



THE LAST
Di Sione
CLAIMS HIS PRIZE

MODERN™



MAISEY YATES

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The Last Di Sione Claims His Prize

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'I want that painting. It is my last Lost Mistress. My Lost Love.' Alessandro Di Sione is renowned for being cold and unsentimental, but even he can't deny his grandfather's dream of retrieving a painting steeped in royal scandal. Yet the key to its return is the outspoken Princess Gabriella. Traveling together to Isola D'Oro to locate the mysterious painting, Gabby is drawn to the man tortured by guilt from his past. Her innocence makes her untouchable, as Alex is convinced his Di Sione blood is tainted. But could their passion be his salvation? Book 8 of The Billionaire's Legacy

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“Who said I was a maiden?” Gabby closed her eyes for a second, allowing the sun to wash over her face, the corners of her lips curving up slightly into a smile.

“You didn't have to say it,” Alessandro said. “I could feel it in your kiss.” Or rather the lack of it.

Her stomach sank down to her toes and she opened her eyes again, the corners of her lips falling. “Was it so terrible?”

Of course it hadn't been.

“Not terrible. Inexperienced. I could taste it on your skin.”

“That's ridiculous. Inexperience doesn't have a flavor.”

He grabbed hold of her arm again, turned her to face him, drawing her closely toward him. Rather than speeding up, this time her heart stopped beating altogether.

He lowered his head slightly, then reached up, sliding his thumb along the edge of her lip. “Yes, Gabriella, inexperience absolutely has a flavour. And on your lips there was also innocence and wildflowers. I did not mistake the taste of any of that.”

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Maisey Yates



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MAISEY YATES is a New York Times bestselling author of more than thirty romance novels. She has a coffee habit she has no interest in kicking, and a slight Pinterest addiction. She lives with her husband and children in the Pacific Northwest. When Maisey isn't writing she can be found singing

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EPILOGUE

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CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS RUMORED that Alessandro Di Sione had once fired an employee for bringing his coffee back two minutes later than commanded and five degrees cooler than ordered. It was rumored that he had once released a long-term mistress with a wave of his hand and an order to collect a parting gift from his assistant in the following weeks.

There were also rumors that he breathed fire, slept in a dungeon and derived sustenance from the souls of the damned.

So, when his shiny new temporary assistant scurried into the room, with red cheeks and an apologetic expression, on the heels of his grandfather—who appeared neither red-cheeked nor sorry for anything—it was no surprise that she looked as though she was headed for the gallows.

Of course, no one denied Giovanni Di Sione entry to any place he wished to inhabit. No personal assistant, no matter how formidable, would have been able to keep his grandfather out. Age and severely reduced health notwithstanding.

But as his typical assistant was on maternity leave and her replacement had only been here for a couple of weeks, she didn't know that. She was, of course, afraid that Giovanni was an intruder and that she would be punished for the breach of security.

He saw no point in disabusing her of that notion. It was entirely possible she would spend the rest of the day deconstructing the meaning to his every glance in her direction. Likely, in the retelling, she would talk about the blackness of his eyes being a reflection of his soul, or some other such nonsense. And so, his reputation would darken even more, without him lifting a finger.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Di Sione," she said, clearly out of breath, one palm pressed tightly over her rather unimpressive breasts.

He made a low, disapproving sound and raised one dark brow.

She was trembling now. Like a very small dog. "Should I go back to work, sir?" she asked, nervous eyes darting toward the door.

He waved his hand and she scurried back out much the same as she had scurried in.

"I see you're up and moving around," Alex said, not descending into sentimentality because his relationship with Giovanni didn't allow for that. With each returned Lost Mistress, Giovanni's health had recovered bit by bit.

"It's been a while since my last treatment, so I'm feeling better."

"Good to hear it."

"The way you acted toward your assistant was not overly kind, Alessandro," his grandfather said, taking the seat in front of Alex's desk somewhat shakily.

"You say that as though you believe I have a concern about being perceived as kind. We both know I do not."

"Yes, but I also know you're not as terrible as you pretend to be." Giovanni leaned back in his chair, both hands planted on his knees. He was getting on in years and, after seventeen years in remission, his leukemia had returned. At ninety-eight, Giovanni likely didn't have many years left on the earth regardless of his health, but it had certainly added a bit of urgency to the timeline.

The goal being to recover each and every one of Giovanni's Lost Mistresses. Stories of these treasures were woven into Alex's consciousness. His grandfather had been spinning tales about them from the time Alessandro was a boy. And now, he had tasked each of his grandchildren with finding one of those lost treasures.

Except for Alex.

He had been expecting this. Waiting for quite some time to hear about what part he might play in this quest.

“Maybe not,” Alex said, leaning back in his chair, unconsciously mimicking his grandfather’s position.

“At least you do not dare to behave terribly in my presence.”

“What can I say, Nonno? You are perhaps the only man on earth more formidable than I.”

Giovanni waved his hand as if dismissing Alex’s words. “Flattery is not the way with me, Alessandro, as you well know.”

He did know. His grandfather was a man of business. A man who had built a life out of nothing upon his arrival to America, a man who understood commerce. He had instilled that in Alex. It was how they connected. Where their minds met.

“Don’t tell me you’re feeling bored and you wanted to get your hands back into the shipping business?”

“Not at all. But I do have a job for you.”

Alex nodded slowly. “Is it my time to take a mistress?”

“I have saved the last one for you, Alessandro. The painting.”

“Painting?” Alex lifted a paperweight from his desk and moved it, tapping the glass with his index finger. “Don’t tell me you were a great collector of clowns on velvet or some such.”

Giovanni chuckled. “No. Nothing of the kind. I’m looking for The Lost Love.”

Alex frowned. “My art history is a little bit faint at my advanced age, but the name does sound familiar.”

“It should. What do you know about the disgraced royal family of Isolo D’Oro?”

“Had I known there would be a test, I would have studied before your arrival.”

“You were given a very expensive education at a very high-end boarding school. I would hate to think my money was wasted.”

Alex shifted, his hands still curled around the paperweight. “A school filled with teenage boys halfway across the world from their parents and very near a school filled entirely with teenage girls in the same situation. What is it you think we were studying?”

“This subject would have been related to your particular field of study. The Lost Love is a very scandalous piece of royal history. Though it was only a rumor. No one has ever seen it.”

“Except for you, I take it.”

“I am one of the few who can confirm its existence.”

“You are ever a man of unfathomable depths.”

Giovanni chuckled, inclining his head. “I am, it’s true. But then, that should be a perk of living a life as long as mine. You ought to have depths and secret scandalous paintings in your past, don’t you think?”

“I wouldn’t know. My life primarily consists of long hours in the office.”

“A waste of youth and virility in my opinion.”

