them fixed on my lips. Those eyes, generally devoid of emotions, were no longer empty. They were darkening by the second, and once more, the words hunger and thirst rang in my head.

Lost in a daze, my rapid breathing matched his, though I hadn't done anything to reciprocate. I wanted to, but I didn't know how and didn't have the guts to ask.

It didn't matter. He wasn't the type to let others take charge. With a swift move, he lowered the adjustable backrest. He stretched out on top of me and made a space for himself between my parted legs.

A rough hand traced my thigh. I sucked in a breath as he brought a million nerve endings to life with a simple touch. His lips were on my neck once more, trailing down to my stomach. I didn't know where he was taking this, only that my breathing was labored.

Fluids glided onto the table, my core pulsing like it wanted to explode as he moved toward the lower region of my body. He licked my thigh, then moved lower still until reclaiming the office chair and spreading my legs. His lips advanced toward me, gradually, leisurely, until I felt his hot breath on my sex.

What was he doing?

Rising to my elbows, I glanced at his face between my thighs. He inhaled deeply, breathing me in remorselessly. The way he looked, he seemed practically drugged by my smell.

Was he getting high off my scent?

"Dr. Maxwell?" I questioned, my heart racing.

"Think of it as another massage," he breathed. "One with my tongue instead of my fingers."

My breath came out in short bursts as he tasted my skin. I closed my eyes against his lava-like tongue. A whimper escaped my throat when it flitted inward, closer and closer, until he...

My eyes snapped open. "What are you doing?" I screamed, horrified. I pulled on his hair frantically. Oh God, why was his mouth...down there?

With a hand on my stomach, he held me against the table. I had no choice but to be spread wide for him, writhing with humiliation.

"Stop, stop, stop!"

Planting another possessive kiss between my lips, he withdrew and gazed at me. I couldn't believe he kissed me down there...twice. What the hell was he thinking?

"Don't do that again!" I begged, breathless and shaking. "I-it's dirty."

He snapped out of the madness with a dark chuckle. "Then let me clean it up." He latched onto my lips with his teeth, sucking on them the way he

had my neck.

“What?” I squeaked.

I watched, stupefied, as he rubbed his nose between my lips and licked my inner thighs.

“You really shouldn’t do that,” I whispered.

He paid me no mind, his tongue drifting out to connect with my pussy. A shudder roiled through me at first contact. I stopped protesting, consumed by his touch, and gave in to whatever he wanted to do to me.

“Shit,” I murmured when he prodded my lips open.

Plunging two fingers inside me, he flicked his thumb against the sensitive nub. With a deep growl against my sex, he sank farther into me, spreading me wide open so that he could penetrate me with his tongue. I gazed at him, catching him looking back at me with eyes just as awed.

For the first time, I wasn’t self-conscious about what he thought of the scars, even though they were on full display under the bright, ugly LED lights. It was impossible to be insecure when he watched me the way I looked at food, as if he would never be full, no matter how much he gorged. As if it were *my* face plastered across magazines, not his, and he was my biggest fan.

He had nothing in common with the zombies from the streets. He was well-bred, educated, and a literal genius. Yet he looked at me like I was his drug and he was about to plunge the syringe straight into his veins. I never thought I would cherish anything more than food, but the admiration in his eyes was better.

Was that why I let this stranger do this to me? I was wolfing down every scrap of attention he threw my way, because when else would a man like him be interested in someone like me?

This area was not meant to be kissed or licked. It was a heinous act, and I should fight harder to make him stop. It felt so good when his tongue lapped my sex, the obscenity only making me feel hotter. His mouth explored my pussy, massaging it with his tongue. He licked the wetness seeping out of me until I was ready to explode. My mortification had long subsided, and I wanted nothing more than for him to continue.

Taking full advantage of my euphoria, he flicked his tongue over my sensitive spot and then sucked. My hips jerked, thrusting upward as he pushed his face farther inside me. I struggled against him while he buried his face deeper still between my thighs. Drenched in me, he unleashed

himself, devouring me like a man who had been deprived for years, savoring every last drop.

He pushed me higher and higher until I let out a primal scream. He tightened his grip on my ass, following my movements as my thighs clenched around his head. Once I stopped writhing and shuddering under his mouth, he finally gentled his lapping, though he didn't retreat. He stayed there, his mouth nestled between my thighs.

It felt like hours had passed until he finally pulled away. I watched with bleary vision as he advanced toward me, plucking me off the table like he would a toothpick. He carried me to the bed and climbed under the blanket with me. There were no more pretenses. I had suspected he had slept beside me last night, and tonight, he confirmed he planned on doing so again.

He watched me intently as if waiting for something. A reaction?

The moment was anticlimactic as nothing happened. He moved on to tracing a calloused thumb over the bite mark on my neck. Whatever he saw—probably the first hint of a bruise—drew out a groan and a possessive look in his eyes. Grabbing my face roughly with his large hands, he crushed my lips with his.

Delirious, I surrendered to him like a ship being pulled into a raging sea. I was clumsy in my efforts, entirely new to this, but he didn't seem to mind or even notice. He dominated my mouth, forcing my tongue to move alongside his. If a kiss could pitch a flag, that was what he had done with it—staked a claim.

He stretched out on top of me, his hips moving in rhythm with his mouth, igniting another bout of heat between my thighs. His lips moved with intention, like they needed to consume me, and I let it happen.

By the time he settled against my side with an arm wrapped around me, I was out of breath. Lethargy dragged me to the center of the earth, but something else played louder in my mind, keeping me awake.

The kiss, the feeling of being consumed, I had experienced it before.

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

CADEN

Past



“WHO ARE WE WAITING FOR?” My brother looped an arm around my neck, joining me at the bar on my mega yacht.

I brushed off his arm. “No one.” I nursed the Macallan in my glass, eyes fixed on the main entrance.

The student-faculty party—a two-hour river cruise on my boat—was in full swing. Every nook and cranny of the main deck was crammed with infuriating students and unbearable professors. The only person I wanted here was the only one missing. Frustration consumed me as I stared at the ramp. Rose excelled at time management and had never been late.

Where the hell was she?

Some of the students had discussed meeting up before the party to pregame. There was little comfort in the fact that Doyle was here, which meant he had made no such plans with Rose. It was a good thing because I would have ripped his skinny little arms off if he had tried meeting up with her. Though there was no evidence such a thing had occurred, my jaw clenched at the idea of her pregaming with a different man. A stabbing sensation in my stomach said the irrational jealousy could only be put to rest once I saw her.

I thrummed the bar counter with my fingers. The little patience I exercised around these clowns was entirely missing tonight, and I had postponed the sail time indefinitely. If I got stuck with this lot without Rose, I would throw them into the Hudson River one by one.

My impatient gaze returned to the main deck.

My twin watched me. "Eighteen times."

"What?"

"You have glanced at the door eighteen times since I've arrived. You're waiting for someone, and since you hate everyone, I am guessing a woman has caught your attention. I didn't think that was possible. Who is she?"

"No one."

"So you've said. Is she from around here?"

"Leave me alone."

"Nineteen times."

I gnashed my teeth together.

"Can we give the all clear to the captain if you aren't waiting for anyone? The poor man's scared shitless of you and sent me to find out when we could leave." He nodded at a man in a blue hat with a gold band around the base.

The captain of the boat was antsy to set sail and stole glances at me whenever he thought I wasn't looking. It was comical to see a grown man shake in his boots. It was funnier that he had sent Damon to do his dirty work.

Damon RSVP'd as soon as he found out I was hosting a school-sponsored event. He assumed the dean twisted my arm into it and wanted to make sure I didn't throw everyone out within the first ten minutes.

Understandable.

The dean also thought I was playing a practical joke when I offered to host, and he asked for the cameras to come out with a boisterous laugh. Little did they know that for the first time, I was looking forward to a party. I needed an excuse to spend time with Rose in a social setting.

I had forced her to eat most of her meals with me for weeks. Our connection had been steadily intensifying as a result. Rose was reserved, with an aversion to touch, but she was beginning to thaw under my attention. There was a heaviness in the way she watched me, like she wanted to uncover everything about me. She blatantly put herself out there with daily home-baked goods, often accompanied by handwritten notes.

“Thank you for helping me, Professor Maxwell.”

“Great lecture today, Professor Maxwell.”

The things she couldn't say in person, she put them on paper. She wouldn't go to such lengths unless she had feelings for me. One day, after lunch, she suggested an activity outside the lab—a team-building exercise at an amusement park. As my soon-to-be lab manager, she said such outings needed to be normalized to boost morale. If anyone else had suggested such an absurd waste of time, I would have laughed in their faces. But there I was, agreeing to an after-work bonding experience with the entire research team. Once we arrived at the park, Rose had dragged me to a ride. I accidentally brushed my fingers against her chest when strapping her belt. After that, I was solely focused on her body for the rest of the evening and the following two days.

It was pathetic how much power that girl wielded over me. If one accidental brush of a finger could ignite this reaction, it was disturbing what the real thing would unleash in me. Nowadays, just her scent got me hard. Her company, while stimulating, was unfulfilling when I couldn't touch her. My work was suffering as a result, and I had reached the point where refraining from touching her was proving nearly impossible.

This intense need had to be mutual, I was sure of it. It was impossible for something this magnetic to be one-sided.

The problem?

She was too self-conscious to give in to her primal instincts, especially with her professor and someone in a position of power. If I made a move before she felt completely secure, she would retreat and never give me an inch.

I had to enlist our head of security's services to figure out her insecurities. I called Alex a week after he started investigating her past.

“Tell me you have something useful,” I had demanded.

“I have something useful.”

“I’m listening.”

“They never found the culprit who attacked Ms. Ambani. There was no description of the person. I can keep digging into it, but the gist of it is that someone stabbed her and then vanished into thin air.”

I scratched my stubble. “I don’t need you to find the culprit. I already know who did it.”

I initially had Alex explore Rose's case to find out who had attacked her. But one night, a thought came to me, and I started digging into the Ambani family's finances. It wasn't difficult as we kept extensive logs on them—know thy enemy and all that—including the beneficiaries for each family member. Following the money was an age-old trick that never failed. I considered who had the most to gain if Rose died and stumbled on the answer. It was painfully simple.

"The person who attacked Rose is dead," I told him.

There was a surprised pause on the other end of the line. "You didn't do it, right?" he had asked, unsurely.

"No." But only because someone had beaten me to it. Otherwise, I would have taken great pleasure in burying them six feet under. "I thought you said you found something useful—"

"Right. It's not about the culprit but about Ms. Ambani herself. The police report said she saw the perp but couldn't remember anything about him. Ms. Ambani was diagnosed with PTSD-related amnesia. She's known to dissociate from traumatic memories and has trouble recounting events around the time. There are reports of many distorted memories between the ages of eleven and twelve."

Everything about Rose finally clicked into place.

PTSD-related amnesia was quite common in patients with trauma. The brain blocked out painful memories to protect itself. The person may seem emotionally numb, often experiencing incomplete and altered memories. Triggers could bring back intrusive memories, but they could also cause avoidance behavior. Perhaps it was for the best if she detached from recalling the past.

Given her history, it made sense that she was easily spooked by men. We had spent numerous hours together at the lab. I knew everything about her, yet she kept me at arm's length. It was fucking infuriating. She had sealed off a part of herself that I couldn't break through. If I wanted her to come out of her shell, I needed to change her perception of me as her professor, and that could only happen in a social setting with a lot of alcohol.

Except Rose was nowhere to be found.

My fingers gripped the crystal glass tighter than necessary. I wanted to burn everything to the ground. The past several weeks had been hell, being near her, always wanting to touch her while acutely aware of her invisible

walls. The only thing that kept me sane was this upcoming student-faculty affair. I needed to create a carefree setting on a yacht that reminded her of the good times from her childhood. I even had the boat painted in beige and soft colors to put her mind at ease.

I would have never volunteered to host this insufferable party if I knew Rose would bail.

I set the glass on the bar counter louder than intended. “We’ll leave when I’m ready.”

My twin had an infuriatingly accurate understanding of me. His head reeled back. “Holy shit! There is a girl. I was just fucking with you before.” He tilted his head, reading me like an open book. “And you’re nervous about seeing her. People lose their shit at the thought of talking to you, but a girl’s got your panties in a bunch. Where did you even meet her? You haven’t been anywhere except for your lab in weeks. Is she a professor at the university?”

I couldn’t tell Damon about Rose. Her family was having him investigated for her cousin Rayyan’s murder. The claims were bogus and wouldn’t amount to much. Still, there was a point for contention.

My fixation with Rose would complicate things for him as he already had an unhealthy obsession with another Ambani—Poppy. It was unlikely for their family to approve one Ambani-Maxwell match, let alone two. Damon would discourage me from pursuing Rose, using the trump card that she was my student, which could jeopardize everything I had achieved in my career.

It didn’t help that Rose was fragile, physically scarred from her past, and mentally wounded by her parents’ rejection. Taking advantage of her vulnerability, especially while I was her professor and soon-to-be employer, was wrong on many levels. But the more I had tried shoving these feelings down, the more they had intensified. The more I tried to be appropriate, the more uncontrollably I reacted to her.

There was no way I could change my mind about her. The moment I saw her scars, it had awakened fierce, primal instincts I hadn’t known existed in me. I knew she was vital to my existence. Her presence anchored me. Everyone around me noticed the changes in my attitude, especially my staff. They were overjoyed that I no longer felt the need to work myself—or them—to death. What sane man would give all that up?

“Drop it, Damon.”

“We both know that I won’t. How long have you guys been going out, and why didn’t I know about it?”

I didn’t respond.

Damon whistled. “You’re not going out with her.”

I gave him a scathing look.

“Did she turn you down because of your delightful personality? Or is it the way you charmingly boss people around?”

“I don’t boss people around.”

Damon roared with laughter. He brushed a lock of hair away from his eyes with a flick of his fingers. “Never thought I would live long enough to see my baby brother pine over a woman.”

“I’m not pining.”

“Defensive!”

“I’m not defensive.”

“*That* was defensive. And I don’t get it. You’re the one who files sexual harassment lawsuits *against* women, not the other way around. How come you haven’t made progress?”

Because despite the time we had spent together, Rose could barely make eye contact with me.

“Does the great Caden, the most brilliant man on earth, need girl advice? I thought you knew everything about everything.”

“I do.”

“Except when it comes to one simple girl. Need my help?”

I scoffed. “In your dreams.”

“Suit yourself.” He turned on his heel.

I downed my drink, and resentfully spat out the word, “Wait.”

I didn’t have to look at him to know he was wearing a shit-eating grin. He returned to the bar, cherishing every moment of this interaction. Although I couldn’t tell him about Rose, he could still shed light on the matter.

Frustration gnawed under my skin when Chad, the dean of the university, approached the bar at the same time and asked if we would be departing shortly. I was about to bite his head off when Damon intervened and made up an excuse in a charming voice. We were Jekyll and Hyde, except I had a shorter fuse than Hyde.

I ordered another drink and told the bartender to leave the bottle. When I glanced at the entrance again, Damon reached into his pocket and pulled

out a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He flipped open the lid and held out the pack for me.

“I know you quit, but you could use one tonight. Calm down before you deck the dean of the university.”

He was right. I was on edge.

A flame danced at the end of the cigarette as I lit it and took a long drag. We had picked up smoking in high school, but since I prided myself on my self-control, I kicked the habit after my residency. Nowadays, I only smoked on select occasions when my temper was through the roof.

Damon took a drag of his cigarette. “Your problem is that you got used to girls chasing you. Every woman wants to tame the bad guy. They respond to your dark persona because they want to fix you. Clearly, this girl’s different if your *charming personality* isn’t working on her.” He used air quotes around the words charming personality. “It could only mean one thing—she isn’t looking for trouble.”

I eyed him through the haze of smoke, shocked that he had hit the bull’s-eye. Rose had an obsessive-compulsive disorder and left nothing to chance. She arrived fifteen minutes before class, did two safety checks before using anything flammable, and if anything was left out of order, she returned to the lab to fix it. Proactive and diligent, she had spent hours familiarizing herself with the lab because she would be joining my team next semester. She was the only person meticulous enough to manage a high-stress work environment like mine.

The only risk she had taken was changing her major against her family’s wishes. Even then, she secured a job to maintain financial independence in case they found out.

All in all, Rose Ambani wasn’t a risk taker.

“Do you know what these types of girls like, the ones who aren’t looking for trouble?” His index finger waved over my face. “They like it when you smile.”

Seriously?

“No, no. Not that face you’re making—the whole *grr, I’m going to kill you* look. And your hair.” He rumpled my hair, and I jerked out of his hold. “Relax. I’m trying to make you approachable. You look like a Disney villain between the hair and the face. Try smiling. Never mind, that’s worse. Just...stop frowning. And why does everything about you have to look so stern?”

He undid the first two buttons of my shirt and ran his fingers through my hair to destroy the smooth and neat pile. If it were anyone other than my twin, they would have been lying in a heap by now. But I didn't shove him away, because he had a point. Although I had done everything in my power to downplay my scary demeanor around Rose, it wasn't enough. Her history was too ingrained in her personality, and she was scared of someone like me.

At least there was a silver lining. I had memorized every expression on Rose's face, and though she exercised immense caution around men, she didn't view me as a threat. I took full advantage and engaged her in small talk at every opportunity. My staff was shocked. I was notoriously famous for being short with people. I didn't have time for idle chitchat and maintained a relentless pace at work. I never shared personal thoughts with my team or inquired about their lives. It was different with Rose, and others noticed, though no one was brave enough to point it out.

After Damon stopped with the grooming, I glanced at the mirror over the bar. My hair was a disheveled mess, with strands sticking out in every direction for an unkempt appearance. "Great. I look like you."

"You're welcome."

I rolled my eyes.

"What did I tell you about making that face? Try to be polite for once in your life. If you don't bite anyone's head off in front of her, then maybe, just maybe, she won't be scared shitless of you."

I lifted the drink to my lips. He had a point. Rose and Damon shared a casual friendship, and she wasn't scared of him. He was a philanthropic goody two-shoes who didn't pose a threat.

"Oh, and buy her gifts. Girls like that. Go to Cartier on Fifth. That's where Dad used to take Mom."

Damon talked my ear off with more unsolicited advice on my love life. When I still hadn't given the thumbs up to set sail, he said, "Farewell, young grasshopper," and disembarked the yacht.

If we left now, the boat would return too late for my brother, and I got the feeling that he wanted to see Poppy. It seemed both of us had an unhealthy obsession with the Ambani girls.

A loud laugh pulled my attention to the other corner of the deck. It was Rose's roommate. She threw her head back and laughed at something. Next to her was none other than Rose herself.

There was suddenly a loud thumping in my chest.

When did she get here? I had been staring at the entrance for an hour.

She stood in a circle with other students from the lab, wearing a black, knee-length dress with full-length sleeves and a high collar. The material clung to her curves, stressing the dip around her waist and accenting her ass. My gaze leisurely traveled up her body, paying extra attention to her long, toned legs, which were on display for the first time. She had become bolder with her outfits over the last month. The dress was classy and sexy without being over-the-top, and my imagination was running wild about what was hidden beneath.

I was about to cross the deck when I noticed she was speaking to a tall blond, who had his back to me. She smiled warmly at him, and I froze in my tracks. Anger roared in my ears when the man turned out to be Matt Doyle.

Had she been with him all along, and I didn't notice?

I stood there, stunned, until the wave of anger made me want to tear someone apart, starting with Doyle. Instead of blending in with the background, Rose chose an attire that made her stand out, and I wasn't the only one to notice. Even from here, I could see that fucker fawning over her. His beady eyes consumed her with the same lustful thoughts running rampant through my own mind.

I had made a habit of monopolizing Rose's time. Now that other people were demanding her attention, it left my insides with the volcanic rage Damon had warned me against.

The idea of someone else wanting her made my blood boil. I didn't care if no one—not even my twin—wanted us together. I wanted to break up their little party and send Doyle sprawling on the floor, but my brother's long-winded advice nagged at me. I cracked my jaw to fight the overwhelming need to go to her, and instead, told the captain to set sail.

I occupied myself at the bar and was inundated by eager students and professors. The cheerful atmosphere irritated me, and I struggled to maintain politeness, responding in brief, single-word replies to every inquiry. Silently, I watched Rose and Doyle from afar. It was evident that I had been too cautious. Waiting for Rose to become ready for a relationship had given other men the chance to enter her life.

That was over. No more waiting.

I pulled out another cigarette from the pack Damon had left me with. He was right. Rose wouldn't open up to me until she felt safe, and my interaction with others played a key role in the matter. I thought about what Damon would do, how he would speak, and then I responded accordingly.

So, when Professor Rossi proposed a joint project, I listened to his proposal instead of chasing him away.

Miles asked if I could write him a recommendation letter. I told him it would be on his desk on Monday. He seemed surprised but quickly ran away in fear that I would change my mind.

Professor Christine Lewis suggested we go out for coffee to "complain" about our students. It wasn't the first time she had made this suggestion, but she was being more transparent when she placed a hand over my chest. Instead of telling her no like last time, I merely excused myself.

A representative from the school newspaper sought a statement regarding the university's claim to develop a non-addictive opioid alternative by the end of the year. Last time, I had growled at them. This time, I redirected the press to cover the best student-faculty party of the year.

I kept up the facade until one of the female students bypassed the antics and shoved her breasts against my back.

"Did I give you permission to touch me?" I snarled, ending the theatrics.

Everything came to a screeching halt. Even the bartender stopped rocking the cocktail shaker in her hands and watched the woman in question. The embarrassed hormone monger—a brunette with glitter smeared across her chest—backed away with trepidation. "I-I—"

"I-I, what?" I snapped. "You go around sexually assaulting professors and think it's all right? Is that it?"

She turned beet red, eyes darting in all directions, hoping someone would swoop in to save her.

"Get lost," I hissed.

She ran away without hesitation, and I was done with the charade.

Rose had no idea what I was enduring for her sake, yet she hadn't so much as glanced my way. This was ridiculous. Hundreds of women groveled for my attention, yet one shy girl's inattentiveness was eating away at me. She was put on this earth to humble me in the unlikeliest way —by doing nothing.

When I glanced up to find Rose, the group had dispersed. Sean and Matt were at the bar, and Amelie was taking selfies. I turned in the opposite direction to see a wave of dark hair slinking away toward the staircases.

Rose?

I left my drink at the bar, stealthily moving through the crowd to avoid drawing attention to myself. The second floor of the yacht was off-limits and barricaded with ropes, which explained why Rose chose it to find solace. She liked large parties because she didn't have to carry the conversation. Her new look had catapulted her into the unwanted limelight, and the attention had quickly gotten old.

The electricity was turned off in the downstairs area to discourage guests from wandering, and the only light came from the moon. It took a few minutes for my eyes to adjust. I searched for Rose in the shadows and found her on the balcony overlooking the water.

I made sure to make the wood creak under the soles of my dress shoes so she would hear me coming. Rose didn't react well to surprises in the dark.

She turned just as I reached her. "Hi," she said breathlessly, eyes wide. "You're here."

Why was she surprised to see me?

"Were you expecting someone else?" I asked, barely keeping the bite out of my voice.

She shook her head.

"You've snuck onto the only floor that's off-limits. I guess I shouldn't ask whether you were having a good time at the party—hiding so soon after arriving late."

She frowned. "I didn't arrive late. I arrived two hours ago to help set up the party. Then I went to the lower deck to talk to the captain about a safety check. He didn't like that."

It was then that Rose managed the unthinkable—she made me laugh. It wasn't the sarcastic laugh that scared my staff, but a wholehearted one that took even me by surprise. I chuckled for the first time in ten years. "Of course you arrived early to set up and do a safety check." None of my staff would have had the good sense to take the initiative, but Rose would never leave anything to chance. I laughed again.

She seemed happy, too. Receptive.

Fuck, Damon's advice worked. Shedding my sternness and engaging in brainless chatter with other insignificant people made Rose see me in a new light. I had exercised patience with her, but I never thought of doing so with others as well.

"I thought you weren't coming."

She shook her head. "I wouldn't miss it. Plus, I love boats."

I opened my arms to gesture at all the empty rooms on this level. "Then pick your favorite room and stay the night. Each guestroom has a unique theme."

"Are you staying the night, too?"

"That's my suite." I nodded at the wooden door behind her. "It's unlocked if you want a tour."

She blinked, and I realized I had gone too far with the insinuation. I opened my mouth to say something that would put her at ease, but then she rose on her toes, banded her hands around my neck, and pulled me in for a kiss.

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CHAPTER

NINETEEN

ROSE

I SPOTTED Damon the moment I joined my lab group at Professor Maxwell's party. He was by the bar with his signature cigarette in hand. Amelie handed me a drink, and I knocked back the double vodka with club soda, trying *not* to stare at him. Despite my best efforts, my gaze flicked back to him for the fiftieth time.

Amelie knew about my feelings and cornered me after my third drink of the night. Thankfully, Matt and Sean had left to grab us another round. "By the way you're trying *not* to stare, I assume that's Damon standing by the bar, not Professor Maxwell."

"Oh, it's Damon, all right."

"They're identical twins. I still don't get how you can always tell them apart."

I shrugged. "Professor Maxwell gave up smoking years ago. Plus, he doesn't let his hair fall over his eyes like that." I nodded at Damon with his loose waves. "It might compromise his vision during work. Everything about him has to be perfect, and that means not a hair is out of place. But most importantly, Professor Maxwell doesn't have the patience for small talk. He would never entertain people the way Damon is doing right now."

"Professor Maxwell told you all that?"

"No. I figured it out by watching him."

"Oh." She stared at me for a moment. "What do you like about him?"

My brows drew together. I hated it when people questioned Professor Maxwell's qualities. I had worked closely with him all semester and

understood him implicitly. Contrary to the rumors, he wasn't a villain; he merely hated subpar work, and for good reason. His research was a matter of life and death. He was hard on us because the margin of error was low. Currently, he was conducting a drug trial to create a non-addictive pain medication for patients recovering from surgeries and such. His work could save forty million souls from opiate addiction and spare their families the agony of watching their loved ones suffer, the same way he had with his mother.

If only others could see through his tough exterior, they would change their minds about him. To me, Professor Maxwell was the answer to all my prayers. He offered me a job upon graduation, and thank God for it, because my father cut me off after discovering I had changed my major. It happened last month. His name had flashed across my phone on a Friday evening. He rarely called while away on business, so the moment I saw it, I had a sinking feeling about why he had made the exception.

"Hi, Papa," I had answered his call softly.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he yelled on the other end of the line.

I pulled the phone away from my ear. My muteness had already been a decade-long problem, no need to turn me deaf as well.

The conversation only went downhill from there. He switched from English to Hindi, something he only did when his rage was through the roof.

"I just got off the phone with Chad. He called me to personally invite me to my daughter's graduation. Imagine my surprise when I found out your ceremony would be held in the courtyard of the chemistry building."

My fingers tightened around the phone. The dean sucked up to my father since he often made large donations to the university. It never occurred to me that he might personally invite Papa to my graduation. Each department at the university held a separate ceremony for their graduating class. If I were still a finance major, my ceremony would have been at the business school ballroom. It didn't take long for my father to put two and two together; he was invited to the chemistry building's courtyard because I changed my major.

"Papa... I—"

"Chemistry? You changed your major to chemistry after I specifically forbade it?" His voice was like a whip, measured but laced with fury.

I swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, Papa. Finance wasn’t right for me. I-I wasn’t passionate about it at all—”

“Passion?” His laugh was a low, bitter thing. “Passion is for children, Rose. When will you grow up? Don’t forget that you promised to join the family business after graduation.”

But I never promised anything. He spoke; I listened. Papa took that as my acquiescence.

My throat felt tight. “Please, Papa. I’m not good at investments. This is for the best—”

“Enough.” The word cracked like a gunshot. “I’m your father, and I know what’s *best* for you, and that’s for you to join Ambani Corps like we discussed.”

I shook my head, though he couldn’t see me. Professor Maxwell had once told me, “*If it doesn’t serve you, it ruins you.*” Perhaps it was his guidance that gave me the strength to say, “No.”

One simple word turned the conversation on its head.

He was quiet for a moment, but I knew he was seething. “Very well. If you’re not going to keep your word, then you’ll do this without my help. Starting tomorrow, your cards will be frozen, your trust will be sealed, and I’ll make sure every graduate program knows exactly what you are—unreliable.”

My stomach dropped.

Dev Ambani was known to be a shrewd businessman, and he was just as much a hard-liner in his personal affairs. I expected this reaction, but it still stung that my own father wanted to kill my hopes and dreams. He was going to blackball me from every graduate program. A bachelor’s degree in chemistry wouldn’t get me far in this field, and he knew it, too. At the very least, I needed a master’s degree—if not a PhD.

“Actions have consequences, Rose. You chose this path. You want independence? Congratulations. You’ve got it—cold, hard, and penniless.”

The room swayed a little.

“Call me when you’re ready to correct this mistake. Until then, you’re on your own.”

The line went dead before I could even breathe his name. I had stared at my silent phone for minutes, fingers numb, the cold edge of his voice still carved into my chest.

Since then, none of my credit cards had worked, my trust fund had been taken away, and the word had been spread not to accept me into a graduate program. After Poppy found out what had happened, she sent me a stream of unsolicited payments through Venmo. I hated relying on my younger cousin for money and vowed to pay her back every cent upon graduation. If it wasn't for Professor Maxwell's pending job offer, that wouldn't be a possibility, and my future would be in shreds.

Which was why I couldn't stand it when people criticized him. The worst thing he had ever done was force-feed me healthy meals and make me switch to raw honey and coconut sugar whenever I baked. But if truth be told, limiting my sugar intake had reduced the inflammation of my scars, and I had never felt better.

Sure, he was a bit hot-tempered and kept everyone at a distance. But he was also the most brilliant man I had met. Geniuses didn't fit molds. They thought outside the box, which was what made them remarkable.

At my prolonged silence, Amelie waved a hand in front of my face.
“Hello! I asked you a question.”

I sighed.

“What do you like about him?” she repeated.

I lifted a shoulder. “The man’s a genius.”

“Um—”

I held up a hand. “I know people hate admitting it because they think he’s difficult. But I would be just as angry if I had half his talent and had to compromise on things because of the university.”

Amelie gave me a quizzical look. “What are you talking abo—”

“He is misunderstood, but he isn’t a bad person,” I cut her off defiantly, not wanting to hear anything bad said about Professor Maxwell.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Amelie said slowly.

“I’m saying it’s frustrating that you don’t see what I like about him. He isn’t a bad man just because he likes things done a certain way. And think about it from his perspective. He has to allow students with zero experience into his workspace and risk ruining everything he’s built. I don’t blame Professor Maxwell for being hard on us.”

Amelie stared at me with round eyes, shocked that I was defending Professor Maxwell so vehemently. She opened her mouth for a rebuttal, but a giggle spilled out instead. “Oh my god, you are talking about Professor

Maxwell.” Her palm touched her forehead. “I was asking what you liked about Damon, and you started talking about his twin instead.”

I blinked.

Her brows drew together slightly as she focused on my face. “I have never seen you so worked up before. If I didn’t know any better, I would think Professor Maxwell was the one you were in love with.”

My eyes glazed over, wide and unfocused, as if my brain had short-circuited mid-thought. I didn’t know how to respond and was grateful when she returned to her original question.

“Anyways, why do you like him? And by *him*, I mean Damon,” she specified as I flushed.

Amelie had asked me this question numerous times in hopes of talking me out of my one-sided romance. She had repeatedly pointed out that I didn’t know anything substantial about Damon, that he wasn’t interested in me. If I gave her my generic answer—I liked him because he was a philanthropist who founded charities for survivors of assault and set up suicide prevention hotlines—she would lecture me again. She would tell me that he might be a nice person, but he was wrong for me, and she would plead for me to move on.

Believe me, I tried, but I didn’t have a choice in loving him.

Feeling brave after a few drinks, I decided on the truth. “When I was young, someone stabbed me a bunch of times outside my home.”

Amelie’s beautiful face turned ghostly white. She lowered her gaze. “I know. Poppy told me when we first moved in together.”

Based on how Amelie accommodated my quirks, I had an inkling Poppy had given her the lowdown. My cousin was protective, even though I was the older one. Amelie went out of her way never to touch me unprovoked and generally respected the bubble that made me feel safe. The one time she walked in on me while I was changing, she barely reacted to my scars.

“I’m sorry if it’s weird that she told me.”

I shook my head. “I’m glad you know.”

“I’m sorry they never caught the guy.”

I forced a nonchalant expression. “He left me for dead, and when I opened my eyes, I was in a hospital bed. I had no idea what had happened to me, only that I was in excruciating pain. It felt like I was dying over and over.”

“That’s terrible.”

“The recovery was unbearable, but my parents were only focused on finding out who did it or ‘fixing’ the problem. They said the scars were too ugly and wanted me to undergo plastic surgery, but I couldn’t do it. I was exhausted from the required medical procedures as it was, and when they started talking about cosmetic procedures...”

The dreary memories returned to me, and I quivered. My mother once said, “*No one will marry a girl covered in scars. Just get the surgery, sweetheart.*”

“I thought about ending it.”

“Rose!” Amelie gasped.

I smiled. “Don’t worry. It was a long time ago. I promise, that’s not me anymore.”

Her eyes narrowed, but not in anger. If I knew Amelie at all, she was mentally peeling back my words, searching for hints about whether I needed to be on suicide watch. She would follow me day and night if she thought I was at risk.

“Stop freaking out,” I insisted. “That’s not me anymore because Damon talked me out of it. I was at the hospital the day his mom overdosed. He had rushed her there, but she didn’t make it.”

“Is that how you met him, at the hospital?”

I shook my head. “I had seen him around at events our parents used to drag us to—weddings, fundraisers, that sort of thing. But he was older and hung out with a different crowd. We had never spoken, and he was just another person to me.”

“Until the day his mom died?” she asked.

I nodded. Growing up, Professor Maxwell was a recluse while Damon made random appearances at events within our social circle. We never interacted. That changed on the worst day of our lives—the day his mother died, and the day I almost killed myself. It was the first time we spoke, and I fell in love with him instantly. That was a decade ago.

I glanced at Amelie apprehensively. “That day, I had a really bad fight with my parents over the plastic surgery. The recovery was worse than what happened to me, and I was in constant pain. When I realized my parents would force me into more of the same, I lost it. I was just a little girl. I didn’t know what I was doing, I only knew that I wanted the pain to stop. I went to the rooftop after visiting hours had ended. I kept thinking, the pain will end the moment I jump.”

“My god, Rose. What happened next?”

“Damon had just lost his mom. He went to the rooftop for a cigarette and saw me. He talked me out of it.”

“How?”

I shrugged. “By listening to me, by making me feel seen. He gave me... hope. He even told me to threaten my parents with emancipation if they didn’t back off on the plastic surgery, and he stayed with me for the rest of the afternoon. He was going through his own stuff after losing his mom. It turned out all I needed was for one person to listen to what I wanted. It gave me the strength to keep going. He saved me.”

That day, Damon didn’t cry over losing his mother. Instead, he wore a solemn look that resembled my physical pain. The pain of my flesh was written on his face, and it had haunted me since.

We were kids. Neither of us had any business suffering life’s cruelty at such an early age. But there we were, born from tragedy and intertwined by a twisted fate. The difference was that I embraced our connection, whereas he disregarded it. Forever the philanthropist, he thought he was helping yet another troubled kid and never gave me a second thought. Then our families turned into bitter rivals, and he kept his distance from me. The rest was history.

“I-I don’t know what to say, Rose.”

“It was a long time ago, before the Ambanis and Maxwells became mortal enemies.”

“I never realized you guys had such a deep history. Then how come he’s—”

“Indifferent toward me?” I finished for her. “I doubt Damon wants to rock the boat with his family because we spent one afternoon together a decade ago. That day meant everything to me. It changed my life. But to him, he was just helping another desperate kid with braces, pimples, and Raggedy Ann hair.”

She snorted, and I sighed.

I couldn’t control my feelings. I felt tethered to him, unable to break free from this bond, even though I knew it wouldn’t amount to much. As I grew older, I had hoped to grow out of it. Instead, I was consumed by my emotions.

I didn’t want to feel this way—this unrequited love—for the rest of my life. If I had one chance with him, I wouldn’t waste it. I would kiss him, feel

him, ask him to hold me. Damon would never reciprocate my feelings, but I couldn't imagine myself with anyone else.

The thought pushed me into panic mode.

"Excuse me for a second."

"Are you okay?"

I nodded and walked past Amelie, needing a moment to regroup. The drinks had left me feeling warm and fuzzy, and I stumbled a little. I was drunker than I had realized. I tried to find an empty corner, but the main level was jam-packed. I descended the staircase to the second floor and secured a quiet spot on the balcony instead. I looked out at the dark water and thought back to Professor Maxwell's words from a few weeks ago. He had encouraged me to let go of things that didn't serve me. Oddly enough, his advice applied to my love life, too.

"If it doesn't serve you, it ruins you. Don't continue with finance if you're bad at it." Professor Maxwell had been encouraging me to fully embrace science at every meal we shared. That day was no different as he plated our lunches, assuring me the food was made with the best ingredients.

I had grinned in amusement. Professor Maxwell always sought the best—best students, best staff, best lab, and even the best ingredients in his food. Most of all, he valued the best minds, so I was surprised he had skipped the symposium currently happening across campus. For once, he had the green light to do precisely as he wished—cancel class and surround himself with like-minded intellectuals from his field. For some reason, he declined and proceeded with the lecture. Lately, he had become more invested in this class, and even on the days he had legitimate reasons to cancel, he was resolute in not doing so. After class, we had lunch in the break room, and the conversation inadvertently shifted to my life goals.

He claimed the seat across from me and gazed at me expectantly. I was seized by my usual anxiety and dropped my gaze to the ground. The man interacted with the most brilliant minds in the world. There were supposed to be two Nobel laureates at the symposium today. I was far removed from the circles he was accustomed to and often wondered whether I was boring him.

"You seem disappointed," he said.

I had followed his gaze and realized he was referring to the spread in front of us—avocado salad, chickpea wrap, and chia pudding.

“Not at all. It looks delicious.”

“As delicious as this?” With a slight grin, he reached under the booth and pulled out a bag. I had almost screamed when I saw the label on the bag—Magnolia Bakery. It was my favorite, but I doubt he knew that. It merely happened to be the most famous bakery in New York.

I had been using alternative sweeteners in my baking because sugar inflamed my scars, but God, I needed a dose of the real thing. I inhaled two of the cupcakes, thanking him profusely for the cheat day and asking him again if he was sure he didn’t want to attend the symposium.

“Stop asking me the same question. I’d rather discuss your term paper. Did you choose a topic?”

Chastened, I played with the cupcake wrapper. “Asymmetric synthesis and its importance in drug development. But I haven’t selected a technique yet for the lab portion.”

“Start with a deep dive into real-world drug case studies.”

“Like thalidomide?”

He nodded, then proceeded to give me advice, even though he had told the rest of the students not to bother him with their term paper. I couldn’t help the smile on my face. Despite my trepidation, Professor Maxwell had somehow become a friend and a confidant. Not that I would utter such bold statements in his presence. No one dared to bestow him with such titles, and despite our lukewarm relationship, I was careful never to overstep the liberties he allowed me.

My mind had taken a detour, catching me off guard. I came to reexamine my feelings for Damon and ended up spending my time thinking about his twin instead. With a sigh, I turned just as the man in question reached me. My eyes widened.

Damon.

“Hi.” What was he doing here? Did he come searching for me? But Damon had never initiated an interaction with me. I was sure he could see the questions dancing in my eyes. “You’re here.”

“Were you expecting someone else?” he asked.

I shook my head. Whenever we ran into each other, Damon politely said hello and then immediately excused himself or avoided me for the rest of the party. But tonight, his hand was resting on the railing, his posture was relaxed, and he seemed to be settling in for a long chat. Nothing about his body language said he would cut the conversation short.

“You’ve snuck onto the only floor that’s off-limits. I guess I shouldn’t ask whether you were having a good time at the party—hiding so soon after arriving late.”

My mouth went dry when the moon revealed itself from behind the clouds, illuminating his face. Up close, I could make out his expressions. His pupils were dilated, and he was perusing my body. Unapologetic and unashamed.

My stomach clenched.

In all the years I had known him, he had never looked at me like *that*—with intensity and hunger. My nerves were frayed by his single glance, and I was suddenly buzzing for a different reason than the drinks.

I was so distracted that it took me several moments to process his comment. I frowned. “I didn’t arrive late. I arrived two hours ago to help set up the party. Then I went to the lower deck to talk to the captain about a safety check. He didn’t like that.”

He chuckled. “Of course you arrived early to set up and do a safety check.” He laughed again. The sound sent warm feelings down to the middle of my chest.

Was I dreaming?

I hadn’t expected the warm reception. Damon noticed I was missing, he had sought me out, and now, I had charmed him.

Should I confess my undying love?

No.

Too strong a reaction to a simple laugh.

“I thought you weren’t coming.”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Plus, I love boats.”

“Then pick your favorite room and stay the night. Each guestroom has a unique theme.”

“Are you staying the night, too?”

“That’s my suite. It’s unlocked if you want a tour.”

My heart started beating ferociously. Was that an invitation to his bed? Should I make a move?

I had never made a move on a man, but just ten minutes ago, I was terrified of dying alone because I couldn’t snap out of Damon’s love haze. And now, he was sending me signals. Strong signals.

Damon had mastered the skill of letting me down gently. For whatever reason, he was flirting with me tonight. The sharp thrill of daring to claim

my hidden desire clawed at my chest. I needed to shoot my shot. It was now or never.

Without giving myself the chance to change my mind, I went onto my tiptoes. With trembling hands, I grabbed the back of his neck and tugged his head down. His gaze, which was nothing short of shocked, clashed with mine. I thought he would push me away. Instead, he was motionless. Encouraged, I brushed my mouth against his, giving him my very first kiss.

The world tilted for a moment. His mouth was softer than I had expected, a contrast to the rough edges of his jaw and the controlled calm in his eyes. Electricity shot through me, a sudden heat that pooled in my chest and spilled to my fingertips. Every nerve stood on alert, each heartbeat echoing against his quiet stillness. The fleeting kiss left me breathless, and just like that, it was over.

