

*Off Limits*  
**BILLIONAIRE**

A SECOND CHANCE ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

LYRIC LANSING





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# Chapter One

GRAHAM

As I step onto the convention floor, I'm engulfed by the pulsing rhythms of the music and a kaleidoscope of lights. The whole space has been transformed into a vibrant dance club, and the crowd is fully immersed in the electrifying beats. The air is heavy with the fragrances of perfumes, colognes, and sweat, creating an intense sensory experience.

I weave my way through the dancers and bustling waiters serving drinks, feeling slightly overheated in the same suit that I had worn to the office. *Great*, I think to myself. This hasn't been my type of party in a long time. Over the years, my focus has been directed on achieving my business goals. Doubting that I know anyone on the dance floor, I look around for the door that Levy said would be marked "Private".

"Graham, I didn't expect you to turn up for this. I thought you said you were too busy."

As I hear a familiar voice, I turn around and see Duncan. "Hey there, buddy! It's great to see you. This crowd is crazy, isn't it? It reminds me of the all-

night parties we used to go to back in college. But those days are long gone now." I can't help but smile at the memories we share.

Duncan grins back, extending a handshake vigorous enough to send his blonde hair falling into his eyes. Thin and wiry, dressed in a sports coat and dark slacks. He is also not dressed for the dance floor.

"Speak for yourself. I don't mind a good night out at the club myself. My schedule is just too busy to make time for it these days. Should I get you some aspirins, old man? Is this too much for you? C'mon Graham, enjoy yourself. We are too young to miss out on a good time."

I acknowledge Duncan's response as I run my hand through my hair. "I promised Levy that I would stop by. You know networking and kissing up to people isn't my thing. But you know Levy, he makes it hard to say no."

"Yeah, I get it, but Levy means well, and he has been a good mentor to both of us," Duncan replies.

"That's the only reason I am here. Well, that and I could use a few days off. My current project is running into more roadblocks than I expected. Getting away from the office for a few days will give my staff a much-needed break away from me prowling around."

Duncan leans into me, "Anything serious? If I can help with anything, let me know."

"Just zoning issues for now. They'll get resolved, but not soon enough," I respond, more confident than I feel. "Maybe a distraction would be a good idea."

"You two want a drink?" A beautiful blonde waitress pops up in front of us.

I take in the blond curls piled high in a ponytail on her head and her glistening shoulders exposed by her uniform. Her floral scent reminds me of

what my hard work has taken me away from. It has been a while since I have relaxed and had fun with a desirable woman.

“No to the drink, but could you point us to the private room?” I give her one of my best smiles as I reply.

The waitress looks me up and down before responding, “It's just over to the right. See that guy dressed in black standing in front of the door? It's only for special guests. Are you two a part of that crowd?”

I give her a wide grin, “We are tonight.”

“Well, you two look a bit younger than the crowd I've seen heading for that door. If it gets too dull, just look for me. Okay?” The waitress dips her flirtatious brown eyes at both Duncan and me and walks away swaying her hips.

“Well buddy, looks like we have another option if things get too dull tonight.” Duncan looks my way with a knowing glance.

“I will leave that up to you, my friend. Let's find this room,” I say turning towards the door the cute waitress had identified.

After the guard finds our names on his list, he lets us enter. With the closing of the door, the sound of the loud dance music of the club is muffled and replaced by the melodic sounds of jazz.

We step into some kind of spacious cigar lounge. The dark brown leather of the couches and armchairs blend well with the cream walls. A huge bar is the focal point of the room. Unlike the musky scent of the dance club outside, this space smells of money.

“Looks like an interesting crowd of people,” Duncan quips as he looks around the room. “A good mix of the established and up-and-coming members of the money crowd. Should make for a noteworthy conference.



Three days of the latest and greatest in real estate and finance. Should be a real ego-fest for these guys.”

“You can say that because your family comes from this crowd. All I see are folks flashing dollar signs.” Just as I expected, in looking around the room I only know a few people personally. But I recognize others by their reputation or appearances on financial news shows. As Duncan said, they are the wheelers and dealers of Wall Street. Most are billionaires several times over.

“C’mon man, you are one of us now, Mr. Holloway. Billionaire dollar deals got you here. You’ve made your way into this room. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” It is in settings like this, that I can’t help but feel a stark contrast from where I grew up. I’ll never be like these people. I lack their privileged background. I’m an upstart with new money. No one handed me a trust fund, but I’m making my own way. Straightening my shoulders, I force myself to relax. My goal is to locate Levy, have a few drinks with Duncan, and then find a suitable moment to excuse myself and visit my suite upstairs in the hotel.

Duncan nudges me in my side, “Look out. Here comes Will. The last time I talked to him, it was all about his upcoming wedding and his fiancée. Let’s try not to engage too long.”

Will's booming voice reaches my ears before I spot him.

“Dunk. You haven’t replied to my last text. Are you able to join us for dinner next Sunday? You know you are delaying Marla’s planning.” Will walks up from behind without any greeting at all and pumps us both on our backs like a big bear. In his case, a huge blond teddy bear.

I chuckle at the look on Duncan’s face. As always, I love Will’s nickname for Duncan, but it drives my friend crazy. The two cousins are complete

opposites. I like them both, especially when they butt heads.

“Hey, Graham. Can you tell my cousin to stop ghosting me?” Will turns his eyes to me, hoping to double-team Duncan.

“Oh no. I am staying out of this Will. I learned long ago not to step foot into this territory. This is between you and Duncan so keep me out of this discussion. Instead, you can update me on what’s been going on with you. It has been a while.”

Fifteen minutes later and after several irritated glances from Duncan, I now fully regret my request to Will. Clearly, Will is fully immersed in the details of his destination wedding and very much in love with his fiancée Marla. No one could doubt the happiness in his voice.

Will’s voice finally trails off as he notices that more shrimp is being added to the buffet table. “Hey, do you guys want any food? No? Well, I will just get a plate and see you both later.”

As Will walks off, Duncan turns to me, with a “*I told you so*” look. “How about grabbing a drink? I need something alcoholic to burn all that wedding talk out of my brain. I remember when my cousin thought all girls had cooties. What’s happened to him?”

“Obviously, Marla has taken over his life. Promise to shoot me if I ever get that way.”

“Graham, I want a ringside seat if that ever happens to you. You, my friend, are a confirmed bachelor. All that tall, dark, and handsome going to waste. You don’t even have a list of beautiful models to attach to your name.”

“Well, you seem to be picking up the slack, buddy.” Laughing at Duncan’s teasing while we head to the bar, I casually glance around the room again looking for Levy.

I see *her* before I can form another thought. My eyes fixate on the dark-

haired woman sitting at the far end of the bar. She is laughing and talking to the woman next to her. I stop in my tracks, captivated by her presence. In her ruby red dress, she would get a second look from any male in the room, but it is her face that draws my attention. From this distance, I cannot see them clearly, but her green eyes have haunted my mind more often than I would like to admit. She still looks as beautiful as I remember, though perhaps more poised and alluring than years ago.

As I adjust my tie, I feel a lump in my throat and clench my jaws. Although I had anticipated seeing her again, I had not given much thought to how I would react when the moment finally arrived. A sudden thought hits me. If she is here, it's likely the old man isn't too far away. The thought of seeing him again fills me with a little uncertainty. Surely, I am not afraid. Just not sure that I am ready to see him just yet.

"Graham, there are two open seats at the bar," Duncan says, motioning towards them and drawing my attention.

Dragging my eyes from the woman, I respond "No sign of Levy yet. Let's go grab those drinks."

Steering Duncan to the opposite end of the bar, and away from the woman in the red dress, I'm avoiding a situation that I am not yet ready to address.

# Chapter Two

ALYSE

Brianna groans, slumping over in her chair with exaggerated boredom. “We should leave and go dance our asses off. Look, Ally, just because you’re covering for Dad doesn’t mean we have to hang out in this senior citizen lounge.”

“Brianna, please. Keep your voice down before someone overhears you. And sit up. Mom would be outraged with you sitting like that.” I shoot a quick glance around, hoping no one has noticed my sister’s comments. I struggle to hide my chuckle. Ever dramatic, Brianna probably wasn’t the best choice to bring along with me tonight.

Brianna rolls her eyes, knocking down another shot. She has never appreciated the family business, shirking any responsibility to the firm that our father started well before we were born. Sure, this group is not as lively as the crowd outside dancing, but we didn’t come to have fun.

Brianna hiccups.

I whip my head back to her, narrowing my eyes. “Brianna, you better eat some appetizers. Didn’t you say you missed lunch today? Drinking too much

on an empty stomach is not a good idea.”

She just shrugs. I shake my head, letting my eyes drift back to the crowd. A lot of big names are mingling in the lounge now. Truthfully, I should be working the room and networking to make sure people know that the Farrow family is represented. Dad would expect me to.

My eyes land on two men sitting at the end of the bar. One man has his back to me, but I know the other man. Graham. He catches me looking at him, and we stare at each other for a few moments.

He is impeccably dressed, at least from the chest up. His shoulders are broader than the last time I had seen him. He must work out. I watch as Graham says something to the man across from him and lifts his drink to his mouth. However, his eyes are still focused on mine. The tingling down my spine causes me to look away.

*Why is Graham here? Hmmm.* I remember reading that he had recently completed financing a boutique hotel. I hadn’t found the article intentionally, but I remember reading it thoroughly. I make it a rule not to use social media to track him. I do not have time for that anyway. Too busy working.

Fortunately, Brianna has moved over to the food area. Looking more stable than I initially thought, she peers over some fruit, trying to decide what to get.

I refocus on the man across the bar. He appears very much at ease and is now standing and talking to the other man and Levy Cooperman. I blink. Levy is well-known in the real estate business. Dad thinks very highly of him and his business deals.

Signing, I weigh my options. I *am* supposed to be networking, and an opportunity to converse with Mr. Cooperman should not be missed even if I must acknowledge Graham’s presence to do so. Wait. Graham doesn’t scare



me. We have both moved on with our lives. All I have to do is focus on Cooperman and politely make sure I make a good impression. Who cares about Graham?

Forcing a smile on my face, I stand and walk toward the group, drawing a few admiring glances from the men in the room. I'm used to the stares by now, as much as I loathe the attention. My mother, a former beauty queen, had tried to get me to participate in pageants, but luckily my father took my side and squashed that idea. Poor Brianna wasn't so lucky.

Approaching the group of men, I say, "Hello, Mr. Cooperman. I hope you remember me. I am Alyse Farrow." I look straight into Mr. Cooperman's eyes and speak with the confidence my father has always instilled in me.

Cooperman gives me an admiring look. "Of course, Alyse, I remember you. I saw you earlier when you entered the room. You look lovely, dear."

I bristle at his use of the word "dear" but keep my face serene, extending my hand to shake his. I focus on keeping this interaction on a business level.

As he clasps my hand, his eyes widen in surprise at the firmness of my handshake. Scanning the room, Levy asks, "I haven't seen your father tonight. Is he here?"

I sense a newfound respect in his gaze, directed towards me. "Unfortunately, my father has a previous engagement tonight. He plans to join the conference over the next few days." I turn to the other two men to acknowledge their presence. Levy takes the hint and introduces me.

"Alyse, this is Duncan Wingate."

As I observe Duncan's striking blond good looks, I am reminded of his younger sister, whom I had the pleasure of knowing during college. "Duncan. So nice to meet you. We have never crossed paths before, but I am

acquainted with your sister Emily. It's a pleasure to meet you in person finally. Emily used to talk about you all the time."

"Glad to meet you, Alyse. I must tell Em that I had a chance to meet you."

"Graham, didn't you work for Farrow Investments right out of grad school? Maybe I have that wrong." Levy looks at Graham for confirmation.

"Yes, that's correct." Graham turns toward me, "Alyse, it's so nice to see you again. It's been a long time."

Nodding with a tight smile, I acknowledge his comment, "Yes, it has been a long time, Graham. I recall hearing that you built a hotel. That must keep you busy."

