



**RAGS TO
RICHES BABY**

Andrea Laurence

MILLS & BOON
Desire

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Rags To Riches Baby

«HarperCollins»

Laurence A.

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The woman he doesn't trust is having his baby...When Lucy Campbell inherits a multi-million-dollar Manhattan estate, Oliver Drake sees only a gold-digger. But even with battle lines drawn, CEO Oliver can't resist bedding the very woman he's trying to expose!

The woman he can never trust is having his baby...

When Lucy Campbell inherits a multimillion-dollar Manhattan estate, her employer's nephew sees only a gold-digging scammer. But even with battle lines drawn, CEO Oliver Drake can't resist the temptation of bedding the very woman he's trying to expose! Then Lucy delivers her shocking baby news. Does she genuinely desire a future together? Or is it another ploy that could destroy Oliver's trust forever?

ANDREA LAURENCE is an award-winning author of contemporary romances filled with seduction and sass. She has been a lover of reading and writing stories since she was young. A dedicated West Coast girl transplanted into the Deep South, she is thrilled to share her special blend of sensuality and dry, sarcastic humor with readers.

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To Dr. Shelley—

Thanks for dusting off your MoMA catalog and helping me navigate the modern art references for this book.

I never would've found those pieces on my own. I also never expected to find myself watching a YouTube video of naked women in blue paint pressing against a canvas while a string quartet played. Your suggestions were perfect for the book! Thank you!

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[One](#)

“And to Lucy Campbell, my assistant and companion, I bequeath the remainder of my estate, including the balances of my accounts and financial holdings and the whole of my personal effects, which entails my art collection and my apartment on Fifth Avenue.”

When the attorney stopped reading the will of Alice Drake aloud, the room was suddenly so quiet Lucy wondered if the rest of the Drake family had dropped dead as well at the unexpected news. She kept waiting for the lawyer to crack a smile and tell the crowd of people around the conference room table that he was just kidding. It seemed highly inappropriate to do to a grieving family, though.

Surely, he had to be kidding. Lucy was no real estate expert, but Alice's apartment alone had to be worth over twenty million dollars. It overlooked the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It had four bedrooms and a gallery with a dozen important works, including an original Monet, hanging in it.

Lucy couldn't afford the monthly association fees for the co-op, much less own an apartment like that in Manhattan.

"Are you serious?" a sharp voice cut through the silence at last.

Finally, someone was asking the question that was on the tip of her own tongue. Lucy turned toward the voice and realized it was her best friend Harper Drake's brother, Oliver. Harper had helped Lucy get this job working for her great-aunt, but she'd never met Harper's brother before today. Which was odd, considering she'd cared for their aunt for over five years.

It was a shame. He was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen in real life and since he was across the conference table from her, she had a great view. Harper was a pretty woman, but the same aristocratic features on Oliver were striking in a different way. They both had the same wavy brown hair, sharp cheekbones and pointed chins, but he had the blue-gray eyes and permanently furrowed brow of their father. His lips were thinner than Harper's, but she wasn't sure if they were always like that or if they were just pressed together in irritation at the moment.

His gaze flicked over Lucy, and she felt an unexpected surge of desire run down her spine. The tingle it left in its wake made a flush rise to her cheeks and she squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. She didn't know if it was the surprising news or his heavy appraisal of her, but it was suddenly warm in the small conference room. Lucy reached for the button at the collar of her blouse and undid it as quickly as she could, drawing in a deep breath.

Unfortunately, that breath was scented with the sharp cologne of the man across from her. It teased at her nose, making the heat in her belly worsen.

It was painfully apparent that she'd spent far too many years in the company of a ninety-plus-year-old woman. One handsome man looked at her, and she got all flustered. Lucy needed to pull herself together. This was not the time to get distracted, especially when the man in question was anything but an ally. She closed her eyes for a moment and was relieved to find when she'd reopened them that Oliver had returned his focus to the attorney.

Yes, Lucy definitely would've remembered if he'd stopped by to visit. Actually, she hadn't met any of these people before Alice died and they all started showing up to the apartment. She recognized a few of them from pictures on the mantel, but they hadn't visited Alice when she was alive that Lucy was aware of. And Alice certainly hadn't gone to see them. She was ninety-three when she died and still an eccentric free spirit despite confining herself to her apartment for decades. Lucy had been drawn to her radically different beat, but not everyone would be. She'd thought perhaps Alice's family just didn't "get" her.

Judging by the stunned and angry looks on their faces, they all seemed to think they were much closer to Aunt Alice than they truly were.

"Really, Phillip. Is this some sort of a joke?" This time it was Thomas Drake, Harper and Oliver's father and Alice's nephew, who spoke. He was an older version of Oliver, with gray streaks in his hair and a distinguished-looking beard. It didn't hide his frown, however.

Phillip Glass, Alice's attorney and executor of her estate, shook his head with a grim expression on his face. He didn't look like the joking kind. "I'm sorry, but I'm very serious. I discussed this with Alice at length when she decided to make the change to her will earlier this year. I had hoped she spoke with all of you about her wishes, but apparently, that is not the case. All of you were to receive a monetary gift of fifty thousand dollars each, but she was very clear that everything else was to go to Lucy."

"She must've been suffering from dementia," a sour-looking woman Lucy didn't recognize said from the far end of the table.

"She was not!" Lucy retorted, suddenly feeling defensive where Alice was concerned. She'd had a bad heart and a fondness for good wines and cheeses, but she wasn't at all impaired mentally. Actually, for her age, she was in amazing shape up until her death.

“Of course you would say that!” the woman retorted with a red flush to her face. “She was obviously losing her senses when she made these changes.”

“And how would you know?” Lucy snapped. “Not a one of you set foot in her apartment for the five years I’ve cared for her. You have no idea how she was doing. You only came sniffing around when it was time to claim your part of her estate.”

The older woman clutched her pearls, apparently aghast that Lucy would speak to her that way. Lucy didn’t care. She wouldn’t have these people besmirching Alice after her death when they didn’t know anything about how wonderful she was.

Harper reached out and gripped Lucy’s forearm. “It’s okay, Lucy. They’re just surprised and upset at the news. They’ll get over it.”

“I will not get over it!” the woman continued. “I can’t believe you’re taking the help’s side in this, Harper. She’s basically stealing your inheritance right out from under you!”

“The help?” Harper’s voice shot up an octave before Lucy could respond. The time for calm had instantly passed. “Wanda, you need to apologize right now. I will not have you speaking about my friend that way. Aunt Alice obviously felt Lucy was more than just an employee as well, so you should treat her with the same respect.”

Lucy started to shut down as Alice’s relatives fought amongst themselves. The last few days of her life had been hard. Finding Alice’s body, dealing with the funeral and having her life upended all at once had been too much on its own. That was the risk of being a live-in employee. Losing her client meant losing her friend, her job and her home.

And now she found herself in the middle of the Drake family money battle. Lucy wasn’t one for conflict to begin with, and this was the last thing she’d anticipated when she’d been asked to come today. At best, she thought perhaps Alice had left her a little money as a severance package until she could find a new job and a place to live. She had no real idea how much Alice was worth, but from the reactions of the family, she’d been left more than a little money. Like millions.