My cheeks burned hot as I pulled back to assess his reaction. Stormy blue eyes watched me steadily. He was going to push me away, I just knew it, and I braced for his rejection.

Oh God. What had I done? If I hadn't had three double-shot vodkas in my system or freaked out about dying alone, I would have never done something so stupid.

Feeling foolish about my impulsiveness, I started to drop my hands, but he stunned me by grabbing them. He moved them back to his neck.

My mouth dropped.

My head swam with alcohol, and I swayed, or perhaps it was because of the way he was looking at me. His gaze was lecherous, and totally unlike him, as one of his hands wrapped around my waist. I didn't get much more of a warning before his lips swooped down to meet mine.

The world ceased to exist. My heartbeat thundered in my ears, and even my fingertips were pounding with the blood rushing everywhere in my body. His lips lifted off mine for a moment, and I stared back at him, wide-eyed and utterly mesmerized, no coherent thoughts stirring in my mind. Almost imperceptibly, he began his descent, giving me space. We were so attuned; he knew of my invisible bubble and how difficult it was to be touched. But he needn't worry. This rule existed for everyone but him.

He paused mere millimeters from my mouth. When I didn't protest, he closed the distance between us. Our lips met in the same earth-shattering manner, and he drew me closer, my chest pressing against his. I clung to his

white dress shirt desperately, wondering whether I would float away if I let go.

For years, Damon had thwarted my feelings. Why was he suddenly interested in me? I didn't understand the change of heart, but I couldn't seek answers, not when he was kissing me like his life depended on it.

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CHAPTER
TWENTY
CADEN

OUR MOUTHS COLLIDED, though I kept expecting her to snap out of whatever had possessed her tonight. When I thought she would push me away, she pulled me closer. With one hand flat on my chest, she wrapped the other around my neck and leaned forward.

My ears buzzed, high on her scent. The kiss turned intense, and I traced her bottom lip with my tongue, then moved down her throat.

“Your skin...fuck. That tastes amazing,” I murmured against her collarbone.

My breath was heavy, like a man savoring his final meal. Panting against her neck, I knew my self-control was in tatters. I gently bit her neck when she didn’t pull away.

Fuck, I needed this, but it wasn’t enough.

I needed more.

Suddenly, she jumped, though I grabbed her before she could disengage entirely. She didn’t seem rattled by me; instead, her gaze was on the staircase. I followed her line of vision. There was a commotion coming from upstairs, and the noise had snapped her back to reality.

Fuck, she was addicting. I was wrapped up in her and hadn’t heard the noise. But I could hear it now, and it sounded as if things were escalating.

“*You’re such a fucker.*”

“*Do you know who my father is?*”

“*You’re drunk.*”

“*No, fucker. You are.*”

Irritation gnawed at me. I had no idea how long we had been at this, but we had docked at some point in the last five minutes, and a few of the students had started a fight. I needed to put a stop to it.

I let go of Rose. She avoided eye contact while I studied her face. Perhaps she was drunk, and I had overstepped. I was her professor, after all, and this could be construed as taking advantage of the situation.

But fuck did I care. The last few weeks had been a testament to patience that I didn't possess. Exercising discipline now was the least of my concerns. Rose gave in, and that was all the validation I needed.

"Stay here," I ordered. "I have to go upstairs and sort this out." I was about to have whoever interrupted us expelled. I had finally gotten her where I wanted, and entitled brats ruined the progress.

She nodded, retreating into herself.

"We'll talk after I come back."

Once more, she nodded. I took the stairs, glancing at her over my shoulder.

I reached the top of the stairs and assessed the situation. The boat had just docked, and two drunk idiots got into it about who would disembark first. I should throw both of them into the water and solve the problem.

On the bright side, the fight made everyone else want to leave the party. A crowd formed around the ramp while two security guards escorted the drunken idiots off the deck.

I instructed my crew to return tomorrow to clean up—I didn't want anyone else interrupting us—and within ten minutes, I was informed that all the guests had left the boat. By the time I returned downstairs, it was too quiet for my liking.

"Rose," I called.

I was greeted with silence.

Fuck.

Rose had fled the scene.



I slammed the door to the presidential suite of the mega yacht—a duplex with a bedroom upstairs. I was pissed. Really fucking pissed. I was

talking to the crew for less than ten minutes, and Rose used that window to disembark with everyone else.

What the fuck.

I wanted to throw something across the room to dissuade my anger, like the lamp, but everything was anchored to the wall or floor to account for wave turbulence. I couldn't believe Rose snuck out.

I threw open the door to the upstairs bedroom, turned on the bedside lamp...and froze.

Great. Just great.

A woman was under the covers of my bed with her face turned away from me. I didn't need a second glance or an explanation. Another semester, another student trying to seduce me. Last semester, a woman had taken off all her clothes and walked into my office after hours. The semester before that, a naked student had cornered me in the bathroom at another student-faculty event.

When would this end? Threatening to expel students was no longer doing the job.

I turned my back to the bed. "Get out," I spat out the words.

She moaned, and I heard the ruffling of the sheets, followed by her footsteps. At least she was sensible enough to take me at my word.

Before I could relish the small victory, two hands wrapped around my middle with a head resting against my back.

God, I hated these parties and this university and every shitty thing about these entitled students. I grabbed her wrists. I was ready to rip them off me and drag her out of the room when she spoke.

"The room's spinning."

It was the husky softness in the voice, familiar and undeniable. I whirled around in shock, eyes widening when I saw the owner of the voice. I searched her face, awed that *she* was here.

"Rose." I grabbed her elbow.

Rose stood there, wide-eyed and placid.

Disbelief that this little girl had the audacity to sneak into my bedroom consumed me. Yes, we kissed and I pointed out my suite, but never in my wildest fantasies had I expected her to climb into my bed. It was so unlike Rose that I had mistaken her for another woman.

I had no idea where this surge of boldness to sneak into my room came from, but I didn't care. I only knew I wouldn't let her out.

She mumbled something, one hand reaching for the back of my neck, her eyes heavy-lidded from alcohol or sleep. The other hand fisted my shirt, her nails grazing my chest through the thin material. I closed my eyes, breathing heavily to counteract the intoxicating effect she had on me. I didn't want to move or breathe too loudly or do anything that snapped her out of it. I didn't want her to lose her nerve and back out.

If she thought I was a gentleman who would turn her down because she was vulnerable, she had walked into the wrong brother's room. There was only one woman I wouldn't chase out, and she was here, writhing in my arms.

The faint smell of a mild perfume wafted into my nostrils. Even her application of perfume was tactful. When she splayed a palm on my chest, it broke the dam.

Gripping a fistful of her hair, I tilted her head back. "Only you can do this to me."

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

ROSE

I MUST HAVE DOZED OFF, and when I drifted awake, I found myself in a room shrouded in darkness. My eyes, initially unfocused, sharpened as they adjusted to the dark.

Where was I?

Though the curtains were drawn, a sliver of moonlight peeked through a gap. I was on the boat, waiting for Damon in his room. I had rested my head against the pillow for only a second but had succumbed to sleep.

Blood rushed to my head when I tried sitting up. There was a rustle nearby, followed by the light being turned on. The person immediately turned away, perhaps to give me privacy in case I was indecent. Despite the quick evasion, I recognized him.

Damon.

My ears were buzzing, and I didn't catch whatever he said. I was still drunk. I peeled myself off the bed. For years, I had fantasized about ending up in a similar scenario. This setting, on his brother's yacht, was a pretty damn romantic one. With legs made of lead, I walked to the man of my dreams and rested my head against his back.

“The room’s spinning.”

He whirled around so fast that I almost stumbled. He stared at me with an odd expression, then gathered me in an embrace.

“Rose.” Gripping a fistful of my hair, he tilted my head back. He stared at me for a moment before lunging at me with six simple words on his lips. “Only you can do this to me.”

I yelped when he picked me up and settled me on the bed. I caught his scent—amber—emanating from him. Feeling a bit too warm, I gripped the sheets to steady myself.

“How much did you drink?”

“Not that much.” The lie tumbled out of my lips before I could stop myself.

I knew he would stop if I told him the truth—I was tanked. He was the good guy and wouldn’t take advantage of a drunk woman. But I had waited more than a decade for this moment and couldn’t risk sabotaging it.

“Good. Now tell me that you want me,” he said gruffly.

Want him? I wanted him so badly that I couldn’t think straight. “I want you.”

Blue eyes heated at my answer. With a hand flat on my belly, he pushed me onto the mattress. My head spun when my back collided with the firm surface. He seized my upper arms and crushed his mouth to mine. I automatically parted my lips, and he slipped his tongue inside, stroking mine with urgency. I brushed my tongue against his, and he inhaled sharply—an abrupt, harsh sound in the still room. I had hoped my acquiescence would center him. It had the opposite effect. He climbed on top of me, his mouth devouring mine like it was the end of the world.

I struggled for air.

But just as abruptly as they had descended on me, his lips disappeared. Slowly, he lifted the skirt of my dress. My eyes were on the ceiling, too chicken to meet his gaze. Because any second now, he would see the scars on my belly and be horrified after inspecting them up close. It was a difficult sight to stomach, even my parents couldn’t deal with it.

I should stop him or at least turn off the lights. But the gentle sway of the boat, the smell of water, and his amber scent created an intoxicating mix. It took longer to gather my strength and lift my arms. By the time my hand landed in his wavy locks, my dress was around my waist, and he had dragged my underwear to my ankles.

I angled my head and saw that his shirt was missing. My gaze returned to the ceiling while his rough hand explored every inch of my skin, caressing it like he was trying to memorize the pattern. It was unbearable and reverent all in one, and all thoughts of my hideous scars and flaws vanished from the way he worshipped my body.

The gentle caresses on my bare skin put me in a trance. I felt high, never wanting this feeling to end, and was only revived when he changed direction.

“What are you doing?”

He didn’t respond and pulled my dress over my head, then proceeded to undo my bra. No one had seen me naked before. My first instinct was to cover up, but the way he was staring at me, he was the furthest thing from scared. He was fascinated, tracing every mark with the brush of his fingers. When I swatted his hand away, he dragged me to the edge of the bed and put his mouth on the largest scar on my belly and traced it with his tongue.

I gasped. “Stop that.” I tried to pull away, but a firm hand on my hip kept me in place.

Was he insane?

I was entirely out of breath when he repeated the motion of kissing and licking my scars. At some point, it dawned on me that he had taken off his pants.

I had never seen a naked man and was suddenly too intimidated. My gaze bounced between his muscular torso and the ceiling. Finally, I shut my eyes.

I sensed, rather than saw, his head dipping, before a set of lips were on my inner thighs.

I jolted. “What are you—” My voice died away when he peppered my thighs with soft kisses.

I let out a soft moan, and my toes curled. I had always felt the urges of a normal twenty-one-year-old woman, but the intimidation of touching a man kept me from acting on them. But now, it was sensory overload.

“Have you done this before?” he asked.

I shook my head.

“You’re a virgin,” he stated rather than asked. There was an undertone of possessiveness in his voice, one I hadn’t expected from the easygoing Damon.

He waited for a verbal confirmation, lifting his head to stare into my eyes.

I nodded shakily.

The way his eyes flared—a glint of something more than lewd—made me retreat. I knew then that something had shifted between us.

His blue eyes deepened to a frighteningly dark color. What was going through his mind? “I’ve never been with a virgin. What made you wait?”

My lips parted as I watched him.

When I didn’t respond, he answered his own question. “The correct answer is—you were waiting for me.”

My bottom lip trembled at his streak of possessiveness. “I-I was waiting for you.”

“That’s right.” He pressed a kiss on my inner thigh, inching himself to where I needed him most. “There’s something I haven’t done before, either.”

I knew he wasn’t talking about sex because I had overheard of the twins’ conquests from around campus.

“I have never done *this* before.” He nipped at my mound.

His tongue landed on my clit, and whatever I was thinking turned into mush.

Fuck, that felt good.

He sucked until I moaned, and when his tongue found its way inside my wetness, I nearly jumped off the bed. I was so tightly wound from his efforts that it took me several seconds to process what he had said before.

He admitted that he had never gone down on a girl. It was my first time, but he was also giving me one of his firsts.

He pulled back and slipped his thick fingers inside me. I was so wet, I was sure I could take his dick. I shut my eyes, savoring the warmth spreading through me. When his mouth returned to my clit, I screamed. There was no finesse to it; he was practically making out with my pussy, as if he had waited eons to do this.

Finding out about my virginity had unleashed something feral in him. A switch had gone off in his mind to wreak havoc. I clutched the sheets underneath me and arched into his mouth.

“Fuck,” he growled. “I’m going to come just from this.”

My eyes flickered as he licked my pussy in an open-mouthed kiss. His tongue was aggressive, as if lapping up anything to leak out, then it gentled and massaged me, coaxing me into letting go.

Pleasure built, and my hands restlessly roamed the bedsheet. His tongue drove me wild, and I quivered, whimpering pathetically until his aggressive pace pushed me to the brink.

The moment I cried out, his tongue left me, and I became aware of a hard length pressing insistently against my inner thighs where his tongue had been.

My body stiffened, and I glanced between us. He held his dick between my thighs and jerked off with the tip inside me. It was the most erotic sight I had seen, and he hadn't even penetrated me. I couldn't look away as he grunted, spilling inside me. It oozed around me, and I watched the mess he made, fascinated by the way he splayed his cum over my thighs and stomach to mark me.

He wasn't done, though. He jerked his dick against my pussy in a relentless rhythm and thumbed over my nipples until they were pronounced, and soon, he was hard again.

The tempest of heat and sensation stole my breath. "Oh God." My head arched back, and I found myself staring at the headboard.

The tendons in his neck rose as he clenched his teeth and gradually pushed forward. "I have been too patient with you, and now, we have a problem. All types of assholes are circling you, thinking they have a chance with you. All because I gave you time to adjust. That's about to change," he rasped, forcing me to look at him.

That was why he waited until now. Did he know of my insecurities and was giving me time to adjust?

But I didn't want to wait any longer. I wanted to surrender myself to him. "Will it hurt?"

"Yes." He didn't sugarcoat things, but after a slight hesitation, he added, "But I'll go easy on you tonight since it's your first time. I'll hold back."

I had no idea where the bravado came from as I puffed, "I don't want you to hold back."

He snarled as if giving him free rein was music to his ears. It seemed there was a war waging within him, trying to reel in his inner beast. I had never seen this intense side of him and was suddenly caught in the eye of the storm. I second-guessed whether I was ready for whatever I had unleashed.

"I'll be gentle just this once. But don't get used to it. Next time, I won't stop until I wreck you."

"Promise?" Once more, I was shocked by my gutsy comeback. He smirked, and I added, "I never want you to hold back with me; I want you to wreck me."

“Next time.”

I watched in awe as he gripped my hips and fed his dick into my pussy, inch by inch.

“Fuck,” he breathed heavily. “You have no idea the hell I have been living through waiting for you to be ready for this.”

But why did he wait? He knew I liked him, and I hadn’t been subtle about my feelings. I tried to reply but couldn’t catch my breath. My mind was blank from the pain of intrusion, and I closed my eyes. “Ow.”

“Eyes on me, baby.” He rested his forehead against mine, dick pulsing inside me like a beast waiting to let loose.

I hadn’t expected the term of endearment, and my eyes flew open. The moment our gazes clashed, he pushed forward, tearing through my unused channel.

“Fuck,” he growled. Sharp pain cut through me while he punched the mattress. “I should have known you’d be so goddamn perfect.”

I bit my lip to subdue the pain. He wrapped his hand around my neck, shocking me. I hadn’t expected the dominance from the upstanding citizen. What was more surprising was my reaction to his primal act. Pleasure pooled between my thighs, contrasting sharply with the budding pain.

To my surprise, he was an animal in the bedroom, but I sensed him holding back for my sake. Restraining his wilder instincts was a challenge for him. I could tell by the way he was controlling the rhythm of his hips. At times, it would intensify, like he wanted to lose control. Then he would remember and rein it in.

It was sweet in a beastly kind of way.

The grip on my neck tightened, leaving him in complete control and me in an extremely vulnerable position. It was an unexpected relief that I had no say in how this was going to play out. I surrendered, relinquishing control to him.

With each thrust, he dove deeper, and his control shattered. The sounds of my arousal and his movements drove me to madness. The pleasure between my thighs grew as the sharp ache faded. There was still some discomfort, likely due to his size, but it was overshadowed by the intense, pulsating friction that followed each movement.

My mouth fell open when he hit a spot I hadn’t known existed. He nearly withdrew, then thrust back inside so hard that I almost toppled over.

My heart raced as I gripped the sheets to keep my balance. His rhythm grew wild and uneven, and it seemed it was too late to back down.

Blue eyes blazed with possessiveness he wasn't known for. "You were made for me, baby." He pushed deeper, and a harsh groan escaped his lips. "I hate holding back with you."

If this were him holding back, I would never survive the real thing.
"Slow down."

He didn't.

To subdue him, I leaned up and took his lips like I had on the deck. I brushed my lips against his. He froze. For a second, I thought he would squeeze my neck. Instead, he crushed his lips against mine. His tongue worked with the rhythm of his hips, and his thrusts intensified.

Overwhelmed and ravaged by him in every way, my body gave out. I convulsed. When I cried out, he squeezed my neck, allowing me only fragments of air. It extended my euphoria, and I fell back onto the bed.

With his hand still wrapped around my neck, he kept fucking me senseless. Throughout, he bit my breasts, my shoulders, and anywhere his mouth could reach. Finally, his hand on my throat tightened as his lips bruised mine with a biting kiss.

His hips jerked, and I felt him release deep inside me.

I was lightheaded by the time he straightened me on the mattress and pulled me to his chest. After the brutal claiming, I was shocked when he ended with a simple kiss on my temple, and whispered, "You're finally mine. I didn't just own your pussy tonight, baby, but everything about you. Remember that after you sober up."

It turned out he had known I was drunk all along. I was merely surprised it didn't stop him. I thought he was the good guy.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

ROSE

Present



“No!” Adrenaline pumped through my veins as my eyes snapped open from my slumber, my heart thundering in my chest. The same nightmare had been haunting me for days, yet I could barely remember the fragments.

A menacing man flashed through my memory, though I couldn't make out his face. His voice slithered through my mind like a garbled radio transmission, the words twisted and indistinct. Footsteps echoed ominously in the silence, each step vibrating through my bones as he neared. I remembered huddling against the wall, warding him away with two hands held in front of my face. He kept advancing, and suddenly, his hand shot out to grab my neck, and he...

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the images to fade. They persisted, nonetheless, taunting me. My long hair clung to my sweat-dampened neck as I tried sitting upright, but the heavy arm slung over my chest kept me in place.

“What the hell?” I whispered, turning to find Dr. Maxwell’s eyes were already on me.

I nearly jumped at the figure filling the bed. What startled me more was his clothing, or lack thereof.

Last night, Dr. Maxwell had plucked me out of the medical suite and carried me to his presidential suite, insisting my ankle wouldn't be ready for weight bearing until the next day. It was a duplex with a grand living room downstairs and a bedroom upstairs. I was momentarily stunned when I saw the suite. It was eerily familiar, like I had been here before and we had done this song and dance in another life.

Dr. Maxwell didn't say much during the short walk and only put me down once we reached the bed. At some point, he had stripped down to a pair of black boxer shorts, and my robe had ended up on the floor.

I instinctively pulled the sheet up to my chin. As a result, the cover slipped away from him, revealing the defined edges of his hip bones and the sculpted indentations of muscles.

A knot formed in my stomach as the fuzzy memories of last night slowly resurfaced—the massage, then the *tongue* massage, and, of course, the all-consuming kiss.

With a sharp inhale, I turned away from him. The bedroom had a panoramic view of the ocean, though the curtains were partially drawn. Soft morning light filtered into the room, casting odd shadows on the wall.

"Morning," he said in his signature baritone voice.

"M-morning," I managed, forcing myself to face him.

My breath caught in my throat when our gazes clashed. His dirty-blond hair was slightly disheveled, framing eyes heavy from sleep. But it didn't hide the blazing heat in them or the charming half smile gracing his face.

Why was he in such a good mood?

This was the first time his expressions mimicked anything close to contentment. I wouldn't go as far as to say he was happy, more like happy-adjacent. He was pleased about waking up next to me.

My clammy hands reached up to brush a stray hair out of my face, unintentionally exposing my cleavage. My face burned hot under his scrutiny. The dark look he fostered whenever he took stock of my features and fixated on my bare skin... There was an undeniable intensity behind it, a wildness that couldn't be contained.

With a quick blink, I regained control of the sheet and covered myself. But I still couldn't catch my breath as memories from last night washed over me. The intoxicating kisses, his voice, that look, it was all too familiar.

That was when the realization hit me like a gut punch—I knew this man.

Figments of the past had been taunting me for days, but I couldn't piece them all together. But ever since he kissed me, I became certain of one thing. He had kissed me like *that* before.

For days, I'd had vivid dreams of a different life. All this time, I thought it was my subconscious acting out. Except those weren't dreams, they were hazy memories. I knew this man before I lost my memories—he was my professor.

Why did he lie about our past? He must have had nefarious reasons for going to such great lengths to conceal our acquaintance.

A cold sweat trickled down my back. Latent panic had the air around my ears buzzing with a ringing sound. What if Dr. Maxwell was the madman I had been running from?

My spine straightened as I remembered how he had broken the deliveryman's hand. Suddenly, the fact that he was made of pure muscles no longer had me salivating. Even at my strongest, I wouldn't stand a chance against a man like him.

My mind reeled as he lifted to his elbows. The smirk on his face turned into a wolfish grin, and I realized it was because I was staring at him. He thought I was enamored by him. But this wasn't adoration; I was freaking out.

I jumped when he spoke again.

"Bad dream?"

"W-what?" I stammered, cursing the tremor in my voice.

He raised an eyebrow. "You look a little pale. Did you have a bad dream?" He watched me, assessing every emotion that crossed my face. "Or did you remember something?" His tone was casual yet somehow sharp. I could tell the answer mattered with how he awaited my response.

My heart rate quickened, and I forced a weak smile. "Oh. I, erm, yeah, I had a bad dream," I told him, my voice barely above a whisper. "But I can't remember what it was about."

He studied me momentarily, and I fought the urge to squirm. Those piercing blue eyes dissected me, trying to catch me in a lie. "Interesting," he mused, a hint of something indecipherable in his eyes. "You screamed over a bad dream you can't even remember."

I swallowed hard, my throat dry. The air was squeezed out of my lungs, making it difficult to breathe. "I didn't scream," I said in a placating tone. "It was more like a gasp."

I couldn't bring myself to make eye contact, desperately searching for a way to end the conversation. I had no idea if my explanation was convincing, and lying to him was impossible.

"Ow." I clutched my ankle when it suddenly flared up.

He immediately bolted upright. "Does your ankle hurt?" he asked, his voice softer, almost caring, and his interrogation over my nightmare all but forgotten.

Saved by the bell.

When I nodded, he rotated my ankle to examine the swelling, and I said a silent prayer for the distraction. He gave me anti-inflammatory pills and applied an ointment.

I watched him work and couldn't make sense of my situation. If he were the man from my nightmares, why was he healing me? Why did he save me in the first place? Perhaps I was mistaken, and my mind was playing tricks on me.

I had to calm down. He couldn't be the man from my nightmares, because if he wanted to kill me, he would have done so already. Instead, he had saved me from certain death.

"How does it feel now?" he asked.

I plastered on what I hoped was a convincing smile. "Much better. Thank you."

The ointment and medication weren't miracle treatments, but he wouldn't let me out of bed if I said I was in pain. At least the swelling had decreased. I patiently waited for him to come to the same conclusion.

When he was satisfied with the progress, he grabbed the room service menu from the nightstand and ordered breakfast over the phone. I used the opportunity to pick up the robe from the ground and draped it around my shoulders.

I hobbled to the bathroom and turned on the sink. The stream wasn't loud enough to drown out my thoughts.

What the hell was going on?

I knew Caden Maxwell. He was my professor but kissed me like he was my boyfriend. Why did he conceal his identity and our relationship to one another?

I didn't have the answers, and I couldn't confront him, either. Not when I was vulnerable and completely at his mercy. The staff bowed down to

him, and even Amelie acted like his minion. He was the law on this boat, and no one would save me if my accusations made him volatile.

Then I remembered his interaction with Jace, who had tried taking the heat for me. Perhaps there was one person on this boat who wasn't under the doctor's thumb. We had a five-minute conversation and hadn't exactly laid down the foundation for a lifelong friendship. Confiding in him was a big gamble, but I was trapped on this boat with no one else to turn to. Until I spoke to him or figured out the extent of my past with Dr. Maxwell, I needed to stay on guard.

I used the facilities, brushed my teeth, and washed my face with a cleanser. The aesthetician had left behind an entire beauty line in the medical suite, and I was surprised to find out they had mysteriously migrated to Dr. Maxwell's bathroom. There were numerous items, including a serum, moisturizer, eye cream, and sunscreen. I used all the products to extend my time in the bathroom until I heard a knock on the door.

"Food's here," Dr. Maxwell called out from the other side of the door.

The words were music to my ears, and I was already salivating. Even the fear of my possible killer couldn't keep me away from food. With a deep breath, I opened the door and found him with a small trolley laden with covered dishes. He had put on a pair of sweatpants, his chest still bare. He looked nothing like the professional doctor from yesterday in a white coat. It looked like we were at home, and he was cozy. Intimate, like a person deeply familiar with me.

My eyes involuntarily lingered on his torso. It wasn't my fault that his looks muddied my mind every damn time. A woman awaiting execution at the gallows would be just as stumped by him. I wasn't embellishing his beauty. If anything, I wasn't doing him justice because I was wary about the whole *he might have tried to murder me* dilemma.

He licked his bottom lip, studying me in the thick robe. The way he stared, you would think it was the most revealing article of clothing rather than a plush robe with zero suggestive value. Worse yet, his eyes, the two bottomless pits of the ocean, had a sliver of warmth in them.

In what hellish dimension was Dr. Maxwell warm? An unprompted grunt from him was generally a struggle.

I watched him carry the plates to the breakfast table on the large terrace. Dr. Maxwell's movements were precise, with the underlying attentiveness in everything he did. Wind whipped my hair against my face as I followed

him outside and peeked at the blue water surrounding us. It was the most breathtaking view I had seen. I closed my eyes and breathed in the salty water and basked in the sun until my nerves calmed down.

The smell of warm spices filled the air as he uncovered the dishes, and I forgot about the beautiful ocean. My stomach grumbled, and I eyed the items curiously. I would never take food for granted after my experience on the streets, even if it were served by a possible monster who put me in this predicament.

Like yesterday, there was a muffin with breakfast. When he caught me staring at it, he offered it to me.

“Thank you,” I murmured, and took an aggressive bite out of it, savoring the blueberry bits.

His blue eyes flicked to mine, another ghost of a smile playing on his lips. He sat across from me and patted his knee. “Come here.”

Irritation gnawed at me. This man knew me intimately but had been pretending like we had never met. It was a cruel trick to play on someone suffering from memory loss. Even if he wasn’t the monster from my dreams, he knew my family and my friends and was intentionally keeping them from me. And now he wanted me to sit on his lap like an obedient dog?

I had been complacent thus far, letting him feed me and do with me as he pleased. The intimate gestures that made me feel cherished previously made me feel utterly powerless today.

When I still hadn’t moved, he opened his arm invitingly. “Did you hear me? I said, come here.”

His left eye twitched. He didn’t like my refusal, and the look on his face seemed like an ominous threat. I sighed. As much as I wanted to stick it to him for lying, I couldn’t escape the reality of my situation. There was nowhere to hide on the open water. If I were truly on the run from Dr. Maxwell, it would be wiser to play along.

“Yes, Dr. Maxwell.” I hesitantly sat on his thigh. His stupid, rock-hard, perfect thigh.

For the first time today, he seemed annoyed. Perhaps I was heavier than I thought and started to rise from his lap. With an arm banded around me, he pulled me back down. “Don’t call me that,” he reproached, annoyed.

I frowned. “Call you what?”

“I spent half the night with my tongue inside you. It’s time you called me by my first name, don’t you think?”

My cheeks burned at the sordid comment, though his demand to call him by his first name stole the spotlight. He sounded on the brink of losing his patience when this was the first time he had voiced the complaint.

Or was it?

He was my professor, so it was unlikely I had called him by his first name. Had he made this request before I lost my memories? Perhaps I didn’t agree to it because I wanted to keep him at arm’s length, and he didn’t take kindly to it.

The sporadic fear I experienced around him, along with the unexplainable attraction, scrambled my brain. My mind whirled with possibilities, each more terrifying than the last.

“Caden,” I said, tasting the name on my tongue for the first time. It felt private, like a secret shared between us.

It was enough to put him in a good mood. “Hm,” he hummed. “Try these. They are made with low glycemic ingredients. They’re anti-inflammatory and won’t spike your blood sugar.”

None of the gibberish he spouted held any meaning to me. I was purely focused on the dishes in front of us. The aroma of pancakes made my mouth water as he lifted a slice drenched in syrup to my lips. I ate every bite he fed me and the more he filled my stomach, the more my anger faded into the distance.

It was disturbing how much I was willing to overlook in exchange for food. Nonetheless, the fact remained: I needed answers without implicating myself or letting him know I was catching on to his lies.

When we finished eating and he let me off his lap, I followed him to the bedroom and gathered my courage. “Dr.... Caden,” I corrected myself.

“Hm?” he asked without looking up, putting the empty dishes back on the cart.

“I-I was wondering,” I began apprehensively. “Could I explore the ship today?”

He stilled, and for a moment, I feared I had gone too far. Then, to my utter shock, he shrugged. “Sure, your ankle should be fine for weight bearing. I’ll take you around, just don’t wander off and stay close to me. And you need to be careful about your injuries. Do you understand?”

Although I wouldn't be allowed outside unless escorted by him, I relished the small freedom. I tried but failed to contain my excitement. "Yes. Yes. I'll be super careful, I promise. I'll be really, really good."

There was a hint of amusement in his eyes at my eagerness. "In that case, I'll be right back."

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

ROSE

ONCE CADEN EXITED THE ROOM, I decided to shower. I stepped under the heated stream, cherishing the few moments I had to myself, and pondered my options.

If I tracked Jace down, would he risk his job to help me? Did he know about my past with Caden?

The water flowed onto the floor, divided from the rest of the space by a small barrier to contain any overflow. I massaged shampoo into my hair, inhaling the refreshing mix of herbs in the steam to calm myself down.

There was commotion coming from downstairs when I reemerged in the same robe, which was now slightly damp. I peeked over the railing and saw that the living room was buzzing. There were women everywhere, setting up clothes, accessories, and shoes. Before I could work out the meaning behind all the fuss, my attention was pulled by an unmistakable distinction.

“No men,” I muttered to myself. I had teleported to an alternate Amazonian universe filled with women. The only man, as far as the eye could see, was Caden.

The women were busy with their preassigned tasks. Two women rolled a rack of clothes from the hallway to the living room, and the rest were busy setting up. Jewelry stands covered the table by the window. Shoeboxes were stacked on the nightstand, and swimwear was laid out on the couch. Everything looked expensive and beautiful.

Fascinated, I took the stairs to the living room. No one glanced at me or provided me with an explanation when I entered the room. I had no idea

what was happening, so I watched them curiously while toweling my hair dry. It wasn't until Caden returned that they acknowledged my existence and looked at me.

"Hey," he said with a smile.

Another warm smile from the cold doctor instead of a smirk. Was he in such a good mood because of what happened last night, or was I imagining things?

Before I could respond, he closed the distance and grabbed me in his arms for a kiss so wild it left me breathless. A possessive hand wrapped around my throat for a firm but breathable squeeze. My palms landed on his hard chest for balance, but really, it was his body keeping me upright. I couldn't catch my breath against his hard lips and his tongue exploring every crevice of my mouth. The kiss was unbelievably lewd, and he forced everyone to bear witness to it, only letting me go once he was good and ready.

Everyone stared at us, seemingly in awe of the handsome doctor showering me with affection. I remembered being an exceptionally shy person in my past life who turned away from the spotlight. If he had shown such public displays of affection, I probably would have cocooned myself. But in my new life, I didn't seem to mind the limelight. The spa day yesterday, with everyone fawning over me, made me feel cherished, and I was surprised none of the lavish attention bothered me.

My eyes moved around the living room invasion. "What's going on?"

"You need clothes if you want to explore the ship."

I peeked behind him at the makeshift storefront. The staff finished unpacking and cleared out as another woman stepped inside the suite—a striking redhead who appeared to be the pack leader. Her outfit—a tight black skirt and a silky blouse—was perfectly fitted to her body and complemented her warm, golden skin and green eyes.

I recognized her. The beauty team had pointed her out yesterday from my window. She was one of the women who longed for the coveted Mrs. Caledon Maxwell title.

She bristled at her employees over how they had set up the displays, though everything seemed perfect. The glint of jewelry caught in the sunlight made the displays shinier and more appealing. The scent of expensive perfume lingered in the air. Ambient music playing in the background made the room seem like an actual storefront.

Her eyes landed on Caden, lips tilting into a coy smile. She walked past me and sauntered toward him. “Dr. Maxwell,” she purred. “I heard you decided to join us on the cruise after all. Where have you been hiding these past few days?” Her hand lingered on his arm, her voice dropping to a sultry whisper. “I was wondering when I’d see you.”

I shifted uncomfortably, feeling like an intruder in their private moment. Hints of envy brewed inside my chest until I caught Caden’s expression. He slanted his body away from the redhead so her hand naturally fell away. The happy-adjacent man had left the building, and he was back to the emotionless blank slate.

He really disliked unprompted touch, didn’t he? At least, he hadn’t entertained her efforts. I was relieved.

“Rose.” He grabbed my hand and pulled me closer until I was plastered against his hard chest. “This is Natasha. She manages the clothing stores on this boat,” he introduced us, though he didn’t look at her, only at me.

Natasha made the same observation. Her smile faltered when she saw me in his arms, facing me with a barely concealed disdain. “This is the... patient...who needs a new wardrobe?”

“This is Rose,” he corrected, his tone brooking no argument. “She also needs a dress for the Captain’s Gala.”

I frowned. “Gala?”

He nodded. “It’s a welcome reception to celebrate the boat’s first cruise.”

“Oh.” I shouldn’t be surprised. A boat like this must host numerous events and activities for its guests, each with its own dress code. Proper attire was a requirement to leave this room, that much I had gathered.

It sounded reasonable—but expensive. I looked at the price tag for one of the dresses and counted the four zeros following the number eight. I doubt they had anything in my budget—four zeros without an eight preceding it.

It would be so much easier if I got a job. The crew members had designated uniforms. Problem solved.

I cocked my head. “Do you think I can borrow something instead?”

Caden stared at me pensively. His fingers settled on my hips, lazily skimming over the bathrobe as he spoke. His focus was always on one part of my body or the other. “It’s important to blend in instead of standing out. Do you understand?”

I nodded, though I didn't understand at all.

He added, "Natasha will be your assistant today and help you pick out a few things."

Natasha's jaw tightened, and I knew why. It seemed purposefully demeaning to call her an assistant when she managed all the stores on the boat.

With narrowed eyes, she looked me up and down. I thought she would set the record straight. Instead, she adjusted her posture, jutting out her breasts provocatively. "Of course." Her voice dripped with fake, syrupy sweetness. "We'll make her *presentable*," she emphasized the word *presentable*, making it transparent that I wasn't at the moment.

Caden's gaze slid over Natasha like ice. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he asked, voice low and precise.

I hadn't expected his quick reaction to the offhanded insult. I placed my hand on his chest, silently telling him it was okay, but his body was tense under my touch.

Natasha's eyes widened in horror at Caden's tone. "I-I just meant we'll find her something nice to wear."

"Is that what you meant?" The sarcastic question might as well be a scalpel gliding over Natasha's neck.

"I-I didn't mean it as an insult, I swear. Please forgive my poor choice of words. Your companion is..." She wanted to say something catty about me, but she also wanted to appease Caden. After another cutting glance from him, she swallowed her pride and said, "Beautiful." I wasn't in the same league as her and complimenting me caused her excruciating effort. "I only meant that the clothes from our shop will enhance her natural beauty."

It was a good save. Caden dropped the topic once she complimented me, though his eyes remained glacial.

I learned about *villainesses* and *the other women* from the Korean dramas Amelie made me watch yesterday. The other women in the shows were always unreasonably bitchy, and they waited until the hero was out of sight to strike.

Natasha wanted Caden, and I held his attention. Ergo, nothing good would come out of this interaction, especially if he left me alone with her.

I gazed up at Caden. "Are you sure I can't just borrow something from—"

Amelie poked her head through the open front door, interrupting my protest. I brightened on cue, and she returned my smile. If she was surprised that I had left the medical room in favor of Dr. Maxwell's suite, she didn't let it show. She glanced at Caden, and said, "Dr. Maxwell, call for you."

A huff of annoyance passed his lips.

Amelie held up two hands in surrender. "Your brother's on the line. I told him you were busy, but he insisted on talking to you."

Cursing under his breath, Caden relented. "Fine," he told her, his voice clipped. He pulled me to the side, his eyes shining with annoyance, though it wasn't directed at me. "There is a guard stationed outside the room," he said in a low voice as Amelie and Natasha watched us curiously. "Her name's Linda. Call out for her if you need anything."

"Guard?" I had noticed security women patrolling the corridor of the medical room, which was just down the hall from Caden's suite. It seemed this part of the boat was home to only the crucial rooms—medical center, presidential suite, supply storage, office, that sort of thing. There were no guest rooms located in this hallway, so... "Why's there a guard on duty?"

His expression was impenetrable. "For your safety. There'll be one with you from now on."

Was he siccing spies on me? Here I was excited about the sliver of freedom I had received to explore the ship. "Why?"

He shrugged. "In case someone's still after you."

I tried to laugh it off, though my insides froze at his statement. The person who was after me might be standing in front of me. Everything had become obscure the moment I remembered our past acquaintance. "How can someone be after me? We sailed away from the mainland."

"I recently found out that it's easy to sneak into this boat," he pointed out.

Touché.

He kissed my temple and turned on his heel, procuring a sidelong glance from Natasha. I had half a mind to ask Amelie to stay, but Caden had assignments for her. She followed him with quick steps, leaving me alone with the wannabe future Mrs. Maxwell.

The room was suddenly cold and hostile.

Natasha thrust a notepad and a pen into my hands. "Write down the items you want on this pad."

The tension between us was palpable, and I barely knew the woman. Wandering around the boat in my robe wasn't an option, so I complied. We didn't speak as we sorted through the racks, ignoring each other as much as possible. The rustle of expensive fabrics and the background music were our only companions.

I kept sliding the hangers without glancing at the dresses, only looking at the price tags.

Five thousand dollars.

Three thousand dollars.

Six thousand dollars.

Sulking, I rifled through the casual wear instead.

Eight hundred dollars for a pair of jeans.

Four hundred dollars for a blouse.

Was everything in this store made of gold? What else could justify these prices? The cost of one blouse could have fed me for months on the streets.

Perhaps these outrageous prices wouldn't bother me if I weren't thoroughly familiar with hunger pangs. Everything here was detached from the struggles of real life. My stomach churned with a sudden wave of nausea. Knowing how much food I could buy instead of one outfit made me physically ill over the wastefulness.

Screw this. I saw a thread kit in the bathroom. Perhaps I could sew a dress out of the bedsheet.

"Do you have anything under fifty dollars?" I finally asked her. I planned to defy Caden and work a few shifts in the kitchen to pay for a few items. Two outfits and a couple of bras and panties were all I needed. I could rotate the outfits until the end of this cruise.

Natasha's lip curled with disgust. "Ew," was the sound she made.

Okay, then.

She turned up her nose. "Why are you pretending like money's an issue? We both know Dr. Maxwell's picking up the tab." The thought seemed painful for her to admit.

I had anticipated her hostility. What I hadn't expected was the direct attack.

If I had to guess, Natasha was at a crossroads. She hated that Caden offered to splurge on another woman, but she also wanted the fat sales commission. After the things I had lived through, I couldn't waste money on frivolous things, even on someone else's dime. I would forever compare

material possessions to how much food I could buy with their estimated value.

“Don’t most stores have a sale section?” I pressed, ignoring the rest of her ramblings.

Her eyes broadened with barely contained irritation. “Stop pretending you care about saving Dr. Maxwell a few bucks. He’ll get angry with me if a new wardrobe isn’t selected by the end of the day. He doesn’t tolerate insubordination. Don’t get me in trouble with him,” she warned.

Finally, she spoke a language I understood. No one wanted to piss off Caden. If he left her with an instruction, it must be obeyed. It didn’t matter if my first instinct was to check the price tags and calculate the conversion rate of this long red gown to the cost of food.

Instead of harping on about it, I changed the topic. “How long have you known Caden?” I asked curiously.

Her mouth dropped, unimpressed. “What gives you the right to call him that?”

The sniped words had their intended reaction—confusion. “Sorry?”

“Dr. Maxwell doesn’t allow anyone to call him by his first name. Don’t make that mistake again,” she announced possessively as if she were waiting at the edge of her seat for the day he granted her permission. Until then, everyone else must also call him Dr. Maxwell.

My brows shot up. Today, he insisted I call him Caden and seemed angry I hadn’t taken the initiative myself.

Instead of arguing with her, I restarted my search and landed on a pair of black lacey panties at the reasonable price of one hundred dollars. It was the cheapest thing in her inventory, and I was desperate to wear underwear.

Much to my chagrin, they felt like air when I pulled them on under my robe.

Natasha held up a champagne-colored dress with pearl strands extending from the collar to the waistline. Tiny gold-plated chain links went around the collar. At least this outfit satisfied my curiosity—these dresses were made of literal gold.

“This should work for the Captain’s Welcome Reception,” she mused, struggling to keep her previous ire at a minimum. “Try it on.”

I didn’t argue, desperate to escape the tension for a few minutes. “Sure.” I grabbed the dress and headed for the bathroom to try it on, but she blocked my path.

She tsked, irritated. “Change out here so I can fit it properly.”

I shook my head, having learned my lesson after how the beauty team reacted to my scars. I wouldn’t subject anyone else to that again. “Erm. I’ll change in the bathroom.”