*Why did I mention the hotel?* Now he'll think I have been checking up on him like some fan girl. I could kick myself.

"Sorry, guys. Levy, it looks like someone is trying to get your attention." Duncan breaks into the conversation.

Levy glances over his shoulder. "Oh, it's Jack Edwards. I think you know his son, Duncan. I see him over there too. Graham, will you and Alyse excuse us?"

Not waiting for our agreement, the two men turn away to head toward the men across the room.

*Okay, what just happened?*

Despite my best efforts to network, I suddenly find myself alone with Graham. This is definitely not part of my plan. His piercing gray eyes are now fixed on me, and I am struggling to maintain a natural demeanor. Help!

# Chapter Three

GRAHAM

Levy and Duncan have left us standing in an uncomfortable silence. I am speechless as Alyse stands before me in that stunning red dress. The way it hugs her curves while still leaving much to the imagination has left me itching to take hold of her. Memories from our past rush in and flood my mind.

Deciding to dampen my reaction to the beautiful woman before me, I go in a different direction and say, "Walter must be very proud of you, seeing how he trusts you to fill in for him tonight. It seems like you are now fully entrenched in the family business. May I say he has taught you well. You are quite the businesswoman, Alyse. It looks like the dynasty will live on."

"Ha. Ha. Graham. I don't remember you being so sarcastic in the past. Joining the firm after getting my law degree was always part of my plan. Look at you with your own company. How do you like playing with the big boys now?" Alyse replies and crosses her arms in front of her.

My smile becomes a little more genuine. Alyse crossing her arms is a sure sign that she doesn't feel as confident as she seems. Odd that I would

remember this one thing about her. It's her "tell" like a poker player trying to bluff a good hand. This time, her crossed arms only draw my gaze toward her breasts.

I quickly force my eyes back to hers, shrugging. "As you said before, I own a hotel through my firm. This conference could be a good opportunity to build my business. Your presence here proves that your daddy feels the same, or he wouldn't have sent you to represent him."

Alyse uncrosses her arms and takes a step closer. Suddenly, her perfume engulfs me. It's more floral than the sweet, youthful lemony scent she used to wear. More mature. I could lose myself in it. God, I almost close my eyes to breathe her into me. Only the clink of glasses behind the bar reminds me of where I am.

She keeps her voice low, speaking for my ears only. "Stop speaking to me like I am a little girl who only does what my father tells me. I work for the firm, and I am doing my job. Why are you trying to insult me, Graham? Can't you play nice and have a decent conversation?"

She's right. I do not want to continue this line of conversation. The tension between us has nothing to do with her work at the firm. We both know this. This isn't the appropriate setting for what we should be discussing. Suddenly, this lounge is the last place I want to be. Releasing some tension seems like a good idea.

I look into Alyse's eyes and say, "Listen, you're right. Insulting you is not my intent. Maybe we are just too wired by seeing each other again. Do you want to get out of here and dance?"

She looks at me like I have grown horns, and I can practically see her thoughts whirling in different directions. I am unsure why it feels like so much is riding on her answer.

"Hold on. Let me find my sister to let her know," Alyse turns around and moves across the room.

As I stand there, feeling a bit unsteady and questioning why I said those words, I can't help but wonder why she didn't just say no. This whole situation seems like a bad idea. But now that it's done, maybe dancing will help us relax and move on from the past. Perhaps it's precisely what we need.

As I glance up, Alyse stands before me once again. Her stunning appearance leaves me breathless. Taking her presence as a positive sign, I draw nearer to her and ask, "Are you absolutely certain about this?"

Alyse nods in agreement. "We're just dancing, Graham. We both need to unwind after a long day and evening. Let's not make a scene. I'll leave first and meet you outside. Are you ready?"

Where did this confident woman come from? I try not to be too obvious in watching her leave. I find myself wanting to get to know more about this bolder and more mature version of Alyse.



# Chapter Four

ALYSE

Dancing with Graham feels surreal. Years ago, when he worked for my father, I was just an intern, but even now, he is just as handsome as ever. Each time I move closer to him, my heart quickens.

Our bodies sway to the music. Occasionally touching, I swallow as he looks down at me. His eyes are serious and dark, but somehow, he seems relaxed. I feel totally the opposite. I wonder what it would be like to be held in his arms.

A sheen of perspiration glistens on his face, and his tongue darts out to moisten his lips. My breath catches in my throat. I remember him being so clever and witty. And, above all, very driven. I never understood why he left the firm, and he didn't tell me. Well, maybe he would have if I had returned his texts and messages. But one day, he was gone, and my father refused to discuss it with me.

Maybe Graham could see that I was getting caught up in my thoughts. He suggests that we grab some drinks at the bar. Grabbing hold of my arm, he guides me toward two empty stools.

The bartender immediately greets us as soon as we sit down. "What can I get you?"

I request a tall fruity concoction that I see a woman down from us drinking. Graham orders a beer. It takes no time for the bartender to place the drinks in front of us.

I nod my head mindlessly to the music, sipping my drink and glancing over to the door marked "Private" on the other side of the room. "I guess we both missed our opportunity to network."

Grahams shrugs. "I only came as a favor to Levy. I'm not much into networking."

"How do you know Levy?" I ask to make conversation. There are so many other questions that I would like to ask instead.

"I've known him for years. Duncan and I went to college and grad school together. His dad is a distant cousin to Levy. I would see him at Duncan's family gatherings. Levy took an interest in me. At first, I was pretty reserved. I knew about his years of success and didn't want it to seem like I was sucking up to him. He has become a good friend over the years."

I stare at my drink, summoning as much innocence into my voice as I can muster. "Well, he is certainly a good friend to have. Was he involved in the completion of your hotel?"

Graham stands up, looking irritated. "Why do you assume he had something to do with my hotel? No, I made sure Levy had nothing to do with that project. I have worked hard for what I accomplished. I don't have a family firm behind me like you."

I rush to my feet, reaching up to grab his arm. "Hey Graham, cool down. I didn't mean to imply that you didn't work hard. Stop being so sensitive to every word I say. And, quit it with the snide remarks about my father's firm."

I stop talking and take a gulp of air. He seems to have a knack for shaking my composure.

"Look, I didn't mean to overreact. Guess I still have that chip on my shoulder. Success hasn't come easy. Perhaps, I am overly sensitive to comments like the one you just made."

Graham runs his fingers through his hair, causing the black strands to stand straight up in the most adorable way. I glance away, uncomfortable with the way the conversation has turned. My fingers seem to itch with the sudden urge to reach up and touch his inky black hair strands. Keeping my eyes averted, I sink down on the barstool and reach for my drink. It's thoroughly watered down by this point. I glance up at Graham with a sign, only to find him staring at me intensely again.

"Don't do that, Graham." My voice comes out huskier than I want.

"Do what?" He says as he moves closer to me. "You are just as beautiful as I remember. That dress makes it impossible to ignore you. The girl I knew before was always in khaki pants and buttoned-up shirts, blending into the office staff. I take that back. You could never blend. With that face and those eyes, you could only stand out. Beautiful."

He turns me around on my stool so that I face him. He then puts both of his hands on the bar. I feel trapped by his arms, but I look up at him, mesmerized by being the focus of his attention. He cups my chin with one hand as he pulls my face closer. His breath caresses my lips, and I see a question burning in his eyes.

Before I can think, my body is already answering. I breathe out a sigh of "Yes."

He kisses me with a passion that causes me to strain my neck as I reach to deepen our contact. My hands move to his hard chest and caress the muscles

underneath his suit jacket. I am working my way up toward his neck when the mood suddenly shifts.

Graham grasps my waist before pulling me to my feet.

"No." He says firmly. "I refuse to act like a teenager getting lucky at a bar. How about we go somewhere else? I happen to have a suite upstairs. You can follow me up to my room, or I can call my driver to take you home."

After a slight pause, I take his hand and leave my better judgment on the barstool. He nods and leads me through the lobby, where a private elevator waits to take us to his suite.

Anticipation rolls off me in waves as we shoot up on the elevator to his floor. Graham's hand never leaves my waist, pulling me closer before our destination arrives. He grabs my hips and lifts me into his arms, kissing a line down my neck as we navigate out of the elevator. I run my hands through his hair and deepen our kiss as Graham frees one of his hands and flashes his key card to open the door to the suite.

I barely look around as he guides me toward the center of the room. The back of my legs bumps against what I assume is a sofa. I plop down. Not one of my most elegant moves, but I can care less about it.

Graham looks down at me. His skin is flushed. I have never seen him like this. He is fully aroused and very assured of himself.

"Alyse." He looks down at me. "I have wanted to be here with you since I first saw you tonight. But, if you want to go back down on that elevator and leave, now is the time to say so."

I rise onto my knees on the sofa and reach up to strip off his suit jacket. I smile as I look into his eyes. "I think it's too late for that."

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Curled up in Graham's arms several hours later, my smile widens as I recall how we collapsed, sweaty, and satiated on this bed. Sometime during the night, we traded the sofa for the bedroom. Now, the room is silent except for Graham's breathing. He remains suspiciously still.

*Does he have regrets?*

I have never done anything like this before, but I know I just had the most mind-blowing night of my life. This isn't even remotely what I imagined would happen if we met again. His hands touched areas of my body that now make me blush at the memory. The intensity of his passion only made me bolder in my response. Remembering how I allowed my hands to move from his chest down to his pelvis. His groans as I guided him into me.

My stomach clenches at the thought of what my father would say if he knew about tonight. Graham's departure from my dad's firm happened abruptly. No, my father can never know about this. He isn't a vicious man, but he is a formidable opponent. I know that he wouldn't approve of any relationship between Graham and me.

I shake my head. Why in the world am I thinking about my father at a time like this? Any woman would kill to be in Graham's arms like this.

Catching a look at the clock on the nightstand, I jump when I see the time. "Graham, I have to go. Should we talk about last night?" I reach tentatively to brush his arm, but I pull back at the last moment. We just spent hours exploring every inch of each other's bodies. How crazy to feel hesitant to touch him now. I rest my hand against his chest with more confidence than I really feel.

Graham stretches and throws a wicked grin at me. "What happened tonight? I recall us dancing all night. In and out of bed."



"Don't be corny," I mumble as I attempt to roll out of bed. I suddenly realize all my clothes are on the floor by the sofa.

Graham quickly rolls over to me, naked as a jaybird, and grabs me from behind as I try to cover myself with the sheet and slip out of bed.

"Slow down, Alyse. We can talk about anything you want."

I blush, feeling like a teenage girl as he continues to hold me. "Listen, Graham," I say in a rush as his arm presses against my bare waist. "I don't want what happened here to become a big deal. I know we both let our emotions get the best of us. But as you said last night, we must remember that this conference is very important. We don't want to ruin our reputations by not being discreet."

"So, you want to treat this like a one-night stand?" Graham nibbles the back of my neck. "Shame, shame, Alyse. What would your father say?"

"You leave my father out of it," I burst out a little more heatedly than I mean to. "Don't make light of this, Graham. Let's just come to an agreement about what the next few days will look like. Maybe, we don't have to see each other during the conference at all," my voice peters out at the end of my sentence. *Is that really what I want?*

"Alyse, I am not going to pretend this didn't happen. I also don't want my private life to be the topic of conversation over the next few days. Yes, this conference is very important professionally. My reputation means a lot to me, but what happened in this room is something private involving the two of us." Graham tightens his hold on me. "I really enjoyed our time together. I would not jeopardize it happening again by doing anything that makes you uncomfortable."

I turn in Graham's arms to look at him. "Really?"

"Yes. Really. We can play it cool for the next few days. After that, we can

see what happens."

His lips brush across mine before his tongue probes deeper. The tingling in my body extends down to my toes. Just as I am trying to figure out how to wrap my legs around him, he ends the kiss and pinches my cheek. Leaving me breathless and unable to focus.

Graham jumps up. "I'll call my driver to take you home. And, just so you understand, I would drive you myself, but I get the feeling that I would get a hard *NO* from you on that. Leave your information so I can reach out to you later."

