



KING

OF



THE MULTI-MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

H A

Ana Huang is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly*, and #1 Amazon bestselling author. She writes new adult and contemporary romance with deliciously alpha heroes, strong heroines, and plenty of steam, angst, and swoon sprinkled in.

A self-professed travel enthusiast, she loves incorporating beautiful destinations into her stories and will never say no to a good chai latte.

When she's not reading or writing, Ana is busy daydreaming, and scouring Yelp for her next favorite restaurant.

AI□ by Ana Huang

KINGS OF SIN SERIES

A series of interconnected standalones

King of Wrath

King of Pride

King of Greed

TWISTED SERIES

A series of interconnected standalones

Twisted Love

Twisted Games

Twisted Hate

Twisted Lies

IF LOVE SERIES

If We Ever Meet Again (Duet Book 1)

If the Sun Never Sets (Duet Book 2)

If Love Had a Price (Standalone)

If We Were Perfect (Standalone)

**KING
OF
GREED**

ANA HUANG



PIATKUS

First published in 2023 by Bloom Books,
An imprint of Sourcebooks
First published in Great Britain in 2023 by Piatkus

Copyright © 2023 by Ana Huang
Cover and internal design © 2023 by Sourcebooks
Cover design by Cat at TRC Designs
Internal images © Epifantsev/Depositphotos, Danussa/Depositphotos

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-349-43636-4

Piatkus
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company

www.hachette.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

*To knowing your worth and never settling
for less than you deserve.*

Playlist



Million Dollar Man

Lana Del Rey

Cold

Maroon 5 feat. Future

Same Old Love

Selena Gomez

Love Me Harder

Ariana Grande & The Weekend

Unappreciated

Cherish

Just Give Me a Reason

Pink feat. Nate Ruess

Dancing with a Stranger

Sam Smith & Normani

Without You

Mariah Carey

Love Don't Cost a Thing

Jennifer Lopez

We Belong Together

Mariah Carey

Revival

Selena Gomez

Two Minds

Nero

Lose You to Love Me

Selena Gomez

Amor I Love You

Marisa Monte

Contents

CHAPTER 1: Alessandra
CHAPTER 2: Dominic
CHAPTER 3: Alessandra
CHAPTER 4: Dominic
CHAPTER 5: Alessandra
CHAPTER 6: Dominic
CHAPTER 7: Dominic
CHAPTER 8: Alessandra
CHAPTER 9: Dominic
CHAPTER 10: Alessandra
CHAPTER 11: Dominic
CHAPTER 12: Alessandra
CHAPTER 13: Dominic
CHAPTER 14: Dominic
CHAPTER 15: Alessandra
CHAPTER 16: Dominic
CHAPTER 17: Alessandra
CHAPTER 18: Alessandra
CHAPTER 19: Alessandra
CHAPTER 20: Dominic
CHAPTER 21: Alessandra
CHAPTER 22: Alessandra
CHAPTER 23: Dominic
CHAPTER 24: Alessandra
CHAPTER 25: Alessandra
CHAPTER 26: Alessandra
CHAPTER 27: Alessandra
CHAPTER 28: Dominic
CHAPTER 29: Alessandra
CHAPTER 30: Alessandra
CHAPTER 31: Alessandra
CHAPTER 32: Dominic

CHAPTER 33: Alessandra
CHAPTER 34: Dominic
CHAPTER 35: Alessandra
CHAPTER 36: Dominic
CHAPTER 37: Dominic
CHAPTER 38: Dominic
CHAPTER 39: Dominic
CHAPTER 40: Alessandra
CHAPTER 41: Dominic
CHAPTER 42: Alessandra
CHAPTER 43: Dominic
CHAPTER 44: Alessandra
EPILOGUE: Dominic

CHAPTER 1

Alessandra



ONCE UPON A TIME, I'D LOVED MY HUSBAND.

His beauty, his ambition, his intelligence. The wildflowers he'd plucked for me on his way home from a graveyard shift, and the gentle kisses he'd trailed over my shoulder when I stubbornly refused to heed my alarm clock.

But once upon a time was a long time ago, and now, as I watched him walk through the door for the first time in weeks, all I felt was a deep, dull ache in the places where love once resided.

"You're home early," I said, even though it was near midnight. "How was work?"

"Fine." Dominic shrugged out of his coat, revealing an immaculate gray suit and crisp white shirt. Both custom-made, both costing upward of four figures. Only the best for Dominic Davenport, the so-called King of Wall Street. "Work was work."

He gave me a perfunctory kiss on the lips. A familiar whiff of citrus and sandalwood brushed my senses and made my heart squeeze. He'd worn the same cologne since I gifted it to him a decade ago during our first trip to Brazil. I used to find the loyalty romantic, but the new cynic in me whispered it was only because he couldn't be bothered to find a new scent.

Dominic didn't care about anything that didn't make him money.

He flicked his eyes over the lipstick-smudged wine glasses and remnants of Chinese takeout on the coffee table. Our housekeeper was on vacation, and I'd been in the middle of cleaning up when Dominic came home.

"Did you have friends over?" he asked, sounding only marginally interested.

"Just the girls." My friends and I had celebrated a financial milestone for my small pressed flower business, which was nearing its two-year anniversary, but I didn't bother sharing the accomplishment with my husband. "We were supposed to go out to dinner, but we stayed in at the last minute instead."

"Sounds nice." Dominic had already moved on to his phone. He had a strict no-email policy, so he was probably checking the Asian stock markets.

A knot formed in my throat.

He was still as breathtakingly handsome as the first time I saw him in our college library. Dark blond hair, navy eyes, a sculpted face set in a semi-permanent pensive expression. It wasn't a face that smiled easily, but I liked that about him. There was no fakeness; if he smiled, he meant it.

When was the last time either of us had smiled at the other the way we used to?

When was the last time he touched me? Not for sex, but for casual affection.

The knot pulled tighter, restricting the flow of oxygen. I swallowed past it and forced my lips to curve upward. "Speaking of dinner, don't forget our trip this weekend. We have a Friday night reservation in DC."

"I won't." He tapped something on his screen.

"Dom." My voice firmed. "It's important."

I'd put up with dozens of missed dates, canceled trips, and broken promises over the years, but our ten-year wedding anniversary was one of a kind. It was unmissable.

Dominic finally glanced up. "I won't forget. I promise." Something flickered in his eyes. "Ten years already. It's hard to believe."

“Yes.” My cheeks might crack from the force of my smile. “It is.” I hesitated, then added, “Are you hungry? I can heat up some food and you can tell me about your day.”

He had a bad habit of forgetting to eat when he was working. Knowing him, he hadn’t touched anything except coffee since lunch. I used to visit his office and make sure he ate when he was starting out, but those visits stopped after Davenport Capital took off and he became too busy.

“No, I have some client things to take care of. I’ll grab something later.” He was back on his phone, his brow furrowed in a deep frown.

“But…” *I thought you were done with work for the day. Isn’t that why you’re home?*

I bit back my question. There was no use asking things I already knew the answer to.

Dominic was never done with work. It was the world’s most demanding mistress.

“Don’t wait up for me. I’ll be in my office for a while.” His lips grazed my cheek on his way past me. “Good night.”

He was already gone by the time I responded. “Good night.”

The words echoed in our palatial, empty living room. It was the first night I’d been awake to see Dominic come home in weeks, and our conversation had ended before it really began.

I blinked back an embarrassing sting of tears. So what if my husband felt like a stranger? *I felt like a stranger to myself sometimes when I looked in the mirror.*

At the end of the day, I was married to one of the richest men on Wall Street, I lived in a beautiful house most people would kill for, and I owned a small but thriving business doing what I loved. I had no good reason to cry.

Get it together.

I took a deep breath, straightened my shoulders, and plucked the empty takeout boxes off the coffee table. By the time I finished cleaning up, the pressure behind my eyes had disappeared like it’d never been there at all.

CHAPTER 2

Dominic



THERE WAS AN OLD ADAGE THAT BAD THINGS CAME IN threes, and if I weren't so scornful of superstitions, I might've believed it after this shit show of a day.

First, a ridiculous tech malfunction reset our email and calendar systems that morning, and we'd spent hours getting everything back in order.

Then, one of my top traders quit because he was "burned out" and "found his true calling" as a fucking yoga teacher, of all things.

Now, an hour before U.S. markets closed, news leaked that a company we had a large position in was being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission. Stocks were in free fall, which meant the value of our position was declining by the minute, and my plans to leave early had disintegrated faster than tissue paper in a washing machine. As the CEO of a major financial conglomerate, I didn't have the luxury of delegating crisis management.

"Talk to me." Brisk strides took me from my office to the emergency staff meeting three doors down in thirty seconds. My muscles coiled so tight, it was a miracle they didn't cramp. I'd lost millions in minutes, and I didn't have time to beat around the bush.

"Rumor has it the SEC is going hard on this one." Caroline, my chief of staff, matched my pace with ease. "The new chairman wants to make a

splashy first impression. What better way to do that than to go head-to-head with one of the biggest banks in the country?”