It was Alex’s turn to laugh. “Right. Because you did not spend your thirties deeply entrenched in building your fortune.”

“It is a privilege of the elderly to see things in hindsight no one can see in the present, and attempt to educate the young with that hindsight.”

“I imagine it’s the privilege of the young to ignore that advice?”

“Perhaps. But in this, you will listen to me. I want that painting. It is my last Lost Mistress. My lost love.”

Alex looked at the old man, the only father figure he’d ever truly possessed. Giovanni had been the one to instill in Alex a true sense of work ethic. Of pride. Giovanni had raised him and his siblings differently than their parents had. After their deaths he had taken them in, had given them so much more than a life of instability and neglect. He had taught them to take pride in their family name, to take nothing for granted.

His son might have been a useless, debauched partyer, but Giovanni had more than made up for mistakes he made with him when he had assumed the job of raising his grandchildren.

“And you intend to send me after it?”

“Yes. I do. You spend too much time at work. Think of it as a boy’s adventure. A quest to retrieve a lost treasure.”

Alex picked up the paperweight again. It hovered an inch or so off the desk before he set it back down with an indelicate click. “I should think of it as what it is. A business transaction. You have been very good to me. Without your influence in my life I would likely be completely derelict. Or worse, some sort of social climber working his way through champagne and sunless tanner in South Beach.”

“Dear God, what a nightmarish prospect.”

“Especially as, by extension, I would be doing it with your money.”

“Your point is made. I am a steadying and magnificent influence.” The ghost of a smile that played across his grandfather’s ancient features pleased him. “I need you to retrieve the painting for me. It took all of my strength to put my socks on and come down here today. I can hardly track across the Mediterranean to Aceena to retrieve the painting myself.”

“Aceena?” Alex asked, thinking of what little he knew about the small island. With its white sand beaches and jewel-bright water, it was famous the world over.

“Yes, boy. Honestly, now I want a refund from that boarding school.”

“I know where and what Aceena is, Nonno. But as far as I’m aware their primary attraction is alcohol and their chief import is university students on spring break.”

“Yes. A hazardous side effect of beachfront property, I suppose. But also, it is where the D’Oro family has spent their banishment.”

“On spring break?”

“In an estate, I’m told. Though I fear Queen Lucia’s children have been on perpetual spring break ever since carving a swath of scandal through Europe. The queen lives there with her granddaughter. She was the rumored subject of the painting—” his grandfather paused “—and the last person to have it. So I’ve heard.”

Alex wasn’t a fool, and he didn’t appreciate that the old man was playing him for one. Giovanni wouldn’t send him off to Aceena because of half-heard rumors. And he would know full well who the subject of that painting was, had it been in his possession.

Leave it to Giovanni to have a portrait of a disgraced queen in his collection of lost treasures.

“You seem to know a great deal about the royal family,” Alex said.

“I have some ties to Isolo D’Oro. I...visited for a time. There are...fond memories for me there and I carry the history with me.”

“Fascinating.”

“You don’t have to be fascinated, Alessandro, you have to do my bidding.”

Of course, if Giovanni asked, Alex had to comply. He owed him. Giovanni had raised Alex after the death of his parents. Had given him a job, instilled in him the work ethic that had made him so successful.

Without Giovanni, Alex was nothing.

And if his grandfather’s dream was to see his Lost Mistresses reunited, then Alex would be damned if he was the weak link in the chain.

Enough suffering in his family was tied to his pigheadedness. He would not add this to the list.

“As you wish,” Alex said.

“You’re turning this into a clichéd movie, Alessandro.”

“A quest for a hidden painting secreted away on an island by disgraced royals? I think we were already there.”

CHAPTER TWO

“THERE IS A man at the door, here to see Queen Lucia.”

Princess Gabriella looked up from the book she was reading and frowned. She was in the library, perched on a velvet chair that she privately thought of as a tuffet, because it was overstuffed, with little buttons spaced evenly over the cushion, and it just looked like the word sounded.

She hadn't expected an interruption. Most of the household staff knew to leave her be when she was in the library.

She pulled her glasses off and rubbed her eyes, untucking her legs out from underneath her bottom and stretching them out in front of her. "I see. And why exactly does this man think he can show up unannounced and gain an audience with the queen?"

She slipped her glasses back onto her face and planted her feet firmly on the ground, her hands resting on her knees as she waited for a response.

"He is Alessandro Di Sione. An American businessman. And he says he is here to see about...to see about The Lost Love."

Gabriella shot to her feet, all of the blood rushing to her head. She pitched sideways, then steadied herself, waiting for the room to stop spinning.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" asked the servant, Lani.

"Fine," Gabriella said, waving her hand. "The Lost Love? He's looking for the painting?"

"I don't know anything about a painting, Princess."

"I do," Gabriella said, wishing she had her journal on hand so she could leaf through it. "I know plenty about it. Except for whether or not it actually exists."

She had never outright asked her grandmother about it. The older woman was loving, but reserved, and the rumors about the painting were anything but. She could hardly imagine her grandmother engaging in the scandalous behavior required for The Lost Love to exist...and yet. And yet she had always wondered.

"Forgive me, but it seems as though knowing whether or not something exists would be the most essential piece of information to have on it."

"Not in my world."

When it came to researching genealogical mysteries, Gabriella knew that the possibility of something was extremely important. It was the starting point. Sometimes, collecting information through legend was the key to discovering whether or not something was real. And often times, confirming the existence of something was the final step in the process, not the first.

When it came to establishing the facts of her family's banishment from Isolo D'Oro, legend, folktales and rumor were usually the beginning of every major breakthrough. In fact, her experience with such things was leading her to odd conclusions regarding yetis and the Loch Ness monster. After all, if multiple cultures had rumors about similar beasts, it was logical to conclude that such a thing must have a grain of truth.

But until she was able to sift through the facts and fictions of her familial heritage, she would leave cryptozoology for other people.

"What should I do with our visitor, ma'am?"

Gabriella tapped her chin. She was inclined to have their visitor told that she and her grandmother were Not at Home, in the Regency England sense of the phrase. But he knew about The Lost Love. She was curious what exactly he knew about it. Though she didn't want to confirm the existence of it to a total stranger. Particularly when she hadn't established the existence of it in all certainty to herself.

She had to figure out what his game was. If this was just a scammer of some sort determined to make a profit off an elderly woman—and that was likely the case—then Gabriella would have to make sure he was never given entry.

"I will speak to him. There is no sense in bothering the queen. She is taking tea in the morning room and I don't wish to disturb her."