Her eyeballs went to the ceiling. “Without my help, you might break the zipper or tear the fabric. This isn’t off-the-rack, this dress needs to be handled delicately.” Her insinuation was clear—I was inept at handling such expensive fabric unsupervised.

“I’ll be super careful, I promise. I-I don’t like changing in front of other people.” *Trust me, I’m saving you from some nasty nightmares.*

“Give me a break,” she snapped. “Women like you disgust me. You pretend to be all innocent to bait a rich husband. Drop the shy act. Dr. Maxwell isn’t here for you to impress.”

I clutched the soft fabric of the dress with trembling fingers. My panic was accelerating with her rising aggression, my skin prickling with nervous sweat, and it was over a silly dress that equated to one thousand meals. I much preferred the food. I slid the dress back on the rack. “You know what? I don’t need the dress after all.”

She was ready to hit the roof, utterly displeased by my change of heart. “Oh, so you can tell Dr. Maxwell *I* am the reason you have nothing to wear at the gala, and then I get into trouble,” she said viciously. “Dr. Maxwell gave me a job, and I’ll handle it like a professional.” She held up the dress again. “Now, strip.”

I swallowed hard, trying to maintain my composure. As her gaze bore into me, my resolve crumbled. I didn’t fight when she strode forward, untied my belt, and pushed the robe off my shoulders.

As soon as the robe dropped, her first impulse was to scream. It was so high-pitched that the guard from the hallway materialized at the door. Scrambling, I grabbed the robe off the floor and threw it around me.

“Ma’am, are you okay?” The woman at the door wore an all-black security uniform, and when she pushed farther into the room, I read her name tag—Linda.

I instinctively wrapped my arms around myself, wishing I could disappear.

“What happened?” she prodded, her chin-length blonde hair bouncing as she looked between us.

“What the hell are *those*?” Natasha shouted.

I flinched at her words.

“Calm down,” Linda told her patiently.

“Me? You’re asking *me* to calm down?” Natasha breathed heavily, angry beyond reason, her voice rising by the second. “Someone marked her body. Have you seen it? Were you in a gang or something?”

Linda cut me a confused glance.

My insides froze at Natasha’s accusations. Even for a K-drama villainess, she had gone overboard with her far-fetched theories. I had no idea when or how I got those scars, but I doubt sporadic marks on my midriff were a gang initiation.

Since I couldn’t rule out a criminal past with certainty, I tried a nonreactive approach, neither admitting nor denying her baseless allegations. Smoothing out my face, I imitated Caden’s signature poker face mask.

Natasha raised her arm, her index finger pointing at me. “We all know he found you on this boat, trying to steal food. You’re a criminal. And if I had to guess, you sell yourself on the streets for money. Do you know what would happen to his reputation if he was linked to someone like you? He took pity on you, and you’re exploiting him. Why would you jeopardize his career and everything he has built after he saved you?”

It turned out I didn’t have Caden’s natural knack for expressionless faces. My bottom lip trembled. Someone left those abhorrent marks on me, yet I was responsible for how the scars affected the people around me and their reputations.

“I don’t understand what the hell he sees in you,” Natasha mumbled.

There it was.

What Natasha meant was— *Why you and not me?*

It dawned on me that she didn’t hate me because of Caden or her suspicions that I might have a criminal past. She was glamorous, polished, and perfect; she couldn’t accept defeat to a woman filled to the brim with imperfections. Conceding to me, someone beneath her in rank, station, and beauty, was a blow to her ego. She would have reacted better had Caden picked a woman of his stature.

My stomach somersaulted when I thought I heard footsteps in the hallway, and I prayed it was Caden coming to the rescue. My heart sank upon realizing the sound was coming from the room downstairs.

Was it possible for someone to be your source of comfort, though they could also be a threat to your existence? All day, I had ping-ponged between two warring emotions where Caden was concerned. But now, he was the only person I wanted to see. The few times he saw my scars, there was never revulsion in his eyes. Instead, he stared at me with awe, like I was a celebrity and he was my devoted fan.

But he wasn't here, and I needed this humiliation to end. "Let's call it a day. I-I... I'll just take whatever you recommend for the gala. I don't need to try it on."

Her eyes glittered maliciously. "Are you serious?" she spat. "You think I want a criminal wearing the collection from my shop? I'm not selling you one piece of clothing." She nodded at my crotch. "I don't even want you wearing that underwear. Take it off."

I looked down between my thighs.

When I didn't move, she started toward me. "Either take it off, or I'll do it for you."

She wouldn't dare, would she?

"Ma'am," Linda warned Natasha from the door. "Don't make me restrain you."

Linda didn't get the chance to step in before Natasha pounced. Panic rose in my chest as she reached for me, her fingers like claws digging into my skin.

"Give it back to me," Natasha screamed hysterically, trying to pry open my bathrobe. "Give it back, you stupid bitch."

After that, everything went dark.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

ROSE

IT WAS several minutes before I realized Linda had pulled me off Natasha. My hands throbbed, and I stared at them in disbelief.

Natasha was on the ground, screaming obscenities. Blood oozed from her busted lip, and both her cheeks were bright red with handprint marks.

What the hell?

I slapped Natasha a few times. As if that weren't bad enough, I pulled her hair and scratched her like a wild animal.

As the reality of what I had done sank in, the door swung open, and Caden marched inside. He looked at the scene, his eyes immediately locking with mine.

Without a second thought, I ran to him, the adrenaline overpowering the pain in my hands. Similar intuition had him pulling me to his chest, his hand sliding around my waist protectively. My fingers clung to his shirt in perfect synchrony.

The comfort of his warm embrace slowed my racing heart. His body was tense under my touch, a subtle shift in his posture as he processed my mood. He checked my pulse, and I realized he intentionally put off demanding answers until I had calmed down.

Linda stood next to Natasha, unsure whether she should help the poor woman. She seemed to be awaiting Caden's orders.

"What the hell's going on?" he finally asked, barely holding back his anger.

I peeked over my shoulder to see Natasha's face twist. "Oh my god, Dr. Maxwell," she cried. "She's crazy. She—she went insane and attacked me. She should be committed. Linda saw everything. Tell him," she implored Linda, who had nothing to say.

I felt Caden's hand reach my back, pulling me closer until I was practically glued to his chest. It was difficult to see Natasha with his arms wrapped around me so tightly.

"What did you do?" he asked. I thought he was talking to me before realizing the question was directed at Natasha.

My heart twisted with guilt when she broke down in sobs. In between wiping her tears and the blood, she said, "I didn't do anything, Dr. Maxwell. She overreacted and started attacking me. She would've killed me if Linda hadn't stopped her."

"Is this true?" he breathed against my ear.

What was wrong with me?

Before today, I didn't think I was violent. The world suddenly went black, and I couldn't snap out of it. Had Linda not stopped me, I would have kept going.

Perhaps Caden wasn't the monster in the room, maybe it was me. I should be committed and face the consequences of my actions.

"It's true," I whispered.

I'd be lying if I said I attacked her for trying to strip me. One slap would've sufficed for self-defense. But I attacked her like a rabid dog, and I only did it after she said...

You stupid bitch.

I lost it when she uttered those words. Before I could stop myself, my hands had flown up without my permission. The sharp crack of the slaps had echoed throughout the room, followed by Natasha's piercing howl when I clawed at her neck and face.

I couldn't place the source of the trigger, but I knew someone had said those words to me before. They were ingrained in my soul, and I reacted without knowing why.

Natasha lifted her head, her puffy face a mask of indignation. "See? I told you. This whole doe-eyed thing is an act. She's crazy."

The taut muscles on Caden's chest tightened. "Why?" he asked me.

"I-I don't know," I replied truthfully.

Caden turned me to face him. Wholly ignoring Natasha, he held open my palm. “Let me see your hands.”

I lifted my head, confused. “My hands?”

Natasha needed medical attention. The scratches on her face and neck were getting worse, and one eye looked swollen shut. He was a doctor. Why wasn’t he patching her up?

He gently opened my palms to examine the reddening skin. “Fuck,” he spat. He turned to Natasha, mouth turned down. The veins in his face pulsated like a roadmap of fury. “Look at what your face did to her hands!” he snarled so loudly that I jumped.

Three jaws dropped simultaneously—mine, Linda’s, and Natasha’s.

Natasha sputtered, “B-but she hit *me!*”

I was thinking the same thing. I was at fault. Sure, Natasha said horrible things, but my actions were unjustifiable.

Caden was furious at Natasha’s face for hurting my hands, but he was no less angry with me. “Your hands are swollen, Rose. Do you want to spend the rest of this cruise in the medical suite? If you wanted to slap her, why didn’t you have Linda do it?”

I stared at him, dumbfounded. I expected him to reprimand me for my unruliness, but he was angry that the viciousness of harming someone else had left me with injuries.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, smoothing a thumb over my palm.

I shook my head, flabbergasted.

His ire landed on Linda next. “Why didn’t you stop her?” he barked.

Linda straightened. “Um—”

“She tried to stop me, but I was too fast,” I said quickly, not wanting the woman to lose her job on my account.

“I’m docking your pay for the day. It’s your first and only warning.”

Linda glared at Natasha, the woman responsible for her pay cut. She seemed seconds away from pouncing on her, too, but was careful not to direct her wrath at Caden. Instead of protesting, she apologized, “I’m sorry, sir. It won’t happen again.”

Caden guided me to the couch, throwing Linda an order over his shoulder. “Grab the ice pack from the fridge.”

She ran to grab a compress. Natasha yowled for someone to help her up as she could barely stand. Linda merely stepped over her to rush the ice back to Caden.

His jaw clenched when I hissed at the impact. Once more, he glanced at Natasha, his anger bubbling like lava. “You’ll pay for this.” He nodded at Linda, who seemed to have been holding back for an unspoken command. “Throw her in the brig.”

Brig.

I must have spent a lot of time on cruises because it took me mere seconds to recall why the word sounded familiar. A brig was a temporary holding cell for passengers or crew members who committed serious offenses. Most ships had a small, secure room—much like a jail cell—where they detained people for assault or drug possession until reaching the next port. There, offenders would either be handed over to local authorities or forced to disembark and find their own way home.

“No. Please, Dr. Maxwell,” Natasha protested in a whisper-yell.
“Please, don’t do this.”

Guilt dragged me to the center of the earth.

I belonged in the brig, not her. What Natasha needed was urgent medical care, not to be thrown into solitary confinement. I couldn’t assault her and let her be punished for my crimes.

Linda stepped forward. Before I could process what was happening, she grabbed Natasha by the arm and pulled her to her feet. The stylist ripped away from her and fell back on the floor, reaching out a hand toward Caden.

“Please, Dr. Maxwell!” she wailed, but was cut off when Linda grabbed her again. This time, she dragged Natasha across the floor and toward the door. Natasha did everything in her power to resist, and it turned into a violent battle of wills.

“Oh my god,” I cried out. “Tell Linda to stop.”

Caden apathetically watched the scene unfold. “This is how security handles people who cause problems. I wouldn’t want to interfere with their protocol.”

He was being deliberately obtuse. He was the law on this boat and could stop the woman’s suffering at the snap of his fingers. Linda was pissed about losing a day’s pay and blamed Natasha for it. She was being unnecessarily rough, and Caden was letting it happen—as a punishment for my injuries.

It was a twilight world where the victim of my assault was being punished for causing me adverse side effects. Whether Natasha was a good

or bad person was irrelevant to her current treatment. I couldn't ignore her heart-wrenching pleas as Linda dragged away her injured and unwilling body.

"Caden, please." I turned to him, and whispered, "Please ask Linda to stop. She'll listen to you."

It was Natasha's turn to be blindsided. In her enraged emotional state, she forgot her sticky situation. She stopped fighting Linda, and shouted, "Don't call him by his first name. He goes by Dr. Maxwell."

My eyes widened as the woman's obsession with Caden settled like yesterday's dust. She was deeply in love with him, and he...he was cruel.

Caden looked ready to murder Natasha, eyes radiating with rage I hadn't seen before. Her suggestion that I shouldn't use his first name prompted a fury much worse than the deliveryman, Jace, or the assault. "Get her the hell out of my sight," he thundered.

Natasha protested again, which only made Linda haul her more aggressively for the last stretch to the door. I shook my head at Caden, but he ignored me. I begged him to change his mind, yet he remained unmoved. It seemed his anger wasn't only directed at Natasha. He was pissed at me, too, not for hurting Natasha but for putting myself at risk while doing so.

Finally, I placed two hands on his broad shoulders, hoping to make him see reason. "Please, Caden. My hands feel better, and I'm sorry for letting myself get injured. I won't let it happen again. Please ask Linda to let her go."

"You promised me this morning that you'd be careful."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

His eyes flashed. "Next time you feel like slapping someone, have one of the guards do it. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes. I understand."

"What do you understand?"

"If I feel like slapping someone again, I'll ask the security to do it," I parroted. "I promise. Please just let her go."

With a deep inhale, he tilted his head at Linda. It was barely a nod, but the signal was enough—she let Natasha go.

Natasha stood on shaky legs, eagerly fleeing the scene as quickly as her injured body would allow it. She was in no state to pack up her merchandise. Not that it mattered. Caden haphazardly informed Linda we were keeping the entire inventory and to settle the bill with Natasha. He

also assigned her an extra shift for tonight, because clearly, I needed more supervision than one guard could provide. The shift came with overtime pay and an evening rate that superseded her day rate.

Incentivized by the bonus, Linda left to carry out his bidding. Caden continued icing my palm. The palm I used to *hit* someone. All the while, he warned me that if I pulled a stunt like that again, I wouldn't leave this suite for the rest of the cruise.

His expression eventually softened, and my apprehension ebbed away. Though initially unsettled by how he treated his employees, I recognized the fairness in Caden's approach. He had deliberately humiliated Natasha so she would never target me again. Nonetheless, he purchased her entire inventory, rewarding her team's hard work for setting up this faux shop with a substantial commission. It also compensated Natasha for my violent attack. Likewise, he assigned Linda overtime duties, affording her the chance to recoup the wages he had previously docked.

He was ruthless yet somehow just.

"Take these." He placed two ibuprofens on my tongue and held a glass of water to my lips.

"Thank you," I whispered, gulping down the cold water.

Once my hands no longer throbbed, he put away the ice pack. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, and I couldn't help leaning into his touch. When he pulled away, the loss of contact left me feeling oddly bereft.

My mind whirled with conflicting emotions. I should be alarmed by his actions, but I kept returning to how he took my side, even though I was in the wrong. He didn't demand a reason for my irrational behavior, either. It was somehow endearing that he wasn't bothered with morals or the right thing where I was concerned. His only bottom line was my welfare.

Someone having your back unreservedly was heady for an unclaimed woman who woke up behind a dumpster. Perhaps I had jumped to conclusions about Caden. How could I suspect him of harming me when he was unconditionally on my side?

Yes, he lied about knowing me. Maybe he had his reasons for concealing our past association. He was a doctor, after all, and he knew better than me about how to deal with traumatized patients. He was probably worried I would go into shock if he revealed too much at once.

Not to mention, my mind had been playing tricks on me, as recently demonstrated. Who was to say I was right about the things I remembered?

My recollections were unreliable, and it was for the best I didn't tell him some of my memories had returned. Instead, I should let him guide my recovery as he saw fit.

There was no reason to be wary of Caden. Truth be told, I was finding myself less concerned with my previous life while his warm arms were wrapped around me. All that mattered was this man in my present, not his role in my past. His unwavering support warmed me from the inside out, chipping away at the walls I had built around myself. Especially when he looked at me like I was the only person on earth. The way he indulged me made me forget my fears, my doubts, and the nightmare haunting me. In this space between us, I felt safe.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

CADEN

Past



I BRUSHED a strand of hair away from Rose's face. She stared back with tired, heavy-lidded eyes, and no wonder. The student-faculty affair concluded hours ago. On top of attending the party, she had arrived early to set up and perform a safety inspection. I hadn't exactly helped matters. From the moment she crawled into my bed, I hadn't been able to keep my hands off her. Rose just lost her virginity, and I had tried to hold back. However, I couldn't stop myself from exploring other parts of her body, waking her up every so often. The proof of my hunger was etched into her exhaustion.

"Sleep," I murmured into her hair, wondering how long I could hold out this time around.

She wordlessly obeyed by closing her eyes. The boat rocked gently over the still water, lulling her toward slumber.

Despite being in my arms, she felt far away in her sleep. I pulled her closer until she was plastered against the front of my body. It wasn't enough. I wanted to mold us together until we somehow became one. My dress shirt draped around her like a claim, my silent brand, whether she consented to it or not. When she subconsciously clung to me, my chest

roared with pride. It was the final stroke of possession, which was turning into a dangerous territory where Rose was concerned.

Last night, I almost snapped when I saw her with that fucker, Doyle. She claimed she wasn't interested. Then why was that asshole hovering over her every time I turned around? My jaw tightened just thinking about it.

She had been dressing boldly since I commented on her clothes, and now I regretted my words. Doyle had been salivating after her. How much longer before more boys her own age took notice of her new wardrobe and tried to swoop in? What if she decided she was ready to experiment now that she had gained some experience?

No. I wouldn't allow it.

There would be no other men and certainly no experimenting. Rose couldn't back out after letting me in. She had awakened something feral in me, something that had been lying dormant until now. She hadn't yet fully grasped what she had done. The aftermath of rousing uncontrollable hunger in someone like me came with consequences. Because this was unchartered territory for me, and even I couldn't promise that my new savage compulsions wouldn't consume her. I needed to breathe in her essence and leave invisible marks that would tell the world she was mine. To cover her with my scent, or better yet, cover her in me.

I sealed her mouth with mine. She kissed me in her sleep, parting her lips obediently because she already knew my touch. By the time I pulled away, my shuddered breathing filled the room.

The beast, the one she had awakened, clawed at my insides, demanding more of her—her scent, her taste, the sound of my name on her lips as she came undone. After finally having her under me, I didn't know how to stop myself. It was my first encounter with losing control, a crack in my composure.

My lips traced her jawline, tasting salt and sleep, as my hand found its way between her thighs. I teased her bare skin—a silent question in the dark.

“Mm,” Rose murmured in her sleep.

When I did it again, she moaned louder.

I watched her as my fingers found her slick arousal. My tongue traced a path along her skin, tasting her with deliberate intention. I cupped the soft weight of her breast as my mouth found her nipple, teasing it with gentle

flicks. When I pulled it between my lips, Rose's body trembled against mine.

A small gasp escaped her lips. “Oh God!”

She didn’t have the energy to open her eyes, but her vocal reactions were all the encouragement I needed to continue.

I knew exactly where I wanted my mouth, between her trembling thighs. I was obsessed since the first taste, and I was dying to return to what had become my new favorite place. Starting from her breast, I kissed down to her stomach and neared her pussy. I put my nose between her thighs and inhaled deeply like a dog needing to memorize the scent to find it again.

I pressed a kiss on her cunt and stroked her slit with two fingers. When I swiped her opening with my tongue, her head lolled back in her sleep.

“Oh God.”

“Fuck, you...are...addicting,” I stuttered in between licks.

Rose’s head moved side to side on the pillow as I devoured her with desperate hunger, my tongue circling and then delving inside. Her body tensed, her hips lifting involuntarily from the sheets. Though she twisted, I held her firmly in place until she shuddered, and I heard that raw, broken sound tear from her throat.

“Oh, fuck,” she cried out in her sleep. Or perhaps she had woken up. It was unclear, though the only thing I knew for certain was that she came.

I traced a path upward with my lips—inner thigh, the curve of her breast, the hollow of her throat—until I found her mouth. My cock pulsed against the heat of her thighs. The images in my mind were nothing short of savage. I wanted to see her writhe, to feel her buck and twist under me, to make her understand how it felt to be powerless, desired, and owned all at once. I wanted to hear her beg, to hear her whisper my name with every ragged breath. The being inside me roared with the need to claim her—harder, deeper, until every step she took tomorrow reminded her who owned her.

As much as I wanted to seize her, to unleash the predator I had kept caged for months, I was unsure whether Rose could withstand the full brunt of my attack. The way I wanted to take her would scare her and she would see me the same way as my parents.

I held back instead of giving in to the animal roaring inside me. Instead, I slid along her folds, coating myself in her arousal until I was on the brink. I jerked my cock with my fist, and when I came, it was sharp and raw. Her

name tore out of me like a warning, and I painted her skin with my cum. I spread it over her thighs and stomach, working it in with a dark satisfaction that I had hopefully ruined her for anyone else.

When Rose drew in a shuddering breath, I nudged her to my chest. I spent the rest of the night watching her. I grazed my thumb over the apple of her cheek, trailing my finger down to her jaw. I studied her face, tracing every detail. Pink lips parted just enough to reveal a hint of moisture on the fuller bottom lip. Dark lashes cast delicate shadows across her flushed cheeks. Her wild hair splayed across my pillow like a chaotic halo. Even with her messy, tangled hair and smudged makeup, she was a wet dream.

Incomparable.

Invaluable.

Mine.

Every time she stirred, I noted something new about her—the slight asymmetry of her lips, the tiny mole beneath her left ear that no one else would notice. She was the fantasy I was starting to think would never come alive. Now that it finally had, I knew I would never let her go.

Denying myself over the past few months had taken more effort than anything I had experienced. There was no argument about it. No man on this useless planet had wanted a girl as much as I wanted her because my existence was tethered to her.

Rose was my first human connection.

When I was young, I never understood why lesser human beings were obsessed with creating connections. My mother, for example. Her strongest bond in this world was Damon. It was probably because golden boy saw the best in people and forgave her flaws, including her addiction. He saw the telltale signs but wholeheartedly believed she would change. He was always in her corner, and in turn, she did everything in her power to make him happy.

She once stood in line all night to get him the newest gaming console. It was nearly impossible to find due to the high demand. Stock sold out within seconds of becoming available, and the only way to get your hand on one was standing in long lines. But she didn't mind and even bought the accompanying zombie apocalypse game. Though it was rated M for Mature, it was worth it to her when he had stared at her gift with wide-eyed joy.

“No way, Mom. This is the Nexora Viba,” Damon had said, his voice reaching an octave only dogs could hear.

I placed my fingers over my eardrums to silence all the happiness. Leaning against the living room armoire, I watched the picture-perfect family. They hadn't noticed me walk through the doors. Then again, my mother couldn't see anyone else when Damon was around.

Her eyes were beaming, all proud of herself that she could do this for him. "There's another surprise. Check the other bag."

He opened the second gift bag and fished out a video game. "Holy shit! Doom of the Dead?!" His voice had cracked with excitement.

"Language, Damon," she had lightly chided.

"Sorry, Mom," he had obliged sheepishly. We cursed all the time at school. While I didn't keep up the facade in front of our parents, poster child was nothing if not obedient. Damon spun the box in his hands. "This is so awesome. But I thought Dad said we weren't allowed to play rated-M games."

Her eyebrow arched mischievously. "Then we better make it our little secret. Besides, I think you're mature enough to handle it."

"Thanks, Mom. Seriously. You're the best." He threw his arms around her.

I scoffed. Mother of the year, ladies and gentlemen. Buying her twelve-year-old violent video games, because last week, Damon had questioned whether she really needed to be prescribed pain medication for a minor backache. She came up with all types of excuses to refill her prescription, and Damon was catching on. This was the perfect distraction so he wouldn't ask too many questions moving forward. What more could you expect from a drug addict's parenting skills?

She ruffled his hair, chuckling as he tore into the box. He started setting up the console but paused midway.

"Something wrong, son?" she had asked.

He had frowned, searching inside the box.

"What are you looking for?"

"I think the store made a mistake. There's only one controller. Can you call them and ask them to ship the second one?"

Her brow creased. "Why do you need a second controller?"

"For Caden," he had replied like the answer was obvious.

I rolled my eyes. The prized heir still didn't get it, did he? Despite spending twelve years with our parents, he was utterly clueless about our family dynamics.

Luckily, Mother dearest was there to shatter his illusion about this perfect family. Her smile faltered. “It wasn’t a mistake, Damon. Your brother is still grounded for damaging the curtains downstairs.”

Last month, some of the curtains in the basement had turned black when smoke rose from my sugar and potassium nitrate mix. How else was I supposed to create a smoke bomb? It was called collateral damage.

“That was weeks ago,” Damon protested.

Her expression soured. “Which means he has had weeks to apologize for it. Caden doesn’t get video game privileges until he shows remorse for his actions.”

Whatever. Like I wanted to play her shitty video game. I would never apologize to inferior beings.

“C’mon, Mom,” Damon groaned, massaging his temples. “You know Caden doesn’t do apologies. You already docked his allowance to clean the curtains. Just let it go.”

“It’s not about the money, it’s about accountability. Caden keeps doing dangerous experiments at home after we specifically told him not to. I can’t reward his behavior with a video game.”

“But—” Damon had started warily.

“No buts.” Her voice sharpened. It was that tone she generally reserved for me.

Damon stared at the gaming station for a long moment. Only the word yearning could describe his love affair with the latest console. Yet he pushed the box away. “If Caden can’t play, then I don’t want it, either. You can return this.”

Of course.

Damon and his savior complex. He clearly wanted the stupid metal box but had too many fucking principles. Always the martyr. It made my teeth itch.

My mother seemed peeved by the turn of events. “Damon. You can’t punish yourself for your brother’s mistakes.”

“But he only used the basement because you guys took away his shed.”

My jaw clenched at the reminder. I had been happily staying out of this family’s way, spending most of my time in the shed and doing my class projects there. But no, even that had to be taken away from me. All because I had worked on a free energy project using magnets and copper wire. It wasn’t my fault the power lines weren’t strong enough to sustain my

creation. The circuit overload fried a few appliances around the house, and not even the major ones. My dramatic parents took away my shed, and I hadn't found a moment's peace since.

Damon leaned closer and dropped his voice. "He takes a million science classes and almost all of them require him to do experiments. Where else is he supposed to do them?"

"At school!" she replied, exasperated. "We don't want him doing unsupervised experiments in the house."

"But school told us these projects were to be done at home. This isn't his fault, you know? You and Dad can supervise him if you are worried about what he's doing."

I scoffed. As if Mother dearest would ever take the afternoon to supervise one of my projects or interests. Being locked in that shed with me would be her worst nightmare.

"Damon..."

"Please, Mom. It won't be fun to play without Caden." It was a bald-faced lie. Damon just wanted to include me, though I wasn't interested in these things. "Think of it this way. If we play together, he'll have less time for unsupervised experiments."

Her somber expression said it all. She didn't want to relent, but she also couldn't stand to make her firstborn unhappy. She sighed. "Fine. If that's what you want."

Yippee. She said fine because she couldn't bear to spoil her favorite son's mood.

Damon grinned and turned back to setting up the console. When his head snapped up, his eyes found mine across the room. "Caden."

My mother glanced up. Her pupils were dilated, probably because she had recently upped her dose. She thought I wouldn't notice. The only person she couldn't hide from was me, and she hated me for it. She looked at me like I was the wild animal she wasn't sure should be fed. If she could help it, she would put me down one day.

But Damon didn't see the truth about our family, nor did he see us for what we truly were. Our mother was self-destructive, our father was an idiot, I was a monster, and Damon was clueless.

He jumped to his feet like he had just spotted a long-lost friend. "Dude, you won't believe it, Mom got us a Nexora Viba. The store forgot to include the second controller but we can take turns until it ships."

Mom got us a Nexora Viba? He spoke as if it had been her plan all along. As if he hadn't just begged her to share the console with me out of pity. Or perhaps because it would be too awkward to play in front of me. It wasn't enough to be the perfect son, he also had to be the hero.

"Do you want to go first?"

My eyes narrowed. "I'm good," I muttered, turning on my heel.

"Dude, it's Doom of the Dead—" Damon's hand clamped down on my shoulder to make me listen to his pitch about the dumb game.

Fuck him.

I turned around and shoved him. "Get your fucking hands off me."

He stumbled back, crashing right into our mother.

"Caden!" she exploded, grabbing Damon by the arms to steady him.

Damon's eyes flicked to mine, rubbing his shoulder. There was something there—hurt, maybe—not from the shove but from my rejection. Honestly, I hadn't meant to shove him that hard. I didn't want him touching me, that was all. I had no idea why he bothered with me when I had made it clear that he shouldn't.

The glimpse of regret left my thoughts as soon as my mother's shrill voice filled the room. "What is wrong with you?!"

I shrugged. "He shouldn't have touched me."

"You do not put your hands on your brother!" Her eyes burned holes through me. "Do you understand? Apologize."

I sneered just as Damon stepped between us. "It's fine, Mom. I surprised him, that's all. He didn't mean it."

For fuck's sake. Could he give the savior complex a break for once in his goddamn life?

"No, Damon. This is not okay. This is exactly the behavior I'm talking about." Her seething eyes raked over me. "You're grounded. No dinner tonight. No electronics. Don't show your face until you're ready to apologize."

"Sure, I'll apologize. When hell freezes over."

She pointed at the stairs. "March to your room. Now!"

I leisurely took the stairs to the second floor, which further pissed her off. When I reached the landing, I could hear Damon trying to calm her down.

"Why does he have to be so cruel?" she wept while he consoled her.

"It's okay, Mom. Don't cry."

If I had to guess, she wasn't hurt by my actions. She was upset Damon refused to see me for what I truly was—the uncouth leftover child who had become the bane of their existence. I didn't meet her standards as a child—not like her perfect Damon. She was horrified to discover that a little boy could break rules and sabotage opponents without remorse. When Damon and I played *Monopoly*, I'd slip hotels onto my properties while he was in the bathroom. My mother called it 'cheating,' I called it 'strategic asset management.' I convinced Damon that washing dishes built character, so he did mine for three years. At ten, I persuaded Amy Berger, some lovestruck fool who used to follow me around, to take the fall for setting fire to the science lab after my experiment went wrong. At eleven, I forged Mother's signature on detention slips. By twelve, I realized I was more intelligent than my teachers and regularly cut class if the subject matter didn't interest me. In algebra, I used to correct Mr. Peterson's equations, then walk out when he fumbled through explanations.

Each incident, each note sent home about my 'disruptive behavior' or 'antisocial tendencies,' was confirmation of her long-held suspicion that I was the devil's embodiment. My childhood was rife with the texture of her disappointment, the clipped tone she reserved for me, the way her lips thinned when I entered a room, and her involuntary recoil when I brushed too close. My existence presented her with a riddle she could neither solve nor ignore, a constant reminder of the one variable in her life that refused to be brought to heel. The time-outs, punishments, and protracted lectures had no effect except to train me in the art of sullen resistance. Then came the therapists. A circuit of women in soft cardigans who all, after a few months, issued the same verdict: "He was gifted and acted out because he was bored."

They parroted those words because I had conditioned them into believing it. My mother suspected it but couldn't find a therapist that I couldn't outsmart. None of them would sign off on shipping me off to some mandatory school for dysfunctional and troubled children. I did everything to gain the upper hand and to manipulate meager humans to bend to my will. Rules might as well be written in private codes where I was concerned.

But Damon, he was golden and luminous, with the blueprint for human decency. In my mother's eyes, I was the genetic miscalculation that threatened to corrupt her perfect firstborn. It made sense to focus on the child she had a shot at molding into a decent human being. The only thorn

in her side was me. Our parents feared that I would corrupt Damon and wanted me out of the house before that could happen. Unfortunately, Damon had this disillusion of a perfect family that included all four of us. My mother couldn't risk Damon hating her by shattering his fantasy, and ultimately, stopped trying to send me away.

She had always bent over backward to make Damon happy. It puzzled me. Why did humans humble themselves in exchange for a connection? They clung to each other as if forming lifelong bonds would make their pathetic lives somehow matter. Humans were weak, and I couldn't relate to this incessant need for attachments. Even to my twin, I was a lousy brother throughout our childhood. It wasn't until our mother passed away that I started tolerating Damon. Her death gutted him, and unlike me, he didn't do well in solitude. I wouldn't win any *Brother of the Year* awards for my efforts, but ever since our mother died, I stopped pushing him away.

Still, it wasn't a connection I necessarily needed.

But Rose... Rose was different. For the first time in my life, I craved a connection with another human being.

My feelings didn't fit societal constructs, nor would anyone write flowery songs about it. Rather, it was something savage that had sunk its teeth into my flesh. It was a tether I didn't know I wanted until it was wrapped around my throat.

She was my purpose, and I had never had one of those before. The only thing I knew was my work because I had a mind for it. But a purpose...it was different.

It was addictive.

Sure, our relationship would ruffle feathers. I could already hear Saint Damon droning on about how I was jeopardizing my career. But I could handle the university. I could make the dean look the other way by expediting my work. The downside? I'd have to hire more incompetent staff members.

Rose's family would pose objections, too, but with her scent lingering on my skin, I couldn't find it in myself to be bothered by it. My need for her transcended anything I'd known. This wasn't just desire, it was absolute.

After months of torture, I had finally entered heaven. I had tasted what life could be with her, and I would burn anyone to the ground who tried to take that away from me.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

ROSE

I WOKE to a dimly lit room and ran a hand over my body. I was wearing a dress shirt, and my body ached with an unfamiliar pain between my thighs. The curtains had been pulled shut, yet a sliver of sunlight peeked through the gap so I could see the presidential suite of the mega yacht. A faint smile spread over my face as vivid images from last night flashed through my mind. I slapped a hand over my eyes. It finally happened. Everything I had wanted had come true. To my surprise, he was ecstatic that I was a virgin and didn't mind my lack of experience.

Unable to contain my joy, I turned over. My blurry vision focused on the empty bed. I touched the pillow next to mine. It was cold.

“Damon?” I called out.

No response.

I listened closely, but there was no sound coming from the bathroom or downstairs. My brow furrowed in confusion.

I tossed aside the covers and wrapped myself in one of the white sheets.

Turning on the light, I checked the downstairs area of the duplex.

Untouched and empty.

Rose: Where are you?

I texted and stared at the screen, urging my phone to vibrate.

Did he leave?

No way. He wouldn't leave me stranded on his brother's boat.

Oh God, his brother! It suddenly dawned on me that I was on his brother's boat, who happened to be my favorite professor. What if Professor Maxwell returned in search of his twin? It would be humiliating to be caught here, completely naked. Would he look at me differently or think I was a promiscuous woman? I never wanted him to view me as those thirsty women he constantly shook off.

I started searching for my clothes—and perhaps a note with an explanation. When I didn't find one, I decided the safest course of action was to leave and connect with Damon later.

Fortunately, the pier was close to the main road, and I was able to call an Uber. When I remembered Amelie saying she planned to visit her boyfriend this weekend, I plugged in Poppy's address instead of the dorm. I was restless and had no idea how to interpret Damon's abrupt departure. I wanted company, but I wasn't ready to admit that I had slept with our family's archnemesis, nor could I process his subsequent reaction the following morning.

My cousin had recently moved in with her mom and stepfather at a mansion outside the city. It was the perfect escape, and Poppy wasn't an inquisitive person. I could have company without rehashing last night.

My phone buzzed in my purse, and I lunged for it. My heart sank when I realized it wasn't Damon, just a random number. Our family had been harassed for various reasons, mostly by angry customers whose investments didn't pan out. Our public relations team had instructed us to never engage with random callers and to block the number immediately, which I did.

I reached her family home in less than forty-five minutes. It was more of a mansion sprawled over several acres of land. Still, something about the charming architecture and the green grounds made it a cozy home.

Once the security guard saw it was me in the Uber, he let the car through the large gates. Orange shades of early morning light enveloped the expansive grounds, the distant fog adding to the cathartic atmosphere.

I exited the Uber and rushed inside. The large front doors were open in anticipation of my arrival, and I strode into the living room to find Poppy reviewing client portfolios. Clad entirely in black, she sat on the floor and used the coffee table as her workspace. She was on her laptop and glanced up when she heard me enter.

"Rough night?" She looked me up and down. There wasn't any trace of surprise over my unannounced visit. You would think she had been

expecting me since yesterday.

“You could say that.”

I looked wild with unkempt hair, smudged makeup, and last night’s outfit. But Poppy didn’t ask about it or what I was doing there so early in the morning. Others might view our interaction as cold and impersonal. It wasn’t quite the case. Like Professor Maxwell, Poppy lacked empathy. Yet she had a knack for reading me and knew I wasn’t in the mood to bare my feelings.

Instead of trying to engage me in a futile conversation, she said, “Hm. I’m hungry. Let’s order breakfast.” She slid her phone open and pulled up the Uber Eats app on the screen. I watched her select a few items before passing me the phone. “Choose.”

I peered over the screen and absentmindedly selected a side item. I wasn’t a big eater, and it seemed the only times I ate nowadays was with Professor Maxwell. It had become a habit.

My phone buzzed, and I was disappointed to find another unregistered number flashing across the screen.

Poppy closed her laptop. “You’re staring at your phone like it’s a bomb.”

“I’m getting calls from random numbers again.”

“Block them.”

“I did.”

“Then why are you still upset?”

If Poppy were opening herself up for an emotional exchange, I must look like an absolute wreck. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t muster a smile to reassure her. “It’s nothing.”

Her eyes softened, and I didn’t take the small gesture lightly. She kept her feelings locked away, so her offering any form of comfort was significant. “He’ll get his head out of his ass soon.”

For a moment, I was speechless, then I realized she was referring to my father. My father cutting me off suddenly seemed trivial compared to losing my virginity and then losing, well, the guy.

“Thanks, Poppy.” I smiled gratefully. “Hey, can I crash in your guest room this weekend?”

She shrugged. “Knock yourself out. Mom and Zane are away on vacation.”

Zane was Poppy's stepfather. It was a relief to hear they were away. My aunt, Piya, was the opposite of Poppy and had too much empathy. If she saw me in this condition, she would pester me relentlessly until I cracked and told her what was wrong. I wasn't ready to talk about it.

I stayed cooped up in Poppy's guest room for the rest of the day. I had a daily ritual: wake up at exactly eight in the morning, make the bed with my pillows aligned with my sheets, brush my teeth with my favorite toothpaste, and drink my morning coffee. I hadn't done any of those things today. Any interruption to my routine generally left me unsettled and restless. But for the first time in years, it didn't feel like the world would fall apart because I skipped a few mundane tasks.

Instead, I had found a new thing to obsess over—my phone. Something bad must have happened at Ambani Corp. My phone wouldn't stop ringing with calls from unregistered numbers, all of which I promptly blocked.

I texted Damon a few more times to ensure he was all right. In case his phone fell into the wrong hands, I kept the messages nondescript and sexless. However, he left each message on read. My heart sank, and I finally accepted the harsh truth—last night meant nothing to him. He took my virginity, then regretted it so profusely that he couldn't be bothered with letting me down gently. I felt used and discarded.

Apparently, even good guys treated you like shit after getting what they wanted.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

CADEN

LEAVING MY BED, while Rose was keeping it warm, was a testament in self-control. But it was important to keep up with her nutrient-dense diet, and she didn't eat much last night. She generally followed a poor diet, often missing meals unless we ate together.

I doubt there was much I could do to make her appreciate food, but I still decided to do a breakfast run before she woke up.

There weren't any restaurants around the dock, only a wellness café a short drive away. My strides to my car were long, and though the café was relatively close, it seemed miles in the opposite direction from Rose.

Last night replayed in my mind as I waited impatiently in the morning line, glancing repeatedly in the direction of the harbor. My lack of restraint around Rose was astounding. She was wary of physical contact, and I had initially intended on easing her into it. But seeing her with that asshole Doyle had broken my willpower.

I paused, my jaw clenching involuntarily.

Who else was sniffing around Rose? I only knew of that prick Doyle because of class, but there could be others. Rose would never tell me if there were other men chasing her. And hadn't Alex mentioned her family only approved of matches with Indian men in the upper one percentile? It hadn't crossed my mind until now that they might be setting her up on dates.

Fuck.

My hands aggressively fisted into the brown bag with our breakfast sandwiches as I paid for our order. Every muscle in my body tensed as though bracing for impact while heat crawled up my neck. Once more, I was crashing into a wave of jealousy and possessiveness where Rose was concerned. The only thing keeping me sane was last night's memories. The way she trembled and grabbed my shoulders when I was inside her for the first time. Rose wouldn't have broken her *no touching* rule unless she wanted me just as badly and was willing to fight her family.

So, imagine my surprise when I sped back to the boat, only to find an empty bedroom. My hand roamed the empty sheets where Rose had been. The darkness behind the blackout curtains couldn't hide her absence. Last night's high faded as I rapped on the bathroom door.

"Rose?"

Silence.

I blinked hard, trying to focus my thoughts. She wouldn't leave. There was no fucking way.

I checked downstairs, followed by the main areas of the boat, calling her name repeatedly.

Nothing.

You've got to be kidding me.

I returned to my room and slammed my door so hard the walls shook. Grabbing the bag of breakfast sandwiches off the coffee table, I hurled it across the room where it knocked a glass of water to the floor with a satisfying crack. My fists pummeled the wall, the impact sending shock waves up my arms.

What. The. Actual. FUCK!

The satisfaction of last night evaporated, replaced by a storm. She finally gave in, but then she disappeared without a word. Was this because her family wouldn't approve or because she was my student?

Rose had an aversion to risk. She wouldn't have taken such a big one without thinking it through or fully committing to it. There was no way she was backing out or changing her mind, though all signs pointed to the opposite.

I wouldn't let her retreat, not after we finally crossed that line. For so long I had kept a lid on it, keeping my distance so I wouldn't spook her. My obsession had been warring with her personal boundaries for months. She finally reciprocated, only to disappear.

I grabbed my phone and pulled up Rose's phone number, the one Alex had sent me. The phone rang a few times before going to voicemail. I tried the number again, and this time, her phone was switched off.

I refused to let her ignore me.

I left a message, sent her a few texts, too. When none of it elicited a response, I dialed a different number.

"Professor Maxwell." Miles sounded surprised, and perhaps still a little drunk from last night.

"Miles. Call Rose Ambani from your phone. I'll text you the number."

He was quiet for a moment. Miles wasn't stupid. He had worked for me long enough to know I never paid attention to students. He knew my interest in Rose wasn't entirely innocent but would never make the bold accusation out loud. After all, I held his career in the palms of my hands.

"Is everything okay—"

"I need to get a hold of her. Now!"