For fuck’s sake. It was always the newbies that crashed their way through their first year like a bull in a china shop. I had a good relationship with the old chairman, but the new one was a goddamn thorn in my side, and he’d only been there for three months.

I checked my watch as I pushed open the door to the executive conference room. A quarter past three. I was supposed to fly out to DC with Alessandra at six. If I kept the meeting short and drove straight to the airport instead of stopping at home first like I’d originally planned, I could still make it.

Dammit. Why did the chairman have to upend things on my wedding anniversary, of all days?

I took my seat at the head of the table and reached for my lighter. It was instinct at this point; I didn’t even have to think about it. “Give me the numbers.”

Thoughts of DC and upcoming flights melted away as I flicked the lighter on and off while my team debated the pros and cons of dumping our position in the bank versus weathering the storm. There was no room for personal concerns in times of emergencies, and the solid, comforting weight of silver focused my thoughts on the task at hand instead of the insidious whispers crowding my brain.

They were always there, filling my head with doubts like how I was one bad decision away from losing everything. How I was and always would be the butt of every joke, the foster kid whose own biological mother abandoned him and who flunked sixth grade twice.

The “problem student,” my teachers lamented.

The “idiot,” my classmates jeered.

The “slacker,” my guidance counselor sighed.

The voices were loudest in times of crisis. I reigned over a multi-billion-dollar empire, but I walked through the halls every day with the prospect of a crash hanging over me.

On. Off. On. Off. The increased speed of my flicks matched my escalating heartbeats.

“Sir.” Caroline’s voice cut through the buzzing in my ears. “What’s your verdict?”

I blinked away the unwanted memories lurking at the corners of my consciousness. The room came back into focus, revealing my team’s anxious, expectant expressions.

Someone had pulled up a presentation sometime in the past minute, even though I’d repeatedly said I hated slide decks. The right side was filled with a comforting mix of charts and numbers, but the left contained several lengthy bullet points.

The sentences swam before me. They didn’t look right; I was sure my brain had added some words while erasing others. The back of my neck heated while my heartbeats thundered with such fury, it felt like they were trying to punch through my chest and knock the words off the screen in one fell swoop.

“What did I say about presentation format?” I could barely hear myself over the noise. It grew louder every second, and only my painful grip on the lighter prevented me from unraveling. “No. Bullet points.”

I bit out the words, and the room fell deathly silent.

“I-I’m sorry, sir.” The analyst presenting the slides paled to the point of translucence. “My assistant— ”

“I don’t give a damn about your assistant.” I was being an asshole, but I didn’t have time to feel bad about it. Not when my stomach was turning and a migraine was already crawling its way behind my temple.

On. Off. On. Off.

I turned my head and focused on the charts instead. The switch in focus, combined with the clicks of the lighter, calmed me enough to think clearly again.

SEC. Tumbling stocks. What to do with our position.

I couldn’t fully shake the sense that one day, I would fuck up so royally that I’d destroy everything I had, but that day wouldn’t be today.

I knew what to do, and as I laid out my strategy for holding on to our position, I pushed every other voice out of my head—including the one telling me that I was forgetting something damn important.

CHAPTER 3

Alessandra



HE WASN'T COMING.

I sat in the living room, my skin ice cold as I watched the minutes tick by. It was past eight. We were supposed to leave for DC two hours ago, but I hadn't seen or heard from Dominic since he left for work that morning. My calls had gone to voicemail, and I refused to check in with his office like some random acquaintance begging for a minute of the great Dominic Davenport's time.

I was his wife, dammit. I shouldn't have to chase him down or guess his whereabouts. Then again, it didn't take a genius to figure out what he was doing right now.

Working. Always working. Even on our ten-year anniversary. Even after I'd stressed how important this trip was.

I finally had a good reason to cry, but no tears came. I just felt...numb. A part of me had expected him to forget or postpone, and wasn't that the saddest part?

"Mrs. Davenport!" Our housekeeper, Camila, entered the room, her arms laden with freshly laundered linen. She'd returned from her vacation last night and had spent the day tidying up the penthouse. "I thought you already left."

“No.” My voice sounded strange and hollow. “I don’t think I’ll be going anywhere this weekend after all.”

“Why...” She trailed off, her eagle eyes taking in the luggage next to the couch and my white-knuckled grip on my knees. Her round, matronly face softened with a mix of sympathy and pity. “Ah. In that case, I’ll make dinner for you. Moqueca. Your favorite, hmm?”

Ironically, the fish stew was what my old childhood housekeeper made me when I was heartbroken over a boy. I wasn’t hungry, but I didn’t have the energy to argue.

“Thanks, Camila.”

While she bustled off to the kitchen, I tried to sort through the chaos swirling through my brain.

Cancel all our reservations or wait? Is he simply late or is he not going on the trip at all? Do I even want to go on this trip now, even if he does?

Dominic and I were supposed to spend the weekend in DC, where we’d met and gotten married. I had it all planned out—dinner at our first-date restaurant, a suite at a cozy boutique hotel, no phones or work allowed. It was supposed to be a trip for *us*. As our relationship frayed further every day, I’d hoped it would bring us closer again. Make us fall in love the way we had a lifetime ago.

But I realized that was impossible because neither of us was the same person we used to be. Dominic wasn’t the boy who gave himself a hundred paper cuts making origami versions of my favorite flowers for my birthday, and I wasn’t the girl who floated through life with stars and dreams in her eyes.

“I don’t have the money to buy you all the flowers you deserve yet,” he said, sounding so solemn and formal I couldn’t help but smile at the contrast between his tone and the jar of colorful paper flowers in his hands. “So I made them instead.”

My breath caught in my throat. “Dom...”

There must’ve been hundreds of flowers in there. I didn’t want to think about how long it took him to make them.

“Happy birthday, amor.” His mouth lingered on mine in a long, sweet kiss. “One day, I’ll buy you a thousand real roses. I promise.”

He’d kept that promise, but he’d broken a thousand more since.

A salty trickle finally snaked its way down my cheek and shocked me out of my frozen stupor.

I stood, my breaths shallowing with each step as I walked quickly to the nearest bathroom. Camila and the staff were too busy to notice my silent breakdown, but I couldn’t bear the thought of crying alone in the living room, surrounded by luggage that would go nowhere and hopes that’d been shattered too many times to mend properly.

So, so stupid.

What made me think tonight would be different? Our anniversary probably meant as much to Dominic as a random Friday night dinner.

Dull pain sharpened into knives as I locked the bathroom door behind me. My reflection stared back from the mirror. Brown hair, blue eyes, tanned skin. I looked the same as I always did, but I hardly recognized myself. It was like seeing a stranger wear my face.

Where was the girl who’d pushed back against her mother’s modeling dreams for her and insisted on going to college instead? Who’d lived life with unapologetic joy and unbridled optimism, and who’d once dumped a boy for forgetting her birthday? That girl would’ve never sat around waiting for a man. She’d had goals and dreams, but somewhere along the way, they’d fallen by the wayside, consumed by the gravity of her husband’s ambition.

If I pleased him, if I organized the right dinners with the right people, if I made the right connections, I would be useful to him. Years of helping him accomplish his dreams meant I hadn’t lived—I’d served a purpose.

Alessandra Ferreira was gone, replaced by Alessandra Davenport. Wife, hostess, socialite. Someone defined only by her marriage to *the* Dominic Davenport. Everything I did for the past decade had been for him, and he didn’t even care enough to call and tell me he’d be late for our fucking ten-year anniversary.

The dam burst.

A solitary tear turned into two, then three, then a whole flood as I sank to the floor and cried. Every heartbreak, every disappointment, every piece of sadness and resentment I'd harbored poured out in a river of grief edged with anger. I'd bottled up so much over the years that I was afraid I'd drown beneath the waves of my own emotions.

Cold, hard tile dug into the backs of my thighs. For the first time in forever, I allowed myself to *feel*, and with that came blinding clarity.

I couldn't do this anymore.

I couldn't spend the rest of my days going through the motions and pretending to be happy. I had to take back control of my life—even if it meant destroying the one I currently had.

I was hollow and brittle, a million shattered pieces that hurt too much to pick up.

My sobs eventually slowed then subsided altogether, and before I could second-guess myself, I pushed off the floor and stepped back into the hall. The temperature-controlled penthouse maintained a perfect seventy-three degrees year-round, but tiny shivers wracked my body as I grabbed what I needed from the bedroom. The rest of my essentials were already packed and waiting in the living room.

I didn't allow myself to think. If I did, I would chicken out, and I couldn't afford to at this stage.

A familiar sparkle caught my eye when I pulled my suitcase handle up. I stared at my wedding ring, a fresh ache tearing through my chest as it blinked up at me in a seeming plea to reconsider.

I faltered for a split second before I set my jaw, slid the ring off my finger, and placed it next to my and Dominic's wedding picture on the mantel.

Then I finally did what I should've done a long time ago.

I left.

CHAPTER 4

Dominic



“ÁLE!” MY VOICE ECHOED THROUGH THE PENTHOUSE. “I’m home.”