Gabriella brushed past the servant, and headed out of the library, down the richly carpeted hall, her feet sinking into the lush, burgundy pile. She realized then that going to greet a total stranger with bare feet was not the most princess-like act. She did quite well playing her part in public. A lifetime of training made a few hours of serene smiling and waving second nature. But when she was home, here in the wonderful, isolated estate in Aceena, she shut her manners, along with her designer gowns, away. Then unwound her hair from the tight coil she wore it in when she was allowing herself to be trotted out in front of the public, and truly let herself simply be Gabriella.

She touched her face, her glasses. She also didn't go out in public in those.

Oh, well. She didn't want to impress this stranger; she wanted to interrogate him, and then send him on his way.

She padded through the grand entryway, not bothering with straightening her hair or preening in any way at all.

He had already been admitted entry, of course. It wouldn't do to have a man like him standing outside on the step. And she could see what kind of man he was immediately as he came into her view.

He was...striking. It reminded her of an experience she'd once had in a museum. Moving through wall after wall of spectacular art before entering a small room off to the side. In it, one painting, with all of the light focused on it. It was the centerpiece. The only piece that mattered. Everything that had come before it paled in comparison.

The journey had been lovely, but this man was the destination.

He was like a van Gogh. His face a study in slashing lines and sharp angles. Sharp cheekbones, an angular jaw roughened with dark stubble. There was a soft curve to his lips that spoke of an artist with a deft hand. Who knew that after so much hardened and fearful symmetry there needed to be something different to draw the eye. There was a slight imperfection in his features, as well, one peak of his top lip not quite rising as high as the other. It gave a human quality to Alessandro that was missing from the rest of him. Those broad shoulders, muscular chest and slim waist covered by his severely tailored suit. Long, strong legs, feet covered by handmade shoes.

Yes, everything about him was formidable perfection.

Except for that mouth. The mouth that promised potential softening. That hinted at the fact that he was a man, rather than simply a work of art.

She blinked, shaking her head. That was a lengthy flight of romantic fantasy. Even for her.

"Hello?" She took a step deeper into the entry. "Can I help you?"

His dark eyes flickered over her, his expression one of disinterest. "I wish to speak to Queen Lucia about The Lost Love."

"Yes. So I was told. However, I'm afraid the queen is unavailable to visitors at the moment." She resisted the urge to push her glasses up her nose, and instead crossed her arms, trying to look slightly regal, though she was wearing black leggings and an oversize sweatshirt.

"So she sent... I give up. What are you exactly? The resident disaffected teenager? Ready to head out to a mall or some such?"

Gabriella sniffed. "Actually, I am Princess Gabriella D'Oro. So when I say that my grandmother is not available to see you, I speak from a place of authority. This is my home, and I regret to inform you that we have no space for you in it."

"Strange. It seems quite spacious to me."

"Well, things are organized just so. Quite a few too many American businessmen have been by of late. We would have to store you in the attic, and you would just collect dust up there."

"Is that so?"

"I fear you would atrophy completely."

"Well, we can't have that. This is a new suit, and I don't particularly want to atrophy in it."

"Then perhaps you should be on your way."

“I came a great distance to speak to your grandmother. This may surprise you, but I did not come to Aceena to engage in frivolity. But rather to speak to her about a painting.”

“Yes, so you said. I regret to inform you there is no such painting. I’m not entirely certain what you heard about it...”

“My grandfather. He is...the collector. I came to see about purchasing the painting on his behalf. I’m willing to offer a generous sum. I imagine disgraced royals might not be in a position to turn such an offer down.”

“Oh, we do just fine, thank you for your concern. Should you like to make a donation to someone in actual need of your charity, I would be happy to provide you with a list.”

“No, thank you. The charity was only a side effect. I want that painting. I’m willing to pay whatever the cost might be.”

Her mouth was dry. It made it difficult to speak, and yet she found she also couldn’t stop the flow of words. “Well, I’m afraid to disappoint you. While we do have paintings, we do not have that painting. That painting, if you weren’t aware, might not even exist.”

“Oh, I’m well aware that it’s what your family would like the public to think. However, I think you know more than you’re letting on.”

“No,” she said, and this time she did push her glasses up her nose. “I’m just a teenager headed out to the mall. What could I possibly know that you,” she said, sweeping her hand up and down, “in all your infinite and aged wisdom, do not?”

“The appeal of Justin Bieber?”

“I’m not entirely certain who that is.”

“I’m surprised by that. Girls your age love him.”

“In that case, can I offer you a hard candy? I hear men your age love those.”

She was not sure how this had happened. How she had wound up standing in the hallowed entry of her family estate trading insults with a stranger.

“I’ll accept the hard candy if it means you intend to give me a tour while I finish it.”

“No. Sorry. You would be finishing it on the lawn.”

He rubbed his hand over his chin and she shivered, an involuntary response to the soft noise made by the scrape of his hand over his whiskers. She was a sensualist. It was one of her weaknesses. She enjoyed art, and soft cushions, desserts and lush fabrics. The smell of old books and the feel of textured pages beneath her fingertips.

And she noticed fine details. Like the sound skin made when scraping over stubble.

“I’m not entirely certain this is the tactic you want to use. Because if you send me away, then I will only circumvent you. Either by contacting your grandmother directly, or by figuring out who manages the affairs of the royal family. I am certain that I can find someone who might be tempted by what I offer.”

He probably wasn’t wrong. If he managed to find her parents, and offer them a bit of money—or better yet, an illegal substance—for some information on an old painting, they would be more than happy to help him. Fortunately, they probably had no idea what the painting was, much less knew any more about its existence than she did.

But they were wretched. And they were greedy. So there was very little that she would put past them.

Still, she was not going to allow him to harass her grandmother. Tempting as it was to keep him here, to question him. She’d been studying her family history for as long as she’d known how to read. Rumors about this painting had played a large part in it.

Part of her desperately wanted him to stay. Another part needed him gone as quickly as possible. Because of her grandmother. And partly because of the dry mouth and sweaty palms and strange, off-kilter feeling that had arrived along with him.

Those things defeated curiosity. He had to go.

"I'll chance it. Do feel free to meander about the grounds before you go. The gardens are beautiful. Please consider limitless viewing time on the topiaries a conciliatory gesture on my end."

The corner of his mouth worked upward. "I assure you, I have no interest in your...topiaries."

Something about the way he said it made her scalp prickle, made her skin feel hot. She didn't like it.

"Well, my topiaries are all you're going to get. Good day to you, sir."

"And good day to you," he said, inclining his head.

He sounded perfectly calm, but a dark note wound its way around his words, through his voice, and she had a feeling that somewhere within it was also woven a threat.

However, she didn't allow him to see that she had picked up on it. Instead, she turned on her heel—ignoring the slight squeak her bare skin made on the marble tile—and walked out of the entry without a backward glance, leaving him there. She fully expected a servant would show him out. Either that or she would have to have him installed in the attic. The idea of collecting a man like him and putting him in the attic like one might do to an old, rusted suit of armor amused her.