"You got it." He didn't even ask why I wasn't the one making the call if I already had her number.

"Merge the call when she answers." If she thought she could avoid me, Rose had another think coming. One way or another, I would make her talk to me, even if Miles had to stay on the line, listening in on the conversation.

"No problem."

I hung up and texted him the number. A few minutes passed before he called me back.

"I tried her cell a few times. But my calls are going to voicemail," he explained, which merely grated on my nerves.

"Have the other assistants try the number. Don't stop until someone gets a hold of her."

He seemed reluctant at my new request. While he wouldn't question my relationship with Rose, he didn't want anyone else catching on and jeopardizing my position at the university. Because any blow to my career would trickle down to damage his. "Are you sure you want to include them—"

"Yes," I snapped.

"What should I tell them this is in regard to—"

"Tell them nothing and just to do as I say," I barked, hanging up the phone.

Despite the involvement of my staff, I continued to call and text Rose. Seconds bled into agonizing minutes without any response. When it hit the one-hour mark, I started to lose my mind.

My relentless pursuit led me to her Instagram. I scrolled through it with the fake account I had created to keep tabs on her. There was a new post from last night—a photo with Doyle and the rest of her group. He stood right next to her, and she was smiling.

She was fucking smiling.

Was it possible it wasn't her family at all and there was someone else?

I flung the phone onto the bed and lay flat, pure rage buzzing through me. Rose should've talked to me if she was overwhelmed by what happened between us, not blow me off and post photos with other assholes. Irritation thrummed in my veins because I doubt Rose would post a photo of us online. She wasn't brave enough to lay a public claim on me, but apparently, she had no problem doing so with other men.

She would pay for this.

My obsession had hit a new peak since last night. I'd finally gotten a taste of what I'd craved for months, and I was a man possessed. I couldn't stand the thought of her finding someone her own age or race and moving on.

For the first time in my life, I was anchored to this world. Not in a comforting way. In a way that made the world before Rose feel like a void. There was suddenly no reason to exist without this lifeline, and I had no idea how I had lived without it in the first place.

My mind buzzed for the rest of the day. By the next morning, my frustration bubbled over, and I ended up at Rose's dorm, only to find out she wasn't there. Rose had gone into hiding, probably at her family's mansion or somewhere I wouldn't have access to.

To hell with this.

After months of keeping me at arm's length and torturing me, she gave just enough to get me hooked. She was dangling what I wanted most in my face, taunting me with it.

I checked my phone again, willing it to vibrate. A call. A text. Anything.

When nothing came, my hands trembled with anger and frustration. I had been holding back my inner monster around Rose, always subduing my voice and tone so I wouldn't scare her. But now, the beast inside me snarled at her rejection, clawing to claim what was rightfully mine. She was

messing with my head, and I'd had enough. When I caught her—and I would catch her—I'd make her remember how her body belonged to me. She was sadly mistaken if she thought she would get the same version of me after the stunt she pulled. No more gentleness. No more patience.

“I never want you to hold back with me; I want you to wreck me.”

Little did Rose know that I would give her exactly what she wanted. After running away from me, she had ensured that I would have no reason to hold back. Rose. Was. Mine. And I would claim every inch of her until she couldn't remember a time when she wasn't mine.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

ROSE

I WAS EXTREMELY FRAZZLED.

After losing my virginity to my family's archnemesis and spending the weekend hiding at Poppy's house, I had emerged from my cocoon. Clawing myself out of my depressive state was a feat on its own and hitting traffic was the cherry on top. My phone had died at some point, adding to this logistical nightmare.

This was a failure on my end. I should have accounted for extra time to stop by my dorm to change my clothes, tame my crazy witch hair, and grab my phone charger. Now, I was late to class, and I had never been late to anything.

What if Professor Maxwell made an example of me in front of the entire class? I couldn't deal with it if he thought less of me, today of all days. I was already feeling down on my luck.

The classroom was creepily empty when I entered.

Weird.

I glanced at my phone. I was eight minutes late. The class should have been in session by now. I checked my email next. Class hadn't been canceled, either.

Where was everyone?

The lab was huge, featuring numerous connecting rooms, including the break room, a small gym, the bathrooms, storage rooms, and separate experimental areas, as well as Professor Maxwell's office. I did a sweep of

each room and concluded it was a ghost town. Could they all be in the professor's office?

His office was soundproof since he often listened to loud music while working. Luckily, the door was left slightly ajar. There was a group gathered in a circle, and I poked my head inside to hear their conversation. Though I couldn't see anyone's faces, I recognized the back of Amelie's head. Everyone else was in lab coats, which meant they were research assistants, and class had been dismissed.

Why was only Amelie asked to stay behind?

They were turned away from the door, facing Professor Maxwell's desk. I couldn't see him, either, but heard his stoic voice.

"I went to your dorm. No one knew where she had gone. When was the last time you saw her?"

"At the party." It was Amelie talking.

"Why didn't you check on her when she didn't come home? You're her roommate."

"But, Professor Maxwell, we weren't supposed to see each other this weekend. I went away to see my boyfriend and just got back this morning."

"Call her."

"Her phone's turned off."

"Try it anyway."

They are searching for *me*.

Professor Maxwell's concern touched me. I should announce myself, but I was having a hard time finding my voice among this intensity.

Taking a deep breath, I did a counting exercise I had learned from my therapist and pushed the door open. Everyone turned when the door creaked.

Miles's eyes widened, startled. "Rose! Where have you been? We've been calling you all weekend."

That explained all the unregistered numbers calling my phone. I never exchanged numbers with any of the research assistants.

Professor Maxwell sprang from his seat the moment he heard my name. His chair kicked back angrily, and everyone stepped to the side so he could see me. His expression shifted from relief at seeing me to anger. "What the hell, Rose?"

I watched him from the door, my heart pounding loudly in my ears. I wanted to ask, *What's going on?* or *Why did you ask people to track me*

down? but my voice was muffled by my panic. Despite the lenience I had received from him, I still lost my voice whenever he was this intense.

“Why didn’t you pick up my calls?” he shouted. The immense control he exercised not to shout around me was missing.

My palms started sweating with anxiety. I had no idea what I had done wrong and had a feeling I was about to find out. I only blocked his number because I didn’t recognize it, just like I did with everyone else who called me. We never communicated outside of class or during the weekend. How did he get my number anyway, the school registration records?

Shelby was doing her best to compose herself, but I could tell she was taking immense pleasure in my public reprimanding. She was upset when Professor Maxwell took an interest in my academics and had been wanting to knock me down a peg. I was finally in trouble, and she was in heaven. She was trying not to smile but failing miserably.

Professor Maxwell glanced at Miles, who in turn gave him a knowing nod. The silent exchange prompted Miles to speak out. “Okay, people, back to work.” People were momentarily stunned by the change of pace. When they didn’t move, he knocked on the desk to make noise. “Let’s go. Everyone, out of Professor Maxwell’s office. Now.”

What was going on?

Confused rumbles sounded in the room as people were unceremoniously ushered out.

I backed out as well, but Professor Maxwell pierced me with an unfathomable look. “Not you, Rose.”

I froze. It seemed Miles knew that Professor Maxwell wanted to speak to me alone and was doing his bidding by getting everyone out of the office. But what had I done wrong?

I was rarely in trouble with my teachers, and now I was in trouble with my favorite one. He had taken me under his wing, provided me with opportunities I could never have dreamed of, and he was the reason I had a future in this field. Everything in my life had been better since he came along, and I looked up to him tremendously for it. What could I have done to incite this ire? I triple-checked my work and left nothing to chance so I wouldn’t disappoint the man I tried to impress the most.

Did I mislabel something?

Did I shelf the vials wrong?

Did I place an incorrect order?

No one glanced at me—except for the self-satisfied smirk from Shelby—as they ran out the door.

Amelie sidled up next to me and let everyone else pass her. “Dude, where have you been?” she whispered in my ear.

“I stayed at Poppy’s over the weekend. What’s going on?”

“I truly have no idea. He lost it this morning when he walked into class and didn’t see you. Told everyone that class was canceled but asked me to stay behind. Apparently, he has been trying to get in touch with you all weekend and even had the research assistants call you.”

“What’s so urgent?”

“I don’t know. Did you murder someone?”

I pretended to think about it for a moment. “I don’t think so,” I said to lighten the mood and the apprehension rolling inside me.

She shrugged and slipped out with the rest of the group.

I glanced around the empty room, panic flaring.

Professor Maxwell crossed his arms and glared at me. “Close the door,” he ordered.

I wanted to ask, *Have I done something wrong?* but couldn’t. His anger had me in paralysis. It took me several moments to make my way to the door. My hands were shaking as I turned the knob.

The door had barely shut when my face was pressed against it. I hadn’t realized when he had moved from his desk and plastered his body against my back.

I yelled.

“I don’t want to fucking hear it,” Professor Maxwell burst out. “I’m barely hanging on. Don’t push me right now.”

What the...

“Did you think you wouldn’t have to face me again if you snuck out?”

Was he referring to the student-faculty affair? There were hundreds of people, and it was perfectly normal that our paths never crossed.

He turned me around and grabbed my upper arm. Professor Maxwell wore a menacing look, his face flushed with fury. “I’m jeopardizing my career for you, and you’re treating this like a game.”

He was standing so near that I could catch the amber scent of his skin. I attempted to create some space between us and pushed at his chest. My heart raced when he grabbed my fingers and glared at me from beneath his eyebrows.

I didn't know what to do. Panicked, I tried to take a tentative step away from him. Again, he stopped me. He lost it when I tried to disengage a third time. He shoved me against the door and captured my lips for a hard kiss.

For a moment, I didn't move.

I was stunned.

His fingers slid into my hair and grasped my tendrils to tilt my head up. He wrapped a hand around my neck as his tongue invaded my mouth, moving assertively. It was an enraged kiss like he was pouring something inside me.

His ironclad grip on my neck momentarily cut off my circulation, and my thoughts with it. He kissed me as if he were taking possession of me, leaving me with no choice but to submit. My brain short-circuited when I realized his lips on me didn't feel like a foreign invasion. The familiarity behind the kiss overpowered me, turning me into putty in his hands. An intense heat spread through me as his lips consumed mine, while his knee urged my legs apart. The clash of our tongues and teeth intensified with every passing second. It was only when I felt the firm pressure building against my leg that my eyes shot open.

What the hell was he doing?

I came out of my stupor and shoved at his chest. He didn't budge. He didn't even notice my resistance. Or perhaps he did and it fueled him. I tried to mumble *Stop* and managed to tear away from his mouth. With a hand on my cheek, he merely turned my face and continued his assault.

Not knowing what else to do, I bit his lip. He didn't care, his hand merely drifted to my ass for a warning squeeze. He was in a world of his own, even when I screamed in his mouth and beat his chest.

He finally pulled back and nestled his face against my neck, his lips skimming along my collarbone. "You don't get to freak out about us and leave. Not when *you* started this."

My hand flew to my lips, which were puffy and swollen. He raised his head, breathing heavily, and pulled me off the door. I tried to grab onto something to stop this madness and made contact with the edge of the worktable. He moved me with such ferocity that I couldn't hang on and my hand knocked over an incubator. The glass top cracked on the floor, but he didn't flinch. He didn't even seem to hear it.

He tossed me on the couch by the windows. When he stepped back, I thought he was finally coming to his senses. Then I realized he had only

done so to pull off his sweater.

“I’ve already waited too fucking long for you. I won’t do it again.”

I didn’t understand. Professor Maxwell spoke as if we had already crossed some sort of boundary when there was still time to stop this madness.

He was on me before I could scramble away. Without hesitation, he reached under my skirt, grabbed my white underwear, and swiftly slid them down my legs.

It turned into a battle. I was trying to talk, but no words came out of my parted lips. I couldn’t believe this was the moment my voice decided to leave me entirely. I couldn’t manage a single *No*, but I was wrestling him. Couldn’t he take the hint?

I used my hands instead, but he seemed possessed, unaware. With eyes blazing with fury, he grabbed my cap-sleeve shirt and tore it open. Buttons scattered to the ground, and I realized he had lost his mind. I jackknifed off the couch and took a step toward the door when he lunged at me. With a hand on my ankle, he dragged me back, and I fell face forward on the rug in front of the couch.

He held me tightly against his chest with one hand while unzipping his pants with the other. When I felt his erection against my hip, I tried to crawl away. This time, he bit my earlobe, and I nearly fainted from the sting.

It suddenly dawned on me that nothing could stop this storm and resisting was futile. There were bruises on my arms, rug burns, and blood on my scraped knees. My ear was pounding and I was in immense pain. It was the first time I saw the monster lurking inside Professor Maxwell, the one he carefully hid while he was with me.

Until now.

My physical defiance was egging him on and without my voice, there was no one to call for help. Perhaps it was best to concede.

Sensing my resolve fade, he turned me around and pushed me onto my back. He took my lips for another earth-shattering kiss. His tongue dove deep, practically in my throat.

I couldn’t believe this was happening.

He whispered against my lips, “Talk to me if you’re overwhelmed about us. Don’t disappear like that, or next time, I’ll spank your ass until it’s red.”

What?

I was panting. His warm breath was against my neck as he pressed me down with a hand on my chest.

"I let my guard down because I thought you were finally letting me in. I should have known better. Never sneak out of my bed again, not while I'm out buying *you* breakfast. Otherwise, I'll handcuff you to the bed next time."

My eyes widened, and I froze. Blood rushed to my head as the realization dawned on me.

It wasn't Damon on the boat; it was Professor Maxwell.

No!

The weight of the situation pressed down until my chest was ready to burst.

Professor Maxwell's fingers probed between my thighs. Stunned, I let him migrate south. I emotionally checked out for a moment and only snapped out of my stupor when his tongue slid over my clit. I bucked, but he didn't let up. He was a quick study. No one would guess he was new at oral sex, and it wasn't long before he stabbed deep with his tongue, and I came with an earth-shattering climax. It was so intense that I wondered whether I would pass out.

When I came to my senses, my heavy-lidded eyes landed on the closed door. There were people on the other side of it while we engaged in salacious behavior mere feet away from them. If only they could hear us through the soundproof walls and knew what their revered professor was doing to me.

He blasted up, seized my hips, and thrust inside me. It wasn't gentle or tender, but punishing and forceful.

At first, I couldn't focus on the dull throbbing between my thighs because the pain in my chest was worse. But when he started moving faster and deeper, my body convulsed in unbearable agony. I clutched at his shoulders for anchor.

"I can't be gentle right now. Do you understand me?"

He might be a doctor, but he was built like a lumberjack with a body that could compete with any professional athlete. The onslaught would be brutal if he refused to hold back, and he didn't disappoint. He thrust at a manic speed, with only one goal in mind.

Fuck, that hurt.

Flinching, I tried pushing against his chest, but he gathered both my wrists and slammed them against the floor. He held them hostage while he pillaged. He had no intention of stopping. No matter what I did, I couldn't slow him down for respite. He was relentless in his pursuit.

Painful tears seeped out of my eyes, but he wasn't deterred. When I whimpered, his grip on my hips tightened, holding me firm in case I had plans of slinking away. I barely heard him mumbling over the throbbing pain in my womb.

"It was hell being so close to you and not being able to touch you."

"I never thought you would be ready."

"I thought you had finally given in, then you disappeared."

"If you leave me again, I'll tie you to me."

My back arched when his fingers dug into my hips. I pushed against him, silently begging him to slow down with body language, and when that didn't work, I scratched his neck and shoulders like a cat fighting off a coyote.

He was utterly unaware of my distress, and by the time he climaxed, I was trembling from head to toe.

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CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

ROSE

THE OFFICE LOOKED like a hurricane had hit it. The rug was strewn in my effort to get away from Professor Maxwell. There was a broken incubator on the floor. At some point during our battle, one of us had kicked the coffee table, and the papers on the table were now scattered on the floor.

Everything was in disarray.

The scene paled in comparison to the tornado raging inside me. I was battered and broken.

Peeling myself off the ground, I rested my back against his desk and wrapped my arms around my chest. I glanced at Professor Maxwell on the rug. His hand was over his eyes as if needing a minute to recover. It was the first time I had seen him vulnerable. It was also the perfect time to escape, but I couldn't leave. My knee-length skirt was in tatters and hiked to my waist. The buttons of my white shirt were torn, with my bra on full display. I couldn't go out in front of his staff like this.

What kind of sick joke had the universe played on me?

After years of pining for a man, I mistook his twin for him and slept with him instead. I had never confused them before; their physical attributes and demeanor were unmistakably different. Perhaps I was intoxicated, but even so—why was he smoking like Damon? During one of our lunches, he mentioned that he gave up the habit years ago.

Professor Maxwell dropped his hand and rose to his feet. Immediately, he looked around until he found me leaning against his desk. He

straightened his clothes, and I gulped. He looked threatening, like the demon of lust with his body of steel.

I looked away when he tucked his semi-hard dick back into his black slacks. How could he still be hard?

Oh God. I shouldn't know what his dick looked like, let alone what it felt like inside me.

He marched toward me and dropped to one knee. I tensed when he placed a hand on my trembling cheek, lifting my face to his. His eyes swept over my features. "Was I too rough?"

I had no idea what to say. I wanted to scream at him, but it felt like my voice was permanently gone.

Instead, I slapped his hand away.

He frowned. "You're mad," he surmised.

My weary eyes scanned his expressionless face. How could he be so utterly detached from basic human emotions? Of course I was pissed. Did he not notice it when I fought him?

"On the boat, you told me never to hold back with you."

My heart careened.

Oh fuck, I said that to him, didn't I?

I started all this because I thought he was someone else. I hit on Professor Maxwell, not the other way around. I kissed him. I crawled into his bed willingly. I told him not to hold back because I didn't want to be the infamously timid girl, especially when in his arms. I wanted him to treat me like his woman, not delicate glass.

"I thought that was how you wanted it," he added.

It was a weak excuse for why he had attacked me in his lab with people on the other side of this door. But at least there was some logic behind it—I had practically asked him to do this.

What didn't make sense was everything else. I made a move on him, but why did Professor Maxwell reciprocate?

Other women regularly sought out the impossible-to-please professor—I had seen it with my own eyes. He dismissed them without a second thought. And he hated it when female students were bold with him. Breaking his personal and professional code of conduct was entirely out of character for him. If anyone found out what had happened between us, it would jeopardize his career. He could lose everything because of me, and I didn't want that at all. So, why did he do it?

Professor Maxwell never made emotional decisions. He was cold, calculating, and always in control.

“I couldn’t hold back,” he said at my extended silence. “I’d been going crazy all weekend.”

He reached for me again, and I recoiled. I didn’t want to be consoled by the man who had forced himself on me, though he seemed unaware of the magnitude of his actions.

“If that’s not what you had in mind, it can be different next time,” he promised, brushing his thumb over my lower lip.

Oh God, there couldn’t be a next time. I just wanted to forget any of this ever happened.

“You’re safe with me,” he said when I still hadn’t spoken.

I swallowed my tears as my body started to shake.

“You trust me, don’t you, Rose?”

I so badly wanted to say yes. There had been many times Professor Maxwell had gone to great lengths to protect my bubble—except this time. He had shattered it in the worst way imaginable.

Deep down, I knew this wasn’t his fault. A string of misunderstandings had spiraled out of control, and I had no idea how to fix things.

At some point, he pulled me to his chest. The irony of him comforting me with a warm embrace wasn’t lost on me. The worst thing? It was working. We had developed a friendship over the semester, and the bond provided me with a natural security. With his massive body cocooning me, the monstrous nature of what he had done didn’t cross my mind. I felt safe in his arms even though he was the biggest threat to me.

Burying my face against his chest, I wept, overwhelmed. No matter how many times he asked, I couldn’t bring myself to tell him what was truly wrong.

Finally, he offered to take me home.

When I seemed alarmed by the idea, he gestured at the back entrance of his office. “That door opens to the parking lot behind campus.”

I hadn’t noticed that exit before. It made sense to use it, given that I was in no condition to walk out through the front door. He also deduced I was in no condition to see other human beings.

“I’ll grab the car keys from Raoul and bring my car around. I’ll drive you home.”

He paused for a moment, his body angled toward the door. He returned to me and brushed his lips against my forehead. My heart stopped.

What was *that*?

“Be right back,” he said softly.

The moment he stepped out of the office through the front entrance, I sprang to my feet and bolted through the back door. There might have been a few tears as I ran back to my dorm, clutching my ripped blouse and praying no one recognized me.



My hands were stiff as I opened the door and stepped into my dormitory apartment. I flicked on the lights and saw that Amelie wasn’t home yet.

We shared a modest apartment that we had made into our own. The narrow hallway opened into a cozy living room, where a kitchenette lined one wall with a mini fridge and a two-burner stove tucked beside the sink. A small table served as both our dining area and a study spot. Two bedrooms flanked the living room, with a tiny bathroom and shower stall squeezed in between.

It wasn’t anything special, but we were grateful for it. Having your room was a privilege for on-campus living, and Amelie was the perfect roommate—though I was relieved she wasn’t here right now.

I needed a minute to recover. Professor Maxwell was probably pissed that I ran out on him again. It dawned on me that he probably texted or called me, but his message wouldn’t come through as I had blocked all the unregistered numbers from this weekend.

I removed my sandals and stripped my torn clothes before stepping into the shower. I had the urge to scrub my skin until I bled.

I didn’t know how long I stayed under the stream, but the water had turned cold by the time I cleaned every inch of skin he had touched. No matter how much I washed, I couldn’t erase the lingering trace of his amber scent clinging to me. It stirred unwelcome images—his rough hands, his breath hot against my neck, the way he dominated every moment and refused to let me get away. My skin flushed at the memory of his touch—demanding, possessive, laced with a tinge of obsession.

When did he even develop a sexual attraction for me?

Could this be a part of some deranged obsession with my scars? His fascination had been unsettlingly evident from the moment he had laid eyes on them, leading to the change in my diet and everyday life.

Or maybe he liked the thrill of being with someone inexperienced? I recalled his intrigue when I mentioned my intact hymen on the boat. There was a shift in his eyes, an almost primal draw to what he perceived as untouched and unmarred.

He was a scientist to the core and saw these physical attributes as keys to a deeper mystery within me, one he was determined to unravel regardless of my comfort or consent. His peculiar interest in my scars and my virginity formed a disturbing pattern. It painted a picture of a man whose desires were fueled by a chilling blend of possessiveness and fascination with things he couldn't dissect.

I wrapped myself in a white fluffy robe and stared at the mirror. My fingers hovered over the damage he had inflicted—the marks on my neck where he choked me, my bruised arms from when he gripped me, the rug burns on my knees.

I thought I would be entirely numb, but the apathy my body language usually projected was absent. My raw eyes were strangely animated, my skin was flushed, and my cheeks sported a lively red color.

I never let anyone get close to me. I lived inside a fortress of my creation, but someone had breached the walls. Why hadn't I retreated into myself like usual? It was my go-to defense mechanism. Instead, I looked alive.

I shook my head.

There was something wrong with me. Calling my therapist was the next logical move, yet I hesitated, fearing she would report our conversation to the authorities. She was bound by law to report a crime.

But had a crime even occurred? On the boat, we were consenting adults and it wasn't illegal to have sex. The line of consent was murky during our second encounter, stemming from a place of profound misunderstanding rather than malicious intent.

Perhaps things could still be rectified, and I shouldn't risk going public.

Although my father cut me off, he would go to war with the Maxwells if he found out what had happened. It would escalate their already deteriorating relationship and drag me into the epicenter of the year's

biggest scandal. I couldn't deal with the spotlight. Damon would think I seduced his brother after shamelessly pursuing him for years. Worst of all, Professor Maxwell would lose his lab and his credibility.

No one would win if I reported this incident. The best thing I could do was erase it from my memory and pretend like the last few days never happened.

"Hey, hey! I got you your favorite—lavender latte."

The voice caught me off guard, and I turned to face my roommate. I had been studying my reflection in front of the mirror and hadn't heard her enter. She had two cups of coffee from our favorite university café—Bageltown. It was our go-to spot for breakfast, lunch, and to generally hang out. She placed one of the cups on the table. It was labeled *Rose*.

She watched me intently for a moment. "There's something different about you. But good different. What is it?"

I stealthily glanced back at the mirror. I had erased most of the evidence of the assault, and my robe covered the rug burns. Could she tell something was off from my expression?

She lifted a finger in my general direction. "Haircut?"

"No."

She stared at me suspiciously. "You're practically glowing. I've heard of these vampire facials that use blood to make your skin brighter. Did you get one?"

"Since I saw you this morning? No, I didn't get a haircut or a blood facial."

Her eyes softened. "That reminds me, how did it go with Professor Maxwell? Why was he so upset?"

My back straightened at the mention of his name. Acting nonchalant after what happened was impossible. "I labeled ethanol incorrectly. Imagine his surprise when he almost mixed it with nitric acid." I tried to laugh.

She frowned. "But you're so careful. You obsessively double-check your work."

I avoided her gaze. "Everyone makes mistakes, and this was a bad one. It could have caused an explosion. I'm lucky he let me off with a warning."

Her brows drew further together. "That doesn't sound like him."

"Obviously, there'll be some academic reprimanding, and he'll lower my grade by one letter," I quickly added to make it sound more believable.

I had gone a step too far.

“That’s ridiculous. He practically plucked you out of the group because you’re so meticulous. You fuck up once, and he’s going to dock your grade. We should take this to the university admins.”

“No.” I backed away from her, the panic from earlier resettling in my chest. “Please, Am. I just want to drop it. Can we do that?”

“But—”

“I’ll talk to him and try to make him see reason so he won’t dock my grade. I’m sure he’ll agree once he calms down.”

She seemed unconvinced but eventually relented. “If that’s what you think. But he’s a giant ass.”

“Agreed.”

She laughed. “I thought he was your favorite teacher and you would jump to his defense again.”

“Not today.”

With a sigh, I lifted my latte to my lips and took a sip.

She gave me another odd look. “What’s going on with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t rotate the cup three times like you normally do before drinking your coffee.”

I stilled. Amelie knew something was wrong, and though I tried to distract her by asking about her weekend with her boyfriend, her sharp look told me she wasn’t convinced. I should have gone back to Poppy’s home and lived another day in denial.

Eventually, I retreated into my room. I waited until Amelie left for her next class before I broke down in uncontrollable tears.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

ROSE

BY THE TIME dawn broke and signaled an end to my torturous night, I eagerly jumped out of bed. All my thoughts revolved around my predicament. Since I felt tongue-tied in front of Professor Maxwell yesterday, I considered drafting an email to explain my actions. *I had been drunk on the boat, and the whole thing had been a giant misunderstanding.* Then, I second-guessed the idea. What if his account was monitored? Accusations of sleeping with a student would become widespread if that email got out. Perhaps I could drop off an unsigned letter instead.

In the meantime, I had to keep my shit together and decided to call my therapist, Dr. Lauren Harper. I should have done it yesterday, and after my sleepless night, speaking to her was imperative.

A familiar voice answered on the second ring. “Rose.”

My fingers tightened around my cell phone. “Morning, Dr. Harper. How are you?”

“I’m great. How about you?”

Her voice was comforting, reminiscent of the first time Auntie Piya took me to see her. After my attempted suicide, I started living by invisible rules to the point it was trite. My aunt was the only adult who noticed and sought help for me. Dr. Harper gave me the necessary tools to function, though I never graduated from my obsessive-compulsive needs.

“Sorry for calling at this hour. But I remembered you started early on Tuesdays, so I figured I’d try my luck.”

“I’m happy to hear from you. It’s been a while since we last spoke.”

I nodded, though she couldn't see me. "I've been meaning to schedule an appointment."

"You called me. That's a step in the right direction."

More like a last-ditch attempt to fix my life. I didn't know who else to turn to, and Dr. Harper was fantastic at her job. Between school and my busy schedule, therapy had taken a back seat over the past year.

"Tell me what's going on."

Knowing I had to exercise discretion about Professor Maxwell, I started the conversation with, "My roommate thinks I've been acting differently. Yesterday, I didn't rotate my cup before taking a sip."

She was quiet for a moment. "How do you feel after skipping a routine that you use to manage your anxiety?"

"I wasn't bothered by it." That was the truth. Strange, because I usually couldn't operate without performing my obsessive habits. They were my coping mechanisms.

"Rose! This is a huge breakthrough for you."

I exhaled deeply, allowing her words to resonate within me. "Right."

"Was there any particular event that led to this accomplishment?"

Mental images popped up of Professor Maxwell holding me down on the rug as he fucked the life out of me. Holding two fingers on the bridge of my nose, I tried to dispel the vision.

It was ironic. My recent setback in life was what distracted me enough for a breakthrough. There was no denying it—he was the reason my carefully constructed fortress was tumbling. Those odd ticks made me feel safe and in control, but he had shattered any illusion of safety, and my defense mechanisms no longer seemed to matter.

"I-I lost my virginity."

There was pin-drop silence on the other side. I had done the unthinkable—I had shocked Dr. Harper.

She quickly regained her professionalism and swallowed her personal feelings on the matter. "That's a big step. I imagine this is bringing up a lot of feelings, especially considering how physical touch has affected you in the past. How do you feel about it?"

Devastated, because after years of avoiding contact with men, I had slept with the wrong one.

"There's no correct answer," she said softly. "Whatever you're feeling is completely valid."

“It helped me step out of my comfort zone.” Not exactly a lie. My priorities had shifted since losing my virginity. “I haven’t been obsessing over my compulsions lately.”

“That’s great news, Rose.”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re developing intimate relationships, showing patterns of healthy habits, and seeking me out when you need it. Whatever triggered this progress, stay on course. I have a client that’s about to walk in, but I want you to schedule an in-person session so we can talk through these major changes in your life.”

No way. She would figure me out if I met her in person. “I’ll check my schedule and get back to you. Thanks for taking my call.”

“Anytime.”

I hung up. Blowing out a breath, I texted Poppy to meet up for a study session. I was done talking about my feelings and wanted to be around someone who wouldn’t probe me for answers. I threw on a pair of taupe high-waisted trousers, a stone-colored shirt, and grabbed a trench coat on the way out of my room.

Amelie was already in the living room, dressed in a teal jumper and ready to take on the day.

“Good morning,” she said cheerily, pouring me a cup of coffee and handing me a granola bar. It was our breakfast staple.

My senses awoke when I sipped on my morning java, and I almost forgot the horrors that had kept me up all night. “You’re up early,” I said.

“You’re one to talk.”

“I have to study.”

“But you never wake up this early, even during midterms.”

I unwrapped the bar and took a bite. Not because I was hungry, but to buy myself time. We had lived together since freshman year, and she was attuned to my strict regime. I was walking on eggshells. One misstep and Amelie would figure out something was wrong.

I would have confided in her if she weren’t so fiercely protective. There was a big chance she would report Professor Maxwell to the administrators, and I couldn’t let that happen.

“Consider today an anomaly.” I flashed her my brightest smile, packing my tote bag with books and pens. “I’m heading to Bageltown to study with

Poppy. Wanna come?" I asked, hoping it would distract her enough to drop the topic.

"Sure. I don't have class till noon."

We descended the stairs to exit the building, stepping into the lively energy of the campus mall. The building with "Bageltown" engraved on the side was past the manicured gardens. Just as we reached our destination, I caught a flicker of movement in my peripheral vision. I could have sworn I saw a figure with dirty-blond hair and a muscular build.

Turning slowly, I watched students rushing off to their early morning classes.

Amelie gave me a gentle nudge and a questioning look because I had stopped short in front of the café. Shaking my head, I stepped inside and tried to dismiss the unsettling feeling.

It was a figment of my imagination, I told myself. I had been on edge since yesterday, that was all. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling of being watched.

A wave of relief washed over me when I spotted Poppy in her signature all-black ensemble. Her presence was familiar and comforting. She had claimed a table far away from everyone else, exuding an unmistakable aura that warned others to keep their distance.

"Morning," I greeted, dropping my bag on the chair opposite her.

"Morning, Poppy!" Amelie added cheerfully.

Poppy barely acknowledged us, glancing up briefly before returning to her book on microfinance.

Amelie didn't take the dismissal personally as she had become quite desensitized to Poppy's ways. "I'm going to place our orders." She didn't ask me what I wanted. We never looked at the menu and always opted for our usuals—an oat milk lavender latte for me and an almond chai for her. "Do you want anything?" she asked Poppy.

Poppy cut her another sharp glance. With a shrug, Amelie made her way to the counter.

I fixed Poppy with a pointed look. "You could be a little nicer to my roommate."

She didn't lift her eyes from her book. "You didn't mention she was coming."

"I thought you liked Amelie."

"She serves me no purpose."

My jaw dropped. “Poppy! You know how much I love Amelie.”

“Which is why I tolerate her.”

I snapped my mouth shut. To be fair, Poppy didn’t like anyone.

Tolerating was generally the best she could do, and I shouldn’t expect pleasantries.

I opened my laptop and pretended to work on my thesis, when in reality, my eyes were fixed blankly at the screen. As I sipped on my latte, I periodically closed my eyes, trying to block out the memories from yesterday. When I glanced up, Poppy was watching me intently.

“What’s going on with you?”

Here I thought my cousin wouldn’t interrogate me. My facade must be truly unconvincing if she saw right through me.

“She has been acting weird since yesterday,” Amelie chimed in.

Coughing, I dabbed the corner of my mouth with a napkin. “Why do you think I’m acting weird?”

Poppy studied me suspiciously. “You texted me before seven, which has never happened. You also showed up at my house early in the morning last weekend. Then, you forgot your regular patterns, and today, you didn’t rotate the cup three times before taking a sip. What gives?”

Nothing got past her.

Yes, I skipped my morning routine for the fourth day in a row. Ever since I lost my virginity to Professor Maxwell, the small things that seemed catastrophic ceased to matter. Years of therapy couldn’t control my compulsions, yet a tumble with my professor did the trick.

I was sick.

“I’m fine, guys.”

“I don’t believe you,” Amelie stated.

“Agreed,” Poppy echoed.

At least they were finally bonding over something.

They watched me like a hawk. I understood their need to protect me, but I couldn’t stand it right now. The minor interrogation had my heart racing, and I was on the verge of a breakdown. I was a terrible liar and was scared shitless that I might end up confessing to everything.

“Seriously, guys, I’m—”

“I have a problem.” A familiar fourth voice cut into our conversation, and I silently thanked the gods for it.

Sophie squeezed herself into the empty chair beside Poppy and slammed her purse down dramatically. Subtlety had never been her strong suit, and numerous eyes watched the loud blonde girl with cocktail rings.

Amelie rolled her eyes at Sophie's theatrics. There was no love lost between the two. She thought Sophie was brash, spoiled, and selfish. In turn, Sophie didn't take kindly to Amelie's hot-tempered nature.

"What's the big tragedy?" I asked.

"I'm organizing a threesome, and my third just backed out."

I nearly spat out my lavender latte, and Amelie's face turned crimson. Meanwhile, Poppy seemed amused.

Amelie did a slow clap. "Searching for a sex partner before eight. You've outdone yourself."

"I'm resourceful like that."

"Go away, Sophie. We're studying."

Sophie huffed. "I would think my friends would help me out when I have a problem."

"That's not a real problem, and we aren't friends," Amelie shot back.

"I was talking about Rose." Sophie peeked at Poppy between her lashes. "And Poppy."

I jabbed a finger at her. "Stop hitting on my cousin. She's too young for you."

"She's eighteen, and I didn't say anything." She glanced at Poppy again. "Unless you're interested?"

I shook my head with a small smile. Say what you want about Sophie, but her lack of filter could distract you from the worst things in the world. I almost forgot about being deflowered by my professor.

"Ignore her," Amelie told me. "It'll never happen."

Sophie grinned wickedly. "Why don't we let Poppy decide?"

Poppy was calculating something, I could tell by the way her jaw was set and her steady eyes watched Sophie. At long last, she said, "Let's discuss it over winter break."

Sophie made a face at Amelie. "See? Not everyone's a prude."

"I'm not a prude."

"Oh, yes, you are. You've been with, what, exactly one man your entire life?"

"It's better than soliciting people for a threesome before breakfast."

I let out a laugh, but the turmoil swirling inside me swiftly snuffed out any sincerity behind it. Perhaps being surrounded by people I loved could soothe the chaos inside me, and I could deal with my problems on a different day.

Sophie ignored Amelie and shamelessly flirted with my cousin, brazenly selling her on the idea of a threesome with some mystery man.

I wanted to interject. After all, Poppy was like my baby sister. But I suspected she was humoring Sophie because of a hidden agenda. Poppy could turn any situation to her favor; it was Sophie who should be on guard. Not to mention, I was hardly in the position to offer sex advice.

Just like that, *he* reentered my mind. The chatter from the group faded into a dull murmur, becoming indistinct noise. My mind had been scattered since yesterday. No matter what I did, my thoughts slipped back to our tryst.

Professor Maxwell's aggression.

The way he overtook my body.

His eyes that glinted with lust.

"She's so shameless," Amelie whispered. "I can't believe she's propositioning your cousin with a threesome right in front of you. Poppy's barely eighteen. Shouldn't we do something?"

"What?"

Amelie watched me with narrowed eyes. "Okay, seriously. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you acting so weird?"

"I've just been a little spacey. That's all."

"Hm."

"What were you saying about my cousin?" I asked to distract her.

"I was asking if we should rescue her from Sophie's clutches."

My lips curved. "I don't think Poppy's the one that needs rescuing." Sophie had no idea what she had gotten herself into.

Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of an oversized frame out of the corner of my eye, and my smile dropped. There were only two people on campus with such builds. My heart nearly exploded in my chest, and I stood up so quickly I was surprised my chair didn't knock over.

"Where're you going?" Amelie asked, frowning.

I glanced around the café. Professor Maxwell wasn't here. I must be imagining things like earlier. "I've got to make a call," I told her, needing some fresh air.

I grabbed my bag and headed outside the café...and collided right into a solid wall of muscles. I let out a muffled shriek and staggered back in shock. A possessive hand grabbed my elbow to steady me, the touch deceptively soft yet unmistakably firm.

"Morning."

My eyes widened in horror as I stared into the piercing blue eyes that had haunted me all night.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

ROSE

PROFESSOR MAXWELL's towering stature ensnared me. He had always been larger than life, but now, his presence was imposing to the point of suffocation.

Oh, God. I wasn't ready to face him. My eyes darted sideways, hoping to spot a familiar face. He wouldn't do anything to me out in the open and in broad daylight, right?

I did a counting down exercise in my head, one Dr. Harper had taught me, before opening my mouth. "Morning, Professor Maxwell."

He seemed amused. "Are you planning to call me 'Professor Maxwell' forever? I do have a first name, Rose. Start using it."

I shook my head. I couldn't do that. It would shatter any illusions of boundaries left between us.

He stepped forward, his gaze tracing my face before settling on my mouth. His eyelids drooped, as if recalling a particularly lewd memory about my lips. I would have moved back were it not for his ironclad hold on my elbow. Leaning closer, he said, "I've been inside you, and that's where you draw the line—being on a first-name basis? It'll be awkward to call out my last name when I have you on all fours."

My hand flew to my mouth, not expecting the vulgarity. We were in public!

I quickly brushed him off and took a step back. Noticing my unease, he dropped the curved smile. His intuition had always been on point, and he must be aware that I was beyond uncomfortable.

Professor Maxwell tapped his fingers against his thigh, a subtle rhythm signaling apprehension. If I wasn't mistaken, he was suddenly nervous, as though unsure whether his teasing or presence was being well received.

Odd.

He was always sure of himself.

He glanced at Bageltown, then back at me. "Have you had breakfast?" I nodded tentatively.

"Good." He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. "That's good."

An uncomfortable silence befell us. At least he didn't appear angry today. I thought he would be pissed at me for running away, but he seemed mellow. More so because he wore a casual gray jacket that hugged his broad shoulders and a plain gray T-shirt underneath. He also sported his black-rimmed specs with the blue diamond studs. I had a soft spot for his glasses because they made him more approachable. He almost seemed like a regular person with flaws, and I remembered he was just a few years older than me, and not some untouchable god.

"Miles mentioned that I've been acting differently," he said at long last. "I've been going home at reasonable hours. It doesn't feel as important to spend every waking moment at the lab."

I didn't understand what he was alluding to and merely nodded along.

"In fact, my entire team thinks I've changed, but in a good way."

This conversation felt oddly familiar to the one I had with Dr. Harper and my friends. They also said that I was acting differently, but it was a good thing. I wasn't obsessing over peculiar rituals, and he wasn't engaging in his workaholic habits. If I didn't know any better, I would think we were each other's cures.

"From what I have seen, you have changed, too. It seems we're good for each other."

How would he know that? The image of a dirty-blond-haired figure flashed across my mind. Perhaps it wasn't my imagination running wild this morning. Was he watching me?

"But something's still holding you back," he observed. "At first, I thought it was because I was your professor." His eyes softened. "But I get it now. It's your family."

My brow creased. Sure, our families hated each other. However, my concerns had little to do with them and everything to do with sleeping with the wrong brother.

“You’re worried about adding to the pile when they’re already angry,” he assessed.

“What?”

“Your adviser mentioned that your father found out you’d changed your major. You should have told me what happened,” he chided gently.

I had confided in my adviser about the fight with my father. It seemed she mentioned it to Professor Maxwell. He must have concluded that I’d ran away from him because things were tense at home, and I didn’t want to rock the boat more.

“This isn’t about Papa or my family.” This was about sleeping with the wrong man.

“Of course it is. Why else have you been on edge?”

I opened my mouth to set the record straight before realizing it was a bad idea. Professor Maxwell’s parents had favored Damon throughout their childhood. Being mistaken for his brother would strike a raw nerve and reopen old wounds. I couldn’t do that to him. No matter what had happened between us, I couldn’t shake the sadness I felt over his childhood. My heart went out to the lonely rich boy abandoned by his family.

I closed my mouth, and Professor Maxwell took it as acknowledgment that my family was the problem. “What did he say to you?” he asked.

Lots of things, but none of it had anything to do with my current dilemma.

“Is he trying to intimidate you into working for him?” he pressed.

I said nothing.

“I’ll take care of him if he doesn’t fall back in line,” he declared with an air of finality.

Take care of him?

Did he just threaten my father?