Silence.

My brows dipped. Alessandra usually stayed in the living room until it was time for bed, and it was too early for her to go to sleep. My emergency work meeting had segued into a second emergency meeting after several investors called, panicking about the falling stocks. Still, it was only half past eight. She should be here unless she’d gone out with her friends again.

I tossed my coat on the bronze tree by the door and loosened my tie, trying to ignore the niggling sense that something was wrong. It was hard to think properly during my work-fueled adrenaline crash.

I’d nearly had a heart attack the first time Alessandra went clubbing with Vivian and didn’t tell me. I came home early, didn’t see her, and pictured the worst. I’d called every damn person in my phone book until she finally called me back and reassured me she was okay.

I reached for my cell only to remember it’d died that afternoon. I hadn’t had time to charge it amidst all the chaos.

Dammit.

“Ále!” I called out again. “Where are you, *amor*?”

Still no answer.

I crossed the living room and took the stairs to the second floor. Forty million dollars bought quite a few perks in Manhattan, including a private elevator entrance, twelve thousand square feet spread over two floors, and sweeping views that encompassed the Hudson River to the south, the George Washington bridge to the north, and New Jersey to the west.

I barely noticed any of it. We wouldn't live here forever; I already had my eye on a bigger, even more expensive penthouse that was currently under development by the Archer Group. It didn't matter that I spent only a fraction of my time at home. Real estate was a symbol, and if it wasn't the best, I didn't want it.

I opened the doors to the master suite. I expected to see Alessandra curled up in bed or reading in the sitting area, but they were as empty as the living room.

My eyes landed on the suitcase by the closet. It was the one I usually took for short trips. Why—

My blood turned to ice.

DC. Anniversary. Six p.m. No wonder I'd been walking around with an impending sense of dread all evening. I'd forgotten our goddamned wedding anniversary.

"Fuck." I pulled out my phone only to remember it was dead.

A fresh litany of curses spilled out as I yanked open various drawers, searching for a charger while our conversation from Wednesday night replayed in my head.

Dom. It's important.

I won't forget. I promise.

Thick, slimy dread gnawed at my stomach. I'd missed dates before. I wasn't proud of it, but last-minute emergencies were the nature of my work, and Alessandra always seemed to take it in stride. I had a sinking feeling this time was different, and not only because it was our anniversary.

I finally found a charger and plugged my phone in. After what seemed like an eternity, it gained enough charge to blink on.

Six missed calls from Alessandra, all received between five and eight p.m. Nothing since then.

I tried calling her back, but it went straight to voicemail. I bit back another curse and pivoted to the second-best option: her friends. I didn't have their numbers, but luckily, I knew someone who did.

"It's Dominic," I said brusquely when Dante picked up my call. "Is Vivian there? I need to talk to her."

"Good evening to you too," he drawled. Dante Russo was a friend, a longtime client, and the CEO of the world's largest luxury conglomerate. Most importantly, he was married to Vivian, whom Alessandra had gotten quite close to over the past year. If anyone knew where my wife was, she did. "Tell me why, exactly, you need to talk to Vivian this late on a Friday night?"

A hint of suspicion leaked into his voice. He was fiercely protective of his wife, which was ironic considering he hadn't wanted to marry her at all when they initially got engaged.

"It's about Alessandra." I didn't supply any further details. My marriage was none of his damn business.

A short pause greeted my answer. "Hold on."

"Hello?" Vivian's elegant, dulcet tones floated over the line two seconds later.

"Is Alessandra with you?" I skipped the niceties and cut straight to the chase. I didn't care if she thought I was rude; I only cared about finding my wife. It was late, she was upset, and New York was filled with unsavory people. She could be lost or hurt right now.

My gut twisted into knots.

"No," Vivian said after way too long. "Why?"

"She's not at home, and it's not like her to be out this late." I skipped over the wedding anniversary part. Once again, our marriage was no one else's business except ours.

"Maybe she's with Isabella or Sloane."

Isabella and Sloane. Alessandra's other friends. I didn't know them as well as Vivian, but it didn't matter. I'd talk to the goddamn cat lady who was always falling asleep in our lobby if she had an inkling of where Alessandra was.

Unfortunately, Isabella and Sloane were also clueless to Alessandra's whereabouts, and my calls after I hung up with them went to voicemail again.

Dammit, Ále. Where are you?

I headed downstairs again and nearly crashed into Camila.

"Mr. Davenport!" Her eyes widened. I'd forgotten she was back from vacation. "Welcome—"

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Alessandra." The name came out through gritted teeth. I sounded like a damn broken record, but Camila must've been here when she left.

"Ah. Mrs. Davenport was quite upset about the missed flight." The housekeeper's pursed lips told me exactly what she thought about my tardiness. "I made her favorite soup to cheer her up, but when I came back from the kitchen, she was already gone."

"You didn't hear her leave." My voice was flat. Cold.

"No." Camila's eyes darted left and right.

I liked the woman well enough. She was competent, discreet, and one of Alessandra's favorite staff members, but if she was hiding something from me and Alessandra got hurt as a result...

I went deathly still. "I'm asking you one last time," I said quietly. Blood roared in my ears, nearly drowning out my words. "*Where is my wife?*"

A tremble betrayed Camila's nerves. "I really don't know, sir. Like I said, I came out and she was gone. But when I was looking for her..." She pulled something from her pocket. "I found this on the mantel."

A familiar diamond glittered in her palm. Alessandra's wedding ring.

A sick, sour feeling spread through my stomach.

"I was going to put it in your room," Camila said. "But considering—"

"When?"

"About half an hour ago."

The answer hadn't fully left her mouth before I grabbed the ring and brushed past her toward the elevator, my pulse pounding with a mix of dread, panic, and something else I couldn't quite name.

Half an hour. It was nine and Alessandra's last call to me had been at eight, which meant Camila had found the ring not too long after she left. She couldn't have gone too far.

My hand closed around the diamond. She wouldn't have taken it off unless—

No. She was pissed, as she had a right to be, but I'd find her, explain, and everything would go back to normal. Alessandra was the most understanding person I knew; she'd forgive me.

The diamond dug a painful groove in my palm.

Everything will be fine. It had to be. I couldn't imagine any other alternative.

CHAPTER 5

Alessandra



INSTEAD OF GOING TO ONE OF MY FRIENDS' HOUSES, I checked into a hotel and paid for the week with cash. I didn't want Dominic tracing my whereabouts via my credit card. Luckily, I had my own money from Floria Designs and the foresight to stash an emergency bundle at home when the business took off. It was enough to cover the hotel and hold me over while I figured out what to do.

Was leaving without a word the coward's way out? Probably. But I needed time alone to think, which was why I didn't update my friends immediately either.

I'd turned my phone off after leaving the penthouse, and I left it off while I unpacked, showered, and tried not to think about the past few hours or the sharp ache in my chest.

"Dom!" I laughed when Dominic stepped into the shower and wrapped his arms around my waist from behind. "You're supposed to be ordering room service."

"I did order room service." His mouth trailed over my shoulder and up my neck. Despite the steam clouding the bathroom, goose bumps of pleasure pebbled my skin. "But I decided I want dessert first."

"What if I don't agree?" I teased. "Maybe I want to follow the normal order of things. Not all of us can be rule breakers."

“In that case...” Dominic’s mouth reached the corner of my lips. One hand palmed my breast while the other dipped leisurely between my legs. Pleasure spiraled in my stomach, and I couldn’t hold back a soft sigh. “I’ll just have to find a way to convince you, won’t I?”

I closed my eyes, letting the hot water wash away my tears. We were miles and years away from our first weekend getaway as a couple, but I could almost feel the phantom strength of his embrace. We’d had sex twice in the shower; by the time we came out, our room service meal had been cold, but we hadn’t even cared. We’d devoured the food like it’d been freshly made.

I stayed in the shower longer than I should’ve, but the water, heat, and emotions of the night conspired to pull me under. The moment my head hit the pillow, I was out.

When I woke up the next morning and finally turned on my phone, I had dozens of missed texts, calls, and voicemails from my friends and Dominic. He must’ve reached out to them after he came home and found me missing.

I sent a quick message to the group chat assuring my friends I was okay and that I would tell them everything later before taking a deep breath and opening Dominic’s voicemails.

My heart instantly squeezed at the sound of his voice, which grew increasingly panicked with each message.

Dominic: Where are you?

Dominic: Ále, this isn’t funny.

Dominic: I’m sorry I missed our flight. A work emergency came up and I had to deal with it. We can still make the rest of the trip.

Dominic: Dammit, Alessandra. I understand if you’re mad, but at least let me know you’re okay. I don’t—fuck.

A string of curses blended with the unmistakable patter of rain against concrete in the background. The message’s timestamp read 3:29 a.m. What the hell was he doing out so late?

Looking for you.

I squashed the thought as quickly as it popped up, partly because I didn't believe the new Dominic would do something like that and partly because it hurt too much to think he *would*.

His last message was two hours ago at 6:23 a.m.