For a girl who’d grown up poor and gone to college on a scholarship and a prayer, it was all too much to take in at once. Especially when Oliver’s steely blue eyes returned to watching her from across the table. He seemed to look right through her skin and into her soul. She felt the prickle of goose bumps rise across her flesh at the thought of being so exposed to him, but she immediately tried to shelve the sense of self-awareness he brought out in her. If he was studying her, it was only to seek out a weakness to exploit or an angle to work. He might be Harper’s brother, but he was obviously no friend to Lucy.

The spell was finally broken as he casually turned away to look at his sister. “I know she’s your friend, Harper, but you have to admit there’s something fishy about this whole thing.” Oliver’s rich baritone voice drew Lucy back into the conversation.

“Fishy, how?” Lucy asked.

“I wouldn’t blame you for influencing her to leave you something. You’re alone with her day after day. It would be easy to drop hints and convince her it was her idea to leave you everything.” Oliver’s blue eyes narrowed at her again, nearly pinning Lucy to the back of her leather chair with his casual accusation.

“Are you serious?” She repeated his earlier question. “I had no idea about any of this. We never discussed her will or her money. Not once in five years. I didn’t even know why Phillip called me in here today. I’m just as surprised as you are.”

“I highly doubt that,” Wanda muttered.

“Please, folks,” Phillip interjected. “I realize this is a shock to all of you. I wish I could say something to make things better, but the bottom line is that this is what Alice wanted. Feel free to retain a lawyer if you’re interested in challenging the will in court, but as it stands, Lucy gets everything.”

Wanda pushed up from her seat and slung her Hermès purse dramatically over her arm. “You bet I’m calling my attorney,” she said as she headed for the door. “What a waste of a fortune!”

The rest of the family shuffled out behind her until it was only Harper, Lucy and Phillip sitting at the table.

“I’m sorry about all that, Lucy,” the attorney said. “Alice should’ve prepared the family so this wasn’t such a shock to them. She probably avoided it because they’d have pressured her to change it back. With this crowd, I’d anticipate a fight. That means you won’t be able to sell the apartment and most of the accounts will likely be frozen until it’s resolved in court. Alice put a stipulation into the will that authorizes me to maintain all the expenses for the apartment and continue paying you and the housekeeper in the event the will is contested, so you won’t have to worry about any of that. I’ll do my best to get some cash available for you before her family files, but don’t go spending a bunch of it right away.”

Lucy couldn’t imagine that was possible. She’d made a lot of wealthy friends while at Yale, but she’d always been the thrifty one in the group by necessity. Thankfully, her sorority sisters Violet, Emma and Harper had never treated her any differently.

Having her penniless circumstances change so suddenly seemed impossible. Nearly every dime she made from working for Alice went into savings for her to finish school. She wouldn’t even know what she’d do with money in her accounts that wasn’t earmarked for something else.

“Wanda is full of hot air,” Harper said. “She’ll complain but she won’t lay out a penny of her own money to contest the will. More than likely, they’ll all sit back and let Oliver handle it.”

Lucy frowned. “Your brother seemed really angry. Is he going to take it out on you?”

Harper snorted. “No. He knows better. Oliver will leave the battle to the courtroom. But don’t be surprised if he shows up at the apartment ready to give you the third degree. He’s a seasoned businessman, so he’ll be on the hunt for any loophole he can exploit.”

Lucy’s first thought was that she wouldn’t mind Harper’s brother visiting, but his handsome face wouldn’t make up for his ill intentions. He intended to overturn Alice’s wishes and was probably going to be successful. Lucy didn’t have the means to fight him. She could blow every penny she’d saved on attorneys and still wouldn’t have enough to beat a man with his means. It was a waste of money anyway. Things like this just didn’t happen to women like her. The rich got richer, after all.

That did beg the question she was afraid to ask while the others were still around. “Phillip, Alice and I never really discussed her finances. How much money are we talking about here?”

Phillip flipped through a few papers and swallowed hard. “Well, it looks like between the apartment, her investments, cash accounts and personal property, you’re set to inherit about five hundred million dollars, Lucy.”

Lucy frowned and leaned toward the attorney in confusion. “I—I’m sorry, I think I heard you wrong, Phillip. Could you repeat that?”

Harper took Lucy’s hand and squeezed it tight. “You heard him correctly, Lucy. Aunt Alice was worth half a billion dollars and she’s left most of it to you. I know it’s hard for you to believe, but congratulations. It couldn’t happen to a better person.”

Lucy’s breath caught in her throat, the words stolen from her lips. That wasn’t possible. It just wasn’t possible. It was like her numbers were just called in the lotto. The odds were stacked against a woman like her—someone who came from nothing and was expected to achieve even less. Half a billion? No wonder Alice’s family was upset.

The help had just become a multimillionaire.

* * *

So that was the infamous Lucy Campbell.

Oliver had heard plenty about her over the years from his sister and in emails from his aunt. For some reason, he’d expected her to be more attractive. Instead, her hair was a dark, mousy shade

of dishwasher blond, her nails were in need of a manicure and her eyes were too big for her face. He was pretty sure she was wearing a hand-me-down suit of Harper's.

All in all, she seemed incredibly ordinary for someone with her reputation. Aunt Alice was notoriously difficult to impress and she'd written at length about her fondness for Lucy. He'd almost been intrigued enough to pay a visit and learn more about her. Maybe then he wouldn't have been as disappointed.

She had freckles. Actual freckles. He'd never known anyone with freckles before. He'd only remained calm in the lawyer's office by trying to count the sprinkle of them across her nose and cheeks. He wondered how many more there were. Were they only on her face, or did they continue across her shoulders and chest?

He'd lost count at thirty-two.

After that, he'd decided to focus on the conversation. He'd found himself responding to her in a way he hadn't anticipated when he first laid eyes on her. The harder he looked, the more he saw. But then she turned her gaze back on him and he found the reciprocal scrutiny uncomfortable. Those large, doe eyes seemed so innocent and looked at him with a pleading expression he didn't care for. It made him feel things that would muddy the situation.

Instead, Oliver decided he was paying far too much attention to her and she didn't deserve it. She was a sneaky, greedy liar just like his stepmother and he had no doubt of it. Harper didn't see it and maybe Alice didn't either, but Oliver had his eyes wide open. Just like when his father had fallen for Candace with her pouty lips and fake breasts, Oliver could see through the pretty facade.

Okay, so maybe Lucy was pretty. But that was it. Just pretty. Nothing spectacular. Certainly nothing like the elegant, graceful women that usually hung on his arm at society events around Manhattan. She was more like the cute barista at the corner coffee shop that he tipped extra just because she always remembered he liked extra foam.

Yeah, that. Lucy was pretty like that.

He couldn't imagine her rubbing elbows with the wealthy and esteemed elite of New York City. There was new money, and then there was the kind of person who never should've had it. Like a lottery winner. That was a fluke of luck and mathematics, but it didn't change who the person really was or where they belonged. He had a hard time thinking Manhattan high society would accept Lucy even with millions at her disposal.

His stepmother, Candace, had been different. She was young and beautiful, graceful with a dancer's build. She could hold her own with the rich crowd as though she'd always belonged there. Her smile lit up the room and despite the fact that she was more than twenty years younger, Oliver's father had been drawn to her like a fly to honey.