With that, Graham gets up. I watch his naked butt as he walks out of the bedroom. It is a nice view from where I am sitting. Maybe he is going to retrieve my clothes from the sofa because I feel paralyzed in place. What exactly does he mean by *reaching out to me later*?

# Chapter Five

GRAHAM

As I make my way down the elevator to the lobby, I know one thing for certain, I don't regret sleeping with Alyse last night. I am obviously still attracted to her. I was barely able to resist her back when I worked for her dad, but we kept our relationship low-key. A few casual meals together or a movie. Nothing beyond lingering kisses and snuggling. She was beautiful and intelligent even back then, but she was also the apple of her father's eye.

Clearly, she is nervous about what her dad might think. Do I want to add this drama to my already busy life? Also, we didn't talk at all about how things ended between us in the past.

The elevator dings, announcing that I have reached the lobby. I walk through the empty lobby and out onto the street. It will do me some good to get in a run before breakfast. I need to clear my head.

Feeling refreshed from my run and a quick shower, I return to the lobby to meet Duncan. The traffic in the lobby has picked up quite a bit. Attendees to

the conference arrive and gather for the various seminars and block every space. I spot Duncan at the front desk and head towards him.

"What a turnout today," Duncan says as he greets me. He grimaces as a lady looking the wrong way steps on his foot. "Maybe we should make a beeline up the stairs and grab some breakfast."

"I hear you. There is supposed to be a spread set out for the speakers. Let's get out of this mob before we get mowed down."

True enough, we find the room with no problem. The smell of bacon, eggs, and numerous other appealing foods guides us straight there.

"So buddy, what happened to you last night? You left with barely a word." Duncan asks as he looks at his plate of food.

"I just needed some air and a change of scenery. What time is your first session?" I respond eager to change the subject. We both have been asked to take part in panel discussions about the challenges of financing real estate projects. "I'm later this afternoon."

"Not until mid-morning for me. And, don't think you have put me off my questions. I couldn't help but notice that a certain lady in red seemed to be missing too."

"Was it obvious to everyone?" I ask with a groan.

Duncan chuckles. "I doubt it. Everyone had already gathered around Levy to hear his Caribbean hotel story."

I shook my head, smiling. "Never gets old does it?"

"Never. So, what's going on with you? Usually, you can care less about what people think."

"I don't care. You know that." I say as my mind flicks back to last night with Alyse. "Like I said I just wanted some air."

"No problem, man. I know you keep things close to the vest, but she is a

seriously attractive lady, and I cannot recall seeing you so caught off guard before. Of course, only I would notice that." Duncan gives me a wink.

"Look, I knew Alyse back when she worked part-time at her old man's firm. We went out a few times, but nothing serious."

"How about now? Do you want to make it serious? You two look good together. Maybe Levy is right. You work too hard. I am really surprised that you are not only attending this conference but also have a suite reserved. If you want to have fun with Alyse, that's not a bad deal. You could use a break, not just from work. If you get what I mean."

Duncan finishes with a lopsided grin, though it quickly slips into a more serious expression. He must sense my discomfort with his advice. "Look man, I mean it. Looks like you and Alyse are attracted to each other. Why not pursue it? Is it her old man? I know when you left his firm, you didn't have much love for the guy."

"Hey. Have you turned into a life coach? You seem to be full of unsolicited advice today." I snip. The words leave my mouth with more force than I intend. "No one knows more than you, and maybe Levy, how focused I have been in achieving my goals. Acquiring the hotel is not the end of my journey. I don't need to be distracted by someone from my past. What's the point?"

Duncan stares directly into my eyes. "Does there have to be a point, Graham? Maybe you should take time off to just do something that doesn't get checked off a list. Ever thought of that?"

"There may be complications with pursuing something with Alyse. I told you my current project has hit a snag. Maybe the timing isn't right. But I hear you buddy, maybe it is time to focus on more than work."

We move on to other topics, including our plans for the rest of the conference. As we talk, I wonder more about Duncan's words. Can I make

room for more in my life?"

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The conference room empties as I wait for Levy to finish up with the presenter. It was a great interview, and Levy kept the crowd engaged with his commentary on the real estate market.

"I think the conference came off without a hitch," Levy says with a look of satisfaction on his face. "Still got time for dinner? I would love to catch up since I so rarely see you and Duncan. Where is he, by the way? Levy turns and takes a quick glance around the room.

"He's going to meet us at the restaurant. There was a business call he had to make. I will text him when we head out."

"Hold on, Walter Farrow is heading this way. Glad he had an opportunity to stop by. I saw him in the audience when I was onstage." Levy waves Walter over.

I watch Farrow make his way toward us. He looks very much the same as I remember. It's only been a few years, but his silver hair and youthful gait combined with his tall physique deny his real age. He clearly still finds time to work out because there doesn't seem to be an ounce of excess weight on him.

The two men stop shaking hands, and Levy turns to me, "Of course, you remember Graham Holloway, Walter. We were just talking about you the other night when I met your lovely daughter Alyse again."

Farrow's eyes, a darker green than Alyse's, squint a little and his face shows no emotion. Giving me a slight nod as a way of acknowledging me and a

quick, “Holloway”, he turns back to Levy. His lack of interest in me shows he is still the snobby bastard that I remember from years ago.

Both men talk about some pending legislation that will impact the real estate market, and just to annoy Farrow, I jump into the conversation to share my opinion. Levy encourages my input, and Walter begrudgingly begins to listen to me. The conversation ends after a few minutes with both men complaining about the new mayor and agreeing to have lunch sometime in the future.

I watch with narrow eyes as Farrow walks away. He is well-respected in the finance and real estate fields. As a businessman, maybe he is worthy of that respect. However, my respect for Walter Farrow as a man was tarnished long before I left his firm.

The irony of what happened with Alyse a few nights ago washes over me. I can still hear her passionate whispers as we moved in rhythm together that night. I haven't been able to erase her from my mind. At some point, there may be a need to confront my issues with Walter. For now, getting a grip on what I feel for his daughter is the only thing I care about.

# Chapter Six

ALYSE

Standing in my condo, I lift the glass of wine to my lips as I continue to look out the window to stare blindly down onto the street. The evening skyline of New York does not bring a smile to my face like it usually does. And the flickering lights are making me feel more restless than when I got home an hour ago.

I couldn't bear to remain in the office any longer. Not having heard from Graham since that night has made me restless. If only I had taken the chance to see him, perhaps he wouldn't be a haunting memory, and I wouldn't be left with this feeling of regret.

The jarring sound of my phone ringing on the kitchen island gives me a reason to move from the window. Grabbing the phone, I look at the display, and with a quick smile, I answer. "Brianna, why am I not surprised you are calling on a weeknight?"

"Hey, Sis, who pays attention to weeknights versus weekends? Only you, Alyse. Relax, silly, you are not in school anymore. And don't say you have a job. You know some people find time to have fun after work."



I roll my eyes. My sister, no greeting, just straight talk. "So, have you called to lecture me?"

"No, I am just checking in on my big sister. What's going on?" Brianna's innocent voice doesn't fool me. This is either about some gossip or a favor.

"Listen, Bree, you just lectured me about doing nothing on a weeknight. So, nothing is going on."

"Well, that's too bad, Ally. You really should have more fun. What happened to your mystery friend from a few weeks ago? You know, the one you ditched me for at that boring party?"

"Bree, mind your business. As I said before, it was just a friend. Nothing to see here, nosey."

"Alright, keep it to yourself. It was probably one of your boring lawyer friends. Too bad. It would be nice if you had something juicy to talk about. I did have a favor to ask, but now may not be the right time. Maybe I'll go so you can enjoy the rest of your boring evening of solitude."

I am not moved one bit by Bree's long-suffering voice, and I ring off, thanking her for calling me.

Feeling a little worked up from the call, I head to the refrigerator for some yogurt. The sound of my cell phone ringing again stops my progress. Picking up the phone, I assume it's Bree again calling for her favor after all.

"Bree, I thought you would leave me to my evening of solitude?"

"Alyse?"

I almost drop the phone when I hear Graham's husky voice coming across. Did my recent thoughts conjure him? I try to regroup, but my heart is in my throat.

He repeats my name. "Alyse, are you okay?"

I take a deep breath and pull myself together. "I'm fine, Graham. Sorry, How

are you? I thought you were someone else."

"I hope that I am not interrupting anything. It's short notice, but I'm calling to see if you are free for dinner tonight. But if you are planning an evening of solitude, maybe some other night would be better?"

I can hear his amusement on the phone. "No, I was just joking with my sister. Listen, to be honest; I haven't had dinner. Why don't you text me the address? I can be ready in about an hour. Is that okay?"

"That sounds fine. I'm just leaving my office, so I will meet you there."

"Okay." I end the call and stare at my phone.

*Did I just agree to have dinner tonight with Graham?*

Just then, my phone vibrates with a text message from him confirming the address of the restaurant.

Yep, It looks like I did.

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Standing outside of the entrance of the midtown restaurant, I resist the urge to pull out my cell phone to look at the time again. This is just dinner. I don't need to overthink things except, maybe my choice to wear these impractical high heels. I am nervous enough already, falling on my face in shoes I have only worn once would be the end.

Obviously, I want to be here, or I would have refused the invitation. I could not, for the life of me, think of a single excuse that wouldn't make me sound like I was avoiding him.

I stop my wandering thoughts when a silver luxury sports car pulls up to the curb. The engine purrs as Graham steps out to greet the valet. He looks both svelte and confident in his dark suit. Like he is the star in a car commercial.

My stomach flips, and my eyes literally eat him up. He has chosen a silver tie which makes the gray in his eyes stand out against his dark hair. In a quick stride, he stands before me with a wicked grin.

“Hello, beautiful. We meet again.” He gives me a quick squeeze on my arm as he holds open the door to the restaurant.

Taking in his woodsy cologne as I pass him, I walk slowly to avoid a mishap with my heels.

The foyer of the venue is packed. The clatter of dishes and the weaving forms of serving staff dominate the dining room to the left. Graham guides me to the desk, raking his fingers through his hair. The dark strands look slightly longer than when I last saw him, resulting in the absence of the adorable spikes that appeared that night at the bar. He is devilishly handsome, even without a grin. He shoots his eyes toward me and catches me looking at him. I flush, shedding my coat and handing it to a staff member to hang before we turn to the hostess.

“We have a reservation,” Graham says, smiling at the young lady standing at the desk. “Two for Holloway.”

The waitress looks down and touches the screen before ushering us towards a staircase. The second floor is quieter than the first, with taper candles providing a soft, subdued glow and a cozier, more intimate setting. A stone fireplace casts shadows across the room. The waitress stops at an empty table in the corner before wishing us well as she leaves.

I sit as Graham pushes my chair in for me. He then lowers himself into the opposite seat. He stares at me from his side of the table.

“What? Is there something wrong?” I ask, suddenly afraid that this whole thing has been a mistake.

“I’m glad we could make this work,” Graham says, leaning forward before

continuing. "I wasn't sure that you would come."

"I'm glad to hear that. You are already too sure of yourself."

Graham laughs. "Very funny, Alyse. Have I mentioned that you look great in that dress? It compliments your eyes perfectly," he continues to watch me intently as our server approaches.

"Why thank you, sir." I grin despite myself, turning to the server to listen to the specials and the wine recommendations. I can still feel his gaze on me. I force myself to remain poised, despite the heat of his stare. I feel... *seen*. It is hard to believe that he was looking at me naked a few weeks ago.

Glancing at his menu, he says, "I can recommend the lobster ravioli as an appetizer. It's one of my favorite dishes here. If you prefer something else, the crab cakes are also good."

"The ravioli sounds delicious. Let's get that, and you can also pick your choice of wine." I haven't eaten since lunch and never grabbed my yogurt after Graham's call. Taking the fresh brioche loaf, that the server dropped off, I break myself off a slice.

"As I was saying, you surprised me tonight," Graham says, slowly buttering his slice of bread. "I never expected to see you again. Agreeing to steer clear of each other during the conference was one thing, but saying yes to dinner reminds me of the woman I met that night."