Dominic: Call me back. Please.

The squeeze in my chest became unbearable. I wasn't ready to face him, but sleep had cleared last night's emotional fog, and the desperation in his voice eroded my earlier vow to avoid him until I had a plan. It was better to see him and rip the Band-Aid off, so to speak, than let the uncertainty fester.

"Violet Hotel." I didn't give him a chance to speak when he picked up. "Lower East Side."

I ended the call, my stomach a mess of nerves. I hadn't eaten dinner last night, but the thought of food made my stomach revolt further. Nevertheless, I forced down some trail mix from the minibar. I'd need the energy. If there was one thing Dominic was good at, it was persuading people to do what he wanted.

I was already second-guessing my choices. In the bright light of day, my ring finger felt impossibly bare and my decision to leave seemed impossibly rash. Should I have waited and talked to Dominic before walking out? What if—

Someone knocked at the door.

My stomach pitched again. I suddenly regretted telling him where I was, but it was too late.

It's like pulling off a Band-Aid. Just get it over with.

Still, no amount of internal pep talk could've prepared me for the sight awaiting me when I opened the door.

"Oh my God." A gasp escaped before I could hold it in.

Dominic looked like hell. Disheveled hair, rumpled shirt, purple smudges of exhaustion beneath his eyes. His clothes were plastered to his body, and his usually pristine shoes looked like they'd gone through a Tough Mudder obstacle course.

“What— ” I didn’t get a chance to finish my question before he grabbed my arms and swept his eyes over me.

“You’re okay.” Relief softened the rough edge of voice. He sounded like he was either recovering from a horrible cold or he’d been shouting all night.

“I’m fine.” *Physically*. “Why are you all wet?”

He was dripping water all over the floor. Nevertheless, I pulled him inside and shut the door behind us. It was a low-key hotel, but I didn’t want to risk people seeing or overhearing us. Manhattan was a small island, and Manhattan society was smaller still.

“I got caught in the rain.” Dominic’s eyes swept over the room and stopped on my open suitcase. “And it’s hard to see puddles at four in the morning.”

“Why the hell were you wandering around Manhattan at four in the morning?”

His disbelieving eyes snapped back to mine. “I come home from work to find my wife gone and her wedding ring in our damn housekeeper’s pocket. She’s not answering my calls, and none of her friends know where she is. I thought you— ” He took a deep breath and released it in one long, controlled exhale. “I went to your usual places until I realized they were all, of course, closed that late at night. So I had my security team sweeping the city while I checked your favorite neighborhoods. Just in case. I didn’t know...”

My breath stuck at the mental image of Dominic wandering the streets in the rain looking for me. It was so incongruous with the cold, disinterested man I’d become used to that it almost sounded like he was spinning a fairy tale instead of telling the truth.

But the evidence was there, and it sent a fresh, crippling wave of pain through my chest.

If only he cared that much all the time. If only it didn’t take me leaving to unbury a piece of the person I’d fallen in love with.

“When did you get home?” I asked quietly.

Dull red tinged his cheekbones. “Eight thirty.”

Two and a half hours after our scheduled departure time. I wondered whether he'd forgotten about our anniversary or whether he remembered but ignored it anyway. I couldn't decide which was worse, but it didn't matter. The end result was the same.

"I didn't mean to miss the flight," Dominic said. "There was a work emergency. Ask Caroline. The SEC—"

"That's the thing." My earlier concern melted away, replaced with a familiar exhaustion. Not the type that followed a sleepless night, but the type built over years of hearing the same excuse. "There's *always* a work emergency. If it's not the SEC, it's the stock market. If it's not the stock market, it's some corporate scandal. No matter what it is, it always comes first. Before me. Before *us*."

Dominic's jaw tightened. "I can't ignore those things," he said. "People depend on me. *Billions* of dollars ride on my decisions. My employees and investors—"

"What about me? Do I not count as people?"

"Of course you do." He sounded baffled.

"And when I was depending on you to show up like you promised?" Emotion clogged my throat. "Was that less important than a multibillion-dollar corporation that'll probably be just fine if you took *one* weekend off?"

Tense silence mushroomed and nearly choked us until he spoke again.

"Do you remember our senior year of college?" Dominic's gaze burned into mine. "We barely saw each other outside of school because I had to work three jobs just to cover basic living expenses. We ate fucking instant ramen on our dates because I couldn't afford to take you out to nice restaurants. It was miserable, and I promised myself that if I ever made it out, I would never be in that situation again. *We* wouldn't be in that situation again. And we haven't."

He gestured between us. "Look at us. We have everything we've ever dreamed of, but the only way to *keep* it is to do my job. The penthouse, the clothes, the jewelry. All of it goes away if—"

“What good is any of that if I never *see* you?” My frustration bubbled over to its tipping point. “I don’t *care* about the fancy penthouse or clothes or jet. I would rather have a husband. A real one, not one just in name.”

Maybe I didn’t understand because I came from a well-off family and therefore could never fully empathize with the obstacles Dominic had to overcome to get to where he was. Maybe I was too out of the loop to understand the stakes of the Wall Street game. But I knew myself, and I knew that I’d been a thousand times happier eating ramen with him in his dorm room than I’d ever been attending some fancy gala draped in jewels and a fake smile.

Dominic’s eyes darkened. “It’s not that simple. I don’t have a rich family to fall back on if things go to shit, *Ále*,” he said harshly. “*Everything* is on me.”

“Maybe, but you’re Dominic Davenport. You’re a *billionaire*! You can afford a weekend off. Hell, you could retire this minute and still have enough money to live in luxury for the rest of your life!”

He didn’t get it. I could tell by the stubborn look in his eyes.

The fight bled out of me, and my exhaustion returned tenfold. My voice dropped to a whisper. “It was our ten-year anniversary.”

Dominic’s throat flexed with a hard swallow. “We can leave now,” he said. “We have almost two full days left. We can still celebrate our anniversary like we’d intended.”

No matter how much I tried to explain, he didn’t get *why* I was upset. It wasn’t about physical, tangible things like flights and dinner reservations. It was about a fundamental disconnect in our values and what we deemed important for a good relationship. I believed in quality time and conversation; he believed money could fix everything.

He’d always been ambitious, but I used to think he would hit a point when he’d be content with what he had. I realized now that point didn’t exist. He would never have enough. The more he acquired—money, status, power—the more he wanted at the expense of everything else.

I shook my head slowly. “No.”

I hadn't known what my plan was when I woke up that morning, but it was now crystal clear.

Even if it killed me, even if the easiest thing was to fall into his arms and sink into the memory of what we used to be, I had to go through with it. I was already a shell of myself. If I didn't get out while I could, I'd dissolve into dust, nothing more than a collection of lost time and unrealized dreams.

The stubborn gleam in Dominic's eyes faded, replaced with confusion. "Then come home with me. We'll talk it out."

I shook my head again, trying to breathe through the needles stabbing at my heart. "I'm not coming back."

He stilled. Confusion melted into realization, then disbelief. "Ale—"
"I want a divorce."

CHAPTER 6

Dominic



I WANT A DIVORCE.

The words swirled around us like a cloud of poisonous fumes. Theoretically, I understood what they meant, but I couldn't comprehend them.

Divorce meant breaking up. Breaking up meant separating. And separating was simply impossible. It was something that happened to other people, not to us.

Her wedding ring burned a hole in my pocket.

"I can't believe I married someone who likes mint chocolate chip," I said as Alessandra hovered down a bowl of her favorite ice cream. "You know you're basically eating toothpaste, right?"

"Delicious toothpaste." Her mischievous smile hit me right in the gut. We'd been married exactly one week, two days, and twelve hours, and I still couldn't believe she was mine. "You knew about my taste in dessert before our wedding, so you can't complain now. I'm afraid you're stuck with me and my mint chocolate forever."

Forever.

The concept seemed laughable a year ago. Nothing lasted forever. People, places, relationships...everything had an expiration date.

But for the first time in my life, I allowed myself to believe someone when they said they would stay.

My hand found hers and laced our fingers together. "Promise?"

Her face softened. We were technically supposed to be watching the latest action blockbuster, but the explosions were mere background noise at this point. "I promise."

A door slammed in the hallway, and the memory fizzled as quickly as it arose.

The buzzing in my ears returned. "You don't mean that."

Alessandra simply stared at me, her eyes bright with unshed tears but her face set with quiet determination.

Christ, why was my tie so damned tight? I couldn't breathe properly.

I reached up to loosen it, but my fingers found nothing except damp cotton. No tie, only a vise around my neck and a fist strangling my lungs.

"You never told me." I dropped my arm, wondering where the hell we went wrong. "You never said a thing about any of this until now."

Had I missed more dates than I should've these past few years? Yes. Did Alessandra and I talk as much as we used to? No. But that was the nature of building an empire, and I thought we understood each other. We'd been together for so long; we didn't need to constantly reassure each other of our relationship.