Oliver looked up and noticed his driver had arrived back at his offices. It was bad enough he had to leave in the middle of the day to deal with his aunt's estate. Returning with fifty thousand in his pocket was hardly worth the time he'd lost.

"Thank you, Harrison." Oliver got out of the black sedan and stepped onto the curb outside of Orion headquarters. He looked at the brass plaque on the wall declaring the name of the company his father had started in the eighties. Tom Drake had been at the forefront of the home computer boom. By the turn of the new millennium, one out of every five home computers purchased was an Orion.

Then Candace happened and it all fell apart.

Oliver pushed through the revolving doors and headed to his private elevator in the far corner of the marble-and-brass-filled lobby. Orion's corporate offices occupied the three top floors of the forty-floor high-rise he'd purchased six years earlier. As he slipped his badge into the slot, it started rocketing him past the other thirty-nine floors to take him directly to the area outside the Orion executive offices.

Production and shipping took place in a facility about fifteen miles away in New Jersey. There, the latest and greatest laptops, tablets and smartphones produced by his company were assembled and shipped to stores around the country.

Everyone had told Oliver that producing their products in the US instead of Asia or Mexico was crazy. That they'd improve their stock prices by going overseas and increase their profit margins. They said he should move their call centers to India like his competitors.

He hadn't listened to any of them, and thankfully, he'd had a board that backed his crazy ideas. It was succeed or go home by the time his father handed over the reins of the company. He'd rebuilt his father's business through ingenuity, hard work and more than a little luck.

When the elevator doors opened, Oliver made his way to the corner suite he took over six years ago. That was when Candace disappeared and his father decided to retire from Orion to care for their two-year-old son she'd left behind.

Oliver hated to see his father's heart broken, and he didn't dare say that he'd told him so the minute Candace showed up. But Oliver had known what she was about from the beginning.

Lucy was obviously made from the same cloth, although instead of romancing an older widower, she'd befriended an elderly shut-in without any direct heirs.

His aunt Alice had always been different and he'd appreciated that about her, even as a child. After she decided to lock herself away in her fancy apartment, Oliver gifted her with a state-of-the-art laptop and set her up with an email address so they could stay in touch. He'd opted to respect her need to be alone.

Now he regretted it. He'd let his sister's endorsement of Lucy cloud his judgment. Maybe if he'd stopped by, maybe if he'd seen Lucy and Alice interact, he could've stopped this before it went too far.

Oliver threw open the door to his office in irritation, startling his assistant.

"Are you okay, Mr. Drake?" Monica asked with wide eyes.

Oliver frowned. He didn't need to lose his cool at work. Letting emotions affect him would be his father's mistake, and look what that had done. "I am. I'm sorry, Monica."

"I'm sorry about your aunt. I saw an article about her in the paper that said she'd locked herself in her apartment for almost twenty years. Was that true?"

Oliver sighed. His aunt had drawn plenty of interest alive and dead. "No. Only seventeen years," he said with a smile.

Monica seemed stunned by the very idea. "I can't imagine not leaving my apartment for that long."

"Well," Oliver pointed out, "she had a very nice apartment. She wasn't exactly suffering there."

"Will you inherit her place? I know you two were close and the article said she didn't have any children."

The possibility had been out there until this afternoon when everything changed. Aunt Alice had never married or had children of her own. A lot of people assumed that he and Harper would be the ones to inherit the bulk of her estate. Oliver didn't need his aunt's money or her apartment; it wasn't really his style. But he resented a woman wiggling her way into the family and stealing it out from under them.

Especially a woman with wide eyes and irritatingly fascinating freckles that had haunted his thoughts for the last hour.

"I doubt it, but you never know. Hold my calls, will you, Monica?"

She nodded as he slipped into his office and shut the door. He was in no mood to talk to anyone. He'd cleared his calendar for the afternoon, figuring he would be in discussions with his family about Alice's estate for some time. Instead, everyone had rushed out in a panic and he'd followed them.

It was best that he left when he did. The longer he found himself in the company of the alluring Miss Campbell, the more intrigued he became. It was ridiculous, really. She was the kind of woman he wouldn't give a second glance to on the street. But seated across from him at that conference room

table, looking at him like her fate was in his hands...he needed some breathing room before he did something stupid.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen before tossing it onto his desk. Harper had called him twice in the last half hour, but he'd turned the ringer off. His sister was likely on a mission to convince him to let the whole issue with the will drop. They'd have to agree to disagree where Lucy and her inheritance was concerned.

Oliver settled into his executive chair with a shake of his head and turned to look out the wall of windows to his view of the city. His office faced the west on one side and north on the other. In an hour or so, he'd have a great view of the sun setting over the Hudson. He rarely looked at it. His face was always buried in spreadsheets or he was doodling madly on the marker board. Something always needed his attention and he liked it that way. If he was busy, that meant the company was successful.

Free time...he didn't have much of it, and when he did, he hardly knew what to do with it. He kept a garden, but that was just a stress reliever. He dated from time to time, usually at Harper's prodding, but never anything very serious.

He couldn't help but see shades of Candace in every woman that gave a coy smile and batted her thick lashes at him. He knew that wasn't the right attitude to have—there were plenty of women with money of their own who were interested in him for more than just his fortune and prestige. He just wasn't certain how to tell them apart.

One thing he did notice today was that Lucy Campbell neither smiled or batted her lashes at him. At first, her big brown eyes had looked him over with a touch of disgust wrinkling her pert, freckled nose. A woman had never grazed over him with her eyes the way she had. It was almost as though he smelled like something other than the expensive cologne he'd splashed on that morning.

He'd been amused by her reaction to him initially. At least until they started reading the will. Once he realized who she was and what she'd done, it wasn't funny any longer.

Harper believed one hundred percent in Lucy's innocence. They'd been friends since college. She probably knew Lucy better than anyone else and normally, he would take his sister's opinion as gospel. But was she too close? Harper could be blinded to the truth by her friendship, just as their father had been blinded to the truth by his love for Candace. In both instances, hundreds of millions were at stake.

Even the most honest, honorable person could be tempted to get a tiny piece of that pie. Alice had been ninety-three. Perhaps Lucy looked at her with those big, sad eyes and told Alice a sob story about needing the money. Perhaps she'd charmed his aunt into thinking of her as the child she never had. Maybe Lucy only expected a couple million and her scheme worked out even better than she planned.

Either way, it didn't matter how it came about. The bottom line was that Lucy had manipulated his aunt and he wasn't going to sit by and let her profit from it. This was a half-billion-dollar estate—they weren't quibbling over their grandmother's Chippendale dresser or Wedgwood China. He couldn't—wouldn't—let this go without a fight. His aunt deserved that much.

With a sigh, he reached for his phone and dialed his attorney. Freckles be damned, Lucy Campbell and her charms would be no match for Oliver and his team of bloodthirsty lawyers.

Two

Lucy awoke the next morning with the same odd sense of pressure on her chest. It had been like that since the day she'd discovered Alice had died in her sleep and her world had turned upside down. Discovering she could potentially be a millionaire and Alice's entire family hated her had done little to ease that pressure. It may actually be worse since they met with Phillip.