She let that little smile linger on her lips as she made her way down the hall, toward the morning room where her grandmother was having her breakfast.

"There was a man here, Gabriella. Who was he?" The queen's voice, wispy, as thin as a cobweb, greeted Gabriella as soon as she walked into the ornate room.

There was no sense asking how her grandmother knew about the visitor. She was never ignorant about the goings-on in her own household.

"An American businessman," Gabriella said, walking deeper into the room, feeling somewhat sheepish, yet again, about her bare feet.

Her grandmother was, as ever, impeccably dressed. The older woman made no distinction between her public and private persona. As always, her crystal white hair was pulled back into a neat bun, her makeup expertly done. Her fingernails were painted the same pale coral as the skirt she was wearing, her low, sensible heels the same cream as her blouse.

"I see," the queen said, setting her teacup down on the table in front of her. "And what did he want?"

"This is not something we've ever discussed before, I know, but he was...he was inquiring about a painting. The Lost Love."

Her grandmother continued to sit there, poised, her hands folded in her lap. Were it not for the subtle paling of her complexion, Gabriella would have thought she had merely been commenting on the weather. There was no mistaking her grandmother's response to what she had just said.

"But of course," Gabriella continued, "I told him that it has never been confirmed that there is any such painting. I told him it was nothing more than salacious rumor. And I sent him on his way. Though he may be meandering around the gardens."

Her grandmother turned her head to the window and Gabriella did the same. Just in time to see a figure in a dark suit pass by quickly before disappearing down the path.

Something in Lucia's expression shifted. "Call him back."

"I can't. I just...I just sent him away. That would be... Well, it would seem fickle. Plus, it's rather silly."

"You must call him back, Gabriella." When Lucia used that tone there really was no point in arguing. Still, Gabriella thought she might try.

"I don't trust him. I didn't want him to upset you."

"I need to know who he is. I need to know why he is asking about the painting. It's important." There was a thread of steel woven into her voice now, a command that Gabriella could not deny.

"Of course, Grandmother. I will go after him right away."

"For heaven's sake, girl, put some shoes on."

Gabriella nodded, turning and scampering out of the room, heading down the corridor toward her bedroom. She found a pair of easy slip-on canvas shoes, then continued to head out to the front door. It was firmly closed, the visitor nowhere to be seen.

She opened the door, heading down the paved walk, toward one of the gardens. He didn't exactly seem like the kind of person who would take her up on the offer of a garden tour, but she had to make sure. He might still be here.

Her grandmother had commanded an audience with him, and she would be darned if she would disappoint the older woman.

Her grandmother meant the world to her. Her parents had preferred a life of partying to that of raising children. Her brothers were so much older than her so she could scarcely remember a time when they had lived in the same household. As soon as Gabriella had been old enough to have a say in her own situation, she had asked to go to Aceena to live with Queen Lucia. The older woman had been more of a mother to her than her own had ever been, and she could deny her nothing.

She looked around, and she didn't see him. Of course he was gone. And she hadn't gotten any of his contact information, because she hadn't wanted it. She was annoyed. At him, at herself. But mostly at him.

She walked farther down the manicured lane, turned left at the first hedge, ran squarely into a broad back covered in very high-quality black fabric. She could tell the fabric was high quality, not just because of how it looked, but because of the way it felt squished up against her face.

She stumbled backward just as he turned to face her. He was even more arresting, even more off-putting, up close. He exuded... Well, he just exuded.

"Well, I see you were making use of my offer to tour the gardens."

He straightened his tie, the action drawing her eyes to his hands. They were very large. Naturally, as he was quite a large man. So really, they were nothing quite so spectacular. They were proportional. Useful. In possession of the typical number of fingers.

"No. I was skulking. I thought I might hang around long enough that I can try my hand at getting an audience with your grandmother later."

"That's quite sneaky."

"Sneaky is not typically a word I associate with myself, but I'll take it. Determined, I think sums it up."

"I don't see why you can't be called both."

"Whatever makes you happy. Why exactly are you looking for me?"

"It turns out...my grandmother wants to speak to you."

"Oh," he said, a slow smile spreading over his arrogant face. "I take it you're not the voice of authority when it came to your grandmother's desires, then?"

"I was trying to protect her. Surely, you can't fault me for that."

"Sure I can. I can fault you for anything I like."

She looked hard at him. It was impossible to tell if he was teasing. Impossible to tell if he had the capacity to tease or if he was deadly serious down to his bones. "Which, in a nutshell is exactly why I couldn't allow you to see her. You're a strange man. A stranger, I mean. You also don't seem very...sensitive."

"Do I not?"

She narrowed her eyes. "No."

"Well, I shall endeavor to work on that during the walk from the garden to where your grandmother is waiting for me."

Her lips twitched, but she wouldn't allow them to stretch into a smile. "If you would be so kind as to do just that, it would be greatly appreciated."

"I live to serve."

She had no doubt he did not.

She led the way from the palace gardens back through to the estate; as they walked through the halls she kept her eyes on his face, trying to suss out exactly what he was thinking. His expression was neutral, and he wasn't nearly as impressed as she felt like he should be. The halls of the Aceena estate were filled with beautiful, classic art. Paintings, vases, sculpture. Really, he should be quite impressed.

She supposed that was the hazard with very rich men. It was hard to show them anything they hadn't seen before.

She had grown up in this luxury and she never took any of it for granted. There was always new beauty in the world to discover. It was why she loved art. Why she loved history. There were centuries of beauty stretching back as far as humanity had been in existence. And the future stretched before them, too. Limitless. Infinite in its possibilities. There was hardly a chance to get bored with anything.

Gabriella didn't see the point in jaded cynicism, though she knew some people found it a sign of intellectual superiority.

She just found it sad.

He was probably like her parents. Sensory seekers who were never satisfied with what was around them. Things had to be grand, loud, crowded. Otherwise, they could scarcely feel, could scarcely see.

Gabriella on the other hand needed very little to be entertained. A nicely appointed room, a good book. A lovely piece of art.

She appreciated small things. Quiet things.

She felt very sorry for those who didn't.

"She's in here," Gabriella said, pausing at the doorway.

He arched his brows. "Is she? What are you waiting for? Are you going to go in and announce me?"

"Well, very likely I should. I'm very sorry, I know you gave your name to the staff member who greeted you, but I seem to have forgotten it."

She was lying. Alessandro was his name, she remembered. But she didn't want him to think that he was so important he had taken up any space in her brain.

"Alex," he said.

"No last name?" she pressed.

"Di Sione."

"Should that name mean anything to my grandmother?"