My concerned expression did nothing to deter his spiel. “Your father has some well-kept secrets that can ruin him if I make them public. One phone call, and he’ll never hold a position at Ambani Corps again. Just say the word.”

My heart started beating erratically. How long had he been keeping tabs on my family?

Papa had a few skeletons in his closet, I knew that. Men of his stature generally had some sordid secrets stashed away. What I didn’t expect was for Professor Maxwell to uncover them and blackmail him.

While we had a complicated relationship, Dev Ambani was still my father. How could Professor Maxwell casually discuss destroying him without so much as batting an eye?

He kept talking about different ways to sabotage my father, but I couldn't hear him. He was insane, I just hadn't realized it until now. I stared at him blankly. He was a completely different person from the supportive teacher who had helped me with my term paper. Professor Maxwell had a dangerous side, and he had given me a glimpse into his darkness. He didn't have morals, nor did he live by a code. There was no line he wouldn't cross if it accomplished his end goal.

He leveled me with a sharp look at my extended silence. "Rose. Say something."

I breathed heavily, my skin tingling with dread.

He stared at me for a long moment. "Fine. We'll deal with your father later. For now, give me your phone." He extended his hand, prying it out of my fingers.

His touch lingered. Electricity shot up and down my arm, my eyes widening at the intensity of it. Not only could I tolerate his touch, but I nearly melted under it. I never thought I could bear anyone touching me other than Damon, and that was only because he had made me feel safe when I was young.

I retracted my hand as if I had been electrocuted. What the hell was wrong with me? This man just threatened my family.

Professor Maxwell held up the phone to my face so it would unlock. When I glanced over, he was registering himself into my phone. He paused and frowned at something. My guess—he had figured out I had blocked his number.

If he was offended, he showed no inclination of it other than the small eye twitch. When I peeked at my screen next, he had unblocked himself. He handed the phone back to me. "Call me the next time your family gives you a hard time. Don't let me find out about it from your adviser." He paused before clarifying, "Call me the next time *anyone* gives you a hard time."

I nodded, hoping it would end the conversation.

It didn't.

He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a box that had *Cartier* on it. "Before I forget, I bought something for you."

I tried to make sense of my weird predicament. I slept with my professor, he yelled at me for running away, he threatened my family, he fucked me like a beast, and then, he bought me a gift.

Was he trying to bribe me so I wouldn't tell anyone about what he did in the lab?

I pushed the box away. "No, thank you."

The controlled stillness of his face was betrayed by the tautness in his jawline. He was unhappy with my reaction. "You don't know what it is."

He popped open the lid, revealing a set of heart-shaped sapphire earrings. The deep, vibrant blue shimmered, gleaming like frozen drops of the ocean. They were framed by a delicate halo of tiny, brilliant-cut diamonds, casting sparks of silver across the precious metal.

My eyelids flipped up to his glasses. His black frames had the same gems by the hinges. These earrings weren't sapphire, but blue diamonds like the ones on his glasses.

"I can't accept this," I told him.

His lips pressed into a thin line before he blew out an irritated breath. "Of course you will. I bought them for you."

My gaze dropped to the earrings and inadvertently found myself admiring them. Jewelry had never been a weakness of mine, I only wore them to complement my outfits. But the deep blue stones called to me like a siren's song. I couldn't explain the pull, only that they seemed to have been made for me. There was something peculiar about the gift, and the sentimental value behind the thought somehow exceeded the price tag. Perhaps he wasn't trying to buy me off, and this was a symbolic gesture.

Did he think of me as a romantic prospect?

No. That was impossible.

No one could beg Professor Maxwell. He hated everyone, particularly students who tried to seduce him. This was misplaced attraction, stemming from his curiosity over my scars and sexual inexperience.

I was merely surprised that his curiosity warranted such an expensive gift. Blue diamonds were exceptionally rare and unique. When I was young, my mom had bought me a pair of blue diamond stud earrings. They were barely half a carat, and it was still the most expensive thing I had owned. One carat could easily exceed one hundred thousand dollars and these must at least be ten carats. In fact, ten carats might be a conservative estimate. They were huge and drop-dead gorgeous.

I hovered over the box, admiring the stunning craftsmanship, before remembering myself. I closed the lid and pushed the box back. “I-I think, there has been a misunderstanding. What happened between us was a mistake.”

My voice was hushed in the bustling street, yet Professor Maxwell heard me loud and clear. “Excuse me?”

“W-what we did, it can’t happen again.”

His eyes suddenly turned dull and lifeless, but there was something else there—fury. “Why not?” he asked harshly, voice tinged with the familiar mask of anger I was beginning to recognize all too well.

A cold chill swept over my skin at his tone. My stomach tightened, bracing for impact, before remembering there was a modicum of safety in the public eye.

I let out a few shallow breaths and focused on the task at hand, except his ire was throwing me for a loop. He had never expressed interest in me until our drunken night on the boat when he found out I was a virgin. Perhaps it set me apart from other women he had been with. But his warped fascination with the intact hymen and scars had to end sooner or later. Setting our family rivalry aside, he was my professor—someone who could lose his life’s work for pursuing a student. Surely, he knew this wouldn’t amount to much.

“Rose!” My name cracked like a whip out of his lips. My silence made him lean forward and snap, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Since I couldn’t tell him that I mistook him for his twin, I decided on a different avenue. “I-I was drunk on the boat and made a terrible judgment call. This should have never happened.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

I looked down at my intertwined hands. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” He scoffed. “I jeopardized my career for you because you didn’t know how to hold your liquor,” he asked sardonically.

I shook my head. “I-I tried to clear things up. But you were so angry when I saw you next that I didn’t have the chance.”

“I don’t believe this.”

“Professor Maxwell—”

“Caden,” he corrected with a bark.

Oh God.

Everyone was staring at us now. I looked around, unsure if anyone recognized the famous scientist. I considered asking him to discuss the matter in private, then remembered what happened the last time we were alone. It only steeled my resolve to end things.

I kept my voice low. “I can’t call you that, you’re my professor.”

“That didn’t stop you on the boat. You made the first move, Rose—you kissed me.”

“You’re right. It was all my fault. You have no idea how much I admire you as a teacher and what your guidance has meant to me. I shouldn’t have done anything inappropriate. Can we please pretend that I didn’t and go back to how things were?”

“No fucking way.”

He towered over me, and my breath hitched. Memories from yesterday returned with a vengeance. I saw him in my mind—hovering above me, his expression unreadable, his presence overwhelming—as he took what he wanted without hesitation. Suddenly, I wanted to wrap my arms around myself and rock back and forth like a mental asylum patient.

He scared the shit out of me, and he had never been more threatening than he was now. My pulse drummed in my ears, each beat a warning, and I instinctively began backing away. His gaze locked on me like a predator tracking its prey, and he followed my retreating form. His footsteps approached me—measured, unhurried, but each one landed like a countdown.

I felt the oncoming panic attack even before it happened. The moment his hand closed around my elbow, the touch burning through the material of my sleeve, something inside me snapped, like a rubber band stretched too far.

“Don’t touch me!” The words tore out of my throat, raw and shaking. I violently wrenched my arm, muscles straining in his clutches. He had never seen me react this way, and it shocked him enough to loosen his grip. I used the window to rip out of his hold, the sudden release stinging my skin where his hand had been.

For one taut, endless second, he didn’t move. The tension between us was coiling, seething. The hurt showed on his face in a fleeting glassiness before he forced his expression into neutrality.

When he stepped forward again, I flung both hands up as if they could shield me from the weight of him. The air around me thickened, pressing

against my ribs until I could barely breathe.

“Rose—”

“Please, please stay away from me.” My voice cracked. “Please don’t touch me. I can’t bear to be touched.” With that, I turned and fled, my shoes scraping against the concrete as I ran, every step fueled by the desperate need to put as much distance between us as my legs could carry.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

ROSE

Present



MY EYES WERE FIXED on the mirror, admiring the smoldering eye makeup and hair that had been teased and curled to perfection. To my hairstylist's chagrin, I refrained from touching the hair and ruining her hard work, though my fingers twitched with the nervous urge to do just that. To keep my hands busy, I reached for the assorted fruit bowl on the vanity table. Refreshing sweetness flooded my mouth as I bit into a slice of watermelon and studied my reflection. While the hair and makeup made me look like a vixen, it was the heart-shaped blue diamonds in my earlobes that stole the show.

Maria, my hairstylist, smiled when she caught me ogling the gift from Caden. "Dr. Maxwell has really good taste. The earrings are beautiful."

"They are," I agreed, tossing the watermelon shell.

Tonight was an important event—the Captain's Welcome Reception.

After the whole Natasha incident, I didn't care to interact with other passengers. Caden seemed content with the idea, and other than a tour of his grandiose boat, we had kept to ourselves for the last few days. This was the first and only social event Caden had insisted on attending. Given his general distaste for other human beings, I realized this event must be highly

beneficial to his career. This cruise seemed to revolve around a similar theme—money and power. Wealthy elites booked this cruise under the guise of a family vacation to make deals beside the pool instead of the boardroom. It was a two-for-one deal. Placate their neglected wives and children with a vacation, while they schmoozed with dignitaries from around the world. Wealthy heirs and heiresses sailed away for a fun time, knowing full well they would only be in the company of the upper one percent. Some were looking for rich husbands, others were networking for new opportunities, and most were looking to make connections that'd be beneficial down the line. All the guests were invited to the grand ballroom tonight to flex their money, ego, and power. I knew I had to be on my best behavior the moment Caden made Maria close the salon for the whole works—facial, hair, makeup, nails, and even jewelry.

My gaze fleeted from the earrings to Caden in the mirror. He leaned against the salon's reception desk, swarmed by an army of minions. My skin prickled with awareness as his eyes caught mine in the reflection. After my showdown with Natasha, Caden had stuck to me like glue. Work had piled up, and his staff had tracked him down to the spa. They updated him on numerous matters about tonight's event and urged him to return the important phone calls he had been ignoring. Unfortunately for them, his attention sliced through their fluttering concerns, locking on me like a laser. He gave them vague, distracted replies, while the weight of his attention caressed me like a physical touch from across the room.

Caden and I stared at each other in the mirror until Amelie drew my attention away. She leaned over, her face next to mine. "You look so beautiful, Rose." She grabbed both my shoulders and squeezed, pressing her cheek against mine for an air-kiss.

"Amelie," Caden barked, shooting daggers at the nurse with his eyes. "Did you come here to update me about my messages or to interrupt Rose's appointment?" He didn't like it when I was intimate with anyone else, even if it was in a non-sexual manner. He particularly disliked it when others pulled my attention away from him.

Amelie straightened. "Sorry, Dr. Maxwell. There were forty-eight phone calls for you today. I took detailed messages for each one."

My eyes followed Amelie as she marched to Caden with a clipboard in her hands. She didn't know that I remembered more than I let on. Amelie was my friend throughout college, and a roommate, if I remembered

correctly. For whatever reason, she was going along with this elaborate charade, though she had nothing to gain by lying. Perhaps she enjoyed that I no longer flinched when she dolled me up or showed me warmth with hugs whenever Caden wasn't around to intercept it. I had almost become curious about how long she'd keep up the ruse. I teased her mercilessly with random snippets of our past—handing her a granola bar for breakfast or randomly ordering her an almond chai latte. She tensed whenever I let the past slip into our present, a frozen smile plastered to her face.

I never disclosed exactly how much I remembered. For some reason, it felt important that both Caden and Amelie came clean to me on their own. Although Caden's reasons for lying seemed more nuanced, these earrings were evidence of it. Once more, I glanced in the mirror to appreciate the hypnotic blue gems.

Caden's lips curled with self-satisfaction when he caught me admiring his gift, and I confirmed the lurking suspicion—he had gifted me these earrings before, but I didn't accept them. There was something familiar about them when Maria placed the box on the vanity table with a casual, "Dr. Maxwell chose your jewelry for the Captain's Reception tonight."

When I saw the blue diamond hearts, I realized the glasses he occasionally wore were adorned with the same gems. It jogged a vague recollection of an argument with Caden, where I had rejected the piece of jewelry and him along with it. I recalled spouting lame excuses for my heartless behavior, and I was positive all of them were made up.

Despite the ruthless rejection, I never gave Caden the decency of a truthful explanation, nor could I remember it. I couldn't blame him for wanting to start over with a clean slate when the opportunity presented itself. To be honest, I wanted the same. I fell halfway in love with him on the day he found me on this boat. But now, every corner of my heart had his name etched on it. For the life of me, I couldn't recall why I had spurned him in my previous life when the pull between us was so magnetic.

My mind had been split between my old memories and my new feelings. Unable to understand the conflicting emotions, I'd decided to separate myself into two parallel selves. My former self—let's call her Rose A—had entirely different values and logic than I—Rose B. I tried in vain to make sense of my predecessor's decisions.

According to the scraps of memory resurfacing at odd moments, the interactions with Professor Maxwell were the highlight of Rose A's black-

and-white days. He dismissed other students, refusing to hold office hours. Yet he lingered with her well after class, discussing theories beyond the curriculum, making her feel seen in ways no one else had. He noticed she was a slow note taker and implemented the use of laptops during lectures for her sake. While others seemed irritated by her inability to speak at will, he practiced patience and never rushed her responses. He was attuned to her needs and went to great lengths to accommodate her idiosyncrasies. Each fragmented memory left me astounded by the depth of her feelings for him. Spurning his advances made no sense. She was about to graduate; it shouldn't have mattered *that* much if Caden was her professor.

I could only speculate about her choices with a weak theory. While I was pathetically infatuated by Caden, his attention might have destabilized Rose A. The more he focused on her, the more she viewed him as a threat. My heart ached at the thought. In the grainy footage of recollection, I saw her retreating to the sidelines and living vicariously through others. Each flash of her past revolved around stilted conversations, refusal to make eye contact, avoiding attention, and a general distaste for intimacy. Caden was the spotlight that burned too bright. Anyone near him was dragged to the limelight, whether they wanted it or not. The thought of Rose A under such exposure made my stomach twist. Perhaps it was both self-preservation and self-sabotage that made her reject Caden. It was the only way she knew how to survive.

Therefore, I could rationalize Caden's decision to withhold the truth. It didn't work out between us the first time around. When I stumbled onto his boat, it must have been tempting to rewrite the narrative without Rose A's insecurities standing in the way.

"Why didn't you wear the jewelry I bought for you?" Caden asked out of the blue.

Everyone in the room turned to look at me.

My hands instinctively flew to my earlobes. The blue diamonds were still in place. "I did."

"The earrings are part of a set."

"Oh."

My eyes skimmed the velvet pouch Maria had placed on the large vanity table. I never got around to opening it. Peeking inside, I realized there was a matching pendant, bracelet, and cocktail ring. I gawked at the set, mouth wide open. The gorgeous teardrop blue diamond hung off a

platinum chain. Keeping with the theme, the ring was an oval-shaped blue diamond with a halo of white diamonds, and the tennis bracelet had a mound of blue diamonds studded into the platinum.

“They’re all so beautiful,” I breathed, convinced I had never laid eyes on anything so precious.

“Put them on,” he ordered, voice husky and raw.

All eyes remained on me as I shakily unclasped the bracelet. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t look away from Caden’s reflection in the mirror.

We finally arrived in the Bahamas, and it seemed he had visited a jewelry store on the mainland. The people from tonight must be royalty if the heavy diamonds dragging my earlobes down weren’t good enough, and I needed to be covered in gems to impress them.

The gesture was magnanimous; he went out of his way to match every piece of jewelry to the earrings. It didn’t slip my mind that I had been reaping the benefits of being Rose A, without suffering the trauma that had so thoroughly cauterized her heart. The last few days had been magical as Caden showed me how it was always meant to be between us. Room service for breakfast. Lunch on his terrace overlooking the water. Dinner on his private deck with a sunset view. We spent the rest of the time lounging and swimming in his private pool, adjacent to the presidential suite. Conversations flew naturally between us, followed by comfortable silence. Caden was irresistible, brilliant and witty, and equal parts protective and possessive, though something always seemed to keep him tethered to the edge.

We only left our bubble once we docked in the Bahamas. The marina was slick with humidity, the air heavy with the scents of diesel and frying conch. Before I could reacclimate to solid ground, Caden hauled me from the slip to an international clinic on the edge of the tourist district for a full-body MRI and numerous other tests. He was a man on a mission.

After the imaging, I overheard him asking the doctor whether I was cleared for sex. They said the X-rays didn’t show any fractures, but it was best to wait for the MRI results.

His careful maneuvering to keep his weight off my pelvis whenever he went down on me finally made sense. I also realized why he had been so tightly wound. All week, Caden had exercised restraint against this elusive sex, and it was affecting him. The restless, predatory energy lingered in everyday activities, like whenever he held me against his chest and inhaled

my hair with a shuddering breath, or when I caught him staring at me like he was at the end of his rope. I felt myself drawn in by the same gravity, my own hunger building around the unknown.

The embargo might finally be lifted, and the last stretch was the hardest. Throughout the day, I had felt the atmospheric pressure inside Caden mount slowly, and now, the tension between us was about to burst. The anticipation was a living, breathing thing, monstrous in its appetite. The restraint made him almost feral. When Amelie asked him to sign a document, he nearly ripped the clipboard out of her hands and scribbled on the paper before thrusting it back at her. His eyes never left my face as I finally snapped the clasp in place.

Decorating your body with precious jewels made a girl hungry, and I picked up a piece of fruit. Caden's eyes flicked between my hand and my mouth.

Hungry eyes watched my every move as I bit into the grape. The dam broke the moment juice dribbled onto my bottom lip and chin.

“Everyone out!” he suddenly shouted, his voice shaking.

The staff, who had been hounding him with requests, froze. Sensing his radioactive energy, they thought it wise to obey. Marie dropped the comb in her hand, hung her head, and cleared out. Amelie hesitated for a fraction of a second and gave me a cursory glance before slipping out with the rest of the team.

The door shut softly, leaving us alone in the spa. Wiping the excess juice off my chin, I turned to face him.

“I want to see you in the jewelry. Now.”

With lightning speed, I fumbled with the tiny clasp of the pendant until the hook slid into place. I slipped on the ring next, absentmindedly trying it on different fingers until I found one that fit.

Grinning, I rose to my feet and slowly turned for him.

“You misunderstood.” The way he spoke—slow, unhurried, as if the entire world had frozen except for the two of us—sent a chill through me. “I want to see you in *only* the jewelry.”

My mind scrambled to process his words, but a single glance at his face told me he was serious. His eyes were glazed over with lust so acute that it frightened and thrilled me all at once. He leaned back against the reception desk, arms folded with deliberate patience, waiting for my next move.

With trembling hands, I pulled at the belt of my spa robe and slid the plush cotton off my shoulders. I pushed my underwear down my hips, letting them drop to the floor. A few days with Caden, and I had forgotten all about my scars. It was impossible to be insecure when he kissed, licked, and worshipped each one every night.

His gaze traced a path over my skin, lingering on the pendant at my throat and the hollow of my neck, the earrings glittering in my ears, the ring on my finger, and the bracelet on my wrist. The air between us thickened, even my own breath felt too loud in the silence he had created.

“I can never seem to keep myself in check when I’m around you. I don’t know if I can wait for the MRI clearance.”

I shivered at his words. I loved having this effect on him, where he sounded on the brink of losing it. “How long before the results are in?” I asked breathlessly.

“A few hours.”

“It’s a good thing we’re going to a party then. It’s the perfect distraction.”

His lips curl into a hungry grin. “I can think of a better distraction.”

“Such as?”

“Your hands.” He took a step forward. “Your mouth.” Another step.

My eyes dropped to his tented pants. “What about them?”

“They’re great substitutes while I wait for the real thing.”

Every night, he used his fingers, mouth, and his “tongue massages” to make me see God. The idea that I could do the same with mine made my chest flutter. My gaze was glued to his pants, and his body’s involuntary response beneath the fabric.

“I-I don’t know how to...” I admitted awkwardly. I wanted to please him, but I knew my inexperience stood in the way. “You’ll have to show me.”

Something unholy ignited behind his eyes, and when he charged toward me with purpose, the sheer energy of it sent me backward, with my ass landing on the vanity chair.

Not knowing what else to do, I reached into the fruit bowl for a slice of watermelon. My teeth sank into the light, crisp flesh of the fruit as I watched his purposeful strides, mesmerized. The sweet, refreshing juice coated my tongue at the same time Caden reached me. He leaned down and grabbed the nape of my neck, pulling me into a fierce kiss. The syrupy

sweetness on my tongue tangled with his heated one. He tasted traces of the watermelon juice with a lewd, mouthed kiss, greedily slurping it down his own throat. It was the most erotic way I had ever shared a piece of fruit, and I felt discombobulated by the time he let me go.

“Undo my pants.” He straightened, getting right to the point.

My eyes widened, and he sensed my nervousness. He reached out to thread his fingers through my hair. The slight tenderness in his raw gaze made my chest tighten.

“I need you, Rose,” he said, voice thick with desire.

My fingers fumbled with his belt buckle, then the buttons of his pants. I tugged down his boxers, revealing his erection straining toward his stomach. I swallowed when beads of liquid gathered at the tip. The instinctive urge to touch and taste it clawed at me.

“Touch me, baby,” he murmured.

Reaching down, he covered my hand with his, guiding me to take his big, hard dick in my hands. A low groan reverberated in his throat when he curled my fingers around the base. With his head tilted backward, he moved my hand up and down his length. The way he kept his hand atop mine, coaxing the motion, made the rhythm click into place. Up and then down—slowly at first, then faster. I kept going as he removed his hand.

I saw his jaw clench and his breath catch.

“You’re driving me fucking crazy.” His voice was a low rasp, the words torn from him as if they hurt to say.

The blue diamond glinted on my finger, catching the light each time I brought my hand to the tip and back again. I was mesmerized by the transformation, the way his body tensed, his muscles flexing with every stroke.

“I’m about to come on your face and chest.” His voice, usually so controlled and measured, was guttural and ragged around the edges. “Do you remember what happens when a man comes?”

He was panting from the effort of keeping himself in check, his body vibrating with the tension of a held-back wave. The muscles of his abdomen were rigid and defined, giving away how close he was to unraveling.

“I think you’re about to remind me,” I whispered.

“It’ll make a mess of your hair and makeup.”

“Maria will be displeased if you destroy her hard work.” The poor stylist had spent hours on my hair and makeup.

“Then put your mouth on me and swallow my cum instead.”

Whether he meant to or not, he looked sexy as fuck making dirty demands. I pressed my lips together, willing my voice to stay steady. “My mouth?”

“Do you like it when I use mine to make you come?”

Oh God, yes.

“It’s torture holding back from you,” he said hoarsely. “If I can’t fuck you right now, let me fuck your mouth instead. Can you do that for me, baby?”

I didn’t understand everything he said but nodded regardless. I tentatively leaned forward and took the head of his dick between my lips. He let out an involuntary sound. He tasted clean and faintly salty, the skin hot beneath the smooth tautness. I pulled back, swirling my tongue experimentally, then took him deeper, feeling the heavy weight press past my lips.

Both his hands speared through my hair and held me above my ears, anchoring himself while he told me what he liked.

“Lap the tip with your tongue. Yeah, like that. Now swirl it around my cock. Get it wet.

“Cup my balls.

“Squeeze tighter.

“Just like that.”

I obeyed each command, flicking my tongue over the swollen head, tracing the sensitive ridge until his hips jerked. I became bolder, flattening my tongue and sliding it from tip to root, then back again, feeling every vein and curve and pulse.

He released my hair out of the blue, hooked his hands beneath my underarms, and hoisted me onto the vanity table. He moved the fruit bowl and jewelry boxes out of the way.

“Whoa. What are you doing?”

He didn’t respond, turning me sideways so my legs dangled off the edge. All the blood rushed to my head when he stretched me out on my back until I was lying flat, my head hanging off the opposite side.

The dizzying lightness made me feel weightless. Before I could comprehend his motivation, he stepped forward and plunged himself back into my mouth without warning.

“Fuck, yeah,” he growled. He grabbed the edges of the table, roaring and grunting uncontrollably. “You are killing me.”

My entire world narrowed to the obscene fullness of his dick in my mouth, the rigid line of his body straining over me, and the wild, animalistic noises he made when I did exactly as he instructed.

“Suck me harder. That’s it, baby. Feels so fucking good.” He sounded like a madman. “Don’t stop.”

The slick wetness between my thighs told me that I was enjoying his response as much as he was enjoying my mouth. There was something powerful in this man’s response to my touch.

A strangled whimper caught in my throat when he leaned over, sliding more of himself inside my mouth. I barely had time to process the new fullness before his fingers slid over my areola. He tugged at my nipples, gently at first, rougher as he continued.

“Your mouth feels so good.” His voice was strangled around a groan as his fingers drifted south.

I arched my back when he slid his fingers inside my soaking wet warmth. His dick throbbed in my mouth, and I moaned as his fingers pumped in and out of me.

“You’re soaked, baby,” he gritted, moving his fingers faster.

He leveraged every inch of his considerable height to lean over and bury his head between my thighs. The movement pressed his dick farther into my mouth. My body was stretched between the point of his mouth on my sex and the unyielding pressure of his cock in my mouth, with no escape or no air, only the overwhelming sensation of being conquered from both sides. But I couldn’t focus on gulping down air when his tongue found my clit.

He alternated between broad, flattening strokes and ruthless flicks. He had never tasted me like this before, from this angle. And certainly not while I hung upside down and his dick choked my mouth.

The air in my lungs thinned to a desperate trickle, but I kept my lips tightly wound around his shaft. There was not much more I could do as he was in complete control now, pumping in and out of me with brutal thrusts, while drawing pathetic whimpers out of me with his tongue.

His tongue moved faster, harder, unrelenting, until my thighs threatened to snap closed around his skull. But he forced them wider and found a

rhythm. Tongue, then suction, then a bite, then tongue again. It was exquisite torture, and every second ratcheted the tension in my body higher.

The orgasm hit me fast and unexpectedly, and I screamed around his dick. My legs spasmed, my hands scrabbled blindly for purchase, and for a split second, I thought I might black out. I tried to yank myself off his cock, but he was fast to react. Before I could move my face, he collared my neck with a hand around my throat, forcing me to hold still and keep his dick rooted in my mouth.

“Open your throat and take me deeper,” he growled against my sex, pushing his dick farther into my mouth.

He tilted my head so he could go deeper and down my throat. Instead of panicking about when the oxygen would run out, I forced myself to surrender. My pussy spasmed around his tongue, drenching his face, and my mouth stretched around his dick.

He pulled back and replaced his tongue with his fingers. Each thrust of his dick pumping into my mouth synced with the aftershocks of my climax from his hand massaging my sex. He picked up the pace, driven purely by a primal instinct. When he saw tears prickling my eyes, he stroked my hair.

“I’m almost done, baby.”

I tried to breathe through my nose and control my gag reflex. I wanted to do this for him and didn’t want to tap out.

“Just a little longer,” he grunted with excruciating effort.

His hand cinched tighter around my throat—possessive and savage—thrusting deeper into my mouth, farther and harder than I imagined possible. The motion was relentless; he displayed no softness, only the single-minded goal to finish. I realized exactly what he needed; I had become a vessel to be conquered and filled. Each time the swollen tip battered the back of my throat, I felt the pulse of his need. The hand at my neck squeezed harder, then let go, and then returned, alternating between blocking off my air and letting me breathe.

When he finally released my neck altogether, his hands were white-knuckled on the edge of the vanity as he braced himself. His eyes rolled up and then crashed back open, fixing me with a wild, unseeing stare. I watched his body tense, every muscle and tendon pulled taut like wire, until I sensed the exact instant he careened over the edge. His dick jerked and throbbed in my mouth, and he threw back his head as his release tore through him.

“Fuck! Fuck!” he growled.

The guttural sounds he made were raw. I finally understood what he meant when he said coming on my face would make a mess. The taste of him was fierce and hot, sliding down my throat with violent force. My throat contracted as I swallowed, and slowly, I tried to pull away.

He grabbed my cheeks. “Not yet, baby. Don’t stop.” He held on until I began sucking him again.

He held himself above me and stared down at the sight of himself still buried in my mouth. He pumped until the last drop flooded the back of my throat with shuddering pulses, his hips barely able to resist the urge to keep thrusting.

By the time he pulled out of my mouth, my muscles gave out. He cupped my face, guiding me to a seated position. He lifted me in his arms and sat on the vanity chair with me in his lap.

“That was fucking incredible.”

His face, usually so composed, was transfixed on my mouth, as if trying to memorize this moment forever. In the silence between us, I clocked another realization about our past relationship—I had never done that for him before.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE

ROSE

I TRIED to fix some of the damage Caden had done while he zipped up my silver-tinted dress. Maria would be displeased if she knew of the damage Caden's handiwork had inflicted on my hair and lipstick while he was thrusting himself inside my mouth. The thought quickly dissipated when he kneeled to help me into my pumps and strapped them on. There was something immensely sexy when someone as fierce as Caden acted like a caretaker.

He stood, pulling out his phone when it buzzed. It had been functional since we docked in the Bahamas, which meant more phone calls on top of the ones he received via the cruise's landline. Whoever texted him immediately fouled his good mood.

His lips thinned. "Let's go."

I smiled nervously. "Er. Sure. Just give me a second. Maria had a purse for me. It was here, somewhere."

"You don't need it."

Caden grabbed my hand and led me out of the salon. Impatient energy radiated from him, unsettling me. Something about his urgent footsteps niggled at the back of my mind.

Although he prided himself on being a recluse, Caden had been oddly invested in this gala, personally overseeing all the arrangements. When I pointed out the discrepancy, he claimed he needed to solidify a few partnerships for a new venture. The explanation had been sound. The guests on the ship were moguls, industrialists, and dignitaries from around the

world with connections to supplies, contracts, and labor to support any business deal.

It wasn't until we reached the other side of the boat, where the party was being held, that the modicum of unease turned into agitation. Caden's pace had increased. As we crossed into an empty corridor, I found Linda at the far end of it, molding herself into the wall. She did it every time I caught her trailing me. Clearly, she had been instructed to keep an eye on me while allowing us privacy. But my pace slowed when I saw a second guard. Something felt off the closer we got to the entrance.

Subconsciously, I started backing away when we reached the ballroom door. My escape was quickly halted when Caden's fingers clamped around my wrist like a vise.

"Caden," I started uncertainly. "P-perhaps I shouldn't go to the gala."

His face turned to stone as he dragged me toward the large wooden doors. "Tonight's important. And I'm sure you're tired of being cooped up."

While I had been excited about attending a real party, something about Caden's accelerated steps felt like a trap. He was never excited to socialize, so what was up with the fervent enthusiasm?

"Why don't you go by yourself?"

"Your attendance is nonnegotiable, Rose." He only called me Rose when he was serious or angry.

My pulse hammered against my throat like a prisoner desperate to escape. His grip tightened as he pulled me toward the imposing double doors. I was as stiff as a board in his arms as two security personnel pulled the doors open with deferential nods.

My paranoia disappeared the moment I crossed the arched doorway. The lavishness of the ballroom hit me like a slap. I halted at the second-story gallery overlooking the grand ballroom downstairs. A chandelier hung suspended like a frozen explosion of crystal, splintering light across the sea of silks and tailored suits below. White-jacketed servers slipped between conversations, their trays full of bubbling champagne. Cream walls climbed toward the ceiling, their surfaces etched with silver filigree that seemed almost alive in the shifting light. Time itself loomed large, and a clock face dominated the wall in the middle of the split staircases, watching over everything. The place looked like it had been plucked from some aristocratic past.

Caden hurried me down the steps. When we landed at the bottom of the staircases, the room fell silent at our arrival. The weight of a hundred stares prickled against my skin. Every guest, staff, and crew member was in attendance tonight, and it seemed they'd been waiting for Caden's arrival with bated breath. Guests observed us over their dinner tables set with military precision.

Caden barreled through the crowd, his grip on my hand unyielding as he dragged me behind him. Conversations died around us as he dismissively sliced through the various social clusters. Plastering what I hoped was an apologetic smile across my face, I squeezed his hand to ease up. But he kept up the relentless pace. What was with him tonight?

"Isn't that the stowaway girl?" A woman's voice sliced through the murmurs like a stiletto heel on marble.

"Yeah, that's the homeless girl."

"Natasha said she was out hooking on the streets for drugs."

The magic of the evening vanished in an instant. My stomach plummeted as if I'd missed a step. However, Caden didn't hear the rumors, his single-minded attention was on something at the far end of the room. I chanced a glance around my surroundings and was hit by scrutinizing eyes. My cheeks burned hot when I caught sight of manicured fingers pressed against glossy lips, ice cubes clinking against crystal as women gossiped about me. Men in tailored suits paused mid-conversation, their judgmental eyebrows raised in my direction.

Sweat prickled along my hairline when I recognized the faces Amelie and the beauty team had pointed out from the safety of my suite window. The bachelorette group vying for Caden's attention watched me scornfully. Natasha was at the far corner, silently fuming. Despite dressing me to the nines and showering me in diamonds, Caden couldn't stop these people from figuring out I was uncouth. I didn't have, nor could I recall, Rose A's subtle class and sophistication to carry a conversation with this crowd and disprove their vile theories.

But Caden's increasing eagerness over tonight's event made me vow not to fuck this up for him. I deliberately kept my gaze fixed on his back until we stopped in front of an older gentleman with salt-and-pepper hair and a matching beard.

"Dr. Maxwell." He shook Caden's hand. "Finally."

With a hand on my lower back, Caden pulled me to his side. “Rose, this is Marcus, the captain of the boat.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

His kind eyes lit up with excitement. “So, you’re the stowaway that snuck into my boat?”

“My boat,” Caden corrected instantaneously.

“Er. Yeah.” I flushed, though I didn’t detect any malicious intent in his tone.

The captain chuckled. “I appreciate a daring spirit. You’re going to have to tell me how you dodged my security.”

Before I could open my mouth, a man slapped a hand over Caden’s shoulder. I gasped. No one would make such a bold move unless they were exponentially confident in their social standing.

I glanced at the offender and found myself staring into a bottomless void. A man with impossibly dark eyes studied me curiously. He wore a black tux, which fit his six-foot-three frame like a glove. His dark hair was styled back, though pieces fell over his eyes. Everything about him screamed old money.

My God, he was beautiful.

Instead of sending the man sprawling on the floor like I half expected, Caden acknowledged him. “Cavendish.”

“Great to see you, Maxwell. I was starting to think you wouldn’t come out of your room this entire cruise.” The man glanced from Caden to me with amusement. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your beautiful date?”

Caden’s eye twitched. “This is Rose.”

“Nice to meet you, Rose. I’m Kai Cavendish.” He extended a hand with the sort of confidence you would expect out of royalty. Slow, deliberate, and methodical.

I went to shake his hand, but Caden roped my fingers with his. He seemed unruffled, though I knew better. Caden was displeased that I had entertained the minor invitation for physical touch. I could tell by his death grip.

Instead of being offended by the deliberate snub, Kai chuckled.

“How do you know each other?” I asked to dissuade the tension, though both men seemed perfectly at ease with the awkward exchange.

“Boarding school,” Caden said dismissively.

“In case you’re wondering, he was just as much a grouch back then,” Kai said. “Which brings me to ask, how did such a pretty girl end up with a man like him? There are other options, you know?” he said, laying it on thick.

The insinuation was crystal clear, though I knew Kai wasn’t interested in me. I recognized the hollow flattery in his smile. He wanted to provoke Caden for some unknown reason and had identified me as the trigger to poke the bear. Caden’s steely glare might as well light Kai on fire, his low growl sounding like a warning.

“Are you free tomorrow?” Kai asked me.

“Do you want to spend the rest of your vacation in the brig, Cavendish?”

Kai wasn’t bothered by Caden’s threat. “Just blink twice if that’s a yes.”

The captain sensed the escalating tension and stepped in. “Gentlemen, we have all night to catch up with old friends. For now, we should start the gala.”

“Hasn’t the gala already started?” I looked around at the free-flowing alcohol and trays of appetizers. My nose sniffed the air like a cartoon character when I saw a platter of mushrooms stuffed with melted cheese. The server disappeared before I could grab his attention.

Marcus shook his head. “I have a strict tradition for my Captain’s Receptions. Every gala starts with a first dance. Call it superstition, but I’ve never had a ship go down on my watch.”

My face dimmed when another waitstaff member walked by with risotto balls. He was too far away for me to grab his attention.

“And the dance is always led by the hosts or one of our VIP guests.”

Their conversation was a dull hum in the background as I scouted for more servers with silver trays. That was until Kai extended his hand toward me, his palm facing up. “I’m one of the VIP guests. May I have this dance?”

Mischiefous eyes peered at me, and I immediately recoiled. It was one thing to flirt with me, but a dance? Did he have a death wish?

Caden’s reaction was immediate. He grabbed the lapel of Kai’s tux. It was subtle enough that others wouldn’t notice unless they were paying attention, but aggressive enough to get the point across. His other hand, still laced with mine, pulled me behind him. “Want to keep that hand, Cavendish?”

My wide eyes moved between them. Kai wasn't vexed and gracefully shrugged out of Caden's hold.

"Worth a shot." He smoothed out his jacket.

"Tread carefully." Caden's silky voice spoke volumes.

"Aren't we sensitive." Kai seemed pleased that he had gotten under Caden's skin.

The two men went back and forth with a few more rebukes. I was so distracted by them that I missed yet another server with hors d'oeuvres. With his seething glare still fixed on Kai, Caden tracked someone out of the corner of his eye and summoned them with the flick of his wrist. I rose to my tippy-toes to see who had caught his attention and was delighted to see him beckoning a server. When the waiter reached us, Caden nudged his head toward me. The man materialized at my side, and I hastily accepted his offered napkin and grabbed a lollipop chicken. My favorite. The crispy skin was glazed to perfection, and I longingly stared at the tray, knowing I could easily eat ten more. However, that would be inappropriate at such a fancy party, and I was determined not to embarrass Caden.

When the server tried to leave, Caden said, "Leave the tray."

The man seemed confused by the unusual request, but he knew that his temperamental boss didn't like to repeat himself. "Of course, sir."

Ecstasy burst in my chest when he dropped the entire tray on the cocktail table beside me. Grabbing a shaved bone, I lifted a piece of lollipop chicken to my mouth. There was a slight twitch in Caden's lips when I closed my eyes, though he still hadn't released Kai from his death glare. Mouthwatering crispy skin melted onto my tongue as my gaze, full of suspense, bounced between the two men.

Their verbal rebuttals had turned into a silent battle of wills. I could almost discern their glares. Caden seemed to be saying, *Don't push me when it comes to her*. Kai was saying something to the extent of, *You deserve to be fucked with, asshole*.

Marcus eyed them and coughed uncomfortably. When that didn't garner a reaction, he grabbed the nearby mic. His voice boomed through the speakers. "Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Captain's Gala. Are you having fun tonight?"

The announcement was a wise distraction as the crowd turned toward us and cheered. The glaring contest ended, and I quickly pulled Caden away while Marcus thanked the guests for joining the cruise and made a few

opening remarks. I redirected Caden's attention to the delicious tray of chicken. His lips quirked when I offered him a piece, though he shook his head. I shrugged and resumed eating, only to find him watching me as if I were the most fascinating thing in the world.

After his bad mood seeped out, I asked, "What's going on between you and that guy, Kai?"

Caden watched me for a moment. "A difference of opinion."

"Over?"

He weighed his words carefully. "I provided financial assistance to someone who had done me a favor. Cavendish wasn't thrilled about it."

"Why would he care if you gave someone money?"

"He was hoping to bankrupt this person and had specifically asked me not to get involved."

Christ! Rich people and their twisted games. Kai was trying to rile Caden up just for helping someone.

I glossed over Kai. What an asshole. Kai grabbed a champagne flute from one of the servers and took a deliberate sip, though I noticed his eyes peered over his cup. The move was discreet but so concentrated that I stopped eating. I followed his gaze until it landed on a familiar face. Amelie was chatting with a group of guests near the bar. For a moment, I was struck by her beauty all over again. It was the first time I had seen her out of her scrubs, her long dark strands swaying around her blue mermaid dress. Her Middle Eastern features stood out prominently with her shapely brows, almond eyes, and deep golden skin. I wasn't surprised Kai was staring at Amelie. She was probably the most beautiful woman here. The intensity behind his stare merely took me aback.

My attention returned to Marcus as he introduced the crew responsible for onboard hospitality and gave us a brief history of the boat's construction. There was pride in his voice. He concluded his spiel by extending his hand toward me and Caden. "I would now like to invite our host to kick off this gala with the first dance."

My lips were around a piece of chicken when the spotlight fell on us, and every pair of eyes was on me. There was no warning, only mortification.

Caden didn't miss a beat. He grabbed a cocktail napkin and wiped my hands like a parent helping their dirty child wash up after dinner. He did it

with so much confidence, you'd think cleaning me under hundreds of watchful eyes was the most natural thing in the world.

"Dance with me," he said.

The request punctured my safe bubble of anonymity. I was supposed to be his accessory while he conducted business, not the center of attention. I had no idea whether my previous self could dance. This was important to Caden, and I didn't want to embarrass him.

Caden tugged me toward the dance floor. Just like magic, the crowd parted as he led me to the center stage. When I tensed in his hold, his face hardened. "You're dancing with me, not heading to your execution."

His expression softened the moment I gripped the lapels of his jacket.

With a hand around my waist, he pulled me against his chest. "It's just a dance. There's nothing to be nervous about."

The crowd swirled around us, but Caden remained still, giving me the precious seconds I needed to gather myself.

"But everyone's staring," I whispered, my lungs refusing to cooperate. I had relished the attention from Caden and the beauticians, but I'd never had this many eyes on me at one time.

His forehead pressed against mine, pulling my attention from our spectators. "Then keep your eyes only on me," he murmured against my skin. "I've waited for this moment, when you no longer shy away from my gifts or my attention or being in the spotlight with me." His tone grew harder, deeper.

I stared at him. Was he finally confessing to having known me all along? This was a test to challenge my tendencies to shy away both from him and the limelight. Conquering my fear of the public eye would free me from my lifelong shackles, and publicly claiming him would soothe his feelings of rejection.