Someone would undoubtedly contest the will, which would put Alice's estate in limbo until it was resolved. When she asked Phillip how long that would take, he said it could be weeks to months. The family's attorneys would search for any way they could to nullify the latest will. That meant

dragging their “dear aunt’s” reputation through the mud along with Lucy’s. Either Alice wasn’t in her right mind—and many would argue she never had been—or Lucy had manipulated her.

It made Lucy wonder if she could decline the inheritance. Was that an option? While the idea of all that money and stuff seemed nice, she didn’t want to be ripped to shreds to get it. She hadn’t manipulated Alice, and Alice hadn’t been crazy. She’d obviously just decided that her family either didn’t deserve or need the money. Since she never discussed it with anyone but Phillip and hadn’t been forthcoming about her reasoning even to him, they would never know.

Alice had been quirky that way. She never left her apartment, but she had plenty of stories from her youth about how she enjoyed going against the flow, especially where her family was involved. If it was possible for her to listen in on her will reading from heaven, Lucy was pretty sure she was cracking up. Alice would’ve found the look on Wanda’s face in particular to be priceless.

While the decision was being made, Lucy found herself at a loss. What, exactly, was she supposed to be doing with her time? Her client was dead, but she was still receiving her salary, room and board. After the funeral, Lucy had started putting together plans to pick up her life where she’d been forced to drop it. She had a year left in her art history program at Yale. Her scholarship hadn’t covered all four years and without it, there was no way she had been able to continue.

Working and living with Alice had allowed her to save almost all of her salary and she had a tidy little nest egg now that she could use to move back to Connecticut and finish school. Then, hopefully, she could use the connections she’d established the last few years in the art world to land a job at a prestigious museum.

Alice and Lucy had bonded over art. Honestly, Lucy’d had no experience as a home health nurse or caregiver of any kind, but that wasn’t really what Alice needed. She needed a companion, a helper around the apartment. She also needed someone who would go out into the world for her. Part of that had included attending gallery openings and art auctions in Alice’s place. Lucy had met quite a few people there and with Alice Drake’s reputation behind her, hopefully those connections would carry forward once she entered the art community herself.

Today, Lucy found herself sitting in the library staring at the computer screen and her readmission forms for Yale, but she couldn’t focus on them. Her gaze kept drifting around the apartment to all the things she’d never imagined would be hers. Certainly not the apartment itself, with its prewar moldings, handcrafted built-ins and polished, inlaid hardwood floors. Not the gallery of art pieces that looked like a wing of the Met or MoMA. It was all lovely, but nothing she would ever need to worry about personally.

Except now, she had to worry about it all, including the college forms. It was September. If this court hearing dragged through the fall, it would mess with her returning to school for the spring semester. Phillip had recommended she not move out, even if she didn’t want to keep the apartment. He was worried members of the family would squat in it and make it difficult for her to take ownership or sell it even if the judge ruled in her favor. That meant the pile of boxes in the corner she’d started to fill up would stay put for now and Yale in January might not happen.

All because Alice decided Lucy should be a millionaire and everyone else disagreed.

The sound of the doorbell echoed through the apartment, distracting Lucy from her worries. She saved her work and shut the laptop before heading out to the front door. Whoever was here must be on the visitor list or the doorman wouldn’t have let them up. She hoped it was Harper, but one glance out the peephole dashed those hopes.

It was Oliver Drake.

Lucy smoothed her hands over her hair and opened the door to greet her guest. He was wearing one of a hundred suits he likely owned, this one being navy instead of the black he’d worn to the lawyer’s office the day before. Navy looked better on him. It brought out the blue in his eyes and for some reason, highlighted the gold strands in his brown, wavy hair.

She tore her gaze away from her inspection and instead focused on his mildly sour expression. Not a pleasure visit, she could tell, so she decided to set the tone before he could. “Oliver, so glad to see you were able to find the place. Do come in.”

She took a step back and Oliver entered the apartment with his gaze never leaving hers. “I have been here before, you know. Dozens of times.”

“But so much has changed since the nineties. Please, feel free to take a look around and reacquaint yourself with the apartment.” Lucy closed the door and when she turned around, found that Oliver was still standing in the same spot, studying her.

“You know, I can’t tell if you’re always this cheeky or if you’re doing it because you’ve got something to hide. Are you nervous, Lucy?” His voice was low and even, seemingly unbothered by her cutting quips.

Lucy crossed her arms over her chest and took a step back from him, as though doing so would somehow shield her from the blue eyes that threatened to see too much. “I don’t have anything to be nervous about.”

He took two slow strides toward her, moving into her personal space and forcing her back until the doorknob pressed into her spine. He was over six foot, lurking over her and making Lucy feel extremely petite at her five-foot-four-inch height. He leaned down close, studying her face with such intensity she couldn’t breathe.

Oliver paused at her lips for a moment, sending confusing signals to Lucy’s brain. She didn’t think Harper’s arrogant older brother would kiss her, but stranger things had already happened this week. Instead, his gaze shifted to her eyes, pinning her against the door of the apartment without even touching her. By this point, Lucy’s heart was pounding so loudly in her ears, it was nearly deafening her during his silent appraisal.

“We’ll see about that,” he said at last.

When he finally took a step back, Lucy felt like she could breathe again. There was something intense about Oliver that made her uncomfortable, especially when he looked at her that way.

As though nothing had just happened between them, Oliver stuffed his hands into his pockets and started strolling casually through the gallery and into the great room. Lucy followed him with a frown lining her face. She didn’t understand what he wanted. Was this just some psychological game he was playing with her? Was he looking to see if she’d sold anything of Alice’s? How could he even tell after all these years?

“So, I stopped by today to let you know that my attorney filed a dispute over the will this morning. I’m sure Phillip explained to you that all of Aunt Alice’s assets would be frozen until the dispute is resolved.”

Lucy stopped in the entry to the great room, her arms still crossed over her chest. Harper was right when she said that her brother would likely be the one to start trouble for her. “He did.”

Oliver looked around at the art and expensive tapestries draping the windows before he turned and nodded at her. “Good, good. I wouldn’t want there to be any awkward misunderstandings if you tried to sell something from the apartment. I’m fairly certain you’ve never inherited anything before and wouldn’t know how it all worked.”

“Yes, it’s a shame. I was just itching to dump that gaudy Léger painting in the hallway. I always thought it clashed with the Cézanne beside it, but Alice would never listen to reason,” she replied sarcastically. Calling a Léger gaudy would get her kicked out of the Yale art history program.

Oliver narrowed his gaze at her. “Which painting is the Léger?”

Lucy shelved a smirk. He thought he was so smart and superior to her, but art was obviously something he didn’t know anything about. “It’s the colorful cubist piece with the bicycles. But that aside, I was just kidding. Even if I win in court—and I doubt I will—I wouldn’t sell any of Alice’s art.”

He glanced over her shoulder at the Léger and shrugged before moving to the collection of cream striped sofas. He sat down, manspreading across the loveseat in a cocky manner that she found

both infuriating and oddly intriguing. He wore his confidence well, but he seemed too comfortable here, as though he were already planning on moving in to the place Lucy had called home for years.

“And why is that?” he asked. “I would think most people in your position would be itching to liquidate the millions in art she hoarded here.”