He shrugged. "Unless she follows gossip about American businessmen, I don't know why it would. My grandfather made quite a name for himself both in the States and abroad, and I haven't done badly myself, neither have my various and sundry brothers and sisters. But I'm not certain why our names would matter to royalty."

"What is his interest in the painting?" Gabriella asked.

A brief pause. "He is a collector."

She didn't believe him.

Gabriella let out an exasperated breath. "Be cryptic if you must. But I'm sure there's more to the story than that."

Alex chuckled. "Oh, I'm certain there is, too, but you make a mistake if you think I know more than I'm letting on. I think you and I might occupy very similar positions in the lives of our grandparents."

"How do you mean?"

"We are subject to their dictates."

Shocked laughter threatened to bubble to the surface and she held it in check. She was not going to allow him to amuse her. "Well, regardless. Come with me."

She pushed the door open and stepped inside. Her grandmother was sitting in the same seat she had been in when Gabriella had left her. But she seemed different somehow. Not quite so tall. Slightly diminished.

“Grandmother, may I present Mr. Alex Di Sione. He is here to talk to you about The Lost Love.”

“Yes,” her grandmother said, gesturing for them to come deeper into the room. She turned her laser sharp focus onto Alex. “My granddaughter tells me you’re interested in the painting.”

“Yes,” he said, not waiting to be invited to sit. He took his position in a chair opposite her grandmother, his long legs sprawled out in front of him, his forearms resting on the arms of the chair. He looked exceedingly unconcerned with the entire situation. Almost bored. Her grandmother, on the other hand, was tense.

“What is your interest in it?” she asked.

“I am acting on behalf of my grandfather.” Alex looked out one of the floor-to-ceiling windows, at the garden beyond. “He claims the painting has some sentimental value to him.”

“The painting has never been confirmed to exist,” Queen Lucia said.

“I’m well aware. But my grandfather seems to be very confident in its existence. In fact, he claims he once owned it.” His dark focus zeroed in on the queen. “He would like very much to have it back now.”

Silence settled between them. Thick and telling. A fourth presence in the room. Gabriella noticed her grandmother studying Alex’s face. She looked... She looked stricken. As though she was seeing a ghost.

“Your grandfather, you say?” she asked.

“Yes. He is getting on in years and with age has come sentimentality, I’m afraid. He is willing to pay a great deal for this painting.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you with that,” the queen said.

“And why is that?” he asked, a dangerous note in his voice.

“I don’t have it. I haven’t possessed it for...years.”

“But the painting exists?” Gabriella asked, her heart thundering in her ears.

This was... Under any other circumstances, this would have been incredibly exciting. But Alex Di Sione was here and that just made it feel fraught.

“Yes,” her grandmother said, her voice thinner, more fragile all of a sudden. “It is very real.”

“Why have you never mentioned that before?”

“Because some things are best left buried in the past. Where they can no longer hurt you,” the queen said.

“Do you have any idea where the painting might be now?” Alex asked, obviously unconcerned with her grandmother’s pain.

“Yes, I know exactly where it is. Unfortunately, it’s on Isolo D’Oro. One of the many reasons I have never been able to reclaim it.”

“Where on the island is it?” he asked, his tone uncompromising.

“You wait outside for a moment, young man,” the queen said, her tone regal, leaving no doubt at all that she had ruled a nation for a great many years and expected her each command to be obeyed without question.

And Alex didn’t question it. Strange, since she imagined he wasn’t a man who bowed to many. But at her grandmother’s request, he stood, brushing the creases from his dress pants and nodded his head before he made his way out the door.

“You must go with him to find the painting,” her grandmother said the moment he was out of earshot.

“Why?” Gabriella asked, her heart pounding in her ears.

“I... I should like to see it again. One last time. And because...because just in case, I shouldn’t like for this man to be in possession of it if he is a fraud.”

“I don’t understand,” Gabriella said, trying to process all of the information being given to her. “If he’s a fraud in what way?”

“It isn’t important.”

“I think it must be quite important. We’ve never discussed the painting, but I’ve long suspected that it was real. I know...I know it was controversial. I know that it concerns you.”

“Yes,” her grandmother said. “At the time it was quite controversial. Evidence that...that the princess had a lover.”

Her grandmother had been the princess then. Young. Unmarried. And it had been a very different time.

It was difficult to imagine her grandmother taking a lover. Difficult to imagine her doing anything quite so passionate or impetuous. She was the incomparable matriarch of the family. The figurehead so established, so steady, she might very well already be carved of marble, as she would now no doubt be in the future.

But if the painting existed, then she was the subject. And if that were the case, then of course it had been commissioned by a lover.

“I see,” Gabriella said. “And...did you?”

Her grandmother let out a long, slow breath, raising her eyes to meet hers. In them, Gabriella could see so much. A wealth of sadness. Deep heartbreak.

Things Gabriella had read about, but never experienced.

“It is very easy when you are young, Gabriella, to lead with your heart instead of your head. You have seen this, time and again, with your parents. And they no longer carry youth as an excuse. This is why I have always told you that you must be in possession of your wits. It does not do well for a woman to lose her mind over passion. It doesn’t end well. Not for us. Men can carry on as they see fit, but it isn’t like that for women.”

Gabriella nodded slowly. “Yes, I know.” She thought of her brothers, who most certainly carried on exactly as they pleased. Of her father, who seemed to escape the most scathing comments. The worst of it was always reserved for her mother. She was a renowned trollop whose every choice, from her wardrobe to which man she chose to make conversation with at a social event, was analyzed, was taken as evidence of her poor character.

Gabriella knew this was true. It was just one of the many reasons that she had chosen to embrace her more bookish nature and keep herself separate from all of that carrying-on.

“Our hearts are not proper guides,” her grandmother continued. “They are fickle, and they are easily led. Mine certainly was. But I learned from my mistakes.”

“Of course,” Gabriella agreed, because she didn’t know what else to say.

“Go with him,” Queen Lucia said, her tone stronger now. Decisive. “Fetch the painting. But remember this conversation. Remember what I have told you.”

“I don’t think there’s any danger of my heart getting involved on a quest of this nature.”

“He is a handsome man, Gabriella.”

Gabriella laughed. “He’s a stranger! And old enough to be... Not my father, certainly not. But perhaps a young uncle.”

The queen shook her head. “Men like that have their ways.”

“And I have my way of scaring them off. Please, tell me when a man last danced with me more than once at a social function?”

“If you didn’t speak so much of books...”

“And weevils.” She had talked incessantly about weevils and the havoc they played in early English kitchens to her last dance partner. Because they had been the subject of the last book she’d read and she hadn’t been able to think of anything else.

“Certainly don’t speak of that.”