"I should've." Alessandra looked away. "That was my fault. I kept it all to myself when I should've told you how I was feeling. It's not just about one trip or dinner. It's not even about a dozen trips and dinners. It's about what missing them represents." Her eyes met mine again, and my heart twisted at the hurt I saw in them. Had I really been so blind I'd missed how unhappy she'd been all this time? "You've made it clear, time and again, that I'm not a priority."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?" She gave me a sad smile. "Do you know what I asked myself every night when you were staying late at the office again? I wondered, if there was an emergency at work and at home at the same time, who you would choose. Me or your investors?"

The buzzing intensified. “You know I would choose you.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t.” A tear slipped down her cheek. “Because you haven’t chosen me. Not in a very, very long time.”

Silence fell between us, punctuated by my rapid breaths and the deafening ticks of the clock in the corner. Any response I might’ve had was crushed beneath the weight of her tears.

Poverty. Failure. Sabotage. I’d endured plenty over the years and survived, but seeing Alessandra cry was the one thing that could bring me to my knees. Every damn time.

“I’ve made so many excuses for you, both to my friends and to myself, but I can’t do it anymore.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “We’ve been holding on to something that doesn’t exist anymore, and we need to let go. We’ll both be happier.”

Every syllable chipped away at the composure I’d spent a decade constructing. An army of emotions stormed through me—anger, shame, and a fierce desperation that I hadn’t felt since I was a teenager fighting to get out of my godforsaken hometown.

I wasn’t supposed to feel any of those things anymore, dammit. I was a goddamn CEO, not a helpless boy with no family and no money to his name. But when faced with the prospect of losing Alessandra...

Panic seized my chest. “You honestly think we’ll be happier if we divorce? That I’ll be happier without you? This is *us*.” The word ripped from my throat, raw and loaded with emotion. “*Você e eu. Para sempre.*” *You and me. Forever.*

Alessandra’s quiet sob ripped at my heart. I reached for her, and when she shrank back, the rip turned into a full-blown chasm.

“Don’t make this any harder than it has to be.” The words were barely audible. “Please.”

My hand dropped to my side as the fist squeezed tighter around my lungs. I didn’t know how we got here, but I damn well wasn’t walking away without a fight.

“I fucked up yesterday,” I said. “And I’ve fucked up many more times before that. But I’m still your husband, and you’re still my wife.”

She closed her eyes, her tears now a quiet, steady stream running down her face. “Dom...”

“We’ll work this out.” The thought of living without her was incomprehensible, like asking a heart to stop beating or the stars to give up the night. “I promise.”

We had to.

Maybe I haven’t expressed it as much as I should have, but Alessandra was an indelible part of me. She had been since the moment I laid eyes on her eleven years ago, though I hadn’t known it at the time.

Without her, there was no me.

CHAPTER 7

Dominic



Eleven Years Ago

"I DON'T NEED A BABYSITTER."

"She's not a babysitter," Professor Ehrlich said patiently. "She's a tutor. One of our best, in fact. She's worked with multiple students with dyslexia —"

"I don't need a tutor either." The thought of some know-it-all condescending to me every week made me want to crawl out of my skin. I'd made it this far on my own, hadn't I?

I didn't have any tutors growing up and my teachers had been mediocre at best, destructive at worst. Yet here I was, sitting in a top economist's office at the prestigious Thayer University, less than a year away from receiving my double economics and business degree. I could practically taste the money and freedom already.

Professor Ehrlich sighed. He was used to my stubbornness, but something in his tone had my gut tightening with unease.

"You do need one," he said, his voice gentle. "English literature and composition is a core requirement. You already failed it once, and it's only offered in the fall. If you fail it again this semester, you won't graduate."

My pulse spiked, but I kept my expression neutral. “I won’t fail. I’ve learned from my mistakes.”

I didn’t understand why I had to take English in the first place. I was going into finance, not goddamn publishing. I was acing my economics classes, and that was what really mattered.

“Perhaps, but I’d rather not risk it.” Professor Ehrlich sighed again. “You have a brilliant mind, Dominic. I’ve never met anyone with such a natural gift for numbers, and I’ve been teaching for decades. But talent will only get you so far. A Thayer degree opens doors, but to get it, you need to play by the rules. You want to make it big on Wall Street? You have to graduate first, and you can’t do that if you insist on choosing your pride over your future.”

My knuckles turned white around the armrests.

Maybe it was the fear of losing when I was so close to the finish line, or maybe it was because Professor Ehrlich was the only teacher who’d ever given a damn about me.

Whatever it was, it forced me to swallow my knee-jerk distaste over his suggestion and relent, at least partly, through gritted teeth.

“Fine. I’ll meet with her once,” I said. “But if I don’t like her, I’m not meeting with her again.”

The following Monday, I showed up at Thayer’s main library, ready to get the meeting over with. It was nearly empty this early in the semester, so it shouldn’t take long to find my tutor among the stacks.

Professor Ehrlich had given us each other’s contact information, and she’d left me a voicemail that morning confirming our appointment.

I’ll be on the second floor wearing a yellow dress. See you soon.

She didn’t sound as chirpy as I’d feared. In fact, her voice was oddly soothing. Rich and creamy, with a gentle calm that wouldn’t be out of place in a yoga studio or a therapist’s office.

Still, I was predisposed to not like her. Professor Ehrlich aside, I didn't have the best record with anyone in a teaching position.

My eyes landed on a flash of color near the window.

Yellow dress. Coffee and a familiar blue English comp textbook. That had to be Alessandra.

She had her head bent over something on the table, and she didn't look up even when I pulled out the chair opposite hers. *Typical*. I'd tried working with a handful of tutors in high school and quickly ditched them when it became clear they were more interested in checking their messages and texting.

I opened my mouth, but my irritation died in my throat when Alessandra finally lifted her head and our eyes met.

Her voice was made for radio, but her face was made for the goddamned silver screen. Full lips, high cheekbones, skin that glowed like liquid silk in the sunlight. Chestnut hair spilled in thick, silky waves over her tanned shoulders, and her blue-gray eyes sparkled with warmth as she stood and held out her hand.

Thayer was filled with beautiful girls, but there was beautiful, and there was her.

"You must be Dominic," she said. Somehow, she sounded even better in person. "I'm Alessandra, but my friends call me Ále."

I finally found my voice. "Hello, Alessandra." I placed extra emphasis on her full name. We weren't friends. We just met, and my reaction to her was purely physical. It didn't mean anything.

"Nice to meet you." If she was put off by my pointed use of her full name, she didn't show it.

"Since this is our first meeting and the semester hasn't fully kicked off yet, I didn't prepare any study materials," she said after we settled into our seats. "You're heartbroken, I'm sure."

"Inconsolable."

Alessandra's quick grin sent an equally quick frisson of warmth through my veins. I shifted, half wishing I'd never showed up and half wishing I'd never have to leave.

“I thought we’d discuss expectations and get to know each other a bit during today’s session,” she said. “Even though this is a formal tutoring partnership, it helps if we like each other.”

One of *those* types. I should’ve figured. “As long as you don’t ask me to braid your hair,” I said. “Neither of us would be happy.”

Her laugh almost brought a smile to my lips.

Almost.

“No hair braiding, I promise, but I can’t guarantee I won’t show up with cookies every now and then. They’re wonderfully unhealthy and, if things get down to the wire, they work quite well as bribes.” Another grin, another frisson of warmth. “Don’t ask me how I know.”

For the next hour, we discussed our schedules for the semester, Professor Ruth’s irrational love of juxtaposition, and random shit like our favorite music artists and colors. Alessandra also dug deep into my learning habits—what type of environment I preferred; whether I learned best through sound, visuals, or hands-on activities; even what time of day I usually got the most tired.

I’d never paid attention to half those things before and balked at answering, but for someone who resembled a grown-up Disney princess, she was like a damn pit bull with a bone.

I eventually relented and answered after some thought.

Learning environment: big table, natural light, some background noise as opposed to total silence.

Learning medium: visuals.

Time of day when I usually wanted to take a nap: early afternoon.

“Perfect. This was very helpful,” she said at the end of our hour. “I think we’ll get along just fine. Anyone who’s a fan of Garage Sushi is friend material.”

Our mutual interest in the local indie band had been a pleasant surprise, though I hardly considered it a solid basis for a friendship.

“Does the same time next week work for you?” she asked. “I don’t have class on Mondays, so I’m flexible.”

“No. My SAT tutoring gig starts next week.” Rich people spent ridiculous amounts of money to get their kids into the Ivy League, and the cash I raked in from my math lessons went a long way in covering my expenses.

“What about in the morning?”

“Work.”

“Night?”

“Work.”

Her brows rose. “So you work, tutor, then go back to work?”

“Two different jobs,” I said stiffly. “Cafe in the morning, Frankie’s at night.” I’d stacked all my classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays so I could work the other days. Between the coffee shop, diner, tutoring, and occasional lawn-mowing gig on the weekend, I earned just enough to sort of fit in at Thayer.

I didn’t actually care about ingratiating myself with my classmates, most of whom came from wealthy prep school backgrounds I could never relate to, but the biggest benefit of attending a school like Thayer was the networking. In order for people to take me seriously, I needed to look the part, and looking the part was damn expensive.