She sighed, not really in the mood to explain herself to him, but finding she apparently had nothing better to do today. “Because it meant too much to her. You may have been too busy building your computer empire to know this, but these pieces were her lover and her children. She carefully selected each piece in her collection, gathering the paintings and sculptures that spoke to her because she couldn’t go out to see them in the museums. She spent hours talking to me about them. If she saw it in her heart to leave them to me, selling them at any price would be a slap in the face.”

“What would you do with them, then?”

Lucy leaned against the column that separated the living room from the gallery space. “I suppose that I would loan most of them out to museums. The Guggenheim had been after Alice for months to borrow her Richter piece. She always turned them down because she couldn’t bear to look at the blank spot on the wall where it belonged.”

“So you’d loan all of them out?” His heavy brow raised for the first time in genuine curiosity.

Lucy shook her head. “No, not all of them. I would keep the Monet.”

“Which one is that?”

She swallowed her frustration and pointed through the doorway to the piece hanging in the library. “Iris in Monet’s Garden,” she said. “You did go to college, didn’t you? Didn’t you take any kind of liberal studies classes? Maybe visit a museum in your life?”

At that, Oliver laughed, a low, throaty rumble that unnerved her even as it made her extremely aware of her whole body. Once again, her pulse sped up and her mouth went so dry she couldn’t have managed another smart remark.

She’d never had a reaction to a man like that before. Certainly not in the last five years where she’d basically lived like her ninety-year-old client. Her body was in sore need of a man to remind her she was still in her twenties, but Oliver was not the one. She was happy to have distance between them and hoped to keep it that way.

* * *

“You’d be surprised,” Oliver said, pushing himself up from the couch. He felt like he was a piece on display with her standing there, watching him from the doorway. “I’ve been to several museums in my years, and not just on those painful school field trips. Mostly with Aunt Alice, actually, in the days when she still left her gilded prison. I never really cared much about the art, but you’re right, she really did love it. I liked listening to her talk about it.”

He turned away from Lucy and strolled over to the doorway to the library. There, hanging directly in front of the desk so it could be admired, was a blurry painting, about two and a half feet by three feet. He took a few steps back from it and squinted, finally being able to make out the shapes of flowers from a distance. He supposed to some people it was a masterpiece, but to him it was just a big mess on a canvas that was only important to a small group of rich people.

Even then, he did know who Monet was. And Van Gogh and Picasso. There was even a Jackson Pollock hanging in the lobby of his corporate offices, but that was his father’s purchase. Probably Aunt Alice’s suggestion. He didn’t recognize the others she’d mentioned, but he wasn’t entirely without culture. Aunt Alice had taken him to the museums more times than he could count. It was just more fun to let Lucy think he didn’t know what she was talking about.

When she blushed, the freckles seemed to fade away against the crimson marring her pale skin. And the more irritated she got, the edges of her ears and her chest would flush pink as well.

With her arms crossed so defensively over her chest, it drew her rosy cleavage to his attention. In that area, she had the cute barista beat. Lucy wasn’t a particularly curvy woman—she was on the

slim side. Almost boyish through the hips. But the way she was standing put the assets she did have on full display with her clingy V-neck sweater.

“Iris are my mother’s favorite flower,” Lucy said as she followed him into the library, oblivious to the direction of his thoughts.

Or perhaps not. She kept a few feet away from him, which made him smile. She was so easy to fluster. It made him want to seek out other ways to throw her off guard. He wondered how she would react when she was at the mercy of his hands and mouth on her body.

“I’ve always appreciated this piece for its sentimental value.”

When Oliver turned to look at her, he found Lucy was completely immersed in her admiration of the painting. He almost felt guilty for thinking about ravishing her while she spoke about her mother. Almost.

It wasn’t like he would act on the compulsion, anyway. His lawyer would have a fit if he immediately seduced the woman he’d decided to sue the day before. He did want to get to know her better, though. Not because he was curious about her, but because he wanted to uncover her secrets. He knew what Harper and Aunt Alice had thought of her, but he was after the truth.

This sweet-looking woman with the blushing cheeks and deep appreciation of art was a scam artist and he was going to expose her, just like he should’ve exposed Candace before his father was left in ruins with a toddler. He was too late to protect Aunt Alice, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t put things right.

Turning to look at Lucy, he realized she was no longer admiring the painting, but looking at him with a curious expression on her face. “What?” he asked.

“I asked what you thought of it.”

He turned back to the painting and shrugged. “It’s a little sloppy. How much is it worth?”

“Your aunt bought it many years ago at a lower price, but if it went to auction today...probably as much as this apartment.”

That caught his attention. Oliver turned back to the wall, looking for a reason why this little painting would be worth so much. “That’s ridiculous.” And he meant it. “No wonder my cousin Wanda was so upset about you getting all of Aunt Alice’s personal belongings as well as the cash. She’s got a fortune’s worth of art in here.”

Lucy didn’t bother arguing with him. “It was her passion. And it was mine. That’s why we got along so well. Perhaps why she decided to leave it to me. I would appreciate it instead of liquidating it all for the cash.”

Oliver twisted his lips in thought. It sounded good, but it was one thing to leave a friend with common interests a token. A half-a-billion-dollar estate was something completely different. “Do you really think that’s all it was?”

She turned to him with a frown. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, do you honestly expect everyone to believe that she just up and changed her will to leave her employee everything instead of her family, and you had nothing to do with it? You just had common interests?”

Lucy’s dark eyes narrowed at him, and her expression hardened. “Yes, that’s what I expect everyone to believe because that is what happened. I’m not sure why you’re such a cynical person, but not everyone in the world is out there to manipulate someone else. I’m certainly not.”

This time, Lucy’s sharp barb hit close to home. Perhaps he was pessimistic and became that way because life had taught him to be, but that didn’t mean he was wrong about her. “I’m not cynical, Lucy, I simply have my eyes open. I’m not blinded by whatever charms you’ve worked on my sister and my aunt. I see a woman with nothing walking away from this situation with half a billion dollars. You had to have done something. She didn’t leave the housekeeper anything. You’re telling me you’re just that special?”

The hard expression on Lucy's face started to crumble at his harsh words, making him feel a pang of guilt for half a second. Of course, she could just be trying to manipulate him like she did everyone else.

"Not at all," she said with a sad shake of her head. "I don't think I'm special. I'm as ordinary as people come. I wish Alice had explained to me and everyone else why she was doing what she did, but she left that as a mystery for us all. There's nothing I can do about it. You can take me to court and try to overturn her last wishes. Maybe you will be successful. I can't control that. But know that no matter what the judge decides, I had nothing to do with it. Just because you don't believe it, doesn't make it any less true."

Boy, she was good. The more she talked, the more he wanted to believe her. There was a sincerity in her large doe eyes and unassuming presence. It was no wonder everyone seemed to fall prey to her charms. He'd thought at first she wasn't as skilled and cunning as Candace, but he was wrong. She'd simply chosen to target an older, vulnerable woman instead of a lonely, vulnerable man. A smarter choice, if you asked his opinion. She didn't have to pretend to be in love with a man twice her age.

"You're very good." He spoke his thoughts aloud and took a step closer to her. "When I first saw you at Phillip's office with your big eyes and your innocent and indignant expression, I thought perhaps you were an amateur that I could easily trip up, but now I see I'm going up against a professional con artist." He took another step, leaving only inches between them. "But that doesn't mean you're going to win."