I tried to find a response, some witty retort. But what was there to say? Perhaps, New York isn't big enough to hide from one attractive and distracting billionaire. Our one night together has taught me that Graham is an enigma, a dangerous cocktail of charm, confidence, and sex appeal.

My cheeks flush as I consider my thoughts. Feeling defensive, I quickly retort, "A girl needs to eat, right?"

Graham seems to frown, but it's hard for me to tell. I mentally kick myself

for my smart-ass response. As, our server returns with the wine, it gives me time to gather my thoughts.

“So, you don’t want to talk about our night together? What happened to that mature Alyse from that night?” he asks.

“What do you want me to say?” My voice cracks a bit at the end of my words, and I take a sip of the wine as a cover. “I guess it is an unavoidable topic. How does one casually sleep with somebody and then not talk about it?”

Well, I jumped right into that. Uncharted territory. I need a lifeboat, but as I look across at Graham, it doesn’t look like he will be sending one my way.

“Was it casual to you, Alyse? I will not lie and say I have never had one-night stands before. But what we shared was more than that for me.” Graham looks directly at me. “All I want is honesty, Alyse. I don’t expect anything else from you. We can forget it happened if you like. However, let’s not leave words unsaid. I don’t want to go through your silent treatment again.”

“I don’t really know what to say,” I respond, tapping my nails against my water glass before continuing. “I’ve never done anything like that before.

“So, is it the sex that’s tripping you up?” Graham asked, looking at me from over his wine glass. “Or is it me?”

“It’s everything,” I confess. “It just happened between us. I don’t regret it, but I feel conflicted.”

“That’s an interesting word to use. Are you afraid your father may not like the two of us together?” Graham’s voice has a hard edge that I have never heard him use.

“It’s true that my father never wanted to discuss why you left. That did play a part in me not reaching out to you. Of course, I am not proud of that. I would like to think I have grown a bit since then. If you want honesty, I will say that

I have always wondered how things would have turned out if you had stayed.” I attempt to look him directly in the eyes, but the moment's emotion leaves me focusing somewhere on his nose.

“Thank you for the honesty. It means a lot to know our time in the past meant something to you. When I didn’t hear from you, I assumed it meant nothing. So, the question is what, if anything, do we want to happen now?”

Giving myself a moment to consider the possibility of more time with Graham. I want to be sure about his thoughts. I say finally, “I want to know what you want from... from *this*, from *us*—?”

“Alyse. I think you know what I want. I want you in my bed. I want to pick up where we left off that night and see where it takes us.”

“Are we talking exclusively?” I ask pointedly. “I don’t want to be a number in your contact list.”

“You don’t ever have to worry about that. I don’t think either one of us will have the energy to pursue other people. Also, I would never put you in that position. I don’t play games like that. If things don’t work for either of us at some point, we can be honest about it and end it.”

I am a little taken aback by the serious change in his tone. Playing games is something I know nothing about, so I have no response to those comments. I am too focused on the fact that I can’t see myself being the one to end things. I already know my feelings for Graham are deeper than I want to admit. What if he wants to end things at some point? Is that a risk I want to take? I look at him again and realize that not taking the risk would be a bitter pill.

I smile brightly. “Well, Graham, now that we have put our cards on the table, maybe we should toast to what comes next.”

# Chapter Seven

GRAHAM

The conference room is beginning to smell like the onions from the luncheon spread still left out on the side cart. I look from the food to the beautiful day beyond the windows of the room. Steven's monotone voice is serving as white noise to my pensive mood.

"As you all know, the zoning issue has been resolved and the village of Aurora has agreed to our plans. My team has updated the project schedule to reflect the new milestone dates." Steven pauses to give everyone an opportunity to look over his presentation screen.

Steven is a good man, and the project is important. Everyone in the office is excited about the progress. Having looked at the reports I know where we stand. This is my baby and I have kept a close watch over it. But I just don't want to be here today.

Looking around the room, I say, "Guys, it's Friday. What are we doing here? You all have done a great job so far in keeping this project afloat. The least I can do as your boss is give you the rest of the day off. Unless you have something pressing to do here, take off and enjoy the day." Everyone seems

agreeable to the suggestion. Steven, of course, looks a little put off by not getting a chance to finish his presentation.

Taking the risk of getting daggers thrown his way by the rest of the team, Steven looks toward me. “Well, we know you will be heading out to Dallas soon, is there anything more you need from us?”

“If I need anything I can text or call. Really, we’ve done good work on this. Evan, we are a go with the project manager, right?” Evan responds to me with a thumbs-up.

“Well, that’s it. Get out of here guys.” No one stampedes to the door, but I can tell this unexpected treat is much appreciated. Maybe I work the team too hard, but I expect them to have the same dedication as I do.

To be honest, I am really looking forward to my weekend with Alyse. It has been on my mind since she suggested that we drive out to the cabin. A stab of longing strikes me. Since our agreement to see where things take us, we have shared some pretty steamy kisses and a lot of foreplay, but nothing more. With both of us working long hours, we have been trying to find time for one another when we can. The next few days will be a welcome change.

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With my weekend bag already in the trunk of my car, I grab my laptop and a few files from my office. As I finally get on the road to the cabin, my cell phone rings, and I touch the button on my steering wheel. I am already smiling as Alyse’s honey voice comes through the speaker of the car.

“Hello. You’ve left work, right?” Alyse asks expectantly. I like the anticipation I hear in her voice.

“I am heading your way right now. Should be there in about two hours.”



She coughs, suddenly awkward. “You aren’t allergic to cats, are you?”

“Can’t say if I am or not. I haven’t been around a lot of cats, but I doubt it. Why? Are we sharing the cabin with one?”

“Well... I sort of agreed to cat sit for Brianna while she is out of town. Unfortunately, I am the only one she trusts with Jupiter.”

“I don’t see a problem with a little cat company. Is it he or she? Not sure how I feel about male competition,” I chuckle.

“It’s he, and he’s normally quite tame. You will barely notice him. Drive carefully, and I will see you soon.”

Hearing the smile in her voice as she ends the conversation causes a lump in my throat. We have been avoiding sharing my relationship with anyone else. I do wonder what will happen, if or when the time comes for Alyse to share things with her father. Things are going to come to a head sooner or later. I have never been a coward, but I prefer later. I want more time with Alyse.

In two hours exactly, I park the car in the garage that Alyse indicated in her directions. She arrived earlier via drive share. While we agreed to arrive separately, I plan to insist we drive back together.

Grabbing my bags out of the trunk, I skip up the steps leading to the cabin. Having Alyse to myself for about forty-eight hours suddenly makes me feel like a kid on Christmas.

I barely get to the door when it is flung open by Alyse. We just stare at each other. Dropping my bags on the floor, I gather her in my arms. Our lips reach for each other simultaneously and lock into a long lingering kiss. This is what I have been waiting for all day...truthfully, weeks. Still not having said a word to each other I slam the door closed with a strong backward kick.

Alyse reaches for my shirt and unbuttons it as she pushes it off my shoulders and pulls the sleeves off my arms. Without hesitation, she starts to kiss the

front of my throat and chest. The shirt barely hits the floor before her hands are on the waistband of my pants. She unzips them while running one of her hands across the mound that is growing in them. Pulling my pants down, she bends down, slips off my shoes, and works my legs out of the pants. I can barely stand steady. She stays bent down and reaches up to touch me through my boxers.

At this point, I lift her up, and her legs wrap around my waist. "Where's the bedroom?"

I barely manage to get the words out before she has her tongue in my left ear. "What bedroom?" She blows softly in my ear. "There is a perfectly good sofa over there."

As she continues to straddle me, I carry her over to the sofa, and we collapse onto the softness of the cushions. Our haste to kiss and touch each other is our only focus. With hurried urgency, I work to remove her top and bra as I deepen the kiss that melds us together. I move my hands down her navel and take intense pleasure in hearing her gasp as I find the target of my search. Soon we are both groaning as we passionately reach our sweet pleasure together.

I pull up on my elbows to look down at her, "Sorry, did we even say hello? Maybe we should.... "

Not getting a chance to finish my sentence, Alyse reaches down and runs her hands down my back onto my hips wriggling under me the hold time. Somehow, I forget what I was going to say.

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Jupiter is a ginger menace, somehow both lazy and extraordinarily territorial. While cooking our breakfast, I look over to find him on the kitchen counter. After I yell at him to stop, he climbs up the kitchen curtains with a mouthful of scrambled eggs. I cannot help but laugh, a sound I muffle quickly before donning a pair of oven mitts to coax the cat down from his perch.

When I move to the right, the stupid cat instinctively goes to the left. I climb up on the counter to make a grab for him but without success. The small space makes it impossible for me to move easily which gives the cat all the power.

Hearing the commotion, Alyse appears in the kitchen. She chirps at Jupiter and offers catnip and his favorite treats, but the cat won't be swayed. Honestly, I have doubts that Alyse is even on my side. Her laughing is growing louder by the minute.

Finally, I make a leap up to pull the cat from the top shelf. He yowls, tearing into the oven mitts with a vengeance before shooting out of the kitchen to mourn his losses.

By this time the kitchen is a mess with food all over the counter. I knock over the plate of remaining eggs.

"Crazy cat," I mumble as I look around at the mess.

Alyse walks toward me, shaking her head as she helps me down. I give her a quick kiss on the lips and move her over to save the toast from burning.

"Who knew cats liked scrambled eggs?" I quip, grabbing a plate and dropping the toast on it.

Alyse shrugs her shoulders and chuckles. "I really wish I had my phone with me. A video of the esteemed hotelier Graham Holloway going head-to-head with a cat. That is breaking news! But thank you for trying to rescue breakfast."

I snort, kissing her forehead. “I think the cat won that fight. A bruise to my ego, but I will live.”

Given the morning's disaster, I decide French toast is a safer bet and begin whisking eggs, cream, and a series of spices into a mixing bowl. The bacon is frying in the pan, and Alyse works on cleaning up the mess that Jupiter and I have made.

“Can I give you a hand?” she asks, turning back to face me, and pulling her hair over her shoulder.

I swallow, reaching out to wrap my arms around her waist. Our hours of lovemaking last night had been heated like we were making up for the last few weeks of holding back. We finally fell asleep wrapped in a tight embrace.

The rumble of Alyse's stomach breaks the mood. Laughing, we mutually agree that food is the number priority at the moment. We have time for other things later.

# Chapter Eight

ALYSE

The cabin is rustic but charming, with exposed wooden beams and a brick fireplace that radiates warmth throughout the main room. Graham and I eat in companionable silence in the breakfast nook.

I pop another slice of bacon in my mouth, savoring the delicious taste. “This spread isn’t bad, where did you learn to cook?”

Looking up from his plate, Graham grins. “Unlike you, I had to fend for myself in the mornings. My mom worked nights, and I had to get myself ready for school. When she taught me to cook, she also taught me to be self-reliant. Of course, at the time, I didn't have that perspective.”

“So, there is more to you than your business skills and good looks. Interesting. I guess we really didn’t know each other very well in the past. Did we?”

“Listen, we were just hanging out and having fun. There was no need to go deeper than that. Obviously, I enjoyed our time together, but I knew it wasn’t going to progress more than that. You were the boss’ daughter.”

“Funny, you didn’t treat me like the boss’ daughter. I liked that about you.”

To be honest, I had been falling a bit in love with Graham, back then. If he had wanted more from me, I would have been powerless to say no to him. But when he left the firm, I was afraid to reach out to him.

“Are you ever going to tell me why you left? I know it was childish of me not to return your calls and texts, but I just didn’t know what to do at the time. What happened?”

“It was just the right time to leave. I didn’t agree with some of the things happening in the office and your dad and I had begun to bump heads. I needed to move on. It was just a career move.”

“I get that. I just didn’t understand the changes in my father after you left. He was short-tempered and irritated for a long time in the office and at home. Even my mom noticed.”