His mouth grazed my hairline. "This is your chance to break old habits and become the person you were meant to be. All you have to do is get out of your own head." His hand pressed against my lower back. "Can you do that, baby?"

I looked up into his unflinching stare. He needed me to break free from my old patterns, and I wanted to provide him with whatever he needed tonight. His determination surrounded me like armor. Confidence and strength poured from him into me, washing away my doubts. My mind

began to clear and silence the noise around us, giving my frayed nerves blessed relief.

I gave him a genuine smile. “Okay.”

I breathed as his palm curved possessively over my hip. Caden spun me onto the empty floor and pulled me back with practiced ease. He positioned his broad frame as if to shield me from prying eyes, and I knew he did it to ease my nerves. My tense shoulders relaxed under his poise.

The ballroom fell silent as I placed one hand in his and the other on his shoulder. The music swelled, and Caden moved with effortless grace, swaying me to his will.

My head rested on his chest, and he buried his face in my hair, letting out a low growl, like a predator who had caught the scent of his prey. “Why do you always smell so good?”

I lifted my face just as his eyes lit with the fierce intensity I had come to recognize all too well. As if unable to help himself, he dipped his head and kissed me, despite the hordes of people watching us. Startled, I tried pulling back, but his mouth followed, insistent. My foggy brain tried to remind me that the entire boat was watching us, even as my fingers curled into his chest. Despite all those eyes on us, I couldn’t find the strength to pull away from his warm comfort. The raw kiss wiped my mind clean.

Dancing and kissing him with my eyes closed was a lethal combination. Suddenly, it was only the two of us, and we were gliding across what felt like an endless expanse of polished floor. I was practically floating, and it was all his doing. I could hand myself over to him blindly, knowing full well he’d take care of the rest. When I finally pulled back, the room spun slightly beneath my feet.

We had stopped dancing.

There was a smattering of applause, along with whispers about the inappropriate public display of affection. My cheeks burned as I realized they’d been forced to witness our hardcore make-out session.

Marcus ran up to us with his mic, presenting me with a wave of his hand as if I had just finished a choreographed number on a show. His eyes found mine, and some impish, private message sent a jolt up my spine even before he said, “Give it up one more time for tonight’s hosts, Dr. Caden Maxwell and his lovely fiancée, Rose.”

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

ROSE

MY EYES BUGGED out of my sockets as I stared at Marcus and then Caden, whose expression remained perfectly stoic.

His lovely fiancée?

The ballroom buzzed with stunned voices. Some people had their phones out, taking pictures. A man with a professional camera approached us, and Caden presented our joined hands. I belatedly realized that he was showing off the large, blue diamond on my ring finger.

It happened too quickly, the sleight of hand in front of the world and the cameras, and an engagement ring he had hidden in plain sight under the guise of a matching jewelry set. People came by to congratulate us, or rather Caden, and I was grateful when they didn't spare me a second glance. A group of men in tuxedos and women in colorful ball gowns surrounded him, and their tight circle allowed me to snatch my hand back.

Seizing the small window, I power walked away before he could stop me. "Excuse me. I have to use the restroom," I said without waiting for his response. There was no way he could follow me with that many people blocking his path.

Curious heads turned my way as I passed through a flurry of guests. I didn't stop until I reached the other end of the ballroom. Not that I could escape Caden's orbit. Linda's gaze was a constant presence, following my movements from a safe distance. There was another guard stationed in the upstairs gallery overlooking the ballroom. With both the downstairs and

upstairs exits manned, I felt trapped. For the first time, I wondered whether their job was to keep out threats or to keep me in.

Leaning against a corner wall, I took a few steady breathing. My hands shook, pulling my gaze to the glittering oval blue diamond on my finger. Caden had Trojan-horsed me by slipping in an engagement ring that matched the rest of the jewelry so that I wouldn't read too much into it. It hadn't fit my index or middle fingers when I tried it on, leaving me with no choice but to slide it onto my ring finger. It had been intentionally sized for that digit. He asked to see me in only my jewelry, when what he really wanted was to see me wear his ring and nothing else. No wonder he turned into a savage beast right after. It also explained why he had insisted on Maria giving me a manicure.

Caden's enthusiasm surrounding this party had felt wrong from the start. My intuition told me it was a trap, and I was right. While I still couldn't recall a whole lot about my family, snippets of my memories suggested they were wealthy. They must have been against this union, so Caden purposefully announced our engagement in front of the biggest names in the world. If they ran in similar circles, the news about us would reach them quickly.

The ridiculous part?

I would have said yes had he come clean about our past and then asked me to marry him. Instead, he made me dance under the guise of conquering my fear of the public eye. In reality, the spectacle was meant to seal the deal, leaving no room to thwart the engagement. I hated humiliation and attention, and he used it against me, leaving me with the bitter aftertaste of betrayal. These elaborate lies weren't a sign of love; it was manipulation.

There was an irresistible urge to return to Caden and demand answers, but I trampled over the desire. The anger was still too raw, and I didn't want to make a scene at this fancy event. I needed a moment to cool off.

From my peripheral vision, I saw various cliques staring at me. When a woman in a blue mermaid dress detached herself from her group, I straightened.

"Rose!" Amelie pulled me into a hug. "Congratulations! I can't believe you're engaged." She pulled back, placing a warm hand on my shoulder. "You have no idea how difficult it's been to keep this a secret."

Judas!

Two people had been deceiving me, not one. Caden hadn't confessed to our past, and Amelie was willing to let me be conned into a marriage built on lies. Some friend.

My heart filled with disappointment. I glanced at her hand on my shoulder and didn't return the warm greeting. She brushed off my stoic reception with a smile. "He planned everything down to the menu," she gushed, eyes bright with secondhand romance. "Lollipop chicken. Risotto balls. White roses for the centerpieces. He wanted to give you one hell of an engagement party."

He forgot the part where he asked me to marry him, I wanted to shout.

She grabbed my hand and gushed over the ring. When she realized I hadn't contributed much to the conversation, her face dimmed. Her composure started to shred at my extended silence. "A ring this beautiful deserves a proper celebration. I'll grab us some champagne."

She walked to the bar, but not without a concerned backward glance. While she waited for the bartender, Amelie nervously peeked at me. The guilt was evident on her face. She probably realized that my memories had returned based on my demeanor.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. I gave Amelie and Caden the benefit of the doubt when they withheld the truth. I even blamed myself for whatever had gone wrong with Caden in the past. I assumed he'd eventually come clean once our relationship was more established. Instead, he had doubled down. He thought I was at my most vulnerable without my memories and tricked me into an engagement. A new life and a fresh start were supposed to be built on trust and honesty. But he was entirely comfortable lying to me for the rest of our lives. And Amelie was going to help him cover it up. I had excused their pathological behavior for long enough.

"Rose."

My back froze at Amelie's unsure voice. I slowly turned to her and accepted the offered champagne flute.

I couldn't bear to look at her and averted my gaze. "Thanks."

My ice tone made her flinch. "Are you mad at me?"

I tore my gaze from the crowd of strangers and locked eyes with her. Bitterness flooded me. "Is there something I should be mad about?"

She shifted under the weight of my glare and decided against beating around the bush. "You remember, don't you?"

I said nothing, polishing off my drink and handing it to a passing server.
“I’m sorry for keeping the truth from you.”

The last thing I had expected was an immediate admission of guilt. I thought she would try to extend the lie, say stupid things like, *You must have me confused with someone else.* The fact that she owned up to it so quickly gave me a modicum of relief.

“Why did you lie to me?” I asked. “You were my friend.”

“I still am and always will be.”

My temper flared. “Really? Because I have been trying to remember my life, and you just sat back and watched me suffer. Do you know how scary it is to wake up with no recollection of who you are?”

I started to draw away, but she stepped in my path. “I wanted to tell you the truth. But Dr. Maxwell approached me the night he found you. He said you might go into shock if we pile on too much at once and asked me not to say anything. He said it was in your best interest if your memories returned organically.”

“You two don’t get to make a unilateral decision about what’s best for me and expect me to be happy about it.”

“It wasn’t like that, Rose.”

“Then what was it like?”

She gave me a tight smile. “I don’t know how much you recall, but you used to be extremely OCD. You couldn’t talk on cue or look someone in the eye. Imagine my shock the first time you made eye contact with me. It’s like your past was holding you back, and without it, you were...free. Dr. Maxwell’s approach was getting you exactly what you’ve always needed, and you seemed happy about adopting a healthier version of yourself. I didn’t want to ruin that for you.”

Some of my ire seeped out at her explanation. Annoyingly, a lot of what she said made sense. There were monsters in my past that had held me back, I knew that. Not remembering the trauma had freed me.

“Can you at least tell me what happened to me?”

Her eyes glazed over as she grimaced. “Oh, babe. You fell from the second floor of a building and suffered a major head injury.” She swallowed hard, voice dropping to a whisper. “The doctors had to put you in a medically induced coma to control the brain swelling.”

An invisible icicle pricked my chest. “Did someone push me?”

Her body stiffened, face paling. “Of course not. We were at a party at your cousin’s house—”

“Poppy?” I asked because she was the only family member I remembered.

Amelie nodded. “You got really drunk and stumbled. It was an accident. An awful one.” Her hand instinctively reached for mine before pulling back.

“So, I lost my memories because of the head injury?”

She tilted her head unsurely. “Not quite. The memory loss thing has happened to you before. You experienced something traumatic in your childhood but had little recollection of it. You didn’t just forget the incident, but many things that happened around that time, too. The doctors said forgetting was your brain’s defense mechanism, a subconscious choice to erase the memories so you could survive it.” Her gaze fleeted to my abdomen.

The scars.

“When Dr. Maxwell realized you couldn’t remember anything, he guessed that it had happened again. Your mind decided to block out your most recent trauma. But this time, it seems to have erased anything you found unpleasant, including habits, experiences, people, or anything that was keeping you from living your best life.”

“Is that why I can’t remember anyone from my family other than Poppy?”

Amelie’s eyes moved over my face. I didn’t see any maliciousness in them, only loving concern. “I honestly don’t know. You and Poppy were very close. You had a complicated relationship with the rest of your family. They had never been supportive, and it caused you a lot of stress. Perhaps forgetting them was just another coping mechanism.”

She was right. The fact that I couldn’t remember my last name, yet I remembered our friendship, was a telltale sign of something bigger.

“Er. Speaking of Poppy.” Amelie twisted the bracelet around her wrist. “I should probably tell you something now that you’re remembering things.”

I stared at her warily. “What?”

“Um. After finding you on the boat, Dr. Maxwell called his twin about taking you away and distancing you from anything familiar that could trigger your trauma. He needed his brother to cover for him and deal with

your family. But—" She swallowed. "They didn't even realize you were missing. Dr. Maxwell was listed as your emergency contact, and no one visited you at the hospital other than Poppy."

"Of course they didn't." The words tasted bitter. I felt bad for Rose A and was glad to have erased her family from my memories, just like they had wiped away her existence despite being perfectly sound in body and mind.

Amelie gave me a sympathetic smile. "Poppy's not like the rest of your family. She went ballistic after finding out you were missing and flew to the Bahamas. She called me earlier, demanding to see you. I texted Dr. Maxwell about it right before the gala."

Ah. The text my loving partner had received that made him all but drag me here. It only confirmed my suspicions. He wanted to seal the deal and announce our engagement before anyone could ruin his plans. He thought Poppy would try to intercept if she showed up. I wouldn't be surprised if the security were under strict orders to keep her off this boat.

I huffed. "He kind of left that part out."

She laced her fingers together, gaze darting to the floor. "I'll take you to her hotel if you want. But Poppy's arrival wasn't the only thing I wanted to tell you about." She paused and swallowed again before meeting my eyes. "There's something else you should know."

I narrowed my eyes. "What now?"

"You see—" She bit her lip, eyes darting away. Her shoulders tensed visibly. "The reason Poppy found out your whereabouts was because she had confronted her husband, and he told her the truth."

"Poppy's married?"

Amelie studied me quietly, seemingly nervous about the next piece of information. "Yes. And she's here with her husband, Damon."

How come I couldn't remember Poppy dating anyone, let alone a husband?

Amelie's eyes searched mine, her gaze unwavering. "I can't imagine how you must be feeling," she said quietly, fidgeting with her bracelet. "If there's anything you want to know about them, just ask. I'm done keeping secrets. I'll tell you everything I know."

"I do have a question."

Amelie's eyebrows lifted, her head tilting slightly.

"Who's Damon?"

She froze, blinking rapidly before her mouth fell open. “Um. Dr. Maxwell’s twin.”

My lips pursed before laughter bubbled up my throat. “So, Damon married my cousin, and now, Caden’s trying to drag me to the altar.” I shook my head. “Talk about keeping it in the family.”

“You’re not upset?” Her voice cracked with disbelief.

“That Poppy flew out to make sure Caden didn’t manipulate me while I was incapacitated with memory loss?” My voice was sharp and bitter. “I’m just glad someone cares enough to have my back.”

Amelie flinched at the comment. Her guilty eyes were cast to the floor. “That’s not what I meant,” she mumbled. “I’m just surprised you don’t care that Damon married Poppy.”

I scrunched my nose. “Why should I care if he married my cousin? Does he treat her poorly?”

“No. No. Nothing like that.”

My lips parted slightly in confusion.

“Babe, you were kind of in love with Damon.”

My jaw dropped. Oh God. I had the hots for both twins. “Eww. Please tell me I didn’t date him.”

She laughed at my scandalized face. “Don’t worry. You didn’t even know Damon. To be honest, I don’t think you actually liked him. You liked the idea of *him* because he was a philanthropist who helped people. You weren’t exactly a risk-taker, and Damon was a safe bet. You just wanted a goody two-shoes who’d never hurt you.”

Clearly, Amelie wasn’t a fan. But if I were in love with Damon, why didn’t the name ring a bell? A lot of my memories surrounding Caden had returned, as did my relationship with Amelie and Poppy.

Amelie gave me a tight smile. “You’re not at all reacting how I expected. I’ve been on pins and needles about it, trying to figure out how to break the news to you.”

Once more, I combed through my memories for a positive emotion where Damon was concerned and came up short. I only remembered Caden. In the end, I concluded that if Poppy was the only family member I cared about, I was genuinely happy for her if she found love with Damon.

I shrugged. “I’m happy for them,” I said, genuinely meaning it. Frankly, I was much more interested in my past with Caden. “Do you know anything about my relationship with Caden when he was still my professor?”

Her smile widened into something almost triumphant, as if she had waited eons for me to brush Damon aside. “No, but I figured out something was up when he refused to leave your side at the hospital.”

“Caden was at the hospital with me?” I asked, my voice betraying my disbelief. I wrapped my arms around myself as I processed the information.

She nodded once. “He insisted on being your primary care physician. I worked as a nursing assistant at the university hospital. I saw him there for days on end, sleeping in the staff quarters so he wouldn’t have to leave you.”

My chest expanded. A bewildering ache spread through me as I tried to reconcile the image of that cold, calculating man sitting in a sterile room for hours, yearning for me. The idea of Caden longing for anyone or anything was so unexpected that it left me feeling empty on the inside.

Despite my best efforts, Amelie wasn’t giving me any ammunition to hold on to my anger. Before I could stop myself, I spoke to her as I would to my old friend. “Caden wanted me back then, and I turned him down numerous times. I-I think I hurt him badly.”

I had pushed Caden away for a man I didn’t even like. My chest tightened painfully at the thought.

“That sucks.” She seemed grief-stricken by my confession. Clearly, she was *Team Caden* all the way. She was momentarily pensive before adding, “There’s a Latin phrase I learned in my philosophy class—*tabula rasa*. Do you know what that means?”

I gave her a blank look. I couldn’t even remember sex or my last name, and she wanted me to remember Latin.

She waved me off with a knowing look. “It means a blank slate. At birth—or rebirth, in your case—a human begins without preconceived ideas, memories, or influences, and what happens next is shaped by their experiences. Back then, you spoke highly of Dr. Maxwell, but I’m assuming you kept your distance because of your boundary issues and misplaced feelings for Damon. Since your memories have been wiped clean, you’ve built habits, feelings, and emotions as you see fit. Yet, you still fell for Dr. Maxwell. Whether it’s the old you or the new you, both versions want this man. Only this time, you chose to let him in. I’ve never seen you this happy.” She beamed. “No matter what happened in the past, you have the chance to start fresh with him,” she said encouragingly.

I rolled my eyes. “His idea of starting fresh is marrying me under false pretenses. It seems a little fucked, don’t you think?”

Amelie frowned. “I don’t see it that way. He’s smitten with you. He literally tries to impress your subconscious.”

When I opened my mouth, she quickly cut me off.

“I won’t pretend to understand his reasons for everything. I’ll only say that he’ll do anything for you. You should have seen him after you fled the hospital. He combed the city for days without sleep and tried every avenue to track you down. I mean, just look at his boat. It’s painted in your favorite colors. I’ve seen him mimic your old OCD habits when he does your bandages, so you don’t rip them off for ‘disorderly placement.’ He even wears the colors you like, so you’ll find him soothing. That man’s got Rose written all over him. You, my friend, have managed the impossible. You’ve turned the coldest, most untouchable and unattainable man into a lovesick puppy.”

My throat tightened as I watched her beam at my fairy-tale ending. The sincerity in Amelie’s tone made me forget my anger entirely because most of what she said was true.

Although the smile stayed on her face, it dialed down a few notches. “I hope you can forgive me for lying to you. I only went along with Dr. Maxwell’s wishes because you seemed so happy.”

The familiar look of love on her face made me swallow hard. Lying to me had been eating away at her, and I didn’t believe she would have done it unless she thought it was for my benefit.

I gently touched her arm. “I know. It’s okay.” We smiled at each other, and relief flooded me at all she had disclosed. With my ire entirely erased, I tried steering the conversation to neutral grounds. “Do you know why I ran away from the hospital?”

She shook her head. “I came to your room one day, and you were just gone. The hospital’s close to the river. My best guess is that you were disoriented when you woke up and wandered off.”

Caden suggested I’d seen someone who scared me into running. But according to Amelie, the only person constantly around me at the hospital was him.

“God, Rose. I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what you must have gone through. Dr. Maxwell hired so many men to search for you and enlisted my help, too. He didn’t realize you had lost your memories and thought you ran

away because you were disconcerted. He only agreed to do the cruise's final inspection because your family owned a bunch of sailboats on the pier and he thought you might be hiding in one of them. He planned on searching them afterward. Considering his effort, I still have no idea how we didn't find you sooner."

Probably because I was too scared to leave the dumpster. "Is that why he has guards following me everywhere I go?"

She nodded with a smile. "He was worried you might forget and run away again."

"Oh." My mouth dragged downward, wondering how long the "escorts" would continue. It was hard to breathe freely with them always around. "How did you end up working for Caden anyway?"

"I'm guessing that has less to do with me and everything to do with you."

"What do you mean?"

"I was a nursing assistant at the hospital and became a registered nurse after graduation. But starting salaries are too low. This two-week gig pays better than two months at the hospital. I think he wanted to be in your good graces by helping your friend. I desperately needed the money." Amelie glanced at her empty flute, her despair palpable.

"Amelie, what's wrong?"

She looked as if she had the weight of the world on her shoulders. "I-I don't want to burden you with my problems. You already have enough on your plate."

"You're not burdening me. Tell me what's wrong."

"My boyfriend went through something awful recently." She paused and then held up her hand. She was wearing a silver band on her left hand.

"Well, I guess he's my husband now," she said coyly.

"Oh, wow."

It seemed everyone around me had gotten married in the time I had been indisposed. Life moved on, not waiting for anyone to play catch-up. Considering I had exactly one family member visiting me while I was in a medically induced coma, the idea of marriage and gaining a new family suddenly seemed exciting.

I pulled Amelie into a hug, hoping she found a home in her new husband, though I barely remembered him. "Congrats. I'm so happy for you."

“I wish it were under better circumstances.” She sighed. “His folks passed away.”

“Oh God. I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. They were young and left behind three little kids. We got married so we could take over their guardianship.”

“I really am sorry.”

She waved it off. “The point is that Dr. Maxwell helped my family when we were in a bind. He got me this job and covered all the expenses for the funeral and guardianship. And he did it because he thought it might make you happy.”

“I provided financial assistance to someone who had done me a favor. Cavendish wasn’t thrilled about it.”

Caden admitted to making a generous donation to a mystery acquaintance, and Amelie fit the bill. She had done him a favor by hiding the truth from me. She was right, it did make me extremely happy to hear it. But why would Cavendish want to bankrupt Amelie?

As if on cue, a short waitress with bangs and pink glasses interrupted us. “Amelie.”

“Yes?”

“You’re needed in the medical suite. We have a guest with a hand injury.” She lowered her voice to whisper, “He’s a total hottie, by the way.” She turned her head to the side.

Kai Cavendish stood there in all his glory, gaze steadfast on Amelie. A bloodied linen napkin was wrapped around his right hand, though he seemed oblivious to the pain. The way he watched her made my stomach drop.

Amelie didn’t seem to notice. “Duty calls.”

I quickly grabbed her wrist. “Do you know that guy?”

She gave me a befuddled look. “No. I’m guessing he’s a guest.”

Despite the queasy feeling in my stomach, I slowly released her hand. “Watch out for him.” I had no way of confirming whether Caden was referring to Rose, and Kai wanted to mess with Amelie’s finances. So, I kept my explanation nondescript. “He got into it with Caden earlier. I just have a bad feeling about him.”

“Okay. Hey, let’s meet up tomorrow. I’m excited to catch up now that you’re remembering things,” she said, her eyes brightening.

Before she could leave, I couldn't help pressing her about one more thing. I didn't think my curiosity could wait until tomorrow. "Actually, I have one more question."

"Yeah?"

"How did Caden end up being my doctor? How did he even know I was at the hospital?"

Amelie gave me a bemused look. "Dr. Maxwell was with you when the accident happened. He was the one who rushed you to the university hospital."

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

ROSE

I WASN'T SURPRISED to turn around and find Caden at my side.

"I've been looking for you," he said, his voice soft, and the tone casual.

No, he hadn't been, because he knew exactly where I was. Linda would have made sure of it. He deliberately gave Amelie and me space, knowing she was Team Caden and would push me toward him.

"I was catching up with Amelie."

His apprehensive blue eyes traced my face, trying to decode my mood. Cornering someone into an engagement was morally gray at best, though there was no admission of guilt or remorse in his expression. I expected as much. Empathy didn't seem to be a part of his personality. According to him, he was always on the right trajectory; others merely needed to accommodate. He was only concerned about how the path he chose for us affected our dynamic.

A part of me wanted to lash out at him for his manipulations. Another part of me felt guilty for rejecting him for his own brother. But the biggest part of me clung to Amelie's words about how Caden had rushed me to the hospital, refusing to leave my side. Something twisted inside my heart at the thought of this unfeeling man pining for me at my bedside.

My heart told me to go with him.

My brain told me he was bad news and to run for the hills.

In the end, I went with my heart.

Extending my hand, I laced our fingers. The familiar sparks ran up and down my arm at the contact.

Suspicious eyes watched our adjoined hands. “I wasn’t expecting the warm reception.”

“What were you expecting?”

“Anger.” He seemed skeptical. A normal person would have scathed him.

I shrugged. “I’ll admit. Some heads-up would’ve been nice for my own engagement. But you know, lemons, lemonade. If you had asked, I probably would’ve said yes anyway, and I like jewelry.” I glanced at the glittering blue diamond on my finger.

He remained guarded.

“Why did you spring an engagement on me in front of all those people?” I had an inkling about the answer, but I decided to ask anyway.

“Why didn’t you just ask me to marry you?”

“It would’ve given you the opportunity to say no.”

Direct and blunt as always.

It only confirmed my suspicions that I had rebuffed his advances so cruelly that he felt his only option was to trick me into a relationship. The fact that I had done it out of misplaced love for his twin made it worse. Though it no longer mattered, I wanted to ease the agony of the past.

“I would’ve said yes.”

There was a slight shift in his eyes that told me he processed my response. I wasn’t sure he believed me. Perhaps he would always expect me to reject him based on our history.

Feeling the weight of the ring dragging me down, I added, “But please don’t spring a surprise wedding on me.”

Caden remained impassive instead of agreeing to my terms with a verbal commitment. Not at all relieved by his reaction, I was fully convinced he might do just that. Without another word, he spun on his heel, guiding me through the throngs.

Confused, I asked, “Where’re we going?”

“It’s a surprise.” When I tried to dig my heels into the ground in alarm, he glanced over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. “It’s not a wedding.”

He was quick to lead us out of the ballroom, not hurrying but not dawdling, either. People occasionally blocked our path to congratulate us, and I kept my chin high, even as my insides burbled with uncertainty.

He took me to a room just off the grand ballroom that was no less impressive in grandeur. We were still close enough to hear the music—the

DJ was playing Stardust—but the sound was smothered when Caden shut the door behind us.

Inside, the lights were dim except for a shimmer on the glass cases. It was a museum of sorts. Or perhaps a shrine to novelty vintage items. The formality of the room radiated from the hush of the carpet to the velvet ropes guarding valuable items. The polished brass plaque identified each item and its estimated value.

A cigarette case belonging to the wife of a Russian ambassador.

A signed first edition of a Hemingway novel.

A Cartier brooch that looked like an insect trapped in amber.

“What is this place?” I asked, hands folded.

“Auction hall for vintage items. Guests will bid on these collectibles tonight, and the proceeds will go to charity.”

“Are we allowed to be here if it isn’t open yet?”

“Only if you know the owner.” He smirked. “See anything you like?”

I blinked. This felt an awful lot like a consolation gift for ambushing me into an engagement. It was starting to dawn on me that Caden didn’t believe in apologies or regrets, but rather trade-offs and exchanges to squash hurt feelings. I could only imagine this stemmed from an unhappy childhood or unhealthy relationships. Based on what I remembered, it was both.

“You don’t have to buy me anything to make up for tonight.” I lifted my right shoulder. “Like I said, I would’ve said yes anyway.”

He leaned closer, his voice low. “I’m not making up for anything because I don’t regret my actions.” Despite the asshole words, a shiver went down my spine when his lips grazed the shell of my ear. “It’s an engagement gift.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about his confession. Instead, I followed Caden as he moved through the exhibits, trailing a finger over a display case without actually touching the glass.

I stopped in front of the most prominent item in the middle of the room—a classic, vintage car. According to the plaque, it was a Rolls-Royce Phantom I.

One look at it, and I knew this car was meant to make an entrance. It looked like a rolling throne, the embodiment of elegance, wealth, and untouchable status. The long, stately silhouette was finished with a hand-crafted coach-built body. Wide sweeping fenders framed enormous wheels, capped with pristine whitewall tires. The headlights were large and

commanding. The tall, imposing radiator grille gleamed with a silver finish, crowned by an elegant hood ornament.

I peeked inside, which was equally impressive. The rear was upholstered in leather, accented with polished mahogany. The chauffeur's compartment up front was trimmed in black leather to emphasize the separation between the two cabins.

The car exuded power, yet it was refined, kind of like Caden.

Caden's hand wrapped around my waist. "You want it?"

My brows shot up. "You want to buy me a car? I don't even remember how to drive."

I watched as his hand gripped the velvet rope. With a practiced flick, he dropped it to the floor. "I'll teach you."

"How? We can't exactly test drive a car on a boat." I strolled around the car, tracing its outline from close.

His lips quirked. "There are other ways of taking it on a test drive. For example, I'm particularly curious to find out if the back seat's sturdy."

I caught my reflection in the glossy hood and realized Caden was right behind me. His eyes were dark, and he closed the nominal gap within the blink of an eye. The hairs on my arms rose, every nerve alert and ready. He pushed me against the hood and pressed his body against me to keep me pinned.

I ran my tongue across my parched lips, my heart slamming so violently against my rib cage, I was sure he could hear it. My eyes lingered on the ridges of his abdomen through his shirt, then drifted higher to where his chest rose and fell with quickened breaths.

Looking at him stole the air from my lungs.

My ears started ringing, and when he whispered something about getting the all clear from my MRI results, I squeezed my thighs together.

We both knew what it meant.

Despite every thundering beat urging caution, I couldn't deny him. I didn't want to.

I kept thinking about Amelie's words—*tabula rasa*. I thought about what it meant to have a blank slate and start fresh. For so long, my past colored my choices and my restrictions. The notion of simply wanting and taking was alien. Not to mention, who was lucky enough to experience their first time twice? God, I wanted to remember sex.

"I can't wait anymore," he growled, his voice so deep and rough it barely sounded like words. "I need you."

Caden rounded the car with me in his arms, opened the back seat door, and tossed me inside. This was really happening. My body trembled at the edge of something primal as he jerked his jacket off and tugged at his shirt before climbing in. He practically ripped off my clothes until we were both left panting and staring at our naked forms.

His eyes studied my body like I was the center of his universe. For all his dominance and possessiveness, the way he stared at me, the way his fingers trembled against my skin, told a different story. That I held power over him, unlike anyone else.

I tilted my head back, my gaze traveling slowly up the towering expanse of his body. Every inch of him radiated raw power—from the carved definition of his thighs to the broad sweep of his shoulders. Reality blurred at the edges as I stared at every magnificent inch of him, overwhelmed by his nakedness. The evidence of his desire jutted proudly between his legs, the same impressive thickness my lips had stretched around earlier tonight. His length nearly reached his navel.

I gulped. "You're too big."

Caden chuckled low in his throat. And fuck, why was that so sexy?

My gaze dropped to his erection, glistening at the crown as he drew his hand slowly over himself, the fluid easing his movements. I wasn't kidding, he was too big.

At my dreaded expression, some of his amusement seeped out.

"I'll try to be gentle." He wasn't speaking to me but rather reminding himself to fight his instincts. Whatever came next would reduce us both to animals of pure instinct and probably leave marks on both my body and soul.

I wasn't some fragile girl anymore. I craved the uninhibited Caden I'd glimpsed earlier, the one who'd taken and claimed my mouth without hesitation.

"Don't be." I couldn't look away from Caden's wild eyes, my breath catching in my throat.

"Then turn around." His throaty voice vibrated with authority, awakening something biblical within me.

I shifted in the seat so I was on all fours with my forehead leaning against the window. The seat was slick under my palms and knees, smelling

faintly of wax and leather.

I was completely naked and offering myself up to this man. My nipples hardened to tight peaks, skin flushed hot, wetness gathering between my thighs. My pulse hammered through my swollen clit, and I burned for him as if I'd never been touched before.

All spread out before him, I glanced back at Caden with an invitation in my eyes.

A sound escaped him—part hunger, part possession—and I watched his body respond, pulsing with need, the wet heat of his desire dripping against the back of my thigh.

I couldn't tear my eyes from him. The sheer size of his dick was intimidating. I imagined the stretch as he filled me. I knew it would hurt, but I craved it with every fiber of my being.

"Rose." His voice dropped to a rasp. "I need you." The words slipped between clenched teeth, his control visibly fracturing.

He dropped to his knees behind me, and a moan escaped my lips. His rough hands claimed my flesh, and I arched my back. Savage need flashed in his eyes. When his hand wrapped around himself, I couldn't help the small gasp that escaped me as he began to stroke, slow and deliberate.

My limbs trembled, my skin feverish with anticipation. His eyes raked down my body, claiming every inch with his gaze.

"You're mine," he growled, fingers digging into my flesh with each possessive squeeze. I watched him over my shoulder. His eyes darkened as they locked with mine. "Finding you has made me lose my mind, baby." The muscle in his jaw twitched as he inhaled deeply. "I want to go slow, but I can't promise to hold back for long."

The raw hunger in his voice made me swallow.

I gave him a silent nod. His knee nudged between my thighs, opening me to him. He pulled back slightly, his gaze dropping to where I was exposed and waiting.

"Fuck, you're soaked for me."

The evidence glistened on my inner thighs, and I braced for him. The corded muscles of his forearms tensed as his fingers dug into my hips. I glanced down at my body to where his length bobbed against me.

A pulse of desire tightened me from within, drawing forth another rush of wetness. He shifted his weight, and I felt the blunt pressure of his head

against my sex. The rigid heat of him pressed against me, and then he waited, letting the anticipation build.

I raised my gaze to stare out the car window, lungs frozen mid-breath, pulse hammering against my windpipe. The pressure of him against me promised an impossible width, a stretch I couldn't yet comprehend.

He made a sound like thunder as he eased forward, breaching me just barely. A gasp tore from my lips at the invasion.

“Mine!” The word erupted from him as he pistoned his hips in one motion.

My eyes widened, lips parting in silent shock. This was sex.

A cry escaped me as my body struggled to accommodate him, stretched beyond what I’d imagined possible. His hands found my waist, claiming dominance. His grip tightened, a silent command that froze me in place, leaving no doubt who was in charge right now.

Every nerve ending was alive with sensation.

“Fuck, baby,” he groaned, his voice barely human. I tried to turn my head, desperate to witness his face in this moment of possession, but my head nearly banged against the car window at the full force of his assault. With a thump, I slapped a hand on the window at the last second to cushion the impact.

When Caden withdrew, his grip tightened. There was no reprieve as he surged forward in another powerful thrust that left my lungs seizing and vision swimming.

“Caden!” The moan escaped unbidden.

“You’re mine,” came his primal answer. “Only mine.”

He drove into me with relentless force, each thrust sending tremors through my body, making my breasts sway with the rhythm of his movements. I gripped the seat beneath us, fingernails sinking into the leather. Between his firm grasp on my waist, my hand splayed against the window, and my fingernails digging into the seat, I found an anchor while he plundered.

“Fuck, yes,” he growled. “You feel incredible, baby.” His tone was raw, matching his nature. “So slick and perfect.”

Power surged through me at the sound of his possessive voice, making me feel alive. The wet sounds of his dick slapping into me echoed in my ears. When his hand slid around my stomach and down between my thighs to stroke my clit, I bit down on my lip until I tasted copper.

His fingers worked against my most sensitive spot. Within moments, I shattered, waves of pleasure coursing through me as he continued his relentless rhythm, my body gripping him tighter with each thrust.

“Oh God.” My head fell back as ecstasy consumed me.

I gasped for oxygen when his fingers moved over my clit again and made me climax for a second time at full force.

My lungs burned by the time the third orgasm hit me. Tears sprang to my eyes from the overwhelming intensity.

“Caden, I can’t anymore.”

When I finally managed to draw in a breath, Caden withdrew his hand. Electricity raced through my veins when he pulled back, only to bury himself inside me to the hilt.

“Oh God!” I whispered.

A sound rumbled from his chest as his palms claimed the curves of my ass, his massive hands digging into the flesh. With a powerful roll of his hips, he drove himself deeper until I felt completely consumed. My lungs seized, and my heart hammered like a storm breaking against the shore.

“Oh God, oh God,” I said in a breathless chant as my head dropped back, surrendering to pleasure too intense to withstand.

I stared out the window while he drove into me with his intense rhythm. He pushed inside me, faster and harder, his lips grazing my neck, followed by his tongue trailing up and down my throat. He gripped my ass to pull me back and forth to meet him thrust for thrust.

A white flash clouded my vision when he pressed the thick base of his length against me, grinding against my sensitive bundle of nerves with deliberate pressure.

“Fuck,” I moaned, my voice breaking.

My body tensed in anticipation of the inevitable wave before it happened.

“I’m coming,” I gasped, my eyelids fluttering closed.

I snapped my mouth open before the orgasm washed over me. This time, I might pass out from the force of it. Even the scream wouldn’t climb out of my throat, and my jaw hung open. I worried about having a stroke as he suspended me mid-climax.

My fingernails carved half-moons into the seat as he drove deeper, each thrust sending me higher until I shattered completely with a broken cry. I let go, my forehead falling against the cool glass. He answered with a growl

that vibrated through his chest into mine, his teeth grazing my shoulder, and his dick filling me as he branded himself on my body.

His teeth latched onto my flesh, signaling his approaching release. The rhythm of his body changed, more urgent now, more desperate, as he chased his pleasure. The sound of wet flesh and skin slapping against skin filled the car.

With a final powerful surge, Caden went rigid, and his release flooded me with liquid heat that seemed to reach my very core. I trembled with satisfaction, and although I knew this feeling was temporary, my addiction to him was unquenchable.

He pulled out of me, spun me around, and pressed my back against the cool leather, all in one fluid motion. His fingers wrapping around my neck sent a thrill through me as his lips claimed mine. I clutched at his hair, fingers twisting through the thick locks, surrendering to the desperate ache of my body.

Without breaking the kiss, his powerful arm wrapped around my waist and pulled me up. I was pulled flush against his body, straddling him with my legs on either side of his hips. His tongue explored my mouth with the same rhythm he'd used to possess my body.

I savored the taste of him as heat bloomed in my belly, radiating through my body.

His muscles finally went slack under my fingertips, and I collapsed against him. Each breath came out ragged and shallow, my mind a beautiful blur of sensation. No matter how I tried to steady myself, my lungs refused to cooperate. With a soft whimper, I let my forehead find his shoulder.

I pulled back to look at his face. The heat in his eyes seemed to devour the small space between us. He had a drugging effect on me. It was addicting, and I knew this feeling was never-ending.

Unfortunately, our reality destroyed the beautiful haze.

Snippets of sex from these very positions returned to me tenfold. Amelie said I was choosing not to remember certain things, and I realized why I had expunged something so beautiful from my mind.

I erased sex from my mind because of what Caden had done.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-SIX

ROSE

Past



“SEE YOU LATER.” Amelie waved at me, rushing off to her next class. She knew waiting for me was futile; I was always the last to leave.

I lifted my hand in return, simultaneously wiping down the counters and putting away the beakers. By the time I packed my tote bag, the lab was eerily quiet.

Weird.

The research assistants were generally around, but it seemed they had snuck out with the rest of the students. Why did Professor Maxwell dismiss them so early? Whatever the reason, I was suddenly alone in a big lab, and it was too quiet for comfort.

I slung the handles of my bag over my shoulders and turned to leave. I gasped when I found Professor Maxwell blocking the entrance.

Things had been immensely awkward since our big blowout. Like a coward, I faked sickness to skip the previous class. I needed the reprieve, but cutting class was a one-time luxury. Attendance was mandatory if I wanted to graduate, and I eventually dragged my ass back to the lab.

Despite the devastating memories of what happened here, I had managed to distract myself by keeping busy. For a horrifying moment, I

thought he might summon me to his office again. Other students stuck to their lab groups, while he dragged me away from mine at every chance. I never looked too deeply into it until our fallout.

At first, I believed Professor Maxwell had singled me out as his mentee because we had connected in a way he rarely did with others. I was wrong. I now realize he had deliberately chosen to *only* let me in, brushing off the attempts of like-minded people to bond with him. His motivations for it remained a mystery.

Only one thing was crystal clear: he was possessive. He was unwilling to share my time and couldn't stand it when others competed for my attention. I had seen it in the way he glared whenever I giggled with Amelie, as if all my laughs belonged exclusively to him. Or when Sean gossiped with me, and Professor Maxwell insisted I share every trivial detail with him. But nothing triggered his possessiveness like when I shared notes—or anything at all—with Matt. That always got me pulled from my group and isolated for the remainder of the lab.

I had arrived at class with trepidation, wondering what awaited me today. To my shock, Professor Maxwell didn't so much as glance my way. There hadn't been any need to be alone with him, either. He didn't pull me from the group to serve as his personal assistant, and I thought he had finally gotten the hint.

Until now.

It didn't cross my mind that he had only pretended to drop the topic so I would let my defenses down and stay behind like always.

This was planned.

Professor Maxwell's arms were crossed over his chest as he watched me. There was no way to skirt past him.

“Hello, Professor Maxwell.”

He didn't respond. It seemed he was still bitter.

“Are you all right?” I asked into the charged silence.

“Are you concerned about me, Little Rose?” he asked testily.

I hated being at odds with him, a person I had come to deeply respect. But there was bound to be tension between us. I felt the overwhelming urge to apologize again, though I knew it would fall on deaf ears. He didn't want my apology; he wanted a better explanation than the one I had provided.

“We need to talk.”

“About what?”

His gaze hardened. “About how I fucked you on my boat and then again in my lab. Or did you forget about losing your virginity?”

My pulse faltered. Before that godforsaken party, Professor Maxwell would’ve never spoken such crass words to me. I froze, unable to form the words that had once come so easily in front of him.

He shifted closer, those ice-blue eyes suddenly sharp. “You can’t pretend it never happened, Rose.”

I glanced around at the empty classroom. It had been recently painted in beautiful shades of ivory. “I told you,” I murmured. “I-I made a mistake on the boat. It was a lapse in judgment.”

“No, it wasn’t. There has been something between us all semester. You’re deliberately acting obtuse.” His voice carried the kind of certainty that slithered up my spine like ice water.

“I don’t know what else to say.” My voice sounded hollow. “I just want things to go back to how they used to be.”

His jaw tightened. “Too bad. You started this, so it’s only fair that I decide when to end it. And I’m not done with you. Far from it.”

Why was he resisting this so vehemently? He was the one who hated being a sex symbol to college girls and went to great lengths to discourage them. Perhaps it had something to do with rejection. A girl had never turned him down before, and that must have dredged up memories of his own mother rejecting him throughout his childhood.

“Professor Maxwell.” My throat tightened, and I had to pause before continuing. “Your guidance has meant everything to me. I don’t want to lose that in my life. But I’m sure you’ll agree that someone of a similar caliber would be a more appropriate choice for you than a student.”

Even as I stared at my feet, I caught the intensity of his gaze burning a hole in me in my peripheral vision. My words didn’t move him. Instead, they had pissed him off. Silence hung heavily between us, and I felt the blade of his stare trace across my skin.

Dormant fear ramped up as he slowly walked toward me. “W-what are you doing?”

I forced my gaze to his face. His expression gave nothing away, but a flicker behind his eyes sent a chill crawling up my spine. My body tensed, instincts screaming *danger*.

I started to back away, but he wrapped his hand around my elbow to stop me. “I don’t want anyone appropriate.” He leaned in and smelled my

hair. "I only want you." His cold voice was absolute.

I couldn't hold back a sharp inhale. "Please let go of me." I yanked away from him and was only successful because he decided to let go.