Lucy didn't pull back this time; she held her ground. "The mistake you're making is thinking that I care, Oliver."

"You're honestly going to stand there and tell me that you don't care whether you get the apartment, the Monet and everything else?"

"I am," she said with a defiant lift of her chin. Her dark eyes focused on him, drawing him into their brown depths. "See, the difference between you and me is that I've never had anything worth losing. If I walk out this door with nothing more than I came in with, my life goes on as usual. And that's what I expect to happen. To be honest, I can't even imagine having that kind of money. This whole thing seems like a dream I'm going to wake up from and I'll go back to being Lucy, the broke friend that can never afford the girls trips and expensive clothes her friends wear. Things like this don't happen to people like me, and the people in the world with all the money and power—people like you—are happy to keep it that way."

"You're saying it's my fault if you don't get your way?"

"Not my way. Alice's way. And yes. You're the only one in the family that lawyered up."

That was because he was the only one in the family with nerve. "Someone had to."

"Well, then, you've made your choices, Oliver, and so have I. That said, I'm not sure there's much else for us to say to one another. I think it's time for you to go."

Oliver raked his gaze over her stern expression and smirked. He didn't have to leave. She had no more claim on the apartment than he did at this point. But it was too soon to push his luck. Besides, the more time he spent with her, the softer his resolve to crush her became. The closer he got, the more interested he was in breathing in the scent of her shampoo and touching her hand to see if her skin was as soft as it appeared. He would have to tread very carefully where Lucy was concerned or he'd get lured into her web just like the others.

"I think you're right," he said, pulling away from her before he got even closer and did something he might regret, like kiss her senseless so he could feel her body melt into his. He walked through the gallery to the foyer and opened the door that led to the elevator.

"Until we meet again, Lucy Campbell."

Three

“I don’t know why you insisted on me wearing this dress, Harper. It’s a baby shower, not a cocktail party.”

As Lucy and Harper walked up the driveway of the sprawling Dempsey estate, she looked down at the white strapless frock her friend had practically pushed on her. It had taken nearly two hours to drive out to the property where Emma had grown up, and Lucy had doubted her clothing decision the whole way. Why they couldn’t have the party at the Dempseys’ apartment in Manhattan, she didn’t know.

Harper shook her head and dismissed Lucy’s concerns, as usual. “That J. Mendel dress is perfect for you. You look great. It’s always a good time to look great.”

“You need to print that on your business cards,” Lucy quipped.

Even then, she felt incredibly overdressed for a baby shower, but Harper insisted they dress up. It was a couples shower for their friend Emma and her new husband, Jonah. Since they were both single and the event was coed, Harper had got it in her head that they should look even cuter than usual, in case there were some single friends of Jonah’s there as well. At least that was what she’d said.

“You need to remember you’re not just the poor friend from Yale anymore, Lucy. You have to start acting like someone important because you are someone important. You were before the money, but now you have no excuse but to show the world how fabulous you are.”

Lucy sighed and shifted the wrapped gift in her arms. “I’m still the poor friend from Yale and I refuse to believe otherwise until there’s cash in my hand and in my bank accounts. Thanks to your brother, I may not get a dime.”

“We’ll see about that,” Harper said with a smirk curling her peach lips.

Oliver had made that same face when he visited the apartment the other day. The brief encounter had left her rattled to her core. Thankfully, no one else had decided to drop in unannounced. But seeing that expression on her friend brought an anxious ache back to her stomach. She intended to get some cake in her belly as soon as possible to smother it.

“Who does a couples baby shower anyway?” Lucy asked. “Any guy I know would hate this kind of thing.”

“Knowing Emma and her mother, this will be anything but the usual baby shower. It’s more of an event.”

Lucy paused at the steps leading up to the Dempsey mansion and caught the distant sounds of string music playing. Live music for a baby shower? They’d passed dozens of cars parked along the drive up to the house from the gate. “I think you may be right.”

They stepped inside the house together, taking the butler’s directions through the ornately decorated house to the ballroom. Lucy bit her tongue at the mention of a ballroom. Who, other than the house in the board game Clue, had an actual ballroom?

Apparently, the Dempseys.

They rounded a corner and were bombarded by the sound of a huge party in progress. Lucy was instantly aware that this was not the punch-and-cake gathering with cheesy baby shower games she was expecting. A string quartet was stationed in the corner on a riser. Round tables were scattered throughout the room with sterling gray linens and centerpieces filled with flowers in various shades of pink.

A serpentine table of food curved around the far corner of the space, flanked by a silver, three-tiered punch fountain on one end and an even taller cake on the other end. A mountain of gifts were piled onto tables in the opposite corner. There were easily a hundred people in the room milling around, and thankfully, most of them were dressed as nicely as she and Harper were.

Lucy breathed a sigh of relief for Harper’s fashion advice. At least for some of it. Harper had tried to get her to wear a piece of Alice’s jewelry—a large diamond cocktail ring that would’ve matched her dress splendidly, she said—but Lucy had refused. It wasn’t hers yet. She wasn’t touching a thing of Alice’s until the deal was done.

“I think Emma’s mother went a little overboard for this, don’t you?” Harper leaned in to whisper. “I guess since Emma and Jonah eloped in Hawaii, Pauline had to get her over-the-top party somehow.”

Lucy could only nod absently as she took in the crowd. Being friends with Emma, Harper and Violet in college had been easy because they’d all lived in their sorority house and their economic differences were less pronounced. After their years at Yale, they all returned to New York, struggling to start their careers and make names for themselves. It leveled the playing field for the friends. This was one of the few times she’d been painfully reminded that she came from a very different world than them. She tried to avoid those scenarios, but this was one party she couldn’t skip. Even with Alice’s fortune, she’d still be a nobody from a small town in Ohio that no one had ever heard of.

“I see someone I need to talk to. Are you okay by yourself for a while?” Harper asked. She was always good, as were all the girls, about making sure Lucy was comfortable in new settings that were second nature to them.

“Absolutely, go,” Lucy said with a smile.

As Harper melted into the crowd, Lucy decided to take her gift to the table flanked with security guards. There were apparently nicer gifts there than the pink onesies with matching hats she had picked out from the registry. One of them had a sterling silver Tiffany rattle tied to the package like a bow.

Without immediately spying anyone she knew, she decided to get a glass of punch. At least she would look like she was participating in the event.

“Lucy!” A woman’s voice shouted at her as she finished filling up her crystal punch glass. She turned around to see a very pregnant Emma with a less-pregnant Violet.

“You two are a pair,” Lucy said.

“I know,” Emma agreed with a groan as she stroked her belly. “Four weeks to go.”

“I wish I only had four weeks.” Violet sighed. “Instead I have four months.”

Just after Emma and Jonah announced their engagement and pregnancy to the world, Violet had piped up with a similar announcement. It had come as a surprise to everyone, including Violet, that she was expecting. She and her boyfriend had been on and off for a while, but finding out she was pregnant a few weeks after she’d been in a serious taxi accident had sealed the deal. Her boyfriend, Beau, insisted he wasn’t losing her again and they got engaged. The difference was that Violet wanted to set a date after the baby was born. She, unlike Emma, wanted the big wedding with the fancy dress and wasn’t about to do it with a less-than-perfect figure.