Alessandra’s face softened. She was the type of student who belonged without trying. She didn’t mention what her parents did, but I could tell just by looking at her that she came from money.

“What time do you get off work?” she asked. “We can meet then. Based on our schedules, Mondays are the— ”

“I don’t get off work until eleven.” I challenged her with a cool stare. “I’m guessing that’s too late for you.” I left out the part about how I usually studied after work. I didn’t know why, but I focused better when I was tired.

I liked Alessandra more than I thought I would, but I wasn’t convinced about this whole tutoring thing. The last thing I needed was her to bail on me in the middle of the semester because I wasn’t progressing fast enough for her.

“Good thing I’m a night owl,” she said, meeting my stare with a serene one of her own. “See you next Monday.”

I didn't believe for a second Alessandra would give up her Monday night—or any night—to tutor me. She probably had a date or party to attend, which was just fine. If we couldn't make a time work, then we couldn't make a time work. Despite Professor Ehrlich's reservations, I was confident I could pass English on my own. I had to. Not graduating was not an alternative.

I wiped down a table at Frankie's, trying to ignore an unwanted pang of jealousy at the thought of Alessandra on a date. I had no claim on her, nor did I want any. I'd hooked up with a few girls at Thayer but never bothered dating any. I was busy enough without dealing with the drama of romantic entanglements.

"Whoa." Lincoln let out a low whistle from the booth where he was scarfing down a burger and fries instead of closing up shop. He was the owner's nephew and one of the laziest fucking human beings I'd ever encountered. "Who is *that*?"

I glanced up, already annoyed that someone was walking in five minutes before closing time, but for the second time in a week, my annoyance died a quick death.

Brown hair. Blue eyes. An armful of books and a half-teasing, half-challenging smile as she took in my shock.

Alessandra. Here. In Frankie's. At eleven fucking o'clock on a Monday night.

What the *hell* was she doing here?

"We're closed," I said, even though we weren't supposed to turn away customers until the absolute last minute and it wasn't my place to turn them away in the first place.

Lincoln stopped drooling long enough to glare at me. "Dude," he hissed. "What are you *doing*?"

"I'm not here for the food," Alessandra said calmly. "We have a tutoring session, remember? I'm here to give you a ride." She sat at a counter stool. "Don't mind me. I'll wait until you're done."

“That’s your tutor? Damn, I should’ve stayed in school.” Lincoln resumed ogling her in a way that made me want to rip his eyes out of their sockets.

“I’m tired.” I stepped in front of him, blocking his view. It was either that or earn myself an arrest for assaulting my boss’s nephew. “We’ll schedule our session for another day.”

“Perfect,” she said, ignoring Lincoln’s indignant protest. “You focus better when you’re tired, right?”

How—*Professor Ehrlich*. I was going to kill him.

I could tell by the look on Alessandra’s face that she wasn’t going to budge, so I didn’t argue further. I’d learned how to pick my battles a long time ago.

Eventually, Lincoln tired of leering at her—either that, or he was put off by my death stare—and left me to close up shop.

“Don’t you have other things to do?” I asked when Alessandra and I finally settled into a booth. “It’s almost midnight.”

“Like I said, I’m a night owl.” She gave me a mischievous smile. “And I heard the milkshakes here are really good.”

I snorted, reining in the small laugh that’d almost escaped. “What happened to not being here for the food?”

“Technically true, but I’ll never turn down a shake if someone offers me one.”

“Right.” She had to have an ulterior motive for showing up. People didn’t go above and beyond like this out of the goodness of their hearts.

Alessandra must’ve picked up on my lingering suspicion because her teasing expression sobered.

“Look, I know you don’t trust me yet, and I don’t blame you, but I want to make one thing clear,” she said. “I’m your tutor, not your mother or a drill sergeant. I promise I will do my very best to help you pass English, but this is a partnership. You need to work with me, and if you really don’t want to—if you feel like I’m wasting your time and you would rather never see me again—then you need to say so now. I don’t give up on my students, but

I'm also not going to force them to do something they don't want to do. So tell me. Are you in or are you out?"

Surprise flitted through me, followed by begrudging respect and something infinitely more uncomfortable. It formed a knot in my throat and blocked my knee-jerk defensive response.

No one had ever called me out quite so calmly and effectively before. No one had cared enough.

"In," I finally said with no small amount of reluctance.

Maybe this was an act and she'd walk away after her initial enthusiasm waned. She wouldn't be the first one. But something in my gut told me she'd stay, and that scared me more than anything else.

Alessandra's shoulders relaxed. "Good." Her smile returned, a warm beam of sunshine beneath the fluorescent glare of the overhead lights. "Then let's get started, shall we?"

Over the next two hours, I understood why Professor Ehrlich sang her praises so highly. She was a damn good tutor. She was patient, encouraging, and empathetic without being condescending. She also came more prepared than a Girl Scout with a bag full of highlighters for color coding, L-shaped cards to frame sections of the textbook and help focus my attention, and a recorder so I could replay our audio lesson at my leisure.

The most damning thing was, it *worked*. At least, it worked better than my usual methods of gritting my teeth and persevering through brute determination.

The only downside was how distracting Alessandra herself was. If she talked for too long, I got lost in her voice instead of her words, and every time she moved, a faint whiff of her perfume drifted across the table, clouding my thoughts.

Christ. I was a grown man, not a hormonal teenager with a crush. *Get it together*.

I reached for the blue highlighter at the same time she did. Our fingers brushed, and an electric current jolted up my arm.

I yanked my hand away like I'd been burned. Pink colored Alessandra's cheeks as tension coated the expanse of our booth.

“It’s getting late. We should head out.” My voice sounded cold to my own ears even as my heart slammed against my ribcage with alarming force. “I have class tomorrow morning.”

“Right.” Alessandra gathered her materials back into her bag, her face still glowing with a hint of color. “Me too.”

Neither of us spoke during the drive back to campus, but my brain couldn’t stop replaying what happened in the diner.

The softness of her skin. The hitch in her breath. The tiny, almost imperceptible stutter of my heart during the millisecond our hands grazed, followed by the unexpected shock to my system.

I blamed it on sheer exhaustion. I’d never reacted so viscerally to such a small touch, but the body did strange things under duress. That was the only explanation.

Alessandra pulled up in front of my dorm. We stared up at the imposing brick building, and another awkward beat passed before I broke the silence.

“Thank you.” The sentiment came out stiffer than intended. I wasn’t used to thanking people; they rarely did anything that warranted genuine appreciation. “For the ride and for coming out to Frankie’s. You didn’t have to do that.”

“You’re welcome.” Alessandra’s earlier mischief returned. “It was worth it for the vinyl booths and fluorescent lights alone. I hear they’re really flattering for my skin.”

“They are.” I wasn’t joking. She might be the only person on the planet who could still look like a supermodel in a shitty, poorly lit diner.

A smile curved her mouth. “Same time next week?”

I hesitated. This was it. My absolute last chance to walk away before she did.

You want to make it big on Wall Street? You can’t do that if you insist on choosing your pride over your future.

I don’t give up on my students, but I’m also not going to force them to do something they don’t want to do. So tell me. Are you in or are you out?

I blew out a breath. *Fuck.*

“Sure,” I said, ignoring my twinge of anticipation at the thought of seeing her again. *I hope I don't regret this.* “Same time next week.”

CHAPTER 8

Alessandra



“I HAVE TO RUN TO A MEETING, BUT MAKE YOURSELF AT home,” Sloane said. “Just remember the house rules. No smoking, no shoes on the carpet, and no feeding The Fish outside of the prescribed hours and amounts, which are taped to the table next to his bowl. Any questions?”

“No. All sounds good.” I mustered a small smile. “Thanks again for letting me stay here while I figure things out. I promise I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

Out of all my friends—of which there were only three or four total, but that was an issue for another day—Sloane was the least warm and fuzzy. However, both Vivian and Isabella lived with their significant others, and despite her general lack of visible emotion, Sloane always went to bat for her friends.

I was tired of living in a hotel, and she hadn’t hesitated when I’d asked if I could stay with her while I went apartment hunting. And she’d greeted my arrival with a mug of coffee, a stiff hug, and a Karambit knife wrapped with a bow—for basic defense or offense, depending on how pissed I was at Dominic, she explained.

“Don’t worry about it.” Sloane’s face softened the tiniest smidge. “We’ll get drinks later. You and I can bitch about men while Viv and Isa pretend they’re not in sickeningly sweet relationships.”

My laugh came out rusty but genuine. “It’s a plan.”

It’d been a week since I told Dominic I wanted a divorce. None of my friends seemed surprised by my decision to leave him, which said all there was to say about how other people perceived our relationship.

My phone lit up with an incoming call.

Dominic. Again. He’d been calling nonstop over the past week, and every time his name popped up, it was a fresh stab in my chest. Still, I couldn’t bring myself to block him yet, so I let his calls roll to voicemail. I haven’t listened to any of them since the first one; it hurt too much.