“Suffice it to say I don’t think you have to worry about me tumbling into a romance. The only problem is... Why would he take me with him? Now that he knows the painting exists, and that it is on Isolo D’Oro, he’ll no doubt have an easy enough time figuring out where it is. And I’m sure he’ll have no trouble finding someone to impart what information they might have about it, for the right price.”

“No,” her grandmother said, “he won’t.”

“Why is that?”

“Because. Because you have the key. You’re the only one who has the key.”

Gabriella frowned. “I don’t have a key.”

“Yes, you do. The painting is hidden away in one of the old country estates that used to belong to the royal family. It is in a secret room, behind a false wall, and no one would have found it. So long as the building stands, and I have never heard rumors to the contrary, the painting would have remained there.”

“And the key?”

Her grandmother reached out, her shaking hands touching the necklace that Gabriella wore. “Close to your heart. Always.”

Gabriella looked down at the simple flower pendant that hung from the gold chain she wore around her neck. “My necklace?”

It had been a gift to her when she was a baby. A piece of the family’s crown jewels that her mother had considered beneath her. So simple, but lovely, a piece of art to Gabriella’s mind.

“Yes, your necklace. Did you ever wonder why the bottom of it had such an odd shape? Once you get into this room, you fit this into a slot on the picture frame on the back wall. It swings open and, behind it, you will find The Lost Love.”

CHAPTER THREE

TRULY, HIS GRANDFATHER had a lot to answer for. Alex was not the kind of man accustomed to doing the bidding of anyone but himself. And yet, here he was, cooling his heels in the antechamber of a second-rate country estate inhabited by disgraced royals.

If he were being perfectly honest—and he always was—one royal in particular who looked more like a small, indignant owl than she did a princess.

With her thick framed glasses and rather spiky demeanor it did not seem to him that Princess Gabriella was suited to much in the way of royal functions. Not that he was a very good barometer of exceptional social behavior.

Alex was many things, acceptable was the least among them.

Normally, he would not have excused himself from the room quite so quickly. Normally, he would have sat there and demanded that all the information be disseminated in his presence. Certainly, Queen Lucia was a queen. But in his estimation it was difficult to be at one’s full strength when one did not have a country to rule. In truth, the D’Oro family had not inhabited a throne in any real sense in more years than Princess Gabriella had been alive.

So while the family certainly still had money, and a modicum of power, while they retained their titles, he did not imagine he would bring the wrath of an army down on his head for refusing a direct order.

However, he had sensed then that it was an opportune moment to test the theory of catching more flies with honey than vinegar.

He did so hate having to employ charm.

He had better end up in possession of the painting. And it had better truly be his grandfather’s dying wish. Otherwise, he would be perturbed.

The door behind him clicked shut and he turned just in time to see Princess Gabriella, in her fitted sweatshirt and tight black leggings, headed toward him. She was holding her hands up beneath her breasts like a small, frightened animal, her eyes large behind her glasses.

That was what had put him in the mind of her being an owl earlier. He did not feel the need to revise that opinion. She was fascinating much in the way a small creature might be.

He felt compelled to watch her every movement, her every pause. As he would any foreign entity. So, there was nothing truly remarkable about it.

“Well, my princess,” he said. “What have you learned?”

“I know where the painting is,” she said, tucking a silken strand of dark hair behind her ear before returning her hands back to their previous, nervous position.

“Excellent. Draw me a map on a napkin and I’ll be on my way.”

“Oh. There will be no direction giving. No napkin drawing.”

“Is that so?”

She tossed her hair and for a moment he saw a glimmer of royalty beneath her rather dowdy exterior. And that was all the more fascinating. “No. I’m not giving you directions, because I have the directions. You are taking me with you.”

He laughed at the imperious, ridiculous demand. “I most certainly am not.”

She crossed her arms, the sweater bunching beneath them. “Yes, you are. You don’t know how to get there.”

“Gabriella, I am an expert at getting the information I want. Be it with money or seduction, it makes no difference to me, but I will certainly get what I need.”

Her cheeks turned a rather fetching shade of pink. He imagined it was the mention of seduction, not bribery, that did it.

“But I have the key,” she insisted. “Or rather, I know where it is. And trust me when I tell you it is not something you’ll be able to acquire on your own.”

“A key?” He didn’t believe her.

“And the...the instructions on how to use it.”

He studied her hard. She was a bookish creature. Not terribly beautiful, in his estimation. Not terribly brave, either. Intensely clever, though. Still, the lack of bravery made it unlikely that she was lying to him. The cleverness, on the other hand, was a very large question mark.

It made her unpredictable.

This was why he preferred women who were not so clever.

Life was complicated enough. When it came to interactions with the female sex he rather liked it simple, physical and brief.

He had a feeling his association with Gabriella would be none of those things and that only set his teeth on edge all the more.

“I do not believe that you have the key, or rather, have access to it that I cannot gain.”

“Okay, then. Enjoy the journey to Isolo D’Oro without me. I’m sure when you get there and find that you hold nothing in your hand but your own—”

“Well, now, there’s no need to get crass.”

She blinked. “I wasn’t going to be crass. I was going to say you hold nothing in your hand but your own arrogance.”

He chuckled. “Well, I was imagining you saying something completely different.”

“What can I have possibly—?” She blinked again. “Oh.”

He arched a brow. “Indeed.”

She gritted her teeth, her expression growing more fierce. “Crassness and all other manner of innuendo aside, you are not gaining access to the painting without me.”

“Right. So, you know where it is, and you clearly possess the key. Why not go without me?”

“Well, it isn’t that simple. I am a member of the D’Oro family. And while technically I can return to the island because I am only of the bloodline, and I never ruled, gaining access could still be a problem.”

“I see. So, how do we play this? Wealthy American businessman on a vacation takes a beautiful...” He paused for a moment, allowing his eyes to sweep over her, not hiding how underwhelmed he was by the sight. “A beautiful princess as his lover?”

“Absolutely not!” She turned a very intense shade of pink, and he found himself captivated by the slow bleed of color beneath her skin.

“You have a better suggestion?”

“I want to prevent scandal. I want to bring the painting back here with as little fanfare as possible. I don’t want you making a big production of things.”

“And I assure you I will not. This is for a private collection and has nothing to do with causing embarrassment to the royal family.”

She worried her lip between her teeth. “I don’t trust you.”

“Excellent. I wouldn’t trust me, either.”

“Excellent. No trust.” Her cheeks were getting redder. This time, he figured it was from frustration. “I want to go with you. But I don’t want to cause a scene. I can’t cause a scene. You have no doubt seen the kind of scandal my parents create in the headlines with their drug use, affairs, separations, reconciliations... The press would love to smell blood in the water around me and I just can’t chance it.”