Neither of us spoke as he glared at me. Professor Maxwell broke the silence with an unexpected admission. "I've lived a quiet and lonely existence, and I was content. The only thing that piqued my interest was my work." He watched me for a moment. "But then you disrupted my monotone life." He ran a finger down my cheek, and I stepped back to disconnect the contact. He moved with me until we were close enough for our breaths to fuse together. "You have no idea what you've started."

Dark eyes flickered.

"Suddenly, work was the last thing on my mind because there was something better. Something I have never experienced. Life was finally exciting." Stormy eyes glared at me. "But then you changed your mind and took it all away." The ominous threat in his voice sent a chill down my spine.

His hand landed in my hair, tunneling through my locks in comforting strokes. This time, I didn't pull away.

"I still don't understand your reasons, try as I might." His fingers suddenly closed in my hair to make a fist. I held back a yelp when his grip tightened on my hair. "I have no choice but to stick to my original assumption. You're worried about your family's opinion, even though they abandoned you. I already told you I'd deal with your father. You should've trusted me to take care of it." He sounded irritated, wondering why I was harping on about this even after he had declared my family a non-issue.

My stomach plummeted at his cavalier tone. "What did you do?"

"It's not what I did, but rather what I found out." He loosened the hold on my hair. His thumb brushed the hollow of my cheek, a strange counterpoint to my burning scalp. "That family doesn't deserve you. You've been covering for your father, and instead of being grateful, he cut you off."

My lips parted to object, but nothing came out. Fear washed over me as the allegation hovered just beyond my grasp.

His laugh was cold in the face of my uncertainty. "Don't tell me no one else noticed you could be Rayyan's twin," he said, his voice dropping to that dangerous register.

My heart careened, graceless and arrhythmic. The air felt thick with the implication regarding my late cousin. "I don't know what you're talking

about,” I said, trying to keep my voice even.

“I think you do. You know very well that Rayyan was both your brother and your cousin.”

My stomach rocked. It turned out Professor Maxwell hadn’t been bluffing about knowing my father’s secret. Papa had an affair with his sister-in-law, and she fell pregnant with Rayyan. It was a well-kept secret only Rayyan, Poppy, and I were privy to. The fallout would be devastating if the word got out, even though Rayyan was long dead.

He tsked, leaning forward until I could smell his minty breath. “I wonder how your uncle would feel about Rayyan being the product of his wife’s infidelity and his brother’s betrayal.”

“I don’t know what you think you know, but this sounds like a baseless rumor.”

“Is that why you look so rattled?”

“Who wouldn’t be at these filthy accusations?”

There was a satisfied glint behind his eyes. “Hmm. Would it still be just a baseless rumor if I ran your dead brother’s DNA against your father’s?”

I glared at the floor, wishing I had the guts to glare at him instead.
“How?” I whispered at last.

The corners of his mouth curled upward, a predator who’d cornered his prey. I hadn’t asked the question, but he understood. How did he find out?

“The resemblance between you two is uncanny. I had my suspicions when I was investigating him, and you just confirmed it.”

Of course I had walked right into his trap.

My breath hitched when the second part of his statement registered. He was investigating Rayyan, a dead person who should be allowed to rest in peace. Sure, Rayyan hadn’t been a good person by any standard—vicious in nature with an addiction to drugs, alcohol, and gambling. One time, he had gone so overboard with an escort that the family stepped in to pay for reparations. Nonetheless, he was my brother. Neither of us admitted it out loud, and now he was dead and we’d never get that closure. The thought haunted me.

“Whatever you have against me, leave my family out of it. I don’t want you spying on them.”

“I need leverage to deal with your father—”

“This isn’t about my father,” I cut him off.

His eyes searched my face for the truth. “Then I’ll give you another chance to come clean. Tell me the real reason you’re pushing me away.”

I considered disclosing the truth, that I mistook him for Damon. There was only one thing stopping me. I didn’t want to be the catalyst to drag his childhood memories to the surface.

As I had expected, he saw my silence as defiance, whereas it was compassion.

“Tell me, so I can find a solution,” he asked, some of his control wavering with frustration.

“Why can’t you just accept that I don’t want to be with you?” I whispered, hoping he would take me at my word.

An unreadable expression crossed his face. His relentlessly probing eyes dissected me, and I nearly wilted under his glower. My chest tightened at the hollow recognition in his gaze, and I opened my mouth to apologize.

But he spoke first. “My mother was convinced I was a psychotic monster.” He kept watching me, letting the sentence sink in. “She was right.”

The words hung between us as my mind scrambled to process the sudden shift in conversation. He had never spoken to me about his mother. I was glad I had kept my mouth shut about Damon. Old wounds had been reopened, and it revolved around his mother choosing his brother over him.

The sadness I felt over his childhood clawed at my heart. But his face was perfectly blank, every emotion canceled out. He was stating facts, not at all interested in the pain behind them.

“Not only her. Everyone was terrified of the big, bad wolf.” He shook his head. “Except you. It was stupid to let me in because you should’ve known I wouldn’t let you go. Being near you woke something I’ve never felt before, and that’s why I don’t accept your answer. You do want me, I felt it every time you stared at me, baked for me, left me notes. You say you can’t bear to be touched, but you fucking melt when you’re under me.”

His gaze traveled slowly down my face before settling on my lips, lingering there with unsettling intensity as the words left him.

“I’ve been trying to figure you out for months. The way you hate taking credit for a job well done but have no problem being the fall guy when others fuck up. The way you stand on the sidelines while your friends take center stage. You’re a guest in your own life, barely connected to your environment.” Something dark rippled behind his eyes. “You and I are the

same. I don't feel connected to anything other than you. That was how I knew you belonged to me."

My pulse thrashed like a trapped bird beneath my skin. Something wild and desperate climbed up my throat, urging me to howl until his words disappeared beneath the noise.

Professor Maxwell's fingers locked around my elbow again before he tugged me to his chest, his shadow swallowing me whole. An amber and cedar cologne filled my lungs until I couldn't breathe. I silently prayed for someone—anyone—to enter the room, though I knew no one would.

I tried pushing away from him. In response, his fingers clamped around my elbow like a throbbing bracelet of pain.

"I told you, my mother was right. She saw me for what I truly was. You baited a monster, and now you have to bear the consequences." He massaged my elbow, willing the sensation back from his menacing grip. Despite the tender touch, his voice was cold. "Because I can't go another day without you."

I belatedly noticed the unholy glint of lust lighting up his eyes. It didn't take a genius to figure out what he wanted. Almost as if he were unable to help it, his face dropped lower, one unyielding hand wrapping around my waist.

"What are you—"

His lips came swooping down, cutting me off. Panicked, I opened my mouth to protest. His tongue dipped inside, suffusing me with unwanted heat.

He pulled back and pressed his forehead against mine. His breath was hot on my lips as he whispered, "If you won't tell me the reason, then tell me that you want me."

Reality rushed back, and my eyes snapped open. Anger flashed in his eyes, thinking I was antagonizing him with my silence.

"Say it," he demanded darkly, and I could see the cracks in his fragile control.

I eyed the exit that he was no longer blocking. If only I could make it to the hallway.

His eyes closed as he kissed down my jaw, his grip loosening with his groan. The distraction was the only reason I managed to pry his hand from my waist and untangle myself. Without giving him the chance to recover, I dashed for the exit.

Three steps. Five. Almost there. My heart hammered when I heard his footsteps closing the gap. The sound of my own breathing filled my ears as my fingers grazed the doorknob.

I made it as far as opening the door when he yanked me back and slammed the door shut with such force the wood frame splintered. Without bothering to spin me around, he folded my body, with him behind me. My palms hit the wood to brace myself. My legs trembled as he gathered my hair in his fist, yanked my head sideways, and sank his teeth into my neck.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he whispered, his breath hot against my ear. “You’ve been avoiding me for days,” His voice was rough with accusation. “Do you have any idea what that does to me? It makes me fucking crazy.”

My shoulder bag slid to the floor with a soft thump, followed by the rough tug of fabric.

“No—don’t!” I screamed as my slacks were wrenched down.

The sharp clink of his belt buckle loosening sent ice through my veins. His weight settled over my back, and I thrashed beneath him.

“Please stop,” I sobbed, nails breaking as I scrabbled for purchase against the wooden door.

I gasped for air when Professor Maxwell wrapped a hand around my neck and thrust inside. No preparation, foreplay, or cajoling. My teeth gritted at the pain, fingers digging into the arms caging me in.

Terror churned in my stomach as my body seized against the violation. My legs kicked wildly while my body fought to accommodate him. Every inch of him felt enormous in this position, and the friction burned as he retreated only to slide back inside.

A tremor ran through him as he pressed his face into my hair, burying himself to the hilt. “Fuck, I needed this,” he whispered, his voice raw.

He wasted no time exploiting my vulnerable position. His fingers found their way between my thighs, teasing me, allowing my body to acclimate to him. Despite my self-loathing, my thighs parted in silent invitation when his hot tongue drew distracting patterns along my neck.

“That’s it,” he murmured against my ear. “Nothing feels like you do, baby. I can feel how your body responds to me. You can’t keep lying to me.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to escape his words as he began to move. He established an unforgiving rhythm. I could only hope no one would walk in. Our bodies collided with a cadence that would mask any approaching footsteps in the hallway. He gripped my hips, pulling me back to meet his thrusts, making me take all of him while I made sounds that I barely recognized as my own.

His fingers strummed my clit, chasing his release and mine, growling like a wild animal claiming its mate. I screamed, coming apart at the seams. We heard footsteps in the hallway, and he slapped a hand over my mouth. Despite his relentless pace, he cradled me through the tremors. And when he climaxed, he bit my shoulder to contain a similar shout.

My head lolled to the side, resting on his shoulder. I had never done drugs and assumed this was what it must feel like to be high. I was on the brink of passing out when the pleasure gave way to the shame of what had happened yet again.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-SEVEN

ROSE

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

I stiffened as Professor Maxwell strode toward me. Seriously? I couldn’t escape from this man even at a holy site.

I attempted what most people would do when they feel utterly helpless, I turned to God. My prayers to end this nightmare had gone unanswered. I had skipped *pujas*, ignoring Hindu holy days, and *Bhagavan* had ignored me in return. Today was supposed to be my triumphant return to my spiritual calling. Except *he* was here, wearing the same intense expression he’d worn when he cornered me in the empty classroom.

After our last encounter, I had made substantial efforts to surround myself with people and dodge Professor Maxwell with polite brush-offs. But he kept showing up at places I frequented. The “coincidences” were entirely intentional. He wanted answers, to understand why I made the first move if I didn’t want to pursue him.

I felt his presence everywhere I went—watching, waiting. Yesterday, he bumped into me in the stairwell. The day before, he was loitering near my favorite café. Each time, his frustration had grown more palpable. A hand slamming against the wall beside me when I refused to eat lunch with him. A pen snapped in half during class when I turned down the offer to be his personal assistant.

His patience was visibly thinning. I didn’t feel safe in the classroom or outside of it, always looking over my shoulder for a shadow lurking behind me. It was reminiscent of my preteen years, when every loud sound drove

me to panic. Convinced that I had somehow riled up my attacker, I avoided all interactions, never wanting to provoke anyone into assaulting me. Eye contact, speaking up, and an outgoing nature could be misconstrued and welcome trouble. For a little while, I stopped talking altogether.

It took me years to find the strength to soldier through it, only to suffer a huge setback. I despised Professor Maxwell for resurfacing these old insecurities. A man who violated the boundaries at his work in broad daylight, and in a classroom where anyone could walk in, was beyond unpredictable. I was always on alert, terrified that he might corner me again.

But I thought I would be safe today. I woke up with an unshakeable determination to return to my roots. I packed my bag with all sorts of offerings and hailed a taxi to our local *mandir*. Nestled between textbooks and a half-eaten granola bar lay a *puja thali*, a plastic bag full of bright flowers, and incense sticks. I had planned on buying the *prasad* from one of the stalls in front of the mandir.

But instead of visiting the usual sweets vendor, I was face-to-face with the last person I wanted to see.

“What are you doing here?” The city was barely awake. I assumed he couldn’t track me down at this time of day. Perhaps he had hired someone to watch me around-the-clock so he could stalk me more seamlessly.

“I asked you first.”

My impatient eyes flicked to the mandir. Wasn’t it obvious?

He glanced over his shoulder, registering the building behind him. If he had hired someone to follow me, they must be incompetent not to have figured out my destination. The giant rose-gold temple stood out against the skyline and was impossible to miss.

“You’re here to pray.” He sounded thoughtful.

“That’s what people do at a mandir.”

“I didn’t realize you prayed.”

I fixed my gaze on a crack in the pavement. Months ago, he’d asked about my dietary restrictions. I’d mentioned that I didn’t eat beef. Surely, someone as perceptive as Professor Maxwell connected the dots to my Hindu upbringing. Why was he acting like my faith was a big revelation?

He tilted his head slightly, as if I had spoken the thought out loud. “I assumed you didn’t eat beef out of cultural habit because you grew up in a Hindu household. Religious reasons didn’t cross my mind.”

Of course, it didn't cross his mind. Professor Maxwell was the cynical type. He probably thought gods and deities were imaginations from children's stories. And because I was into science, he hadn't expected me to lean into my polytheistic religion.

Hopefully, he was totally turned off by me because of my beliefs.

"Yes, I'm extremely devoted to my gods. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm here for morning *aarti*."

The last time I set foot inside a mandir was at *Diwali*, and the broad entrance steps called to me. The fragrances from the flowers planted outside mingled with the faint, sweet smoke of incense and prayer bells drifting from inside.

Professor Maxwell blocked my way with his giant body that took up most of the pavement. My fingers tightened around my tote bag as I waited for him to move.

He didn't.

Instead, he drew my attention to his outfit—a charcoal gray cashmere sweater, perfectly tailored wool trousers, and a camel overcoat. His wardrobe had changed in the time I had known him. He was never a fan of colors, but lately, he had stuck exclusively to a neutral palette. It was as if he'd studied the Ambani aesthetic and wholeheartedly embraced it.

He did a swooping motion over his outfit. "Is this appropriate?"

"Appropriate for what?"

"For morning prayer."

My blood turned to ice. I was furious at him for dredging up my old fears, and now, he was trying to invade my sacred space. "You're not going inside with me." My pitch was higher than I had intended. Luckily, it was the crack of dawn, and there weren't many eyes on us. A few people in colorful saris and kurtas, along with jeans and hoodies, were taking their shoes off by the front steps. Their heads were bowed as they rang the brass bell at the entrance. The deep chime momentarily cut through the quiet street like a ripple in still water.

"Why not?"

"Because..." My voice caught as I searched for words. I needed an excuse. Any excuse. Mandir was the only haven left where he couldn't reach me. "Our families hate each other, and I might know someone inside. If they see us together, they'll report back to my father."

"So?"

“So, I’ll be in a lot of trouble. Why do you want to pray anyway? You’re not Hindu.”

“I’m whatever religion you are.”

My jaw sagged. The absurdity of his claim left me speechless for a moment.

“Y-you’re not coming with me,” I repeated helplessly.

“From what I understand, everyone’s welcome to visit temples as long as they participate respectfully.”

“Then go to a different mandir.”

“This one suits me just fine.”

A frustrated noise escaped me. “Please, stop. We both know you have no interest in religion. You’re only doing this to torture me.”

His expression shifted from casual to granite, like a flip of a switch. The sarcastic humor and teasing bled out of him. “You think being with me is torture?”

Stalking someone isn’t the same as being with them! The words gathered in my throat like a scream, begging for release. The arrogance in his voice that he could make any declarations about this twisted relationship, and I would nod along like a puppet, made me see red.

“We aren’t together, and you *are* torturing me,” I snapped, feeling livid. The scarf around my neck slipped, though I didn’t fix it. I didn’t dare to move.

His jaw was set in stone as his gaze shifted to my bare neck, where he had left hickeys and bruises from choking me. Professor Maxwell had transformed before my eyes, or perhaps this was who he had always been, and I didn’t see it. Gone was his gentle voice to subdue his scary personality and his restraint to protect my bubble.

“Did you forget what you did to me just a few days ago?” I asked, watching him closely for any sign of remorse, hoping the glimpses of gentleness were still somewhere inside him.

But there was no regret in his expression as he nodded at my neck and asked, “Does it hurt?” His voice was clinical, not apologetic. At most, he was curious and wanted to bank the information on whether leaving marks pushed me too far.

Our last encounter had cut me deep, and it had nothing to do with the bruises he had left behind. He took me in an open space where anyone could have walked in and witnessed the obscene display, the smell of sex

permeating the air, and the sound of flesh slapping against flesh filling the room. The way he hadn't bothered to arouse me before taking me was the cherry on top. I felt utterly used. Tears sprang to my eyes, reliving the degrading experience. "Why do you care whether I'm hurt?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"A fitting one, considering our recent interactions."

He watched me for a moment. "You're upset," he ascertained.

Though my hazy gaze was on the pavement, my jaw went slack with disbelief. The casual tone in his voice made my skin crawl. Did he think I was okay after what he did? Was he capable of an ounce of human emotion?

"We should talk if you're upset." He pulled out his phone to text someone. "I asked Raoul to bring the car around. Let's get breakfast. We can go to the temple another day."

In his dreams. This acid bite of betrayal couldn't be fixed with talking. I forced my gaze from the ground to his eyes, my breath coming in short, violent bursts. "There's nothing left to discuss between us."

When he heard the venom in my voice, there was a hint of concession from the man who hated compromises. "I won't insist on praying with you if you talk to me."

"Then talk." My voice came out flat. "Tell me. How can you ask if I am hurt when you're the one who *hurt* me? Do you ever feel remorse?"

His face turned to stone. "Funny that you're bringing up remorse. You instigated things between us, then regretted it before the sheets were even cold. I've seen you take longer to choose a cupcake than you took to consider giving this a chance."

"That's because you're my professor."

"Not for long. You're graduating soon, so that hardly plays a factor."

"That doesn't mean my family would be okay—"

"You said this has nothing to do with your family, and I believe you. If you were fine with defying them for your career, you'd be willing to do the same for your love life. We both know there's more to the story than you're letting on. So why don't you do us both a favor and just tell me?"

I swallowed thickly. Should I come clean about Damon?

Everything in me protested the idea. "I hate being touched," I said instead.

“Not by me,” he retorted immediately. “We’ve already been through this. I’ve watched your reactions since day one. You break into a cold sweat whenever anyone gets too close or if they touch you unprovoked. You’ve never reacted that way to me.”

I blinked. Professor Maxwell had been collecting ammunition against me, tons of it. “T-that was before. I don’t feel safe around you anymore.”

“Maybe,” he bit out. “But that’s not the reason you’re holding back.”

“It is. What happened on the boat was a one-off, and, clearly, a physical relationship is very important to you—”

“Then I’ll wait,” he cut me off.

“What?”

“I won’t push for sex if you want to wait.”

My head reeled back. I hadn’t expected my objection to backfire on such epic proportions. Every time I’d seen him since the night on the boat, he had been on a mission to get me on my back. There was no way he would be willing to wait.

I shook my head. “You’re not known to be a patient man.”

“On the contrary. Research is all about years of work with frivolous results. I’ll wait as long as you agree to a relationship.” After a thoughtful beat, he clarified, “An exclusive one with labels. You’re graduating at the end of the semester. We’ll make it public then.”

My stomach dropped. Committing to a monogamous relationship with him meant saying goodbye to Damon forever. Damon might overlook a few meaningless hookups, but never an exclusive, committed relationship with his twin.

Feeling cornered, I said, “I’ll never be ready.”

“I didn’t think so, either, until that night.” His voice dropped to the temperature of a morgue drawer. “You loved every fucking moment of it. Which proves my point. *Hating my touch* is a pathetic excuse. In fact, every reason you’ve given me is utter bullshit.”

His footsteps closed the space between us with deliberate slowness. My shoulders tensed as if bracing for impact, and even the first ray of sunshine against my skin felt cold and distant.

“I’m calling your bluff, Rose. You’re deliberately placing obstacles to keep me at arm’s length. The question is, why?”

I kept silent, knowing those sharp eyes missed nothing. His calculating thoughts unraveled every excuse I’d crafted to maintain distance. He was

right. My family wasn't going to stop me from being with Damon, and if I had loved Professor Maxwell, it wouldn't have stopped me from being with him, either. Graduation was weeks away, after which our student-professor relationship would cease to exist. There was only one reason that mattered to me—Damon.

For months, I had tried to comfort the lonely boy inside Professor Maxwell, who competed with his sibling for his parents' love. Through our past conversations, it had become abundantly clear that Professor Maxwell cared about his brother a great deal...in his own way. Telling him would resurrect those competitive feelings against the only person who had his back unequivocally.

I could never do that to him.

His ire settled in at my silence. "It's simple, Rose. Commit to a relationship, and I'll wait for you. Keep denying what's between us, and we'll do things my way."

My fury blazed white-hot, consuming every rational thought. Screw him and his entitled attitude regarding my body. A few weeks ago, I would have run to him at the first sign of danger. But now he had ripped away my sense of security, the only thing I had thrived for in my life.

"You keep saying you can't bear my touch. But the last time we were together, I had to slap a hand over your mouth to keep you from screaming."

I turned away from him, my face burning with shame.

He followed me like a shadow. "Stop walking away from me." He grabbed my elbow, and the same unstoppable reaction overtook me.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to touch me?"

"That's only doing yourself a disservice when I have made you come so hard that you nearly passed out—"

His head snapped sideways. The red imprint of my palm blooming across his cheek was the only indication that I had slapped him.

My hands flew to my mouth to cover it. That was entirely unintentional. Unfortunately, Professor Maxwell didn't forgive such mistakes. I considered taking off, though he would probably have me pinned to the pavement before I made it halfway down the street.

He straightened, popping his jaw and squaring his shoulders. Just when I thought he would have mercy on me, he seized my waist and threw me over his shoulder like a sack of flour.

A black Bentley sedan was waiting at the curb, engine purring. Before I could draw a breath to cry for help, he opened the door and tossed me onto the back seat. He slid across the leather seat and clamped his palm over my mouth, silencing me mid-scream.

Raoul, his driver, blanched when he saw a grown woman being kidnapped. When I gave him a pleading look, he guiltily turned away from me.

“Drive,” Caden ordered.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-EIGHT

ROSE

NEITHER OF US spoke a word as the car pulled away. I looked out the window instead, fingers trailing my lap as Raoul weaved through traffic. Professor Maxwell's knee brushed mine when we turned a corner, and I shifted away immediately. His eye twitched, but he didn't say anything.

The car rolled to a stop in a deserted parking lot, and I could no longer keep my apprehensions at bay. "Where are we?" The leather seat creaked beneath me as I leaned forward, my palms damp.

"Here's fine, Raoul," he told his chauffeur instead of answering my question. "Leave me the keys and take an Uber back."

Raoul's sympathetic eyes met mine in the rearview mirror before darting away. He complied, wordlessly handing over the keys to Professor Maxwell. I studied the gray building towering over the empty parking lot. It looked like an abandoned warehouse. We were still in the city, but the building was tucked away in a secluded corner, stripped of civilization. Fear slithered around my spine like a cold snake. The double doors were rusted, and the walls were cracked and covered in graffiti. According to the ladders and paint canisters, someone had been doing repairs to fix the years of neglect.

He hauled me out of the car and dragged me inside. Protesting would only piss him off at this point, so I followed quietly. The warehouse was massive, with high ceilings, rows of towering pillars extending endlessly, and natural light filtering in through the windows. I expected the walls to be

covered in layers of dust and grime, but the restoration efforts for the interior showed better progress.

Despite the gnawing sense of dread curling around my ribs, I couldn't help but admire the relentless precision of the renovations. The walls had a fresh coat of paint—eggshell, I believe—and the floorboards were brand new. Every spackled edge of the drywall was flawless, and every beam and bracket was marked with laser-leveled accuracy. Rows of brand-new workbenches gleamed with unused intent. The glassware was stacked in military order, as if awaiting a parade inspection, while the glistening steel of the autoclaves and centrifuges stood sentinel in their assigned alcoves. It was clearly meant to be a giant science lab, and a dream come true for someone with OCD.

"What is this place?"

Professor Maxwell raked his fingers through his dirty-blond hair, leaving furrows like a freshly plowed field. "I bought this place to start a pharmaceutical company."

"You're leaving NewTech?" I couldn't hide my surprise. He chose to work at NewTech because of its cutting-edge technology. But it seemed he had set up shop with similar access.

"Eventually. This warehouse is being converted into a lab, and I'll add offices for the admins. The renovations will take at least six months."

"The space has...potential," I admitted reluctantly. "Why are you showing it to me?"

"Because you were upset, and I wanted to speak to you somewhere private." He paused before adding, "I also thought you might like to see our new lab."

My insides coiled with dread. "I'm not working for you after graduation." I was counting down to the day until I could get away from him. I thought he would have worked that out by now.

His jaw tightened, eyes turning cold. "Of course you are."

"No, I'm not," I snapped.

"You don't have a choice. Your father cut you off and blacklisted you from every graduate program and job in the tristate area."

"Then, I'll move."

"Like hell you will." His frosty eyes moved over my face before he inhaled. I assumed he was trying to calm himself down. "It doesn't have to be this way, Rose. You don't have to fight me every step of the way."

Frustrated, I closed my eyes. “What do you want from me?”

“Everything.” His voice cut like steel. “How much clearer can I be about my intentions? I want *you*.”

“I think you have a lot of options if sex is what you’re after.”

“It’s not about sex.” His voice cut like a blade against stone. “I want you, and I want everything that comes with it. But you keep yourself locked away from me. Let me in, Rose.”

The raw confession from this usually composed man sliced through my anger. He’d never exposed himself like this, and, for once, he seemed vulnerable. Despite everything, I found myself wanting to reach out, to smooth the hurt from his face with my fingertips.

His hand raked through his hair again. “This is driving me fucking crazy. You are driving me fucking crazy. I’ve never been this way before you.” His eyes seemed wild and unfocused.

I didn’t make a sound as his short-lived vulnerability fizzled away. He was like a live wire, electrifying the air around him and ready to explode with the wrong move.

His eyes held mine captive, the silence stretching between us until it became its own form of violence. The absence of the city noise felt like a trap. I was suddenly hyperaware that there was no one around in a one-mile radius.

His eyes bored into mine, unblinking. “All you have to do is admit that you want me,” he finally said, his voice like gravel. “It’ll put me out of my fucking misery.”

My insides twisted into a knot. “How can you ask that of me after what you did to me? You’re lucky I didn’t report you.”

He considered my words for a moment. “You’re right. You should’ve told someone by now.” He cocked his head to one side, curious. “Why haven’t you?”

I scoffed. “Because you wouldn’t have faced any consequences even if I had.”

“That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have tried.”

This felt like another trap.

His eyes lit up with triumph. “Little Rose, have you fallen so deeply in love with me that you’re protecting me?”

My composure slipped through my fingers at his mocking tone. The word love sounded bitter to my ears. “Don’t talk to me about love. You’ve

no idea what it is.”

“Sounds like you know a lot from personal experience.”

My head jerked up. “I do.”

For a moment, something akin to hope flickered in his eyes.

My stomach dropped. Oh God. If he believed that I loved him, there’d be no stopping him. Any boundaries he still recognized would dissolve completely. I needed to take it back before this turned into something unstoppable.

“I didn’t mean you.” I froze as soon as the words tumbled out. I had revealed too much in my haste to correct his misinterpretation.

Professor Maxwell’s reaction didn’t disappoint. A radiating sense of dread kept me rooted to the spot as he strode forward. I yelled when he lunged for me, seizing my jaw between his fingers.

“What the fuck did you just say?” His gaze hardened into something that made my blood run cold.

That flicker of hope in his eyes turned into something else—a desperate, wounded plea to say it wasn’t true. A ghost of tenderness fluttered in my chest at his gutted expression.

“Who did you mean?” The question was measured and controlled as he tried to rein in his temper, but the muscle twitching in his jaw told me everything I needed to know.

The air between us was tense, as if a pin had been pulled from a grenade and we were waiting for the explosion. I parted my cracked lips and scanned the warehouse for exits.

His fingers dug into my cheeks. “Answer the fucking question.”

Whatever logical man had once inhabited Professor Maxwell’s body was gone, leaving me with an unhinged sociopath. Panic seized my chest, crushing my lungs until each shallow breath became a struggle. The only way out of this was the half-truth because he’d see through my lies.

“N-no one has touched me other than you. I was a virgin. You know that.”

His eyes raked over my face, searchlights seeking the truth. The confession he extracted from my expressions didn’t satisfy him. “Who said anything about touching? We were discussing love. Who did you mean?”

“No one!”

“Who?” he thundered. It was so loud that I was pretty sure a flock of birds flew away at the horrid sound.

I tried to bat his hand away, which only tightened at my resistance. I met his gaze, realizing he wouldn't let up. Physical pain gave way to exposing the horrid truth. "He was my first love, and I never quite got over it. It was a long time ago."

His grip tightened until I felt my teeth against the inside of my cheeks. He leaned closer, blue, bottomless eyes pulling me in. "Name."

I tried to shake my head, which was impossible with his grip on my cheeks. "It doesn't matter. We don't even have communication. All that matters is that I can't get over him," I told him, realizing the truth was inevitable. "Maybe things would've been different had I met you first."

The air between us turned sharp, metallic, like the moment before lightning strikes. He didn't move, didn't blink. The lines around his mouth deepened like I had betrayed him in the worst way possible. I forced myself to look away from it.

I swallowed. "I'm sorry. Please just try to understand. I can't help what's in my heart."

"Then I'll rip your fucking heart out and feed it to dogs."

My heart slammed against my rib cage at the threat.

His fingers released my face. "Tell me his name before I lose it." The words came out soft, precise, each one landing like ice against my skin.

His stance remained tense, body rigid and unmoving. There was a distinct smell in the air, an acrid mix of anger and determination.

I shook my head, not entirely convinced he wouldn't go after his own brother. He was like an animal, driven to eliminate any threats that prevented him from mating with his female.

His face went blank, a mask sliding into place that revealed nothing of the storm raging behind it. "Protecting another man in front of me was a stupid thing to do."

The edge in his voice made my stomach clench. At this state, reason might have abandoned him completely. I pivoted on my heel, ready to take off.

Before I could take another step, his hand threaded into my hair, curling into a tight fist. He twisted my hair, pulling it taut at the roots. It ignited something primal in me, and I turned in his hold to claw his face. He barely registered the attack.

In one fluid motion, he seized both my wrists and yanked me to his chest. "You're mine, Rose. I don't give a shit who you can or can't get

over.”

“Let me go.” My body twisted in a desperate attempt to wrench myself free. But his grip around my waist and on my hair was like metal shackles.

“You would’ve loved me if you saw me first. You said it yourself. So, pretend that you did.”

Despite the frantic drumming in my chest, I couldn’t lie to him. “It doesn’t work that way.”

The hold on my tresses tightened with an unspoken rage before he yanked my head back, exposing my throat. I dug my nails into his arm, feeling the muscle beneath my fingertips. His fingers coiled around my throat, cutting off my oxygen. I immediately retracted my claws.

His mouth crashed against mine with bruising force, making me shriek. I shoved against his chest, but he was immovable.

He tipped me, forcing me to lose my balance, and threw me to the ground. Pain exploded at the back of my head when I landed on the hard floor with a thud. But I couldn’t let the pain distract me because I knew he was seconds away from pinning me down. The last thing I wanted was to be near him. I pressed my hands on the concrete, crawling backward on my elbows to get away from him. I screamed when my back hit the wall, realizing I was trapped. Footsteps echoed ominously in the silence, each step vibrating through my bones as he neared. He seemed menacing, and I huddled against the wall, warding him away with two hands held in front of my face. But he kept advancing. His hand shot out to grab my neck. He peeled me off the wall and pushed me to the ground once more.

“Please, Professor Maxwell,” I begged.

“Caden,” he leaned over to murmur against my throat. “Call me Caden.”

When his hand left my waist to clutch at my shirt, I knew there was only one thing that might snap him out of it. “Caden, please stop. You promised to wait.”

The sound of his name on my lips made him freeze. There was a tinge of sadness in his eyes—remorse, if I wasn’t mistaken—because he didn’t plan on stopping. It was an apology he would never utter.

Instead, he said, “I promised to wait if you gave this a chance. You didn’t hold up your end of the deal, either.” His mouth ghosted across my skin, forehead, and cheeks. “The only thing that matters now is that I love you, and the only way I’ll stop loving you is if someone puts a fucking

bullet through my head. I won't apologize for doing whatever it takes to be with you. If this is the only way I can have you, then so be it, because I refuse to live without you."

My heart felt heavy at his vacant eyes, as though some darker entity had claimed his body. With one violent jerk, he tore the buttons of my shirt, skittering them across the floor.

"Caden, you have to stop," I whispered, desperate to cling to his humanity. Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I wasn't above begging. "Please, Caden. Not like this."

He shuddered, his breath hot against my ear. "I love hearing you say my name." He pinned my wrists next to my head, his fingers digging into the delicate flesh until I gasped.

"You're hurting me!" The words evaporated into the air between us. "Please stop!" My voice cracked.

"You're only making it worse for yourself by fighting me," he whispered, each syllable dripping with honeyed venom.

I stopped breathing, stopped thrashing, too. True fear froze my blood as I looked into those empty eyes. This wasn't the same man who had sometimes pushed the boundaries.

Professor Maxwell seized my face between his hands. His mouth crashed against mine with such force that my head knocked back against the floor again. The shock of violation paralyzed me as he forced himself inside, not caring if I was wet enough to take him. Each brutal thrust pushed me across the new hardwood floors until his hands anchored my hips in place.

I was limp beneath him, retreating in some corner of my mind. When his fingers found their way between us, waves of unwanted pleasure jolted me into the present.

My release came seconds before his with a shout that had me seeing a white flash.

He slumped against me, his weight crushing the air from my lungs. I stared at the ceiling, my mind struggling to reconcile this moment with my consciousness. The warehouse walls seemed to close in around us.

His lips brushed over my forehead, tender in a way that made my stomach turn. Words failed me as he pulled out, leaving a warm trail down my thighs.

He collapsed beside me, his breath sounding ragged in the quiet room. My legs almost gave out beneath me when I tried to stand. By the time he had closed his eyes in the afterglow of his release, I had grabbed my clothes and bolted.

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CHAPTER

THIRTY-NINE

ROSE

PUSHING through the throngs of people, I climbed the stairs toward the second floor. The masquerade-themed party was in full swing. It was meant to celebrate my and Amelie's graduation, but that was the last thing I felt like doing.

Damon had reached out to me a few days ago, dropping hints about an invitation to this party. I was surprised he showed, more so because he brought the bane of my existence with him.

I had been avoiding Professor Maxwell like the plague and stopped going to class completely. When the grades were posted, I stared at my screen in disbelief. Instead of failing me, I received an A from the man who is legendary for never awarding them. Perhaps it was the price for my silence about what had happened in that abandoned warehouse. A shudder crawled up my spine, and I quickly shut down the unwanted images.

No. I couldn't go there again. It would wreck me.

I had successfully dodged Professor Maxwell for days. Despite his attempts to stalk me, reach me, threaten me, coerce me, I had stayed hidden. The few quiet days had given me a sliver of peace. Meanwhile, he had become relentless in his pursuit, getting angrier with each rejection, and now he was here to torment me.

But I was determined to ignore him tonight. I was a woman on a mission. Three tequila shots buzzed through my veins. The liquid courage was just what I needed to confront Damon.

Why had he saved me from the brink of death, only to never spare me a second glance?

A part of me already suspected the truth. My life-changing moment was a dime a dozen to him. He was a philanthropist who had probably saved hundreds of suicidal teens and didn't remember it was me on that rooftop. And that's okay. Romance wasn't even on my radar anymore. After everything that had gone down with his brother, I felt too used and spoiled for anyone else. At least there was one upside, Professor Maxwell had cured my lifelong affliction.

I just needed an answer to the question that had haunted me for years and put my burning curiosity to rest.

But first, I needed to find Poppy. Her parents were out of town and had graciously opened their home to host this party. My aunt had only one condition: Poppy must come out of her solitude for at least thirty minutes to enjoy the company of people her age. My antisocial cousin was yet to make an appearance.

I reached the second floor of Poppy's castle-like home. Poppy occupied the entire floor and her gothic taste was reflected in every nook and cranny. Only my aunt and I were allowed access to this level, aside from her trusted housekeeper. The mezzanine balcony overlooked the party downstairs. I ignored the raging music and charged toward her room. Perhaps I could bribe Poppy into coming out of her fortress of solitude. I rehearsed the pep talk I'd been ordered to deliver when I stopped dead in my tracks.

Standing in the hallway, right by the wall next to Poppy's bedroom door, was Professor Maxwell. He leaned casually against the wall, arms crossed, one ankle cocked over the other, as if he'd been waiting for me specifically. The shadow he cast seemed darker than the gloomy ambience in the hallway.

I considered retracing my steps, but his eyes had already zeroed in on me. As always, there was a flicker of recognition in his gaze that made me realize he could see straight through me. Neither of us spoke. The thrum of the party below sounded a million miles away. I became acutely aware of the way my hands trembled and the sweat gathering beneath my dress.

Then my eyes landed on Poppy's door. A small mercy. What Professor Maxwell could do to me paled next to what would happen if my she-devil cousin found him lurking here. I just needed to make a break for her room.

He uncrossed his arms and inclined his head toward her room. “I wouldn’t go in there if I were you,” he warned, realizing my intention.

The door to her room was slightly ajar, though I couldn’t see inside. The lights were turned off.

“It sounds like your cousin has company.”

Was it Poppy’s annual fuckfest already? She didn’t like distractions during the school year and only allowed herself physical contact one day a year.

I hesitated, expecting him to do something nefarious. He didn’t move a muscle, just tracked me with those bored eyes as I inched backward. My shoulder blades prickled until I moved out of the periphery of his attention. Only when the distance between us felt safe did my lungs remember how to work again.

I pivoted on my heel, but his detached voice froze me mid-step. “Rose.”

Every instinct screamed for me to keep walking, but with several feet between us, I felt safe enough to engage. Perhaps a part of me was itching for a fight. Spit in his face, kick him in the shin, or just scream at him until my lungs burned.

I spun in place. “What now? Discovered more of my family members sleeping with each other? Let me guess. You plan to blackmail me to make me sleep with you.” It was a strong reaction to him calling out my name. But I had been angry for days, and there hadn’t been an outlet.

He smirked. “Tempting. Now I wish I had dug something up to blackmail you with.”

“What do you want?” I spat.

“I missed you.”

I blinked, caught off guard. The unguarded admission hit me like a slap.

For the first time tonight, I took him in. Dark shadows hung beneath his eyes like he hadn’t slept in days. His immaculate hair was disheveled. The polished veneer was starkly missing.

If I didn’t know any better, I would think that I had taken a part of him away by making myself inaccessible. Something twisted in my chest at his vulnerability.

I furiously stomped over my weak emotions. The warehouse. The hardwood floor against my back. My throat raw from pleading with him. I forced myself to remember those brutal images. He said he didn’t give a

shit about what I wanted and proved it with his actions. He was the master of manipulation, and I was falling for it again.

I wanted him to be equally angry, so I didn't have to be considerate of the small ounce of real feelings he had expressed. "I don't have time for this."

I was about to turn away, but an unfamiliar crack in his generally icy tone stopped me. "You forgot everything that happened back then."

"What?"

His eyes dropped to my abdomen, and I realized he was referring to my scars.

"Is this a fetish thing?" I asked, heat rising in my cheeks. "Why are you so obsessed with my scars?"

"They brought you back to me." There was no mask, sarcasm, or even a hint of arrogance in his claim.

I stared at him, trying to read the lines around his mouth and the despondency in his eyes. What was with him tonight?

"Do you really not remember anything that happened back then?" he asked, his voice miles from the glacial detachment I'd come to expect.

"What are you talking about?" Did he miss me *so* much that he had gone into a stupor of confusion?

"That day, you didn't tell me your name. But I knew it was you the moment I saw your scars." He stared at my belly. "Why can't you remember me, Little One?"

His words collided with my memory and bounced off. My knees nearly buckled at the force of it, and I clung to the balcony railing to steady myself. Cold clarity flooded my veins as pieces locked into place with terrible precision.

The realization hit me with the force of a thousand gunshots—it was never Damon on that rooftop. It was Caden.



My arms pumped, my legs cramped, but I didn't let it slow me down as I climbed the stairs. Just one more flight of stairs. I was in immense pain and knew what I had to do the moment I threw the door open to the rooftop.

My hoodie rattled in the crosscurrent of the unforgiving wind, ballooning out from my body. Without thinking, I pressed my palms to the freezing metal rail and climbed over. My feet found the concrete lip at the edge as I leaned over to stare at the river underneath. The drop was terrifying. But what was worse was the pain shooting up from my belly.

My fingers instinctively tightened around the railing as I hovered at the edge. Fat tears dropped onto my cheeks. I didn't want to do this, but at least the pain would be over the moment I jumped.

A sound behind me broke my tunnel vision. I tensed, ready for a nurse's shout or the heavy footfall of a security guard. But the voice that came was flat, amused, and utterly unimpressed.

"Are you going to do it?" the bored voice asked.

I glanced over my shoulder. Blue eyes, deeper than the river below, studied me curiously. He was fourteen or fifteen, but you would think he was older by his towering height. He was even taller than my father, with shoulders too broad for someone his age. I had seen him around before. He was one of the older kids from our circle, though I had never spoken to him.

He had a cigarette in his hand. He took a drag, not at all in a hurry to talk me out of this or concerned about my fatality. I didn't know how to react to his casual indifference.

When he stepped forward, I flinched. "Stay where you are, or I'll do it."

"No, you won't."

"What do you mean I won't?"

Nodding at the water, he flicked his cigarette into it. I watched as it tumbled down, disappearing into the blue. I gulped. He had done it purposefully to show me what awaited me if I followed through. "You would have done it already if you were serious about it."

This guy was seriously annoying. "That's because you're distracting me."

He looked at the sky. "Are you still talking? Jump already. Just don't half-ass it."

"How can I half-ass a suicide?" I asked, irritated.

It wasn't lost on me that I had barely spoken a word to anyone since the 'incident,' but something about his stoic nature frustrated me enough to speak.