“What do you mean *he’s in Mykonos*?” Sloane’s quiet fury chilled the air as she left for her meeting. As a high-powered publicist who ran her own boutique public relations firm, she was always putting out fires for her clients. “That is unacceptable. He *knows* he should be here for the meeting...”

Her voice faded, followed by the slam of the front door. Dominic’s call also ended, and I breathed a sigh of relief only to tense again when another incoming call rolled right into his missed one.

Pearson, Hodder, and Blum.

Waves of anxiety buffeted my stomach. I wasn’t sure what was worse—hearing from my husband or from my divorce attorney.

“Alessandra, this is Cole Pearson.” The deep voice settled some of my nerves. Cole was one of the top divorce attorneys in the country. He cost an arm and a leg, but he was the only one who stood a chance against Dominic’s fleet of high-powered lawyers.

“Hi.” I put him on speaker while I unpacked my suitcase. I needed something to do with my hands or I’d dissolve into an even bigger mess. “How did it go?”

The waves intensified as I waited for his answer.

I’d filed for divorce a few days ago and, in true Cole fashion, he’d expedited the process so he could serve Dominic the papers today. I wanted to get the divorce over with quickly before I lost my nerve or he somehow convinced me to go back.

Most days, I was sure I was doing the right thing, but there were other days when I woke up in an empty bed and missed him so much, it hurt to breathe. I haven't been happy for a while, but I couldn't forget eleven years together just like that.

"We served him the papers," Cole said. "As expected, he refused to sign."

I closed my eyes. Knowing Dominic, he would drag this out for as long as possible. He had the money and power to tie us up in the courts for years, and the thought of sitting in limbo for that long made me nauseous.

"Luckily, we have provisions for that." Cole didn't sound too worried, which made me feel slightly better. "We'll push the divorce through one way or another, but I want you to be prepared. This is Dominic Davenport. It could get ugly."

"Even though we don't have children and I don't want any of his assets?" The penthouse, the cars, the jet. Dominic could have it all. I just wanted out.

"The problem isn't the assets, Mrs. Davenport," Cole said. "It's you. He doesn't want to let *you* go, and unless you can convince him otherwise, it's going to be a long fight."

"I'm so sorry, but Mr. Davenport is in meetings all day." Dominic's assistant, Martha, sounded only marginally apologetic. "However, I can take a message and have him—"

"It's an emergency." My fingers tightened around my bag strap. "I'd like to speak to my *husband* directly." I emphasized the second to last word. It didn't matter that he would be my ex-husband soon if I had my way; as long as we were married, I had certain perks, which *should* include seeing him without his assistant treating me like I was a vagrant who'd wandered in off the street.

Her eyes swept over me, probably taking in my lack of visible injuries and physical distress. "I understand, but I'm afraid he's booked back-to-

back. Like I said, I'm happy to take a message and have him call you back at his earliest convenience." She ripped a Post-It note off the pad on her desk. "Is this related to a social event or some sort of home issue?"

My skin flushed. Normally, I wasn't a violent person, but I was hungry, tired, and irritated after my call with Cole. It took every ounce of willpower not to grab Martha's coffee and toss it in her smug, condescending face.

"Neither." I dropped my polite tone. "If Dominic is currently in a meeting, I can wait. I assume he has to eat lunch at some point, correct?"

Martha pursed her lips. "He has a lunch meeting at Le Bernardin. Mrs. Davenport, please, I must insist you—"

"What's going on?" A cold voice interrupted her mid-sentence.

We both froze for a split second before our heads swiveled toward the now-open door to Dominic's office. The sun backlit his frame, and the width of his shoulders filled the doorway, making him look even more imposing than usual.

My throat dried, and the leather bag strap dug into my palm before I forcibly relaxed my grip.

"Mr. Davenport!" Martha jumped up from her chair. "Your call ended early. I was just telling Mrs. Davenport that you—"

"Repeat that." Dominic stepped into the main office. The shadows peeled away from his form, revealing chiseled cheekbones, stormy eyes, and a frown that could deter Satan himself.

He wasn't looking at me. Instead, he pinned his attention on Martha, who shrank beneath his ire. "I said I was telling Mrs. Davenport that—"

"Mrs. Davenport." The words were lethal in their quietness. "As in my wife. If she wants to see me, she sees me. Don't ever prevent her from doing so again or the only part of a New York office you'll see is the outside when I throw you out. Understand?"

Martha's face paled to the point of resembling chalk. "Yes, sir. I understand."

Vindication battled with sympathy for dominance. In the end, the latter won out.

“That was harsh,” I said quietly as I followed Dominic into his office. He still hadn’t looked at me.

“Not as harsh as she deserved.” Instead of sitting, he leaned back against his desk, the picture of cool confidence, but when his eyes finally met mine, the exhaustion in them tugged at my heartstrings in a way that had me biting back my concern.

It doesn’t matter. It’s not your job to make sure he’s getting enough rest.

Dominic’s gaze swept over my face, lingering on my eyes and mouth. “You’re not getting enough sleep.”

My skin heated. “Thanks a lot.” I guess he wasn’t the only one who looked tired.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear with a self-conscious hand. I *hadn’t* been getting enough sleep. I’d thrown myself into researching how to open a physical store for Floria Designs, which was a longtime dream, and when I wasn’t working, I was agonizing over the divorce. Anxiety and overwork weren’t exactly a winning beauty combo.

“You know what I mean.” He brushed a thumb over my cheek with agonizing tenderness. “Sleep or not, you’re always beautiful.”

My chest clenched. If only he was this attentive when our relationship wasn’t on the brink of ruin.

I usually got a small brush of his lips or brief, blissful moments of our bodies connecting in the middle of the night, but he hadn’t touched me like this—casual, familiar, *intimate*—in ages.

I should move away and put some much-needed distance between us, but I couldn’t help leaning into him. *One minute. That’s all I need.*

“I’m not the only one who hasn’t been sleeping.” His dark circles and sallow complexion gave him away, but still, he was so beautiful it hurt.

“It’s difficult to sleep when your wife refuses to pick up your calls,” he said quietly.

A painful lump blocked the flow of oxygen to my lungs. *Don’t let him get to you.*

I forced myself to step back and ignore the flash of hurt in his eyes. “I’m not here to discuss our sleep habits,” I said, purposely skipping past

the second part of his statement.

Dominic's confident mask snapped back into place, erasing any hint of vulnerability, but his gaze burned into mine with unsettling intimacy.

"Then why are you here, *amor*?" The velvety nickname caressed my skin and sent an involuntary wave of nostalgia crashing over me.

"I can't believe you speak Portuguese." I shook my head, still in disbelief over how he'd conversed with my family over dinner in their native language. "When the hell did you learn to speak Portuguese?"

"I've been attending lessons at the Foreign Languages Institute every Wednesday night." A tiny grin tugged at his lips as he rinsed the last plate and placed it on the rack. We'd offered to do the dishes since my brother had prepared the food and my mother had disappeared immediately after dessert with her latest boy toy. "Close your mouth, amor, or a fly will get in."

"You told me you were working Wednesday nights," I accused.

"I was. I was working on learning Portuguese." Dominic shrugged, a hint of color rising on his cheekbones. "This is my first time meeting your family. I figured it would be a nice thing to do."

An ache unfurled behind my ribcage. "You didn't have to do that. They would've loved you regardless."

Learning foreign languages didn't come easily for him, but the fact that he'd done it anyway because he wanted to make a good impression on my family...

The ache deepened. God, I adored this man.

"Maybe, but I wanted to." Dominic's face softened. "Faria qualquer coisa por você."

The weight of the memory nearly crushed me before I sucked in a painful breath and shoved it aside.

That was then. This was now. *Focus on the now.* "Cole told me you refused to sign the papers."

My answer doused the room in ice.

The warmth vanished from his expression, and Dominic's jaw flexed as he straightened to his full six feet, three inches. "On a first-name basis with

your lawyer already, I see.”

He might as well have slapped me in the face.

Anger flared hot and sudden at his implication. “Don’t even *think* about playing the jealous husband card. Not when you didn’t care *who* I spoke to or hung out with before I dented your ego— ”

“You think this is what this is about? My ego?” His eyes flashed. “Dammit, Ále, it’s been a week. One week, and you already have that asshole lawyer serving me divorce papers. We haven’t even tried to fix things yet. There’s marriage counseling— ”

“We tried that once, remember?” I fired back. It’d been a few years ago, when I’d been so frustrated by his long hours, I’d talked him into going to couples’ therapy. “You didn’t show up because of a—surprise, surprise—work emergency.”

He probably didn’t even remember. I hadn’t asked him to go again because the only thing more humbling than exposing our relationship woes to a stranger was having your husband skip the appointment altogether. The memory of the counselor’s pitying gaze stung to this day.

Dominic’s mouth snapped shut. His throat worked with a hard swallow, and silence thundered in the wake of my response.

“You have two weeks to sign the papers, Dominic,” I said. “Or this will turn into a war, and we both know that’ll hurt your bottom line more than it does mine.” He had a multibillion-dollar company to run; I didn’t.