“You must ask your father about that Alyse. I don’t think it had much to do with me. I doubt your father gave a second thought to me leaving.” Graham stopped there. Obviously, that’s all he had to say on the subject.

One of these days, I will ask my father, but for now, I am just happy to be back with Graham. Maybe digging into the past is a waste of time.

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After breakfast, Graham finally moves his bags from the front door to the bedroom and checks on some items from work on his phone.

Deciding to take a shower, I grab a few clothes and go into the bathroom. Not known for short showers, I have been humming under the spray of the water for about ten minutes before I hear the muffled sounds of someone entering the shower with me.

"I tried to wait for you to come out until I realized that could take an hour," Graham whispers in my ear while adjusting the shower head to direct water onto both of our bodies.

I still have my back to him, and, other than a yelp when he entered the shower, I remain silent. This is new territory for me. My body tenses with excitement, and I wonder how long my legs will be able to keep me standing. As the warm water cascades down my body, Graham's hand begins rubbing in circular motions on my back. I resist my immediate urge to jerk away like a frightened rabbit. However, after a moment, I lean back into his touch. I smell the woodsy scent of his shower gel on my body, and my control slips away. His hands shift to my breast and make their way down my stomach before reaching between my legs. At this point, I turn toward him and whisper his name. I feel the tingling warmth between my legs and can barely maintain standing.

Graham rinses the soap off both of us and grabs a towel to dry us off. He then lifts me up, I straddle him as he carries me to the tile wall of the bathroom. The wall feels cool against my back, but it barely registers. He looks down at me, and I hold his gaze. He enters me with a soft, slow rhythm that has me whimpering for more.

"Oh Graham, please." My head draws back as my moans fill the room. He continues to move in and out until we both scream out.

Graham lowers his forehead to mine and softly murmurs, "Just once this weekend, I think we ought to make it the bed."

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Getting out of the cabin for a walk was a good idea. I breathe in the crisp, fresh air as I beam at the beautiful weather. The leaves on the trees are just starting to change colors. Graham takes my hand with a gentle squeeze.

“What would you be doing if you were at home today?” I ask, longing to know more about his life when I am not with him.

He turns towards me and says, "I would probably catch up on some work at home or work out at the club with Duncan. We might grab dinner and drinks afterward, and go see a sports game if there's one on."

“It is a small world. Duncan’s sister and I used to be schoolmates. I had no idea that you knew him. You two sound close.”

“Besides being dormmates the first two years of college, we shared a house with some other friends after that. He and his family have been very kind to me over the years.”

“What about your family? Do you see them a lot?” It is a simple question, but I feel his hand stiffen around mine.

“I see and talk to my mom quite often. She lives in Texas now, in a planned community. She is far too busy with her friends to worry about me.”

“That’s nice. What about your father?” I keep my voice gentle, and casual. I don’t want to scare him off by asking too much.

“My dad and I haven’t talked for years. My mom speaks to him occasionally, since they are still married, but they’ve been separated since I was fifteen.”

Graham’s mood is getting more distant on the topic of his father. He stares out in front of him, pausing after sharing that snippet of information. I move closer to let him know that I am still here.

“I recall years ago that you said you grew up in Detroit. Do you still have family there?”

“It's more like a small town outside of Detroit. I haven’t been back there



since I left for college. There isn't really anything that ties me there since my mom relocated. My dad and a few of his relatives are still there." Graham's voice has an edge to it now.

In an obvious attempt at distraction, he looks at me and cups my face between his hands. "Hey, we never ate those steaks last night. Let's go back and drop them on the grill. Maybe we can find a decent wine in the cabin."

We change directions and head back toward the cabin. I try to ignore the pit in my stomach and the thought that perhaps both of our dads are off limits for discussion.

# Chapter Nine

GRAHAM

Back at the cabin, I drop the steaks on the grill. Looking out into the woods surrounding the cabin, there is a feeling of being in our own little world. This cozy retreat, isolated from my normal, hectic life, seems like a gift. This certainly puts things with Alyse on another level.

What happened to me back in the woods? I have spent time at some of the most expensive resorts and tropical locations, with women who knew that there was nothing serious going on—just companionship and sex on the agenda. They would never ask questions about my parents. Not like Alyse. Why did I let her touch a nerve?

Taking the meat off the grill, I place the steaks on two plates and head inside. Entering the kitchen, I see that Alyse has put together a salad.

“Is that apple pie I smell?” I take a deep breath. The scent fills the room better than any scented candle.

“Just something I whipped up.” Alyse gives me a sly smile as she sets up the table.

“Really? So, this box on the counter just happens to be here?”

She giggles, “Huh, I thought I had thrown that away. Well, I could have made it myself, but it just happened to be in the freezer. Do we have everything? Those steaks smell great.”

After dinner, we drift into each other’s arms to dance in front of the fire. Except for a few candles, the fire is the only light in the room. It casts a warm glow over us. The sounds of soft jazz play in the background.

We reluctantly pull apart as the buzzer of the oven rings. I trace a line of kisses from Alyse’s ear to the base of her neck, not wanting the dance to end.

“I am still full from dinner,” I whisper into her ear.

“Me too, but I better get the pie. I will let it cool on the counter. The last thing we want is a fire.” Alyse gently pulls away leaving a deep kiss on my lips.

“I believe a fire has already started.” I chuckle.

She wrinkles her nose at my corny joke and turns away.

I force myself not to chase after her. Feeling like an oversexed teenager is not my thing, but I can’t seem to find a place for my hands when she isn’t in my arms. Forcing myself to switch gears, I walk over to the stereo and put on another CD. Sitting down on the sofa, I spread my legs, and run my hands through my hair. I need to get myself together.

When I look up, Alyse is sauntering over to me from the kitchen with two glasses of wine. Grabbing a glass from her outstretched hand, my hand shakes a little when she gently sits on one of my legs. A warm shudder runs through me. I put my glass down on the side table and gather her up, so we

lie sideways on the sofa, her head resting against my shoulder. She grins up at me with a soft smile on her face, as we share her glass of wine.

“Mmmm. This is so nice. It’s like we’ve stolen a bit of time just for ourselves. Just the two of us.” Alyse sighs again.

“I cannot remember the last time that I just slowed down like this.” I grab her chin and tilt her face up towards me. Looking into her green eyes and her lips darkened by the red wine, I am caught by the moment.

“You’re beautiful. Even more so now. You don’t flaunt or use it to take advantage. It’s almost like you don’t know the effect you have on us poor souls around you,” I speak softly.

“Believe it or not, being the daughter of a beauty queen, has taught me a lot. Despite her love for pageants, my mom always emphasized inner beauty over outer beauty.”

Alyse shares more about her family. Three younger sisters, and her former beauty queen mom. Growing up with her sisters and mom occasionally traveling together for Brianna’s pageants. Her father seemed to prefer working in the office over spending time with his family. She also shared her love for exploring museums and watching old classic movies. Her breath whispers across my chest, as I cling to her every word.

“You all sound very close. Did you enjoy the time you all spent together traveling?”

“I guess so. My nose was either stuck in a book, or I would try to keep my sisters entertained while mom focused on Brianna.”

“I just assumed you would have a nanny?” Graham asked.

“We did, but Mom spent most of her time with us. She taught me to take the lead if she wasn’t around,” Alyse responded with a faraway look in her eyes.

“Wasn’t that a lot of responsibility for you? Did you resent it?”

“Not really. I was glad to help my mom. Plus, when we got home, I could update my dad on everything that happened. I always sensed my mother wanted me to do that.” Alyse smiled softly.

“I remember seeing your mom in a publicity photo with your dad. You look a lot like her.” I gently run my fingers through her hair as I listen to this interesting slice of her life.

“Except her eyes are blue. I am the only one with green eyes like Dad. When I was a little girl, I thought my parents were the perfect couple. When they would go out to dinner, my sisters and I would hang out on the stairs to watch them leave. They looked beautiful together.”

“Well, I doubt if there are any perfect couples or marriages. But you and your sisters were lucky. My dad left us. Rather, my mom kicked him out. He just changed on us. Drinking too much, losing job after job. We could do better without him disrupting our home. At least that’s what I remember my mom saying. She never seemed bitter, but I sensed her sadness. I focused on making her proud with good grades and sports. We had some great times together, despite not having much money,” I lower my voice like I am sharing a secret with Alyse.

“I am sure you are her pride and joy. Any mother would be proud of you Graham. Man, I sound as corny as you do sometimes.” Running her hand across my chest, she gently chuckles, “I would love to meet your mother one day.”

Grinning, I think Mom would like Alyse. I feel lighter and closer to the beautiful woman in my arms. Sharing pieces of my childhood isn’t something I do, but it feels good getting closer to her.

Turning slightly to place the empty wine glass on the side table, I can feel the soft flutter of her breath on my chest. She has fallen into a light sleep in my

arms. Maybe the fresh air of the woods and the warmth of the fire have worn us both out. I feel my eyes drifting closed and I gather her closely in my arms. Feeling a bit raw, but content, I close my eyes.

# Chapter Ten

ALYSE

Who knew the hardest part of leaving the cabin would be getting Jupiter ready for the ride home? After chasing the crazy cat around the living room sofa more than a few times, I finally gather him into my arms and the crate.

"I think I got all the bags in the car. Do you want to take another look around?" Graham is standing at the front door. He was a witness to my battle with the cat. His raised eyebrows and side grin give him away.

I wrinkle my nose at him to show that I am in on the joke. Then, I hand him the cat crate and say, "Sure, I'll meet you outside after I lock up."

After making sure everything in the cabin is secure, I sit in the passenger seat of the car. The soft leather seat feels luxurious. Graham gently closes my door and walks around to the driver's seat. I watch him intently as he enters the car. The car feels cramped. After this weekend, I feel like I know every inch of his body and can hardly keep my hands to myself.

Before putting on his seat belt, Graham reaches for my hand. "Before we leave, I want you to know that this time with you has been more than I could

have ever expected. I have enjoyed our time together.” He leans over to me and plants the sweetest kiss on my lips.

My hands move up to his face, and I deepen our kiss. “It’s been a perfect weekend for me too.” We break apart, and he starts the car. As the car quietly leaves the grounds of the cabin. I turn my head toward the window to glance back at the cabin with silly tears in my eyes.

After a few hours, the car enters the city limits, I stiffen as Graham pulls up to the front circular drive of the condo building. Looking out the window of the car I see Aaron already heading toward us.

“Would you like to come in? I can make us a light meal,” I offer, noticing Graham staring out the front of the car. I feel responsible for keeping the connection we made at the cabin alive.

“Is this what you want Alyse?” He didn’t turn to look at me. Maybe, the return to the city is influencing his mood.

“Graham, this is what I want. You can stop testing me about the way things ended in the past. I am not that girl anymore. I want you in my life. How can you have doubts after this weekend? ” I reach for his hand and squeeze it to make my point.

Turning, with his eyes trained on my face, he says, “We are good together. I will leave it up to you to let Walter know about us, but no more sneaking around. We deserve more than that.”

“Graham, I am in this all the way.” I lean over and kiss him with the same intensity that we shared at the cabin. “I want to see where this goes between us. This weekend has shown me how much I am attracted to you. I think we both feel it. Let's have a light dinner and some wine. That was a long drive.”

"Sure." Graham opens the car door and steps out.

“Hello, Ms. Farrow.” The doorman steps up to the open car door and nods at



Graham and takes the car keys.

“Hello, Aaron. This is Mr. Holloway.” I reach to pick up the cat crate as Graham grabs my bags. I notice that he has left his bag in the car. Feeling a little disappointed I try not to think anything of it.

The silent elevator ride up does little to lift my confidence. Will what we shared at the cabin survive our return to the real world? At the door, I enter my personal number into the lock. As soon as I walk into my condo, I know we are not alone.

From the doorway, I see Brianna shaking and gyrating with her headphones on. However, the music is so loud she could have skipped the headphones. Bags of take-out food are scattered on the kitchen island.

Graham steps in after me and the door closes gently behind him. I look up at him to gauge his response.