An evil thought occurred to him and it made him smile. “Well, if you don’t wish to go as my lover—”

“I don’t!”

“Then I’m afraid you’ll have to come as my assistant.”

“No one will believe that I’m your assistant. I’m a princess.” She lifted her little nose in the air, dark hair cascading over her back like spilled ink. Now she did indeed look every inch insulted royalty.

“What do you typically look like when you go out and about? I imagine it isn’t like this,” he said, indicating her rather drab trappings.

“I don’t go out frequently. But when I do I have a stylist.”

“Your glasses?”

“I normally wear contacts.”

He nodded slowly. “Princess Gabriella D’Oro. I have seen pictures of you—it’s only that I would never have recognized you in your current state. The difference is remarkable.”

He had an immediate picture in his mind of a glossier, more tamed version of the woman in front of him. Sleek and, actually, quite beautiful. Though not remotely as interesting as the version of Gabriella that stood before him.

She waved a hand. “Between professionally fitted dresses, undergarments to hold in all undesirable lumps and bumps, makeup to cover every flaw, false eyelashes, red lips... I’m scarcely the same person.”

“A good thing for our current situation.” He regarded her for a longer period of time. “Yes, that will do nicely. You will come as my assistant. With your hair just like this. With your glasses. And with some horrible pantsuit. No one will ever believe you are Princess Gabriella. No one will look twice at you. Certainly not close enough to identify you. That eases any and all problems we might have with the press, with the local government and with scandal.”

He could see that she was fuming, radiating with indignity. He quite liked it. He didn’t have a lot of time. He certainly didn’t have extra time to stand around negotiating about keys and directions with a silly girl.

So she would come. It was no difference to him either way.

“That is a ridiculous idea,” she said. “Anyway, I’ve never traveled. I mainly stay here in the estate.”

“Curled up on a cushion reading a book?”

She blinked. “What else would one do on a cushion?”

“Oh, I can think of several things.”

“Drinking tea?”

“No. Not drinking tea.”

Her expression was a study in confusion. It was almost cute. Except that he had no interest in bookish virgins.

She was...naive. Young. For a moment he was concerned about how young. “How old are you?”

She sniffed. “I’m twenty-three. You can stop looking at me like I’m some sort of schoolgirl.”

“Cara mia, you are a schoolgirl to me.”

“How old are you?”

“That is none of your business.”

“Am I to respect my elders?”

He laughed, he couldn’t help it. Rare was the person who poked back at him. He rather enjoyed having fun at other people’s expense, but they didn’t dare have it at his.

His secret was that he found it rather entertaining just how afraid everyone seemed to be in his presence. His formidable reputation afforded him a great deal of enjoyment. Though the fact that he took pleasure in making people quake in his presence was likely why he had so few friends. Not that he minded.

He had sycophants, he had business associates and he had mistresses. He had no room in his life for anything else. Nor had he the desire for them.

Unfortunately, he also had family, and with them came obligations. Family was, after all, how he found himself here now.

“Then it is decided. You will be my personal assistant, a college student, doing a work experience program. Traveling with me to Isolo D’Oro to take in some of the local culture and scenery while I negotiate a business deal.”

“I’m supposed to be your...intern?” She was positively incandescent with irritation now.

“Yes. Of course, Gabriella is a little bit posh for that. How about Gabby? It has a very nice ring to it. Don’t you think, Gabby?”

“I hate being called Gabby.”

“But I’ll wager you hate scandal even more. So, Gabby my assistant you will be, and we will not create any of it.”

She frowned, her dark brows lowering, disappearing behind the thick frame of her glasses. “If you’re going to be this exasperating for the entire journey I can see it’s going to be a problem.”

“I don’t plan on being this exasperating for the entire journey.” She breathed out a sigh of relief. “I plan on being at least twice as exasperating.”

Her eyes flew wide. “And why is that?”

“Oftentimes I find life short on entertainment. I do my best to make my own fun.”

“Yes, well, I live in an estate with an old woman in her nineties. I make a lot of my own fun, too. But typically that involves complicated genealogy projects and a little bit of tatting.”

“Tatting?”

“You can never have too many doilies. Not in a house this size.”

He arched a brow, studying her face to see if she was being sincere. He couldn’t get a read on her. “I will have to take your word for that.”

“Don’t you have doilies?”

He lifted his shoulder. “I might in one of my residences. I can’t say that I ever noticed.”

“I could make you some. No one should have a doily deficiency.”

“God forbid.” He turned and began to walk away from her. “Aren’t you going to show me to my room?”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“Aren’t you going to show me to my room?” he repeated. “We will leave early tomorrow morning for Isolo D’Oro. I don’t see any point in my staying elsewhere. You have a great many rooms in the estate. And they are replete with doilies, I hear. Which means you should be able to accommodate me.”

He turned his most charming and feral smile in her direction. Usually women shrank back from them. Or swooned.

She did neither.

“I did not invite you to stay. And it’s particularly impolite of you to invite yourself.”

“It wasn’t particularly hospitable of you to not invite me. I will put aside my pique for the sake of convenience, and a more companionable journey tomorrow. Now,” he said, his tone uncompromising. He excelled at being uncompromising. “Be a good girl and show me to my room.”

CHAPTER FOUR

“WHAT IS THIS?”

Gabriella came out of the bedroom positioned toward the back of his private jet. She was wearing her glasses, as instructed, her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was also newly dressed in the outfit he had gone to great lengths to procure for her before his plane had departed this morning for Isolo D’Oro. Well, one of the palace servants had gone to great lengths to procure it. He had taken a rather leisurely breakfast during which he had checked his stocks and made sure that things were running smoothly back at his office in Manhattan.

“Your costume, Gabby,” he said.

Had she been an owl he was certain that at the moment her feathers would have been ruffled. “It isn’t very flattering.”

“Well, neither was the sweatshirt you were wearing when we met yesterday. But that did not seem to stop you from wearing it.”

“I was having a day at home. I had been sitting in the library reading.”

“Naturally.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

“You look like the type. That’s all.”

She shifted slightly, her frown deepening. “Yes, I suppose so. But I’m not entirely lacking in vanity. This...” She indicated the black dress pants, tapered closely to her skin—much more closely than he had anticipated—and the white blouse she was wearing, complete with a large pin that should have looked more at home on her grandmother than on her, but managed to look quite stylish. “This is not the kind of thing I’m used to wearing in public.”

She didn’t look like a princess—that much was true. But the outfit was not actually unflattering. The outfit was very nearly fashionable, albeit in a much lower-rent way than she was no doubt used to looking.

“What exactly is the problem with it?”

“The pants are very tight.”

“Their most redeeming feature in my opinion.”

He was rewarded with another of her blushes. “I do not like to draw attention to my body.”