“Speaking of how far along you are,” Lucy said, “how did the ultrasound go?”

Violet’s cheeks blushed as she turned to Emma. “I’m not announcing anything because it’s Emma and Jonah’s night, but I’ll tell you both, and Harper when I see her. We’re having a boy.”

“Oh!” Emma squealed and wrapped her arms around Violet. “Our kids are going to get married,” she insisted.

Lucy suffered through a round of giggly hugs and baby talk. Since Violet discovered she was pregnant, it had been all the two of them could talk about. Lucy understood. It was a big deal for both of them. She just felt miserably behind the curve when it came to her friends, in more ways than one. She hadn’t even dated since college. Marriage and children were a far-off fantasy she hardly had time to consider.

“Darling.” An older woman with Emma’s coloring interrupted their chat. It was her mother, Pauline Dempsey. “I want to introduce you to a couple business acquaintances of your father, and then I’d like you and Jonah to join us up front for a toast.”

Emma smiled apologetically and let her mother drag her away. Violet turned to Lucy with a conspiratorial look on her face. “So... Harper said you have some news.”

Lucy twisted her lips in concern. A part of her didn’t want to talk about Alice’s estate until she knew what was going to happen. She didn’t want to get her hopes—or anyone else’s—up for

nothing. Then again, keeping a secret in her circle of friends was almost impossible. “It’s not news,” she insisted. “At least not yet.”

“I don’t know,” Violet teased. “Harper said it was huge. Are you pregnant?”

Her eyes went wide. “No, of course I’m not pregnant. You have to have sex to get pregnant.”

Violet shrugged. “Not necessarily. I mean, I don’t remember getting pregnant. I assume sex was involved.”

“Yes, well, you were in a car accident and forgot a week of your life. I’m pretty sure that missing week included you and Beau making that little boy.” Lucy was suddenly desperate to change the subject. “Any names picked out yet?”

“Beau wants a more traditional Greek name, but I’m not sold. I was thinking something a little more modern, like Lennox or Colton.”

“Where is Beau, anyway?” Lucy asked. “This is a couples shower, right?”

“Yes, well, he’s been working a lot lately. Finding out we were pregnant put him in a tailspin. He’s been empire-building ever since. This isn’t his cup of tea, anyway.”

Lucy nodded, but didn’t say anything. As a friend, she tried to be supportive, but she didn’t like Beau. He and Violet argued too much and their relationship was so up and down. It was hard on Violet. He seemed to rededicate himself after her accident, and later, when he found out she was having a baby, but Lucy still worried about her friend. She wanted it to work out like the fairy tales claimed. But fortunately, with or without Beau, Violet would be fine. She was the sole heir to her family’s Greek shipping fortune and could easily handle raising her son on her own if she had to.

“I’m going to sit down for a bit. My feet are swelling something fierce and I’m only halfway through this pregnancy,” Violet complained. “Come find me in a bit. I still want to hear about this big news of yours.”

Lucy waved Violet off and took a sip of her punch.

“Big news of yours?” A familiar baritone voice reached her ears just as her mouth filled with punch. “Do tell.”

Lucy turned around and felt that anxiety from earlier hit her full force. She swallowed the gulp of punch before she could spit it everywhere and ruin her white dress. She wished it were spiked; it would help steel her nerves for round two of this fight.

Oliver Drake was standing right behind her with a ridiculously pleased grin on his face.

* * *

Oliver was willing to admit when he was wrong, and his prior opinions of Lucy’s attractiveness were way off base.

Where had this version of Lucy been hiding? He had no doubt that Harper, his fashion-conscious sister, had gotten ahold of her tonight.

Lucy’s dark blond hair was swirled up into a French twist with a rhinestone comb holding it in place. Her dress was white and cream—a color combination that on most women, brides included, made them look ill. For some reason, Lucy seemed to glow. It was off the shoulder, and with her hair up, it showcased her swan-like neck and the delicate line of her collarbones.

It was hard to focus on that with the expression on her face, however. The rosy shade of her lipstick highlighted the drop of her jaw as she looked at him in panic. She hadn’t been expecting him here tonight and he quite liked that. Catching her off guard was proving to be the highlight of his week lately.

“This big news,” he repeated. “I hope it’s something exciting to help you get over the shock of inheriting, then losing, all that money.”

At his smart words, her lips clamped shut and her dark brow knitted together. When she wrinkled her nose, he noticed that only a few of her more prominent freckles were visible with her makeup on. He found he quite missed them.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, Oliver Drake! How dare you come to the party for one of my best friends, just so you can harass me! Is nothing sacred to you? Tonight is about Emma and Jonah, not about your ridiculous vendetta against me.”

Oliver looked around at the dozen or so people who turned and took notice of her loud, sharp words. Apparently their banter was about to escalate to fighting tonight. He had no plans to cause a scene here, despite what she seemed to think. Reaching out, he snatched up her wrist and tugged her behind him. There were French doors not far from where they were standing, so he made a beeline through them and out onto the large balcony that overlooked the east grounds of the Dempsey estate.

“You let go of me!” Lucy squealed as he hauled her outside, the end of her tirade cut off from the guests inside by the slamming of the door. Thankfully, the weather was a touch too chilly for anyone to be out there to overhear the rest of their argument.

“Is nothing sacred to you?” He turned her question on her. “Stop causing a scene in front of my friends and colleagues.”

“Me?” Lucy yanked her wrist from his clutch. “You started this. And they’re my friends and colleagues, not yours.”

Oliver noticed the palm of his hand tingled for a moment at the separation of his skin from hers. He ached to reach out and touch her again, but that was the last thing he needed to do. Especially right now when she was yelling at him. “Yes, you. And you don’t get to lay claim on everyone inside just like you laid claim to my aunt’s fortune. They’re my friends, too.”

“I didn’t lay claim to your aunt’s fortune. I would never presume to do that, even if I had the slightest reason to think I should get it. Despite what you seem to think, it was a gift, Oliver. It’s a kind thing some people do, not that you would know what that’s like.”

“I am kind,” he insisted. The collar of his shirt was suddenly feeling too tight. Oliver didn’t understand why she was able to get under his skin so easily. He’d felt his blood pressure start to rise the moment he’d seen her in that little dress. And then, after he touched her... “You don’t know anything about me.”

“And you don’t know anything about me!”

“I know that yelling is very unbecoming of a lady.”

“And so is manhandling someone.”

“You’re correct,” Oliver conceded and crossed his arms over his chest to bury his tingling hand. “I’m not a lady.”

Lucy’s pink lips scrunched together in irritation, although there was the slightest glimmer of amusement in her eyes. Could she actually have a sense of humor? “You’re not a gentleman either. You’re a pain in my a—”

“Hey, now!” Oliver interrupted. Ixnay that thought on the sense of humor. “I didn’t come here to start a fight with you, Lucy.”

She took a deep breath and looked him over in his favorite charcoal suit. He’d paired a pink tie with it tonight in a nod to Jonah’s baby, but he doubted Lucy would be impressed by the gesture. At the moment, he wanted to tug it off and give himself some room to breathe, but he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of seeing him react to her, good or bad.

“So why are you here?” she asked.

“I’m here because I was invited. Jonah and I are friends from back in prep school. Did Harper not tell you that?”