“Hmmm. It seems you have a dancing intruder.” He grins as he moves further into the room, leaving me like a statue still standing at the door.

He moves to put down my bags on the floor. Sensing she is not alone anymore, Brianna turns toward us. Her eyes widen as she pulls off the headphones. A sneaky smile spreads across her face as she looks from Graham to me and then back at Graham again.

“Well, hello. Sorry to surprise you both, but I wanted to pick up Jupiter so you wouldn’t have to drop him off tomorrow, Sis.” All the while she is talking to me, she stares at Graham, sizing him up... and not finding him lacking.

Seeing him through Bree's eyes, I take in Graham's tall build and football player physique. But, I am finding him to be so much more than his looks. I have learned to respect the total man he represents.

“I should have taken my key after the last time I found you here alone.” I

move closer with the cat crate and put it gently on the kitchen island that stood between Brianna and me.

“Bree, this is Graham,” I say before turning to Graham, who is watching the scene with some amusement. “Graham, this is my baby sister Brianna. She’s harmless, most of the time.”

Bree comes around the island with her hand stretched out toward Graham, and he meets her halfway.

Graham smiles politely. “Nice to meet you, Brianna. I have heard a lot about you. And, I want you to know that Jupiter and I have become fast friends.”

“Well, don’t be offended Graham, but my dear sister hasn’t said squat about you.” Brianna grins up at him. “Glad to hear Jupiter wasn’t a problem. You must have met with his approval. I don’t see any scratches on you. That’s always a good sign.” She gives Graham a big smile.

Brianna turns away from Graham to the cat crate to check on Jupiter, who is fast asleep. “Hey, you haven’t drugged him, have you?” Brianna gives us both a suspicious look. “Normally he is glad to see me.”

“Jupiter was in good hands. What is that you’re eating?” I sniff, picking up a familiar aroma of Thai food.

“I grabbed some of your favorite dishes on my way over. Just starting mine, so we should be able to share half with Graham.” Brianna turns to the cabinet where I keep my plates and pulls down two more.

I turn to Graham. “Please stay and eat.” I look up at him, silently communicating that, though this isn’t what we expected when we walked through the door, we can make the best of it.

Graham nods. “Where can I wash my hands?”

I point him to the powder room down the hall and turn back to Brianna.

“Good for you Ally,” Brianna whispers. “Why didn’t you tell me you were

going away for a love weekend? Here I thought Jupiter would be keeping you company.”

“It’s all pretty new. Graham used to work for Dad. We reconnected during that conference party that you and I attended.”

“Oh. So, he is the mystery man that you left me for that night.” Brianna dishes out equal portions of food into the three plates. “Why have you been so tight-lipped about him? I tell you all about my lover drama.”

I shoot a glance over my shoulder toward the hall, then whisper, or maybe hiss. “Please don’t embarrass me, Bree. You know I don’t gossip about my private life.”

“Hey, you are really into this guy. Alright, I got you, Ally. Don’t worry about me.” Brianna teases as Graham reappears, ready to join us for an impromptu dinner.

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“Well, thanks ladies, for letting me share your crab rangoon and mango curry. It was delicious. But I have a few morning meetings, so I should make my way home.”

“Are you sure you have to leave? I can gather my things and Jupiter and I can get out of your way,” Brianna offers as she gathers the plates.

Graham smiles, “No need Briana, I have to get a jump start on the week, but thanks for the offer.”

I walk him to the door and step into the corridor with him. Suddenly feeling shy, I avoid his eyes. “Thanks so much for putting up with Bree tonight. I know she can be a lot.”

After a brief silence, I finally dare to raise my gaze to his. The sight makes me catch my breath. His gray eyes are soft, and he looks at me like I am the only woman in the world.

Moving his hands to hold my face, he gently backs me against the wall next to my door. With a husky whisper, he says, “Hey, I am not complaining. I had you all to myself this weekend. The food and company were great. I had fun dining with the Farrow sisters. The more I learn about you, the more fascinating you become, Alyse.”

Graham leans in to kiss me so deeply that I moan. His tongue dips in to meet mine and stirs up emotions that ignite urges that I cannot tamp down. I wrap my arms around his neck and grip the hair on the back of his head. Just as my right leg starts to creep up his calf, he gently breaks away. “Remember babe, we aren’t alone.”

I scowl, reminded of what we could be doing if Bree hadn’t made an appearance.

He smiles wryly as if he can read my mind. Brushing his lips across my cheek one last time, he groans, “This isn’t over. I promise. Goodnight, Alyse.”

He gently turns me toward the door and guides me through it. As he walks away to enter the elevator, I swear I hear him whistling.

# Chapter Eleven

GRAHAM

The room is turning dark as the sun begins to set. The snappy dialogue from the black and white movie on the big screen television is humming along. However, I am the only one paying attention.

"If you're not going to watch this movie with me, sleepy head, I'll wait until we can watch it together," I say as I kiss Alyse's forehead and pull her closer to me. "You are the one who wanted to see the next one. I'm not sure if I can handle seeing another *Thin Man* movie, to be honest."

"They made six in total, so you aren't even halfway through. Isn't William Powell the best? I can watch him all night."

"Well, you almost have. I can think of better things for a Sunday evening."

"You can always think of something better to do, but it is always the same thing to do." Alyse wrinkles her nose as she throws a playful punch at my shoulder.

"I don't recall hearing any complaints. Funny, we have made love in just about every room in this condo. Even when we almost seriously injured

ourselves in the shower.” I laugh at the memory of water spraying everywhere.

“Yes, that was your fault. Luckily, we didn’t have to go to the emergency room. Just so you know, Bree is my emergency contact. How awful if we ever have to call her.” Alyse snuggles a little closer into my shoulder.

Since our time at the cabin, Alyse’s condo has become my home each weekend. I tolerate her love of old classic movies, and she agrees to indulge me in watching sports or documentaries.

“Have you called your mom about your visit to Dallas?” Alyse asks as she grabs the remote to switch off the movie.

“I haven’t had a chance, but I plan to give her a ring to see if she is free.”

“I am sure she would love to see you, Graham. By the way, you don’t have any girlfriends in Dallas that I should worry about. Do you?” Alyse pretends to choke me with her hands around my neck.

“Hmmm. Jealous, sweetheart? No need to be. There hasn’t been anyone but you since we met again. Plus, this is a business trip. I can finally break ground on this project. It’s been delayed for long enough.”

“I am impressed with how you balance your work with other things. For as long as I can remember, all my dad would focus on was work. We, especially Mom, were always second to that. When he went on business trips, my mom would make a point of doing something fun with us. Maybe she was just trying to distract us.”

“It wasn’t long ago that I was falling into that rut. Now, I prefer to focus on the beautiful woman in my arms right now. The Aurora project is important, and I am glad it is getting on track, but I am learning that there are other things in life that are more important.” My voice goes husky as I try to communicate what she means to me.

“Maybe you could be a good example for him. I think if my dad got to know you better, the reasons why you left would be resolved.”

“Listen, like most dads, he wants the best for you. A few years ago, he did find out about our casual dates and made it clear that he didn’t approve of me seeing you. That didn’t really stop me, but it was clear he wasn’t happy with it.”

The fact that Walter Farrow’s morals did not match the loving family he had created was something Alyse would never hear from me.

“I didn’t know Dad even knew about us. He shouldn’t have said that to you. It is my fault for not reaching out to you to find out why you left. I was too scared to find out. You know what they say. Don’t ask questions that you don’t want to know the answers to.” Alyse holds me tightly. “I am so sorry that I didn’t have the guts to reach out to you back then.”

“Maybe it was for the best, babe. We are together now. Looking at the past will only slow us down. I think we should both look forward from now on.” I grab her chin and wipe her tears with my thumb.

She agrees with a smile as I lean down to plant a kiss on her lips.

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“What the hell, Carter? Just when we finally get through the permit and zoning problems, you guys want to back out of the deal?” I pace around the conference room to temper my anger. This trip to Dallas was meant to review the next steps of the project. Not to discuss financing.

“Graham, as I mentioned earlier, the delays on the property have put our other projects at risk. We can’t manage them all and maintain the profits we promised investors. We have to drop one project. Since Aurora hasn’t started

yet, we'll pay the penalty for not completing the deal with you, but it seems like our best option."

"I understand your situation Carter, but the timing is damn bad." Silently, I thank my lawyers for including the penalty clause, but that won't be enough cash to keep the project afloat.

"We can make discreet inquiries to find another firm to replace us. You would have first refusal on any investor."

Sightlessly looking out the window, my mind is already thinking of financially viable alternatives to what is basically one more hiccup with this project. Moving on with another investor at this point would be possible. As Carter said, the project hasn't broken ground yet. I could leverage more of my firm's own resources to manage the project alone, but that would put my company at risk. I cannot afford to do that to my employees.

Turning back to Carter, I ask, "What about the inquiries? I don't want any bad press at this stage, so I hope you have avoided talking too broadly to anyone. We cannot afford the state and county governments getting cold feet."

"We've been discreet and haven't told our bankers. One firm, Farrow Capital Investments, came to us directly before we decided to go in this direction," Carter said, pausing to gauge my reaction.

What the hell? Not displaying any emotions to Carter, I sit back down at the conference table and lean in to look at his face directly.

"How did this inquiry come about, Carter? And why would Farrow approach you directly?" My voice hardens at the thought of old man Farrow getting anywhere near one of my projects.

"I'm not sure, Graham. He seems well-informed about our company's projects, but that's possible since they haven't been kept top secret. Some



local media outlets have covered us. The call seemed casual, but he did express interest in the Aurora property specifically.”

“I cannot tell you how to run your business, but I have no desire to work with Farrow. For now, let’s just keep the firm's interest between us, Carter.”

“No problem with us, Graham. We ended the call with me explaining to him that we were not at liberty to share information on the property.”

After another hour of discussion, Carter and I agree that our legal teams will take over from here. Leaving the office building, I know there is a lot to consider regarding the status of the project. I have met challenges like this before. Building my hotel presented obstacles, but I got through them. I will get through this too.

My mind is spinning. Is Alyse a part of this interference by her father? As a part of his legal team, she would surely know about this. But I want to trust her. The fact that her old man is poking around my project makes me want to hop back on a plane to New York to kick his ass and ask questions later.

My heart clenches. Whatever the case, I plan to get some answers real soon.

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Although my first inclination is to quickly board a plane, I decide to take some time to think. This situation is both personal and business as it involves my trust in Alyse. After updating a few colleagues, I ultimately decide to stick to my original plan and visit the only person I have ever truly trusted.

Sitting across from my mom at her kitchen table, I lean back in my chair, stuffed full of fried catfish, baked potatoes, and salad.

“I cannot eat another bite, Mom. Honestly, you cooked way too much.” My mom could make magic with just basic ingredients. We may not have had

money growing up, but she'd kept me very well-fed.

"I am sure you have a steak every day in New York, so I thought some comfort food would do you good," she says with a wide smile. "I know I always say it, but we have come a long way, son. You followed your dreams and made good on them. I just love you for it."

"It's all because of you. You never lost hope in me. I told you I would get you out of that old town, and we made it. Um...have you heard from him recently?" I hate to bring him up, but the words just form on their own.

"A few weeks ago. He still calls on my birthday and our anniversary." Not one for emotional talk, she hops up to clear away the plates.

"What do you want for dessert? I got your favorite ice cream and Devil's Food cake." As she walks towards me with desserts in her hands, it's clear where my avoidance skills come from.

Feeling the need to clear the air, I continue, "Why do you still love him? You could have divorced him years ago and moved on with your life."

"I have moved on with my life. I have friends and this house. I cannot shut people out just because they don't meet my expectations. I loved your dad deeply once. Before you were born, we were inseparable. After you were born, things slowly changed, but our love brought you into the world. You are the best thing that ever happened to me, Graham. What happened to your father is sad, but shutting him out for selfish reasons wouldn't be right."

"Does he still ask about me?" My voice comes out huskier than I want, but I continue, "We used to spend so much time together when I was younger, then it just all changed."