“Believe me when I tell you this, Gabriella. You do not have to do anything to draw attention to your body. The very fact that it exists does draw attention to it.” He found it was true even as he spoke the words. He had not readily noticed her charms upon his arrival at the estate yesterday, but she was certainly not lacking in them. Her figure was not what was considered attractive these days. There was no careful definition of muscles earned through long hours in a gym. No gap between her thighs.

She was lush. Soft. Average-size breasts that were remarkable if only because breasts always were, a slender waist and generously rounded hips. Hips that were currently being flaunted by the pants she was complaining about.

“Oh. Well. That is... Was that a compliment?”

“Yes. It was a good compliment.”

“Sorry. I’m not used to receiving compliments from men.”

He found that hard to believe. She was a princess. Moreover, she wasn’t unattractive. Usually one or the other was enough. “Do you ever leave the estate?”

“In truth, not that often.”

“That must be your problem. Otherwise, I imagine you would be inundated with compliments. Sincere and otherwise.”

“Why is that?”

“Because. You have quite a few things men would find desirable.”

“Money.”

“That is certainly one of the things. Though right now you could easily pass for a personal assistant. Which is exactly what we are going for.” He took a seat in one of the plush armchairs and picked up the mug of coffee he had poured himself earlier.

“What are the other things?”

“Your body. And its various charms. I thought I made that clear.”

She frowned. He expected her to...well, to get angry. Or shrink up against the wall like all bookish virgins should do. Instead, she walked through the plane and took the seat opposite from him, crossing her legs at the ankles and folding her hands in her lap. “You’re very blunt.”

“Yes. I find it frightens people. Which I very much enjoy.”

“I’m not certain if I’m blunt in quite the same way you are. But I do tend to say whatever pops into my mind. Often it’s about something unrelated to the situation. That also seems to frighten people. Men specifically.”

“The reason you don’t receive many compliments?”

“My mother always told me to keep conversation to the topic of the weather. But we live on an island. Unless a hurricane or tsunami is threatening, the weather isn’t all that interesting.”

“That’s the point. A great many men prefer their women to be dull on the inside and shiny on the outside.”

“You among them?”

He chuckled. “Oh, I am chief among them.”

She tilted her head to the side, a rather bemused and curious expression on her face. “Why is that?”

“Why is what, cara mia?”

“Why do so many men prefer their women to be quite the opposite of what one should prefer in a person?”

“Because. Those sorts of men, myself included, don’t want women for sparkling conversation. They want them for one thing, and one thing only.”

She sighed, a rather heavy, irritated sound. “I imagine you mean sex.”

He was momentarily surprised by her directness. Not that directness shocked him in any manner; it was simply that this kind of directness coming from her was shocking.

“Yes,” he said, not seeing why he shouldn’t be equally direct in return.

“Predictable. I suppose that’s why my mother is able to skip through life behaving so simply. She’s a prime example of what you’re talking about. Someone who is all sparkle and shine. My father no longer even possesses any shine. But I imagine in his case it’s the promise of money and an eventual payoff that bring women into his bed.”

“That sounds quite familiar to me.”

She studied him, a confused expression crossing her face. “But—and I’m speaking in a continued metaphor—you seem to be quite shiny.”

He laughed. No one had ever characterized him as shiny before. “I wasn’t thinking of myself. It’s true, I have my own set of charms that bring females into my bed. Money. Looks, so they tell me. But in this case I was thinking of my parents.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It sounds very much like they would have been friends with yours.”

“Do your parents enjoy drugs, wild affairs and questionable fashion sense?”

He laughed, but this time the sound was bitter. “They liked nothing more. In fact, they loved it so much it killed them.”

She seemed to shrink in her seat, the regret on her face pronounced. “Oh. I’m sorry. I should not have made light of it. Not without knowing your background.”

He picked up his clear mug of coffee and turned it until the light coming from outside the plane window caught hold of the amber liquid, setting it ablaze. “One must make light of these things. Otherwise, it’s all darkness, isn’t it?”

“Some things are only dark, I fear.”

He shrugged, taking another drink. “They don’t have to be.”

“How did your parents die?”

The question struck him. She genuinely didn’t know. But then, it stood to reason. She’d had no idea who he was when they had first met. Rare was the person who didn’t know his entire family history before introducing themselves to him. She was an odd creature. And her cleverness was still off-putting. But he found small pieces of her to be a breath of fresh air he hadn’t realized he’d been craving.

“They died in a car accident,” he said. “They were having one of their legendary fights. Fueled by alcohol, drugs and a sexual affair. Basically, all of their favorite things combined into one great fiery ball of doom.”

“Oh. That’s awful.”

“Yes. I suppose it is. But I was very young. And not much a part of their lives.” He did his best to keep the memories of that night from crowding in. Snowy. The roads filled with ice. His parents shrieking obscenities. And a small boy standing out in the cold, looking lost and lonely. “I find them a tragedy. A cautionary tale. I might be a bit jaded, but I’m not a total libertine. I suppose I have their tragedy to thank for that.”

She nodded, as though she completely understood what he was talking about. He had no doubt she had little experience of libertines outside the pages of a book.

“If it weren’t for my parents,” she said, her words coming slowly, “who knows how I would be? It is their example that has kept me so firmly planted in the estate in Aceena. It’s their example that has caused me to crave a quieter existence.”

That surprised him. It seemed she did understand. At least a little bit better than he had guessed she might. A little bit better than most.

All of his siblings had started life with the same parents he had, and yet he had been the only one affected in quite this way.

His twin brothers were hellions. They were playboys who lived their lives entirely as they saw fit. At least, they had been before their respective true loves had come into their lives.

But always, they had lived with much more passion than Alex ever had. Even now that they had settled down, they continued to live with more passion and emotion than Alex would ever consider.

“Everything makes much more sense if you see life as a business,” he said, speaking the thought before he had decided he would.

“Do you think so?”

He nodded. “Yes. Business is sensible. Everyone is in it to make money. That’s the bottom line. Because of that, everyone’s motives are transparent from the beginning. They’re going to serve themselves. Sometimes favors are traded. Contracts are drawn up, terms are met.”

“A bit more clear-cut than people,” she said.

“I’ve always found it slightly strange that divorce is much easier than breaking a business contract. If people took marriage as seriously as they took business deals, the world would be a different place.” He leaned back in his chair. “Of course, you could go about metaphorically hopping into bed with other partners after taking on exclusive deals with another. But you would quickly lose your credibility, and your business with it. It wouldn’t serve your bottom line. Personal relationships are much more murky. There is no common bottom line. I find that disturbing.”

“I see what you’re saying,” she said. “I hadn’t thought about it that way. But then, I suppose it’s because I don’t have a head for business.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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