"See those rocks down there? You could hit one on your way down. Then you'd crack your head open and there'd be blood. Bits of your brain

will probably scatter everywhere. Messy way to go. It would take the fun out of the whole peaceful drowning thing. Just make sure to concentrate on the deepest part of the water when you jump."

My jaw dropped. "Shouldn't you be trying to talk me out of this?"

He shrugged. "Looks like you aren't going through with it, anyway. Oh well. Not every day can you achieve your goals. Give me your hand, Little One, and I'll pull you back over."

No. I couldn't go back to my hospital suite. My parents forced me to meet the plastic surgeon today. Despite my protests and pleas against more surgeries, they had signed the documents to approve the procedure. The date had been set.

Defeat wore me down. I couldn't go through one more surgery, let alone the several suggested by the physician.

Just jump, and it will be over. No more pain.

"Take my hand, Little One. Maybe tomorrow will be your day."

"Go away."

"Can't. I'm already involved. If you jump, I'll be the last person to see you alive. The police will think I pushed you and make me their number one murder suspect."

"Then go back downstairs."

"This hospital has cameras everywhere except the roof. They'll see that I went to the rooftop and then connect me to the dead girl floating in the river." Crouching down, he started unlacing his shoes. "I think the only way out is for me to jump after you once you let go."

"You're crazy."

He chuckled wholeheartedly, and for the first time, he didn't sound bored or sarcastic. It was real. Something about him told me that he didn't laugh very often. The sound warmed my chest. "I'm crazy? I'm not the one hanging off the railing of a hospital roof."

"You'll die if you jump after me."

"I'll be charged with murder if I don't. I'm a good swimmer. I'll take my chances with the water against life in prison."

He removed his socks next and threw his wallet and pack of cigarettes on the ground.

He was impossible. "You said it yourself. There are rocks. The fall alone will kill you."

“To tell you the truth, I am more worried about the water than the rocks.”

“Why?”

“It’s below freezing.”

I peered over the edge, suddenly unsure whether drowning would be less painful than plastic surgery.

“Water that cold hits you like a thousand knives all over your body.” He removed his jacket next. “Which is why I’m not looking forward to jumping after you.”

I realized my tears had dried at some point during our conversation.

“Then don’t.”

“Like I said, I don’t have a choice. I value my freedom more than ice-cold water.”

“There has to be another way.”

He seemed to be considering my words at great length. “I guess you could always climb back over the railing. Then I don’t have to jump or go to jail.”

I looked from him to the water. I really didn’t want to jump into that cold water or hit my head on one of those rocks.

My resolve broke when he extended his hand. Without knowing much about him, I could tell he didn’t like being touched. Like me, there was a clear reluctance to make physical contact. This was a monumental gesture for people like us. Perhaps it was because I was so touched that I slipped my trembling hand in his.

He didn’t miss a beat. He was well built for a teenager and lifted me with one hand, as if I weighed nothing. He pulled me over the railing so fast that our bodies collided, and the impact sent us sprawling. For a second, I thought he’d drop me, but he wrapped an arm around my waist and twisted so that he hit the concrete first, cushioning my fall with his body.

When I realized there wasn’t any pain from the impact, I opened my eyes. The first thing I saw was a startling pair of the most beautiful blue eyes I had ever seen. It stunned me into stillness. Hovering inches from his face, I couldn’t remember where I was or what I had been doing. I only saw his eyes and his strong jaw and his generous lips above the wild collar of his T-shirt. Beneath me was a wall of chest—his chest—that rose and fell in ragged, close-mouthed breaths.

My heart started thudding. I have had crushes on boys before, but nothing like this. At that moment, it seemed like something monumental had happened. My entire life had changed, and it would never be the same again.

He grunted, “You’re trouble, Little One. You decided not to jump and still almost took both of us out.”

He straightened me. We sat cross-legged on the ground as he picked up his abandoned shoes and socks and started putting them on.

“Want to tell me now why you were jumping off a roof?” he asked.

Suddenly feeling extremely embarrassed, I ducked my head. “My parents.”

“What about them?”

Instead of pressuring me to respond immediately, he waited patiently until I could form the words. “They want me to get surgery. Well, they want me to get more surgery.”

“Surgery for what?”

I normally wouldn’t let anyone see, but something about his dull eyes told me he wouldn’t judge. Slowly, I lifted the hem of my hoodie to show him the scars on my abdomen. One of the nurses almost threw up when she saw them. They had healed a little since then, but they were still grotesque.

He didn’t flinch. There was no pity in his eyes, either. He didn’t even ask how I got them; he merely inspected them. “The stitches are clean,” he declared. “No infections. You should be in the clear. Why do you need more surgery?”

I hung my head. “My parents think they’re ugly.”

“They want you to get cosmetic surgery?” he guessed.

I nodded.

“Surgery for cosmetic reasons would cause more harm than good. You might get an infection. Possibly several. It’d be stupid to do it.”

He was just a teenager but spoke like an adult with complete authority.

“I don’t have a choice. My mom scheduled the surgery—”

“Do you know what medical emancipation is?”

I shook my head.

“Go to the bottom floor of the hospital. Ask them to assign you a social worker and tell them your parents aren’t acting in your best interest. They’ll want to speak to your doctor, who’ll make the same assessment as I just did—superficial surgery is risky and unnecessary. If they still push you,

convince the social worker to get you medically emancipated from your parents.”

I tried to keep up with everything he was saying, but it was a lot of information. “Medically emancipated.” I repeated the words so I’d remember.

He nodded, the corner of his mouth barely twitching with something that might have been pride. It was impossible to tell.

My gaze moved over his face. His dirty-blond hair was wild from the wind, ice-blue eyes glittering in the afternoon sun. His cheekbones made his face look carved, and if not for the perpetual wrinkle between his brows, he’d be the kind of boy you’d see on magazine covers.

I was aware of a strange heat crawling up my neck. “Thank you for helping me. I think I’ve seen you around before. What’s your name?”

He regarded me for a moment, his eyes narrowing as if his name carried all the weight in the world. At long last, he said, “Damon Maxwell.”



“Why can’t you remember me, Little One?”

My eyes, wide and raw, tracked the movement of his lips, but the words that spilled out might as well have been in another language.

I should have known. Sweet old Damon would have never asked me to threaten my parents with emancipation. Sophie’s words from the Alumni Fundraiser slammed into me like a brick hurled through glass. After hearing his mother call him evil so many times, Caden had started believing it himself.

“He donated money but signed it under Damon’s name. He has been doing this since we were kids. Whenever he does something nice, he credits Damon for it.”

Professor Maxwell had credited his brother with saving my life, and when we met again, he thought I had forgotten the whole incident.

My heart was about to implode. I couldn’t breathe. I squeezed my eyes shut, as if a lack of vision would grant me a reprieve. I felt an ache behind my sternum, the warning signs of an oncoming panic attack. My heart was

about to implode, it constricted so tightly that I could practically hear the cartilage groan. My breaths came out in short, sharp staccatos, as if each inhalation had to be force-filtered through a sieve of disbelief.

“We met at the hospital while you were being treated for your scars,” he said.

“W-why didn’t you tell me before?” I managed to ask, the sound more exhalation than speech. It was excruciatingly difficult to force the syllables past my teeth.

He stared at me skeptically, unsure if he should have brought up the topic at all. Perhaps he really had been hurting in my absence and this was his last resort. “I was told that you have no memories of that time. That you get triggered whenever people bring it up.”

Except for that day. I had almost no memories of that time except for the day he saved me.

He studied me with an intensity that bordered on urgency. “Do you remember meeting me?”

Remember him? I had based my entire life around him.

The walls started closing in as I hyperventilated. How was this possible? He had been here all along.

Now that he was in front of me, I didn’t know how to reconcile the man I resented with the phantom of the boy I had worshipped. I wish we could get a reset. I didn’t want to view him as the monster from my nightmares. And he deserved to know of my lifelong devotion to him.

But things had become so murky between us that it seemed impossible to start over.

He took my silence as refusal, whereas it was the panic getting the better of me.

His lips curled into a bitter smile as he shook his head. “Figures. You forgot everything. Even the man who tried to murder you.”

The words cut through my fog like cold water. “You know who stabbed me?”

“You know him, too.”

My stomach clenched. “What are you talking about?”

He watched me with clinical detachment. The specks of vulnerability from earlier were gone. “Did you know Rayyan would have inherited a much larger percentage of the company if he were your father’s sole heir?” he asked, his voice flat. “Even if your father couldn’t publicly claim him, he

would've handed Rayyan his shares upon his death. There was only one thing standing in the way."

The breath was knocked out of me by the punch of his words.

Professor Maxwell straightened from the wall, his jaw tightening as he delivered the final blow. "Your father already had a legitimate heir—you. But if that person were no longer in the picture, Rayyan could combine the assets he would gain from his parents and the ones he expected from your father to take hold of the company. All he had to do was get rid of you."

I shook my head at him, hands trembling violently. "No. You're wrong." My voice cracked on the last word.

"Am I?" His eyebrow arched in challenge. "It wasn't even that difficult to figure it out. All I did was follow the money. It was so obvious that I had to wonder whether your family already knew and deliberately swept it under the rug."

My stomach lurched. I tasted bile at the back of my throat as I swallowed hard. I knew my family was fucked up, but were they that fucked up? My own brother would repeatedly stab his eleven-year-old sister and leave her for dead? The thought made my skin crawl.

I couldn't remember a thing about that awful day, only a voice that repeatedly said, *You stupid bitch*, with hatred so vile I didn't think it was possible to harbor toward a child. He had said it repeatedly until it had been ingrained into my brain.

Professor Maxwell looked at me with half-lidded eyes. "My poor little lost girl." His lips curved with a smile that didn't touch his eyes, it was cruel and mocking. "The things they're willing to do to you are sickening. It's a shame that you have so much love to give, and no one to love."

The words sliced me open. My throat tightened as tears threatened to pool in my eyes.

"It's a shame," he repeated, his voice dropping to a velvet whisper that somehow cut deeper than a shout, "that you keep them around while spurning the only man who loves you."

I stumbled backward, my heel catching on the floor. Each step was an attempt to escape the truth that clung to me like a second skin. I stifled a sob with a hand over her mouth, tasting the salt on my lips.

"They don't deserve your loyalty, Little Rose." His voice caressed my name while his fingers twitched at his sides. He stepped forward, jaw clenching. "When will you finally realize I'm the only man here for you?"

The shots from tonight had gone straight into my bloodstream. Tears and alcohol blurred my vision as I blindly walked backward to distance myself from what he was telling me. I refused to believe it. My tongue felt thick, useless.

His eyes widened suddenly. “Rose, stop!”

The warning ripped from his throat, but it came too late. I had retreated too fast. Cold metal pressed against my lower back, biting into my spine. The split second of horrifying clarity that I had walked too far back was no match for gravity.

“Fuck, Rose!” He lunged for me, his hand outstretched, fingers splayed, the veins in his forearm corded and frantic.

But I had already lost my balance. A shriek exploded out of me, so shrill and animal-like that I barely recognized it as my own. My hair whipped into my eyes and mouth. All the noise of the party—music, laughter, the drunk symphony of my friends—collapsed into a vacuum, and in that hush I could only see him.

In that suspended moment before impact, I caught one final glimpse of his face. The mask of cruelty and cocky disdain he wore like armor had shattered. Instead, he was a shell of a man, mouth twisting with desperation. He looked like a man watching his own soul plummet off the ledge, and I realized his wild expression might be the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

CHAPTER
FORTY
ROSE

Present



MY BODY STIFFENED in Caden's lap as each fragmented memory detonated in sequence. The fog that had smothered my recollections had thinned just enough to reveal two important revelations.

First, my own brother tried to murder me, repeatedly roaring the words, *You stupid bitch*, as he drove a knife inside me. I had stolen what he considered his birthright, and the injustice didn't sit well with him. Natasha said the exact phrase, *You stupid bitch*, and now I understood why I'd nearly blacked out with rage and attacked her. The words triggered a response within me, unlocking a room inside that was slick with blood and betrayal.

Secondly, the man from my nightmares was none other than Caden. How many times had my subconscious tried to warn me? The nightmares had been haunting me for days, and the horrifying images hit me like a freight train. Caden's menacing face. His footsteps echoing in the ominous silence of the warehouse. His hand wrapping around my neck before he threw me to the ground.

I finally knew why I had fled the hospital. Amelie said I was in a medically induced coma, and the only person who had access to me was

Caden. One glimpse of his face when I regained consciousness, and something inside me snapped.

I ran only to end up on a boat with the same man I was trying to escape.

With a shuddering breath, I pulled back from Caden. Slowly, so as not to alarm him, I climbed off his lap and rummaged through the car for my underwear and dress that he had haphazardly tossed aside. All the while, I prayed my hands didn't betray their tremor.

"What's the rush?" he asked, barely coherent. His euphoria hadn't subsided, eyes half lidded.

Carefully masking my expressions, I stepped out of the car with my dress and underwear in hand. "I need to use the bathroom."

He chuckled. "That's the same excuse you used when I announced our engagement. What's freaking you out this time?"

I hated that he was so perceptive. It was impossible to pull the wool over his eyes. At least he was naked, and it would take him a few minutes to gather himself. It gave me an edge. I could run and disembark before he wised up. Poppy was in the Bahamas, I could go to her.

My smile was plastic as I stepped into my dress, forcing myself to stay calm. "I guess I have a nervous bladder."

He watched me for a moment, dissecting me. "I'll come with you."

"No," I said a little too quickly, immediately regretting it.

Having me underneath him had momentarily dulled his killer instincts. But his calculating eyes narrowed at my hasty refusal, cutting through my defenses.

Despite Caden's impassive face, I knew the exact moment when he figured it out. "How much do you remember?"

I bolted.

There was no point in pretending. My feet hit the floor, and I ran out of the dark showroom and into the harsh corridor leading to the grand ballroom. I waited for the sound of his footsteps following me, for his voice calling my name in that possessive tone, but the only footsteps I heard were my own. It was almost worse than being chased, because it could only mean one thing—I was already trapped.

I was proven right when Linda materialized behind me, power walking with long strides. She wasn't actively pursuing me, simply closing the gap so she could tackle me to the ground if it came down to it.

The tactic surprised me until the boat seemed to lurch forward beneath my feet. The water turbulence was unexpected, given that we were docked at the port. At first, I thought it was the rush of adrenaline making me dizzy, but a glance through the oval window confirmed it. The boat was moving.

“No!” I gasped, watching the pier recede.

We weren’t supposed to set sail until tomorrow. No wonder Caden hadn’t bothered to chase me down. He had ordered the captain to move the boat away from the dock so I couldn’t disembark and track down my cousin.

My pace slowed as I realized there was no escaping Caden. I bit the inside of my cheek in frustration. God, I really wanted to get back at him. I already knew I couldn’t get away from him, but I needed a small win, however petty. A streak of rebellion, perhaps. I was just so tired of being bested by Caden Maxwell in both my past and present lives.

Unsure of my next move, I marched toward the bathroom with Linda watching me from a distance. The area around the bathroom was jam-packed with women. When a horde of intoxicated girls came out of the restroom, I ducked behind the giggling group without thinking. I drifted into the pack, using their collective mass as camouflage. I allowed myself to be swept along with them, hoping to shake Linda off my trail. I could enjoy a few precious minutes of unwatched freedom if she assumed I had disappeared behind the bathroom doors.

When the girls blocking me from Linda’s view passed a set of swinging doors, I pushed through them and slipped inside a narrow corridor. Satisfaction warmed my blood at the image of a confused Linda searching for me and a frantic Caden tearing through the crowd with the same desperate energy I had used to distance myself from him. I hoped they felt just as helpless and powerless.

Finally alone, I braced my hands on my knees and panted. The world outside was muffled and strangely distant. Fragments of memory erupted over and over in my skull, a cascade of volatile chemical reactions I couldn’t contain. Rage flooded my system, scalding and unstoppable. It mixed with my sadness. The pressure behind my ribs built, and the dam finally broke. I let out all my frustration and anger with a scream, while my vision blurred with hot tears.

My half-brother tried to murder me.

And Caden... I didn’t even know where to start with him.

He saved me.

He hurt me.

He made me hate him.

He made me fall in love with him.

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, willing all the images to center around the day at the warehouse. Instead, other images continued to take precedence.

Caden sitting by my bedside for hours.

Caden tending to my wounds.

The sound of his laugh—the times he allowed himself to laugh, that is.

The way he always took my side, even the times I was in the wrong.

The way he centered his life around my happiness.

Even his possessiveness was starting to become endearing.

The tears finally stopped, replaced by clarity—I wouldn’t be free of Caden Maxwell even if I escaped this boat. He was tangled up in every part of my soul, impossible to separate from my own sense of self.

“You okay?”

My head spun when a voice broke my spiral. “What the hell?” I jumped, placing my hands on my chest.

Jace, the crew member I had met on my second day on the boat, put his hands up in surrender. My heart rate slowed at the familiar face. “Chill. Remember me? It’s Jace.”

“You scared me.”

“Sorry. It looked like you needed a minute, and I wanted to give you some space.”

Heat crept up my neck as I realized he had witnessed my entire meltdown from the banshee scream to full-fledged tears. “How long have you been standing there?”

“A while,” he admitted. His face was lit up for some reason.

I scanned the corridor. At least there was no one else here who saw my epic breakdown. It looked like I was at the service entrance, connecting the galley to the grand ballroom. The smell of bread and disinfectant permeated the air.

My eyes flicked from Jace’s uniform to the service cart beside him, realizing he was working the event. He had been in the middle of pouring champagne when I had rudely barged in.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t seem fine.”

I let my arms drop. “Long night.” I tried to smile, but it twisted into a grimace. I was grateful when he didn’t press the topic.

Jace reached into the service cart and pulled out a bottle of champagne. “Looks like you could use a drink.”

“Thought those were for the guests.”

“You’re a guest,” he pointed out.

“I guess.”

“Which means you’re overdue.” He pulled two flutes from the tray, poured a generous stream of gold bubbles, and handed one to me. He clinked his glass against mine. “To my esteemed guest.”

The smile on his face was infectious. The champagne warmed my stomach, and I realized my hands had stopped shaking. “Is this what the crew does behind the boss’s back, drink his best champagne?”

“No.” There was a mischievous glint in his eye. “We also eat his expensive caviar and swipe the fancy toiletries.”

Despite myself, a giggle slipped out. The anxiety started to clear, and I pointed at the champagne. “Won’t you get into trouble for this?”

The smile on his face brightened. “Nobody comes back here except the crew. Come with me, and I’ll show you what else we get away with behind the boss’s back.”

He nodded at the door, where servers were filtering in and out with trays of food. The delicious smells from the kitchen called to me, and I followed my nose. Maybe they had lollipop chicken. It would make me feel a lot better than champagne.

When I cracked open the door, I heard the muffled thump of Latin music and the clang of pots. We slipped inside, emerging into the heart of the kitchen. It was pure chaos, but in the best way. Sure, the staff were busy plating hors d’oeuvres, but they were also running on adrenaline and laughter.

A chef in a red bandana was cooking meat and singing along to “Livin’ la Vida Loca” that was playing on the portable speaker. Two servers were doing a salsa routine while weaving between stations, their feet never missing a beat. The dishwashers behind a mountain of plates were betting on who could stack the highest. No one batted an eye at the couple sloppily

making out near the freezer without any care about workplace propriety. Four men were gambling with a card game and hurling insults at each other.

The sophisticated gala in the ballroom was less than fifty feet away, but it may as well have been another universe. I doubt anyone here would murder their sister for her inheritance or manipulate their fiancée with lies and deception.

It wasn't until the chef noticed my fancy dress that he dropped his spatula with a clatter. A horrified expression crossed his face, not having expected guests to wander into their haven. The music screeched to an abrupt halt. Everyone froze in place, as if they had been caught with their hand inside the cookie jar.

Jace grinned, stepped up to the counter, and grabbed a plastic cup. "Relax, guys. Rose is cool," he announced. "She's the stowaway."

That was all it took for the kitchen to accept me as one of their own. They knew if I snuck into this boat, I didn't have the means to fuck with their livelihoods like the rest of the guests. I was one of them.

"Stowaway?" the chef asked sarcastically, giving my expensive jewelry a once-over. "She looks like royalty."

The room burst into an off-key chorus of "Your Majesty!" with exaggerated bows. "Welcome, Your Grace."

I giggled as the music returned to its original volume, and the couple against the freezer returned to dry humping each other. The lively kitchen was like an underground rave filled with vulgarity. There seemed to be an understanding that allowed the staff to party without any service interruption to the gala. One group would transport food and drinks to the ballroom. As soon as they returned, they participated in the shenanigans with a break, while another group swapped places to work the front. It was ingenious and exactly the escape I needed, seeing that a real escape was out of my reach.

"Shots?" Jace asked, pulling out a bottle of tequila. Before I could answer, he lined up a row of shot glasses. A bunch of people gathered around us at the sound of that word.

"What are we celebrating?" a petite blonde asked.

"Nothing," Jace replied. "Rose had a shitty night, so everyone has to drink with her."

"Aww, sorry to hear it, Rose." The blonde squeezed me.

Another man placed a bulky hand on my shoulder. “Let’s drink till you forget.”

“We got you, girl.”

Everyone was at my side without so much as demanding an explanation. They were a ready-made family, and my heart warmed at the thought. I had stepped through a portal, where there were no judgmental eyes, calculated moves, or blindsided engagements.

Even as the thought crossed my mind, an image of Caden wrapping my bandages with OCD precision flashed brighter. Each fold had been perfectly aligned, not because he had the compulsive need for it, but because he thought the asymmetry might bother me.

He had twisted my mind into knots between his cruelty and tenderness. It made me wonder whether I could actually follow through with leaving him. If only I could understand the reasons for his cruelty, then I wouldn’t feel so conflicted. Instead, I ping-ponged between wanting to get away and imagining a future with him.

I grabbed a shot and downed it.

Why couldn’t things be black and white? It would be so much easier if I just hated him.

Instead, I had loved him since the moment on that roof.

With a huge cheer, I took another shot with the group. Instead of the alcohol submerging through my brain, my mind was infiltrated with more images of Caden.

The lab he had repainted in my favorite color.

His new wardrobe that reflected my taste.

The way he gave in to my every whim.

I shook my head to dispel the thoughts.

“One more round,” said the chef, and I had no idea how he was pumping out the deep-fried risotto balls despite his fourth shot of tequila.

When he saw me salivating over the large pan, his eyes twinkled. He set me up with a plate, but only if I took another shot with him.

I tossed back the tequila and felt pleasantly giddy.

“You gamble?” one of the busboys asked me, nudging me toward the card table. Two kitchen staffers were shuffling a deck at lightning speed.

With a smile, I shook my head.

“How about a dance instead?” Jace pulled me to the middle of the kitchen. Others followed us, throwing their heads and hips back with the

type of dancing the guests in the ballroom would have been horrified by.

My dancing was clumsy as Jace twirled me around, and we laughed out loud. Dancing with another man was a part of the rebellious streak against Caden's high-handed ways. There was only one problem.

No amount of sloppy dancing and nonjudgmental eyes could replace Caden's warmth. The hands touching me didn't light up the sky with fireworks. The hot breath on my neck didn't elicit a moan. If I believed in magic, I would think Caden had put a spell on me.

Jace smiled at me kindly. "I'm guessing this is more your scene than that ballroom."

Being in Caden's arms was my scene. I sighed, realizing freedom kind of sucked without him. While I was unsure whether I could live *with* him, I was completely positive that I could never live *without* him.

Jace stopped dancing. "You look sad, Rose. Too sad for someone who just got engaged."

I stilled.

He laughed. "Don't look so surprised. I was working the floor when Dr. Maxwell practically announced your engagement to the world. Shouldn't you be celebrating with your fiancé instead of hiding out in the kitchen?"

I sighed. "It's complicated."

"I have got time."

Jace seemed to be one of those people who had a way of deflecting intensity, like an energy-efficient lamp for bad moods. It was impossible to look at his puppy dog eyes and not want to pour your soul out.

And that was precisely what I did. The alcohol had loosened my tongue, and I spilled my guts. I left out some details that might get Caden into trouble.

We had a toxic relationship, and I ended things with him.

I lost my memories, and he took advantage of it.

I had been hopelessly in love with him since I was eleven, though I left out the part where I mistook him for his twin.

My memories had returned, only to realize that I both loved and hated the man.

After my verbal diarrhea, I tentatively asked, "Got any advice for me?"

"No." Jace's brow furrowed as he studied me. "But I do have a question."

“Only one?” I was surprised, having expected an interrogation after everything I had revealed about his elusive boss.

“Yes. But when I ask you the question, you can’t think about it. Just say the first thing that pops out of your mouth.”

“Okay.”

“When were you happier—then or now?”

“Now.” The answer was immediate and reflexive.

His lips curved into a knowing smile. “Sounds like you know what you want.”

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CHAPTER

FORTY-ONE

ROSE

“WHEN WERE YOU HAPPIER—THEN or now?”

“Now.”

Funny how much clarity a simple question could provide you. While the general outline of my former self had resurfaced and the mystery of my past had been solved, I never wanted to be Rose A again. Before, my trauma had turned me into a shell of a person. Now, I only had fragments of my memories, and I was grateful. My life no longer revolved around fear and the limitations I had placed on myself based on those vivid images.

Lifting a chocolate chip cookie to my mouth—one of many the chef had let me steal—I stared out into the water. After leaving the kitchen, I had drifted up to the upper deck.

In hindsight, this was fitting. “This scene feels awfully familiar.” My voice was barely above a whisper. Leaning against the handrail, I looked out into the water. It appeared almost black under the moonless night.

Caden hadn’t made a sound, but I knew he had been nearby. The weight of his gaze was impossible to ignore. He had lingered in the shadows, caught between wanting to give me what I wanted—space—and his need to be near me.

“If you’re wondering, I won’t half-ass it. I’ll be sure to aim for the deepest part of the water when I jump,” I told him.

“Don’t joke about that.” He sounded unimpressed, and I felt him creeping closer, as if getting ready to tackle me if necessary. “Give me your hand, Little Rose.”

“Relax. I didn’t come here to jump.”

Did he think I’d jump because I was upset with him? Despite the glimpses into our tumultuous past, I was shockingly fine. There was only one thing that was truly bothering me.

He was right behind me now. I turned, staring up at blue eyes that had held me captive for over a decade. I didn’t want to jump into the water; I wanted to jump into his arms. I had finally found the boy who rescued me on that roof, and this time, he hadn’t traumatized me into hating him.

“I’m not suicidal,” I clarified. “Nor am I mad that you withheld the truth. I was angry and scared before, but I get it now.” I shrugged. “We needed the fresh start, and I’m grateful for however we got it. There’s only one thing that’s bothering me.”

He nodded, encouraging me to continue.

I wanted to—no, I needed to—understand why he had felt such a desperate need for me that he had crossed every boundary without caring about the repercussions. If I couldn’t reconcile the cruellest parts of him with the tender glimpses he had shown me, I would always fear him. I needed a valid reason why he had acted like a monster in the past. He snapped after I ended things with him.

I was drawn to him because he saved me. But why had he become so obsessed with me? Sure, we had a bond, but there was something more he wasn’t telling me. There was a reason I had affected him so deeply.

“I know you think that I lost the memory of meeting you on that roof, but I never did. I forgot almost everything else, but you, I remembered. I felt an undeniable pull toward that boy because he saved me. What I can’t understand is why you felt the same attachment to me.” Something didn’t add up with our story. “Even before you got to know me, you were all in. Why?”

His gaze lingered on my face, caught between revelation and retreat. “Because you weren’t the only person trying to jump off that roof. In fact, I got there first.”

CHAPTER

FORTY-TWO

CADEN

Past



“HE DID IT, I know he did. He killed your mother.” Joe’s face was comically pinched. My father was an idiot, but for the first time in his life, he had made a clever allegation.

I did it.

Lord Damon, the savior, was quick to come to my defense. “Dad.” He sounded exhausted, his red-rimmed eyes making him seem older than a teenager. “That’s so fucked up. Our mother just died, and you’re blaming Caden for it. He was the one who brought her to the hospital.”

“Not in time!” Joe shouted. “He intentionally brought her too late to save her.”

My face was impassive as ever, giving nothing away. Once more, he was right. It was interesting how my parents always knew exactly what I was, but Damon refused to see it.

Damon shot up from his seat, furious. “Mom overdosed! Caden found her on the floor and rushed her to the hospital. It wasn’t his fault that the doctors couldn’t save her.”

Joe stared me down with venom. I quirked an eyebrow, challenging him to find a crack in the story. I had made sure this couldn’t be traced back to

me.

“He hasn’t shed a single tear for his dead mother.”

Damon closed his eyes. “That doesn’t mean he isn’t hurting, too.”

Oh, yes, it does.

“Everyone experiences grief differently, Dad.”

We were in the medical suite where my mother had taken her last breath. While we were waiting for paperwork and for the body to be released, my father had devised a plan to send me away to boarding school. Boarding school was a fancy term for a mental institution, and knowing my father, probably the worst of its kind. However, Damon insisted on going with me. Joe lost it at that suggestion. For one, he didn’t want to send away his heir. Secondly, Joe wanted to ship me off to a place grimmer than a mental asylum, where I would never see the light of day again. Joe’s hands would be tied if Damon joined me, and he would have to send us to some fancy school in Switzerland instead. Damon knew it, too. He was diplomatic, not obtuse.

“I see evil in that boy,” my father murmured, speaking about me as if I weren’t here. “He has to go. I can’t look at that boy anymore.”

“We just lost our mother,” Damon told him, exasperated. “Act like the grown-up for once, Dad. Console your sons. Don’t blame us for Mom’s death.”

Joe reeled back like he had been slapped. “I know you would never hurt your mother.” He reached a hand to comfort his favorite son.

Damon stepped out of his reach. There was a sneer on his face. “Then stop trying to send my brother away. Because if you do, I’m going with him. There’s nothing you can do to stop me. I hate to burst your bubble, but twins are a package deal.”

Joe was visibly hurt by Damon’s words, but not enough to deter his intentions. “I know you’re a good boy, Damon.” He looked right into my soulless eyes. “But I have to send *him* away. The doctors said your mother could’ve been saved, and I just know he purposefully brought her here too late. I can’t look at him anymore, not after he killed your mother.”

Once more, I was impressed by my imbecile of a father. He wasn’t generally this sharp.

Damon, on the other hand, was too distracted to see what was right in front of him. “Enough.” He slashed a hand across the air. It was so

unexpected from my even-tempered twin that my father quieted, and I glanced up at him.

Hm. Our mother's death must be affecting him more than I had expected. Oh well, in time Damon would see this was for the best.

"Please, Damon. Don't go with him," was my father's desperate plea. "You should be here with your family at a time like this."

"So should Caden."

"He doesn't care about us."

It was true.

I had returned home earlier than expected and found my mother mid-seizure. See, that was why you should never mix drugs with alcohol.

She stared at me helplessly, her eyes widening when she realized it was me, not Damon, that had found her on the floor. She silently pleaded for help, though we both knew the chances of me helping her were slim to none.

Sure, the hospital was only a five-minute drive, and she had at least thirty minutes before the symptoms kicked in and caused brain damage, possible cardiac arrest, and eventually death. I was almost fifteen and knew how to drive. All I had to do was grab a key and throw her in the back seat of one of our cars. Hell, I could have even called an ambulance.

But I had to play the odds here.

It just so happened that I had walked in on her while she was having a seizure from an overdose. Since my mother had no interest in changing her ways, this would likely happen again, and she would die regardless of my actions today.

Our mother's debilitating addiction had turned into a real inconvenience. Damon had personally taken her to rehab four times in the span of two years. She couldn't bear to be apart from her golden child, so my brother and father often opted to stay at nearby hotels.

My twin and I had our differences, but I had always admired his mind. He was tech-savvy and could achieve great things if he focused on them. Instead, Damon let our mother drag him down with her into her spiral of demise.

I was on track to graduate from high school in six months. Damon could have been on that path, too. Unfortunately, he had missed too many classes playing our mother's emotional support human during her recovery. Except she never recovered and returned home just to restart the same vicious

cycle. It was affecting Damon's future. He should be working on his craft, not living out of his suitcase at remote mountain resorts.

Letting her die was a necessary but calculated risk. Although I was doing my twin a favor, it couldn't look like I was involved.

Instead of pulling her off the floor, I pulled up a chair and started the stopwatch on my phone. I had to take her to the hospital right as she was at the cusp of death. It had to appear like I tried to help her while ensuring there was nothing doctors could do to save her at that point. The brain damage and the lack of oxygen needed to set in.

She had stared at me with hatred as I let her die, knowing she had been right about me all along. I had merely shrugged. Despite what she thought, I wasn't letting her die out of hatred. Farmers put down sick animals to put them out of their misery. Humans were no different. My mother was sick and showed no signs of improvement. She would never get better and die regardless of my actions today. At least if she died now, Damon would have a shot at a bright career. If she died later, she might fuck up his future beyond repair.

What I hadn't accounted for was Damon's reaction. Sure, I expected some tears over his dearly departed mother. But I assumed he would be ultimately relieved. She was an obstacle in his path to achieve greatness. It was impractical to want such a nuisance.

Watching Damon now, you would think he was anything but relieved. He was getting more agitated with each passing second.

"I swear to God, Dad. If you accuse Caden one more time, you don't have to bother sending him away. We'll leave voluntarily."

"I'm not trying to send *you* away. Just try to understand, Damon. I can't live with someone who killed my wife."

Damon stood to his height, nose flaring with fury. "If Caden had hurt my mother, I'd personally bury him six feet under. I know for a fact he isn't capable of it, and the fact that you can't see it is your problem, not ours. I love you, Dad, but sincerely, fuck off."

I stared at Damon, gobsmacked. Had I broken him beyond repair?

While our father shouted, I left the room and made my way to the rooftop for a cigarette. For the first time, I doubted my actions. I had done Damon a huge favor, yet he was utterly devastated. It was concerning. I had never seen him this way. Perhaps their bond ran deeper than I had expected.

Damon had spent his life giving up things for my sake. When we were twelve, he wanted nothing more than a stupid gaming console. My mother said I wasn't allowed to play it, and he was willing to give it up as a show of solidarity.

Now, I had taken away the most important person in his life. We were both in agreement that Joe Maxwell was an idiot, and while Damon dealt with our father diplomatically, his rock had ironically been our drug addict mother. Without her, he had no support system because I couldn't provide that for him.

He needed to stay in New York, surrounded by his friends and the cousins we were close to. Instead, he was willing to move to Switzerland with me and doom himself to a life without emotional support. Damon was giving away what he wanted for someone who took away what he loved the most.

As much as I hated to admit it, there were two people in Damon's life who had been dragging him down. The first person was out of the picture while I was still standing.

I wasn't sure exactly when I landed on the whole suicide thing. It must be somewhere between the first and second hour of deep contemplation. But once the idea came to me, it seemed like a damn good one.

The first reason was obvious. Damon would thrive without me dragging him down.

The second reason was even simpler. I was really fucking bored.

Part of living in a thriving society required honing your interpersonal relationships, and it was a skill I would never perfect, nor would I bother working on it. Everyone fucking bored me to tears, and everyone I met was below me. Why should I try?

It seemed other human beings found each other interesting. I had no idea why, because I didn't. Clearly, I was a defect, not fit for society.

As I said, farmers put down faulty animals that served no purpose. It wasn't enough to own a brilliant mind. Society demanded more, and I had no interest in lowering myself to meet those demands.

It seemed killing myself was the most logical solution.

I wasn't depressed or anything. I considered other avenues before coming to this conclusion.

For example, I could emancipate myself. But I had a feeling that would be too big a scandal for a family like ours, and Joe would do everything in

his power to stop it from happening. He would convince a judge that I belonged in an institution. All it would take was for one person to look at my arrival time at home and the time I brought my mother to the hospital. Despite his accusation, Joe wasn't smart enough to think of it. However, if he accused me in front of a judge during an emancipation case, the time stamps would be thoroughly investigated.

Joe wouldn't budge on his decision to send me away, either. He had been itching for a reason for years. Damon was stubborn and would insist on sticking together. Even if I ran away or I were emancipated, he would follow me to the end of the world.

How come he felt the twin bond so strongly when all I felt was the mild responsibility to strengthen his future?

As I said—malfunctioning.

I dropped my cigarette to the ground, crushing it with my feet. I sighed, staring at the water underneath. God, this was going to be an annoying way to die.

A sound from the opposite side of the roof tore my gaze from the water. A scrawny kid—maybe a preteen—was hanging off the railing.

Great.

Someone else had the idea to jump before me. That was what I got for contemplating my suicide plans for too long. If I jumped now, it would be unoriginal. I hated nothing more than looking like a follower.

I gritted my teeth. I couldn't even die in peace.

My head tilted when I heard her soft sobs drifting from the other side of the roof. It was an annoying sound, though it triggered my brother's voice in my mind.

Save her, Caden.

Talk to her, Caden.

She needs your help, Caden.

Ugh! Stupid brother with his stupid savior complex. If I didn't save her, his voice would annoy me while I drowned. Plus, I sort of owed him a life, considering the whole letting our mother die thing.

Muttering some colorful cuss words under my breath, I marched across the roof. This wasn't how I had planned on spending my afternoon. I longingly stared at the blue water below. It could have been done and over with by now.

For the first time in my life, I decided to be a good brother and do something Damon would want—save a life. Unfortunately, I wasn't capable of achieving such a thing and wondered if there was a way to tip the scales in my favor.

The kid's long, wild hair blew in the wind. Before I could reach her, something fell out of the pocket of her hoodie. I thought it would tumble down to the water. By some miracle, it landed on the ledge instead. Crouching down, I picked up the earrings that fell out of her pocket—blue diamond studs.

Hm. If all else failed, perhaps I could bribe her into coming off the ledge. I could buy her blue diamond earrings ten times the size if she didn't jump. It wasn't like I had a lot of other great ideas in my arsenal. The likelihood that I'd say something to push her over the edge was much higher.

Malfunctioning, remember?

This wasn't me feeling sorry for myself, but, rather, I was stating a fact of life. The only way I wouldn't be defective was if I actually made enough of a connection to talk her out of it.

All I had to achieve was one human connection to know that my wiring wasn't so faulty that I needed to end things. If I managed to talk her down, Damon would be fine in Switzerland with me because it meant I could talk him down, too.

Everything hung in the balance of this moment. Here goes all or nothing.

CHAPTER

FORTY-THREE

CADEN

Present



ROSE STARED AT ME, face flushed, eyes wide.

“The diamonds on your glasses,” Rose said. “You took those out of my earrings, didn’t you?”

I didn’t deny it. Shortly after I had talked her down the ledge, a security guard had roamed up to the roof. Startled, Rose had bolted before I could get her name or return her earrings. I had walked through the hospital suites a few times, but I never saw her again. The earrings were the only thing she had left behind. The only proof that I had made a connection. “I wanted a souvenir.”

She bristled. “Only a serial killer would say that. My mom was pissed that I lost them. She had just gotten them for me.”

“I believe I’ve done a good job of replacing them.” My gaze flicked to the giant blue diamonds in her ears.

She was quiet for a few moments.

Her eyes were glossy when she spoke again. “You do know that I am not *her* anymore. I’m a totally different person than the old Rose.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does. She had an entirely different personality. You fell in love with the old Rose, not me.”

“You could be half monkey, and I’d still love you.”

She smiled. Perhaps she remembered the first day of classes when I compared my students to monkeys. Actually, I believe I had said the monkeys were superior.

She shook her head in disbelief. “What is it that you like about me?”

“I like the way you breathe.”

She huffed. “So, you don’t care about my personality. All I need to do to make you like me is breathe?”

“All you need to do to make me *love* you,” I corrected, “is breathe.”

She was stumped. “Why?”

“Because you exist as long as you’re still breathing. And I wouldn’t exist if you didn’t.”

“That’s such an insane reason to love someone.”

Insane? If only she could crack my head open and read the thoughts inside. I loved her with a ruthlessness that bordered on insanity. In ways she would never be able to fully understand.

I would have killed myself that day if I hadn’t saved her. My entire existence hung in the balance of her delicate hands. She was my only reason for existing.

Instead of telling her that, I gave her a version she could accept. “The first time I laughed was with you on that roof. I didn’t laugh again for ten years, until the night on the boat. So, yes, I fucking love you just for existing.”

After that, she didn’t ask any more questions.



Rose

I kept quiet as Caden wrapped his arms around my waist. There was a sudden peace in the water, the air, and between us. I leaned back, resting my head against his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath my ear.

“Tell me you love me,” he breathed against my ear.

He didn't ask *if* I loved him. He *ordered* me to say it. The thought made me half smile. "God help me, but I do love you."

"You're so romantic," his voice was warm against my ear, trying to sound sarcastic at my reluctant admission.

Nonetheless, his arms tightened around me, and I could feel the tension leaving his body that I had finally admitted it.

"Say it again," he ordered after a few short moments.

I laughed softly. I had a feeling he would make me repeat those three words throughout the night as if they were water after a lifetime of thirst.

This time, I turned in his arms and held his face between my hands. My eyes shone with vulnerability as I let him see all of me. "I love you. And just in case you were wondering, you're the only person I have ever loved. I didn't know you were the boy on that roof. That's the person I gave my heart to, and I was never able to snap out of it again."

I didn't wait to see his reaction. I turned around and nestled back into his arms to watch the water instead. It was a fitting sight considering how we started.

The future stretched before us like the ocean, an unmapped territory we'd navigate together. Whatever world Caden created for us, I'd walk into it willingly because it had become the compass to find the version of myself I never knew existed.

Ironic. It was only after I became his captive that I finally found my freedom.



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AFTERWORD

Thank you for giving my books a chance. This story took me more than a year to write and has a very special place in my heart.

A review for an author is like leaving a tip for your server. If you enjoyed this Titanic retelling, consider writing me a review on [Goodreads](#) or [Amazon](#).

Once I reach 1000 reviews, I'll write a bonus scene for Caden and Rose.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drethi is a dark, contemporary author and prefers to write anti-heroes. Drethi's stories will always have angst, obsession, and a dark twist. Though toxic love and darkness are major players in her books, romance is still a priority. Stay tuned for future releases by signing up for her Newsletter.

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