"He asks about you every time I hear from him. I know he is as proud of you as I am. I believe he knows that he will never be who you want him to be, so he keeps his distance. You know, you don't have to play sides, Graham.

Reaching out to your dad would not be disloyal to me. What happened to our marriage should not stop you from having feelings for him.”

“He left us. How am I not supposed to be angry?” My feelings pour out. “I can never accept that. He is my father, and he left me... us.”

“Graham, parents are not perfect. I certainly haven’t always gotten it right.” She reaches for my hands and holds them tight. “You have to allow the people around you to be human, and you have to be willing to accept that you are only human too. “

“Mom, I’ll try, but I can’t promise anything. I’m working on trusting more,” I say wryly.

“Well, I have learned that love doesn’t go away when times get hard and reappears when times get good again. It’s love that gets you through those hard times.”

We eat dessert in silence for a while. Then drift into reminiscing about old times. Funny, the past doesn’t seem as bleak as I always remember it. There were good times. Maybe reconciling with the past would be good.

First, there are things to face when I get back to New York.

# Chapter Twelve

ALYSE

Tossing the document onto my desk, I give in to my lack of concentration. I am distracted, and he has only been gone for two days.

I am not angry or upset. Expecting Graham to call me directly at least once during his business trip isn't too much to ask. It's not like he's in Dubai. It's just Dallas. A few sporadic responses to my texts are unacceptable. I had fantasized about a sexy online chat while he was in his hotel room and I was in bed. Of course, he didn't know that. It's my own insecurity bugging me. I remember how my dad would leave and not reach out to us at all. How did my mom stand it? Perhaps I am expecting too much.

I snatch up my buzzing office phone, knowing my assistant Diana is on the other end.

"Hi, Di. What's up?"

"Hello, Alyse. Mr. Farrow has called a meeting that starts in twenty minutes. He has asked you to join. Conference room C."

"Okay. Can you tell Derek to join me? Looks like his calendar is free." I hang up, already thinking about all the work in legal right now. Sighing, I pick up

a few folders and walk out of my office to head over to Derek. He is responsible for most of the grunt work, but I see great potential in him. Including him in this meeting will be good for him.

“So, Derek, what do you think this meeting is about? Is there something going on with any of the projects in our court?”

Derek looks up, wide-eyed and clearly freaking out already. His fear of my father is well known to me. Thankfully, I had Diana break the news to him, so I can focus on building up his courage.

“Derek,” I begin in a gentle voice. “Calm down. Preparation is the best way to control your emotions. So, I will ask again. Is there anything we are working on that Walter might want to discuss?”

“I believe everything is in order,” Derek says in a high-pitched voice, indicating that I have been unsuccessful in talking him off the ledge. “You know I don’t like surprising you, so I would have informed you if something was not on track.”

“Well, that is good news, right? So, maybe this is something new for us. Of course, we already have a lot going on, but we can make it work.” Looking down at my phone, I note we have just about 5 minutes to make it to the conference room. “Let’s grab some coffee and head over to the meeting.”

Smiling at Derek, I help him properly put on his suit jacket and gently nudge him out of the door of his office.

There are just a few of us in the conference room. Walter is sitting at the head of the table, and his assistant Harrison is passing out copies of the proposal. As soon as I open the proposal, I can see that the firm is looking into a project in Texas. It’s just outside of Dallas. That piques my interest. Graham’s project is in that area. Dallas is hot in the real estate market these days.

It doesn't take me long to catch up. Holloway Management is leading the project, but a local Dallas investment firm, Carter and Tanner Capital, needs to withdraw from financing it.

I lift my head and look toward my Dad—no, at Walter. Thinking of him as family does not suit my mood. Glaring at him through narrowed eyes, I silently communicate my displeasure. This is no coincidence. No project like this simply drops from the sky, as Walter is suggesting at this very moment to the team. He made this happen. And I know why.

One hour later, the meeting ends. My jaw hurts from keeping my mouth locked shut. The planning team has already started scoping out the project, and the finance group is already working with banks to confirm that the funding could be put into place. Apparently, my legal team is the last department to find out about the project.

I go into my office and gently close the frosted glass door. Derek wants to debrief the discussion, but I tell him to have Diana check my schedule for tomorrow. It is impossible for me to behave as if this is business as normal. My father's actions on this Aurora project, including hiding it from me until the last moment, have hurt me deeply.

I pick up the phone to call his assistant, but I am told that the rest of his day is filled with meetings. I hang up and call him on his cell phone.

"Ah, Alyse. Sorry, I had to leave in a hurry. I have a meeting in mid-town. Is this urgent?" Walter's smooth voice comes across the line.

"You know it's urgent, Dad. How could you spring that meeting on me like that? And don't pretend that you don't know about Graham and me. It would be beneath you. Why are you doing this?"

"Listen, this is business. Nothing to do with you and Holloway. Sure, I know about the two of you. I have known for a while. I am hurt that you didn't feel

the need to share that information with me directly. I guess you are old enough to keep your love life to yourself.”

I can hear the coolness in my father’s voice and the disappointment. “Dad. Are you doing this to get back at Graham and me? I never thought of you as spiteful.”

"Ally, I have arrived at the building for my meeting. I can't talk now. Take the rest of the day off, and I'll call you later."

“Dad, let's discuss this face-to-face. If you're in midtown, could you stop by my condo after your meeting?”

After a long pause, I hear someone in the car remind him of the meeting start time.

I say firmly, "Dad, will you come?"

“Ally, I will stop by after this meeting,” he said firmly but with a hint of reluctance in his voice.

“Thank you,” I say as I end the call.

Grabbing my coat and briefcase, I stop by Diana’s desk to let her know to clear any meetings on my calendar for the rest of the day. I will deal with tomorrow’s schedule later. I leave, claiming a headache.

Does Graham know about Walter’s interference with his project? Maybe that’s why I haven’t heard from him today. But instinctively, I know that isn’t how Graham operates. That’s something that Walter would do. He is always focused on business. Business first, then if it suits him, he will patch up his personal relationships later. I have seen him do this with my mother for years. If he plans to make amends to me, they will not be accepted. I won’t be a pawn in his game with Graham. My love for Graham runs too deep for that.

As soon as I get into my car, I call Graham. I expect to get his voicemail, but he picks up directly.

“Alyse, I was planning to call you this evening. I had to reschedule my flight, so I am just getting back. Actually, I am still at the airport.”

Is it my imagination, or does he sound tense on the phone? I can’t tell, but I have to see him.

“What’s your schedule like? Can you come straight over from the airport to my place?” I keep my tone calm, but I am shaking at the sound of his voice. I can’t bring up the Aurora deal over the phone. I just can’t.

“Well, the meeting in Dallas created some additional work for my team. I was hoping to get on a conference call with them. Listen, I’ll check into the office and text you back if I am free tonight.”

“I really need to see you, Graham.”

There must have been something in my voice that Graham heard because he paused, “Well, traffic is probably terrible, but I’ll be right over, babe. See you soon.”

My heart is racing like crazy. This is the man I love and cherish. Seeing his face as we talk this over is the most important thing for me right now. I don’t know what will happen, but I am not going to hide from this mess that my father has created. I did that once before and lost Graham. I don’t plan for that to happen again.



# Chapter Thirteen

ALYSE

By the time the doorman informs me that Graham is on the way up, I am slightly more relaxed. Needing to do something while I waited for him to arrive, I ordered food from our favorite restaurant. The place where we had our first date. The food arrived right after I had showered and changed into some more comfortable clothes.

Walking over to the door, I hear the elevator make it to the floor. I step out into the hall and watch Graham exit. He looks tired, but his eyes soften when he sees me, a wry smile stretching over his face.

“Hello, beautiful. Just who I need to see right now.” With his travel bag still in his hand, he wraps his arms around me, kissing me as if he had been gone for months.

I return his kiss, and tears gather in my eyes. Nervous about our upcoming discussion, I burrow into him, hoping to draw strength from his muscled chest.

“If we keep at this, we won’t make it inside,” Graham jokes, breaking his embrace and walking with me into the condo. He drops his bag on the floor.

I notice that his tie is already off, and his hair is ruffled as if he had been clawing his fingers through it. I need to feed this man. Then we can talk.

“You look tired. I grabbed some food for us. Why don’t I pour you a glass of wine, and you can take a shower if you want.” I turn away, but before I can take a step, he catches me from behind.

“Shower alone, babe? I have been doing that for the last few days. Surely, you can take mercy on me.”

He squeezes me tightly, and I turn in his arms. “I have a plan, and I don’t want you disrupting it. Now it is a shower for you, then dinner for us. I will just check to see if the food is warm. You go grab your bag and freshen up, mister.”

"Alright, ma'am," Graham replied with a tired grin.

I feel a knot in my throat as I watch him leave the room. No, I’m going to do this my way. Men be damned.

The sound of the phone makes me jump. I hadn’t expected Walter to get here so soon. I had hoped for more time with Graham. To prepare him for meeting my dad. Surprising him was not part of the plan, but it looks like I have no choice.

I instruct the doorman to send Dad up. Waiting outside my door for the elevator doors to open, I try to calm my nerves. Dad steps out. He looks just as tired as Graham did just a while ago. Walter still has on the charcoal grey suit from earlier in the day. While still a handsome man, tall and lean, he looks much older. I haven’t really looked at him as my dad in a while. Maybe I’ve spent too much time as his employee. Has my idol slipped a bit, and I didn’t see it happening?

Walking through the door with barely a glance toward me, he says wearily, “Ally. Let’s get this over with. It’s been a long day.”

“Sure, Dad. Thanks so much for coming. Would you like something to drink?” I follow him into the room and gently close the door.

Walter waves off my drink question as he positions himself at the window. Knowing that Graham could walk out any minute, I want to get out what I have to say quickly. “Dad, why are you going after Graham’s project? I couldn’t believe what I was hearing in the meeting today. What is this all about?” I walk toward him as he stares out the windows looking out onto the skyline.

Walter turns towards me, clearly impatient with my demand for his presence. “This is just business, Ally. I won’t keep repeating myself,” he says.

“If it’s just business, why do it behind Graham’s back? You could have approached Graham and offered to work on the project, but you didn’t. I know you dad, you wanted to back him into a corner. As you said earlier, you know we are dating. Are you trying to hurt me...to jeopardize my relationship with Graham? Don’t I mean anything to you?”

“Honestly, Ally. I thought you had more of a business sense. Was it a waste of time bringing you into the business? I don’t need you second-guessing my business strategy. Listen, you don’t know anything about Holloway. You can have your pick of eligible men to date. Why waste your time on someone who comes from nowhere and is going nowhere?”

“Well, Farrow. I see you haven’t changed with time. Still, the narrow-minded snob that you used to be.”

Walter and I hadn’t heard Graham enter the room. He had showered and put on sweatpants and a tee shirt. His wet black hair curled around his face from drying it with a towel. My heart drops. He clearly had picked the worst time to join the conversation. This isn’t going as I had planned. Getting the two

men together to discuss this issue was my goal. I hadn't expected there would be undercurrents from the past.

"Graham, I am sorry you heard that. Before his personal attack on you, my father was discussing the Aurora project. I am trying to understand why he never mentioned his interest in the project to you directly." I want to move closer to Graham, but my feet feel rooted in this one place.

"Holloway, this is unexpected. My daughter's trying to act as a mediator. Bold of you, my dear," Walter says, nodding wryly at me. "I've underestimated you, Ally."

"Yes, she is full of surprises." Graham sends a narrow-eyed look my way. As if he is trying to gauge my intent with this gathering.

Walter looks at Graham and says, "I'm just taking advantage of a business opportunity that could benefit my firm. There's nothing personal about it." He adds, "I don't understand why she should bother."

"Graham, I heard about Dad's plan today. I invited him here to discuss it. Then I asked you here as well. I guess that's obvious now, but I didn't know my father could be so cruel."

"Your father is just being himself. Perhaps he hasn't shown his true self to you before, but others like me have witnessed it many times. Isn't that right, Farrow?"