I didn’t want to get into a legal fight with him, but if that was what it took, that was what I’d do. I needed to take control of my life again, and I couldn’t do that without closing this chapter with Dominic.

No matter how much it hurts.

CHAPTER 9

Dominic



I STOPPED SLEEPING IN THE PENTHOUSE. I TRIED, BUT even with a full staff and the best entertainment money could buy keeping me company, it felt unbearably empty without Alessandra. Everything reminded me of her—the dresses in the closet, the white lilies lining the hall, the lingering floral scent of her shampoo in our bed.

Instead, I took up residence in my office, where I already had a sleeping area set up for the all-nighters I occasionally had to pull.

My phone buzzed with an incoming call. As always, my heart tripped over hope it was Alessandra before disappointment set in.

Unknown number. It was the fourth such call today. I didn't know how they found my private cell number, which was unlisted and only available to a small group of vetted contacts, but it was getting damn annoying. I'd picked up the first time and heard nothing but silence.

If it weren't for Alessandra, I'd get a new number tomorrow and be done with it.

It'd been two weeks since she showed up at the office and demanded I sign the papers. Her fucker of a lawyer kept hounding me, and no matter what I did, she refused to see me. Gifts. Calls. I'd even booked a damn session at Manhattan's top marriage counselor, which she hadn't shown up to.

I rubbed a hand over my face and tried to focus on the screen. I was still dealing with the SEC investigation into DBG Bank, which was picking up steam and throwing our office into chaos. Something about it bugged me, though I couldn't quite pinpoint why.

Finally, after thirty minutes of fruitless effort, I gave up and called it a night. Since it was only ten and I couldn't stand the thought of sleeping in the silent office this early, I grabbed my jacket off the back of my chair and headed to the one place that had any hope of making me forget about Alessandra, if only for a little while.

The New York branch of the Valhalla Club sat on a heavily guarded estate on the Upper East Side. That much private land was unheard of in Manhattan these days, but the club was founded over a century ago, when there'd been more leeway for a group of extremely wealthy, extremely connected families to claim dominion over a vast swath of real estate.

Valhalla hadn't changed in that it remained an exclusive society for the world's richest and most powerful, but its reach had expanded past its New York flagship and into every major city across the globe, including London, Shanghai, Tokyo, Cape Town, and São Paulo.

I wouldn't have had a snowball's chance in hell of becoming a member had it not been for Dante Russo, a descendant of one of Valhalla's founding fathers.

"You look like hell," Dante said as I approached the bar where he sat with Kai Young, CEO of the Young media empire.

"Great to see you too, Russo." I took the seat on Dante's other side and ordered a bourbon.

Dante had been one of my first investors. He ran the Russo Group, the world's largest luxury goods conglomerate, and a combination of luck, timing, and sheer perseverance had wrestled him away from his investment guy to my fledgling company. Where Dante went, the rest of high society

eventually followed, including Kai, who'd also become a good friend over the years.

I knew I was the odd one out in the trio. Both Kai and Dante came from money so old, it belonged in a museum, whereas my billions were brand new, but at the end of the day, money was money. Not even the pedigree snobs at Valhalla dared snub me openly when I controlled the fate of their investments.

"He's right," Kai said mildly. "You look like you haven't slept in weeks."

Because I haven't.

"Keep it up and you'll scare away your investors," Dante added. "Your face was ugly enough without adding the dark circles and scowl to the mix."

I snorted. "Look who's talking." He'd gotten in so many fights, his nose was permanently fucked up, though that hadn't stopped women from throwing themselves at him before he got married.

"Vivian likes my face just fine."

"She's your wife. She's obligated to pretend." *Like how Alessandra pretended she was happy when she wasn't.* A sharp pang grabbed hold of my heart and twisted.

I tossed back my drink, trying to lose myself in the burn of alcohol while Dante and Kai exchanged glances. I hadn't told them what happened with Alessandra, but she was good friends with Vivian and Isabella, Kai's girlfriend. I assumed they'd filled their partners in on what happened.

"Speaking of wives, how are things with Ále?" Kai asked, his tone so placid, he might as well be talking about the weather.

"Fine," I said curtly.

"Heard she served you divorce papers at work." Unlike Kai, Dante possessed the tact of a socially inept bull.

My shoulders tensed. "That was a misunderstanding."

"No one hires Cole fucking Pearson for a misunderstanding." A touch of sympathy crossed Dante's face. "Tell me you're not brushing this off. If you divorce, your assets—"

“I know what happens to my assets.” The logical part of me said I should care more; I didn’t. “We’re not getting divorced.” I reached for my lighter, but for once, the familiar flicks of the flint wheel couldn’t calm the storm raging inside me. “We’ll work it out. Go to counseling, take a nice long trip somewhere.”

I’d forgotten about the time she asked for couples’ therapy until she brought it up at my office. It’d been three years ago, and I’d been swamped with a huge acquisition at the time. She’d only asked once, so I’d figured it was an impulsive request rather than the sign of a long-standing issue. When we were dating, Alessandra never hesitated to tell me when she had a problem.

We just needed to reconnect, that was all. We could recreate our honeymoon in Jamaica or spend two weeks traveling through Japan. I couldn’t realistically take more time than that off work, but two weeks would be enough, right? Once Alessandra and I spent time alone together, we’d be fine. That’d been her reason for going to marriage counseling in the first place.

Dante and Kai remained silent.

“What?” Irritation crept into my veins. I was already on edge from exhaustion, stress, and a strange ache that seemed to follow me everywhere. I didn’t need my friends’ silent judgment too.

“I don’t think a vacation or counseling is going to solve your problems,” Dante said.

“Why the hell not?”

He gave me an incredulous look. “You missed your *ten-year wedding anniversary*. I forgot about a dinner party *once* and Vivian wouldn’t talk to me for days. If I missed an anniversary...” He grimaced. “Let’s not go there.”

“What Dante is trying to say is, a few weeks at a luxury resort won’t make up for years of suppressed feelings,” Kai cut in, diplomatic as always. “Clearly, Alessandra has been...discontent for a while. The anniversary was the straw that broke the camel’s back, so to speak. You can’t buy your way out of it.”

I stared at them.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Dante said. “Let’s stop beating around the bush. *You’re* the problem, Dom. Even someone who’s met you both once can tell you barely paid attention to Alessandra when she was around. How many times have you stayed at the event while she went home because she didn’t feel well? How many dinners did you take with clients instead of with her?” He shook his head. “Your obsession with work is good for my portfolio, so I’m not complaining about that. But you can’t be surprised Alessandra’s fed up.”

“There’s no short-term fix for something like this,” Kai said, his tone a touch gentler than Dante’s. “It requires an entire lifestyle and mindset shift.”

“You sound like a fitness coach commercial.” *On. Off.* I flicked my lighter with unsteady hands.

Despite my blithe reply, my mind whirled with chaos. Dante made the same points Alessandra had, but whereas hers had cut with precision, his punched me right in the gut.

It was one thing for the other person to point out the flaws in a relationship. It was another for a third party to do so with unerring accuracy, especially when I’d thought everything had been fine. Not great, but not horrible. Obviously, I’d been wrong.

On. Off. The tiny flame blurred as snippets from the past few years streamed past my mind’s eye.

When had our marriage devolved to the state it was now? Alessandra and I used to eat dinner together every night. We had an unmissable date night every Friday, and we never went to bed without telling each other about our days. Then I started Davenport Capital and things changed, slowly but surely.

“I’m sorry, amor, but the investor is only in town tonight,” I said. “He heads one of the biggest insurance companies in the country. If I can get him onboard...”

“It’s okay. I get it.” Alessandra gave me a soft, reassuring kiss. “You’ll just have to make it up to me later.”

Guilt loosened its grip on my muscles. “I will. I promise.”

It was my first time missing our sacred Friday date night. I hated letting her down, but I needed investors and snagging Wollensky would be a huge coup.

One of these days, the whole world would know the name Dominic Davenport, and with recognition came status, money, power—everything I’d ever dreamed of. Once that happened, I could make it up to Alessandra a thousand times over.

“If you miss next week’s date, though, we’ll have a problem,” she teased, chasing away images of private jets and black Amex cards. “I practically had to pledge my firstborn to get a reservation at Le Fleur.”

I laughed. “I’m sure our firstborn will understand.” I curled an arm around her waist and pulled her closer for another kiss. “Thank you for understanding,” I murmured. “This is just one time. It won’t happen again.”

Except it had. *Just one time* turned into two, then three, until we entered a new normal. I’d assumed she was okay with it because she rarely expressed otherwise except for that one time with the counseling. But the way she got quieter and quieter over the years, the way she left events early when she wasn’t hosting them and utter lack of surprise when I canceled plans...

Waves of realization crashed over me, stunning me into near immobility. *Fuck.*

“Like I said, lifestyle and mindset shift.” Kai read my expression like a book. He lifted his glass to his lips and arched an eyebrow. “The question is, are you willing to do it?”

[READ MORE](#)