“No, she didn’t.” Lucy looked through the window with a frown lining her face, then down at her dress. It was short, ending a few inches above her knee with a band of iridescent white beads that caught the light as she moved. “Although a lot of other things make sense now.”

Oliver couldn’t help the chuckle that burst out of him in the moment. “You actually thought I’d driven two hours out of my way just to come here and stalk you tonight?”

Lucy pouted her bottom lip at his laughter and turned toward the stone railing of the balcony. “Well...it’s not like we’ve ever run into each other before this. You have to admit it seems suspicious that you keep showing up where I am.”

He stifled the last of his snickering and stood beside her at the railing, their bodies almost touching. He could feel the heat of her bare skin less than an inch away. “Maybe you’re right,” he admitted.

Oliver turned to look down at her. She was wearing white and silver heels tonight, but even then, she was quite a bit shorter than he was. Outside, the flicker of the decorative candles stationed across the patio made the golden glow dance around her face, a game of shadow and light that flattered her features even more.

She met his gaze with her wide brown eyes, surprised by his sudden agreement with her. “I’m right? Did I actually hear you say that?”

“I said you may be right. Maybe I got all dressed up, dropped a ton of cash on a registry gift and came to this baby shower in the middle of nowhere just in the hopes I would see you here.”

Lucy turned away and stared off into the distance. “I don’t appreciate your sarcasm. I also don’t appreciate you accosting me at a party. I’m missing one of my best friend’s baby showers to be out here with you.”

Oliver turned toward her and leaned one elbow onto the railing. “You’re free to go at any time.”

She turned to face him with disbelief narrowing her gaze. “Oh yeah, so you can start something else inside? Or throw me over your shoulder and carry me off next time? No. We’re finishing this discussion right now. When I go back inside, I don’t want to speak to or even lay eyes on you again.”

He looked at her and noticed a slight tremble of her lips as she spoke. Was she on the verge of tears? He wasn’t sure why, but the idea of that suddenly bothered him. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, why?”

“You’re trembling. Are you really that upset with me?”

Lucy rolled her eyes and shook her head. “No, I’m shivering. It’s freezing out here. I’m not dressed for an alfresco discussion this time of year.”

Without hesitation, Oliver slipped off his suit coat and held it out to her. She looked at it with suspicion for a moment before turning her back and letting him drape it over her bare shoulders.

“Thank you,” Lucy said as reluctantly as she could manage.

“I’m not all bad.”

“That’s good to know. I was starting to feel sorry for Harper having to grow up with you.”

“Oh, you can still feel sorry for her. I was a horrible big brother. I made her life hell for years.” Oliver laughed again, thinking of some of the wicked things he’d done to his sister. “One time, when she was about eight, I convinced her that my father’s new Ming vase was made of Silly Putty and would bounce if she dropped it onto the floor. She got in so much trouble. Dad wouldn’t believe her when she said I’d told her that. He grounded her for an extra week for lying.”

Lucy covered her mouth with her hand to hide a reluctant smile. “Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?” she asked. “You’re not here to fight with me, and yet you’re out here making small talk with me instead of inside with Jonah and your friends. What’s your angle?”

That was a good question. He hadn’t exactly planned any of this. He’d just wanted to get her away from the crowd before they made a scene. Once they stopped arguing, he was surprised to find he enjoyed talking with Lucy. There was an understated charm to her. The longer he spent with her, the more he wanted to spend. It was an intriguing and dangerous proposition, but one that explained his aunt’s bold decision. If he felt swayed by her, his elderly aunt hadn’t stood a chance.

“I don’t have an angle, Lucy.” Or if he did, he wasn’t going to tell her so. “I guess I’m just trying to figure out what my aunt saw in you.”

Lucy opened her mouth to argue, but he held up his hands to silence her. “I don’t mean it like that, so don’t get defensive. I’ve just been thinking that if my aunt really did want to leave you half a

billion dollars, you had to be a pretty special person.” Oliver leaned closer, unconsciously closing the gap between them. “I guess I’m curious to get to know you better and learn more about you.”

Lucy’s nose wrinkled, but for the first time, it didn’t appear to be because she was annoyed with him. “What do you think so far?” she asked.

“So far...” He sought out the smart answer, but just decided to be honest. “...I like you. More than I should, given the circumstances. So far, you’ve proven to be an exciting, intelligent and beautiful adversary.”

Lucy’s lips parted softly at his words. “Did you say beautiful?”

Oliver nodded. Before he could respond aloud, Lucy launched herself into his arms. Her pink lips collided with his own just as her body pressed into him. He was stunned stiff for only a moment before he wrapped his arms around her waist and tugged her tighter against him.

Kissing Lucy wasn’t at all what he expected. Nothing about her was what he expected. She didn’t back down from what she’d started. She was bold, opening up to him and seeking his tongue out with her own. Oliver couldn’t help but respond to her. She was more enthusiastic and demanding than any woman he may have ever kissed before.

This wasn’t the smart thing. Or the proper thing. But he couldn’t make himself pull away from her. She tasted like sweet, baby-shower punch, and she smelled like lavender. He wanted to draw her scent into his lungs and hold it there.

But then it was over.

As she pulled away, Oliver felt a surge of unwanted desire wash over him. It was the last thing he needed right now—with Lucy of all women—but he couldn’t deny what he felt. It took everything he had not to reach for her and pull her back into his arms again. He was glad he didn’t, though, as his need for her was stunted by a sudden blow to the face as Lucy punched him in the nose.

Four

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Lucy asked with outrage in her voice as she backed away from him.

Oliver didn’t immediately reply. First, he had to figure out what the hell had just happened. He was being kissed one second, hit the next and now he was being yelled at.

“Me?” He brought his hand up to his throbbing nose and winced. It wasn’t broken, but there was blood running over his fingers. He’d never actually had a woman hit him before. One for the bucket list, he supposed. “You’re the one that kissed me!”

“I did not,” she insisted.

Oliver frowned and sighed, reaching into his coat for his pocket square to soak up the blood. Harper had never mentioned Lucy being impulsive, but he was learning new things about her all the time. It had been ten seconds since their lips had touched and it hadn’t been his doing. Surely she recalled that. “Yeah, you did kiss me. I said you were beautiful and you threw yourself at me.”

Lucy must have been caught up in the moment, because she seemed very much embarrassed by the truth of his blunt description. Her skin was suddenly crimson against her white dress and she wasn’t even the one who got punched. “Yes...well...you kissed me back,” she managed.

What was he supposed to do? Just stand there? Oliver was not a passive man, especially when the physical was involved. “My apologies, Miss Campbell. Next time a woman kisses me, I’ll politely wait until she’s finished with me and hit her instead.”

Lucy took a cautious step back at his words, making him grin even though he shouldn’t.

“I’m not going to hit you,” Oliver said, dabbing at his nose one last time and stuffing the handkerchief into his pocket. “I’ve never hit a woman and I’m not going to start now. Although it would be nice if you would extend me the same courtesy. What ever happened to an old-fashioned slap of outrage? You straight-up punched me in the face. You hit hard, too.”

She twisted her pink lips for a moment before nodding softly. “I take kickboxing classes twice a week. I’m sorry I hit you. It was almost a reflex. I was...startled.”

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