"Stay out of my relationship with my daughter, Holloway. If you had focused on your business, you wouldn't be in this situation right now. You got lucky on your previous projects, but you are over your head now. I can take over the Aurora project and even pay you a finder's fee for all of your work with the local community."

Graham sneers, "Why should I let you near my project? I prefer to work with people I trust and respect. Can you say the same? Your daughter is learning

this the hard way."

"Listen to me, you punk. You don't know anything about me, and I just told you to stop interfering with my relationship with Ally. I can walk circles around you any time I want. One word from me and your business as well as that project could go up in smoke by tomorrow."

Both men are standing on opposite sides of the room, glaring at each other with hostility. It's evident that they have forgotten my presence and have no intention of resolving their conflict.

"Dad, Graham, let's just take a moment before something irreparable is said. You both just need to talk this through. I don't understand why this has become so personal. If something else is going on, I want one of you to step up and tell me now."

"Be quiet, Alyse! This really isn't about you," Walters mutters and turns towards me.

Graham approaches Walter, visibly angry. He calmly states, "Don't talk to her like that. You can't control her or anything in our lives. You're making this ugly and beneath us. Alyse loves you. Don't lose the only good thing you have in your life. And Walter, that's your family, not your firm."

I have a sense that the two men are speaking in riddles. There's something I'm missing. I turn towards Graham, but he remains fixated on my dad.

After a prolonged silence, Walter moves over and takes a seat on the couch, dropping his head into his hands. When he lifts his head, his gaze falls in my direction, but I don't think he really sees me. "I apologize, Ally. He's right. I would never intentionally cause you any harm. Clearly, I've misjudged the depth of your relationship with Holloway."

"What is this thing between you and Graham? Please tell me. I want to hear it from you, Dad."

Taking in another deep breath, Walter begins, "I'm not certain how your mother will react to me revealing this, but I will. A few years ago, your mother and I were going through some difficulties. She was upset after hearing gossip about me and other women. It was merely harmless flirtations on my part, nothing serious. However, it was enough for your mother to threaten to leave with you and the girls. Instead of working it out, I left on a planned business trip with the team. Holloway included."

Walter signs, "The business deal went better than anticipated, and we all decided to celebrate at a bar. Later that night, Holloway witnessed me entering my hotel room with one of the waitresses. Nothing happened. The whole time was spent with me talking about you girls and your mother."

"Dad, no," I whisper the words to myself. This cannot be true. I force myself to focus on my dad as he continues talking.

Walter shifts his gaze towards Graham and adds, "The next day, I didn't take kindly to Holloway lecturing me on morality. It hit a nerve because of my conversation earlier with your mom. I said some snide things about his upbringing, and he resigned on the spot. I couldn't fathom how he believed he was superior to me. I suppose I'm still harboring some anger about the whole situation."

"Oh, Dad. I had no idea about any of this. Graham had left the office without a word. You and Mom seemed strained at home, but I couldn't connect the dots. How could I?" Tears stream down my face as I shift my gaze from Dad to Graham. The compassionate look in his eyes serves as a reminder of why I love him.

"Holloway, I want you to know that I told my wife everything. It was a challenging period, but we managed to overcome it. That doesn't mean I forgive you for jumping into my personal life, but I guess I was taking my

frustration out on the messenger. As for your project, I wanted you out of my life again. Away from my family. So, I suppose it was more than just business.” Walter leans back with a look of frustration on his face.

Graham takes a seat in the chair across from Dad. “Listen, Walter, I know I had no right to confront you back then. All I can say is that I could have handled it more gracefully. To be honest, my anger at my own father may have gotten redirected to you that day. Leaving the firm was an impulsive move on my part, but it turned out to be what I needed to kickstart my goals.” Graham holds out his hand, and the two men shake.

“Listen, Holloway, I will back out on the project. As Ally said, I was being petty. I hope you both will forgive me.”

Walter gets up and walks over to me, and pulls me into his arms.

Choked with tears, I bury my head into his chest to say, “I love you, Dad.”

He embraces me tightly, whispering, “Ally, I will never take you for granted again. I am deeply sorry for my actions and comments towards you today. I am incredibly proud of the remarkable woman you have become, in both business and in life.”

He passes me over to Graham with a tender gesture. “Holloway, it's clear you have her heart. I hope she can trust you to cherish it,” he says sincerely.

“No worries there, Walter. She has my heart as well,” Graham murmurs softly as he gently takes me into his arms.

# Chapter Fourteen

GRAHAM

Sitting on the sofa, I can tell Alyse is still shell shocked from what just happened. Having left a half hour ago, Walter's presence still lingers in the room.

"You okay babe? That was a lot to digest." I pull her in closer toward me.

"Why didn't you tell me?" She looks up at me with sadness in her eyes.

"It wasn't my story to tell Alyse. You heard Walter. I couldn't risk you shooting the messenger too."

"I guess you're right. How could I not see that my mother was unhappy back then? Would it be wrong of me to talk to her about it?"

"One thing I have learned from my mother is that a marriage is private between a husband and a wife. Maybe you'll get an opportunity to ask her about that time, but don't be disappointed if she leaves you out of it."

"I know you are right, but I hope she had someone to confide in. I hate the thought of her being alone with no one to talk to."

"Based on everything you've shared about your mother, she seems like a strong and independent woman. I'm certain it was a difficult time for her, but



she had you and your sisters to look after. I would say she never lost sight of her family and remained committed to you all. You should be proud of her.”

“You’re right. During the whole time, I don’t recall her ever complaining about my dad. I think maybe I have been taking her for granted. She would love to finally meet you.”

“I would love to meet her. I still can’t get over how you managed to maneuver me and your dad into the same room. You took quite a risk by doing that. Weren’t you worried about what would happen?”

“I was terrified. Once you agreed to come over and you didn’t mention the project, I thought you didn’t know yet. I just wanted you and Dad to talk. I wanted you both to know how much you mean to me. Boy, for a while there, I thought I might have to break up a fistfight.”

“It seems that your plan, whatever it may have been originally, worked. You have to know I love you, Alyse. When I heard about your father and his interference with the project. I was worried, but I didn’t doubt you. I knew all along that you would never agree to your dad’s plans to screw around with my business.”

“I love you too. When I heard about Dad’s plan, I just wanted to be with you and hold you. He’s lucky that he left the office after I found out. I think I could possibly be in jail right now. That’s how angry I was when I heard. You know I am a ‘stand by her man’ kind of woman.”

“I hear you loud and clear. I was so proud of you today. Any fears I still had about how we ended years ago were resolved long before today. Hey, are you crying? Babe, I never want to make you cry. Unless we are making love, and you are crying out my name.”

“I am not crying. It’s not every day that a girl finds out that the man she loves feels the same way. Now, enough with the corny jokes.” She pulls my t-shirt

over my head. Letting her voice grow sultry, she whispers, “Talking is not part of my plan right now, Mr. Holloway.”

Our lips lock as she rests her body on mine. I boldly roll over quickly to flip our positions, and I shift my body as she manages my sweatpants down.

“Hey, it doesn’t seem fair that I am wearing nothing, and you are fully dressed. What are these plans you have in mind?” I look down at her, grinning, as she pauses her movements.

Alyse looks up and mumbles, “I am making it up as I go along. You won’t be disappointed.”.

Moments later, I groan. “Ahh... Please don’t stop, Alyse.”

Wrapped up in our newly expressed love for each other, the glow from the condo windows cast magical shadows over our entwined bodies on the sofa.

# Epilogue

GRAHAM

Just a few feet from the Caribbean Ocean, the white wooden altar is decorated with beautiful white and pink flowers. The calm waves pushing against the shore create a beautiful white noise for the ceremony. The wedding guests all chuckle as Duncan pretends to have misplaced the ring, but the bride and groom only have eyes for each other.

"Are you sure you don't want a big wedding like this?" I whisper into Alyse's ear as we watch the ceremony playing out in front of us.

"This is definitely beautiful. All the planning Marla and Will put into everything has come out perfectly, but I only need a few close friends and family to make it special for our wedding." Alyse whispers back.

"Your mom and Brianna are going to be disappointed that they can't plan for a bigger event, but I can't complain. I feel like you do. Plus, my mom still needs to recover from the makeover Brianna put her through. If we throw any more glitz at her, she might pass out."

Alyse chuckled softly. "I still cannot believe she let Brianna give her the beauty queen treatment. They have really become good friends."

"My mom used to tease me about wanting daughters. Now she has you and Brianna in her life. It's another story when you and all your sisters get together. I can barely get through it myself."

"Haha. Everyone is in love with our new house. When that wears off, we won't have so many visitors. But it is nice to have everyone together. Having a handsome future brother-in-law is a big draw for my sisters. That includes my mom too."

"I am not complaining about it. This is all new to me and my mom. The Farrow sisters are a force to be reckoned with. I am even warming up to the old man, but you better not tell him I said that."

"Oh, I think he is warming up to you as well. It helps that you play golf," Alyse says with a wistful smile.

We rise as Will and Marla make their way back down the aisle. Both look a bit dazed and happy. Eventually, we follow the crowd to the patio outside the resort's dining room and stop at the bar for drinks.

While standing under an umbrella, Duncan suddenly grabs a beer and joins us. "Alyse, please promise that you won't put me through this torture when I am Graham's best man. Marla wants so many pictures of the wedding party I'm almost losing my cool." Duncan looks around nervously, then turns his attention back to Alyse. "You look wonderful in that dress. Brings out the green in your eyes. I believe it's bad taste to outshine the bride at her wedding, isn't it."

Shaking my head, I respond on Alyse's behalf, "Duncan, stop flirting with Alyse and focus on your best man duties. I am sure that both Marla and Will appreciate your hard work."

"Remember the night at the conference when Will chewed our ears off about this wedding? You do remember that night, right Graham?" Duncan smirks

as he takes another drink of his beer.

"Of course I do." I give Alyse a sideways look. "It is a night that I will never forget."

"Yeah, I bet you won't since you and this certain lady ditched me. Not that I am complaining. Some could say I was a pretty good wingman that night." Duncan looks impressed by his comments.

"I don't think anyone would say that, Duncan. But I do see Will looking around for someone. Are you sure they were done with the pictures when you left? C'mon man, you are the best man." I see Will slowly making his way toward us.

"Graham, all I need is about 5 to 10 minutes of peace. See you both later in the dining room. If asked, you haven't seen me."

Laughing, we watch Duncan back up and follow a path leading away from the bar. Apparently, he is looking to drink the rest of his beer in peace.

Still laughing, Alyse grabs my tie. "You know Duncan isn't wrong. If it weren't for that conference, we may not have found each other again or had that wonderful night together." She wraps her arms around my neck and sways to the music playing in the background.

I look down at my beautiful future wife and smile. "Best night of my life. You looked gorgeous in that red dress. I was hooked the moment that I saw you, babe."

"I love you, Graham. Our wedding cannot come soon enough. I will always trust you, and we can always be honest with each other, right?" Alyse's lips brush my ear, and her fingers run through my hair.

"Of course. Hey, are you okay? Not too much champagne? You know there are other people out here. Not that I'm complaining."

"I am fine. Just the thought of that night has me thinking about how soon

after dinner we can get away. There's a nice cabana down on the beach that I believe we should try out. What do you think?"

As her tongue darts into my ear, I think she could convince me to walk straight into the ocean right now. "I will follow you anywhere, babe. Just let me know when and where." I move even closer and wrap my arms around her tightly. Moving backward slowly, we blend into the trees to be alone.

The End

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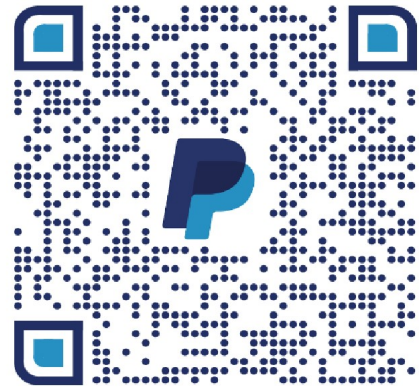


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