



VENGEFUL
IN LOVE

HEARTS ON THE LINE, BOOK 1

NADIA
LEE

AUTHOR OF *ONE KISS*

Vengeful in Love

Copyright © 2011 by Hyun J Kyung

Barnes & Noble Edition, distributed via Smashwords

Formatting by [Nadia Lee](#)

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locales or organizations is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any manner whatsoever without the prior written permission from the author except in the case of brief quotation embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

nadialee.net

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank You](#)

[What's Next](#)

[Titles by Nadia Lee](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About Nadia Lee](#)

Revenge is sweet...

Self-made billionaire Alex Damon wants his pound of flesh from the people who ripped his family apart. When he discovers his enemies' daughter is working at his company—most likely spying for them—he decides to start his revenge by seducing her.

Natalie Hall is stunned at the personal interest from the CEO at her company. Vulnerable, with an already bruised heart, she wants to avoid any involvement—but she can't deny the desire he arouses in her.

...but passion is sweeter...

What should've been a straightforward eye-for-an-eye unravels as Natalie's unflinching loyalty and kindness begin to thaw Alex's cold intent. But caring for her is unthinkable...since he plans to use everything in his power to ruin her family and everyone else she holds dear.

Vengeful in Love

Hearts on the Line, Book 1

Nadia Lee

For Mom and Dad.

Chapter One

NATALIE SHOOK HER UMBRELLA, sprinkling cool water droplets everywhere, as she entered Damon Defense Engineering headquarters in Tysons. She hurried across the lobby toward the elevator, her high heels ringing against the sparkling marble floor. It was only Monday morning, but if this was how her week was going to go, she didn't want to see Tuesday.

She jabbed the elevator button and waited, impatience mounting. There had been three accidents on I-66, turning the Virginia/DC interstate into a parking lot. When a family van driver using a cell phone had rear-ended her on the Beltway with less than one exit left to her office, she'd almost screamed. Almost. Some people *might* recognize her, and she had to maintain her dignity at all times, especially this year.

Louise wouldn't have it any other way. *Think of your father's career.*

How many times had she heard that over the years?

The elevator doors opened with a soft chime, and Natalie walked inside, glancing at her watch. 10:30 a.m. Fantastic—half an hour late to a meeting she'd called last week. She would've let her colleagues know, but her cell phone was lying on the breakfast table where she'd forgotten it that morning.

She checked her appearance in the mirrored walls and smoothed her hands down her black skirt suit, then closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *Calm down.* Getting frustrated wouldn't salvage the situation.

When the elevator stopped at the fifteenth floor, she stepped out onto the muted beige carpet. Normally the sunlight gave the office a hazy radiance through frosted glass walls. But not today. Everything looked drab and gray.

Her assistant, Danielle Hartman, charged toward her. She was young, only twenty-two, but totally out of shape. Her dirty dishwasher-colored pantsuit did nothing for her eyes, hidden behind a pair of thick glasses, or her

limp brown hair. Most high school outcasts grew out of their social awkwardness and improved their sense of fashion by the time they finished college. Danielle hadn't. Which was unfortunate, because she had great skin and a nice smile.

"Thank God you're here." Danielle panted.

"What's wrong?"

"Ralph and Vivien just got fired."

It took all of Natalie's self-control to keep her voice down. "*What?*" Ralph was—had been—the director of DDE. Vivien had been Ralph's right hand and Natalie's direct boss.

"This morning...Alex Damon himself walked in. Half an hour later, Ralph and Vivien left with a couple of security guards. And their stuff. In boxes." The corners of Danielle's mouth turned downward. "Mr. Damon said he wanted to see you as soon as you got in. He's in Ralph's office. His former office, I mean."

So much for the meeting.

It wasn't difficult to figure out what everyone was thinking as she walked through the maze of cubicles. People looked at her over the partitions with pity and apprehension—pity she was getting canned and apprehension they might be next.

The door to Ralph's old corner office was open, but his name plaque was gone. Years of wear and tear had left the ivory walls slightly dingy, except for a couple of pristine squares where he'd hung framed Picasso prints. The office looked barren without Ralph's clutter—mostly family pictures and souvenirs he'd collected over the years.

Someone with cropped black hair sat in an executive leather chair, facing the windows. Torrents of rain blurred the view of gray roads and red brake lights. A large, tanned hand held a cell phone to an ear, but the voice was too low for her to eavesdrop. Natalie took a long breath and counted to ten, welcoming the respite before she had to face Alex Damon, the chairman and CEO of DDE's holding company, Global Strategies Corporation. She'd never seen him in real life, although there were plenty of pictures in glossy gossip magazines. Being one of the planet's most eligible bachelors and a self-made billionaire tended to make one's face well-known.

Finally he snapped the phone shut and swiveled around to face her.

"Yes?" His voice was a steely baritone that demanded an immediate answer with just that one syllable.

His entire body emanated authority and raw sexuality. The dark, tailored suit he was wearing tried to throw a veneer of civilization over him but failed. He would've been frightening if it weren't for the iron control in the winter gray eyes that said *he* ruled, not his primal instinct. She shivered as his gaze brushed over her, head to toe and then back up to her face. She had the most absurd feeling that he was undressing her with his eyes.

Nonsense. He was probably trying to decide if she would cry at bad news and whether he should delegate the distasteful task to someone else.

"I'm Natalie Hall. My assistant said you wanted to see me." She noted with relief that her voice didn't betray her nervousness.

He frowned slightly, his gaze darting to her barren ring finger, then back to her face. Most people didn't expect an Asian when they heard the name Hall. For some reason, it pleased her that she'd managed to surprise him.

He rose from his seat to his full height, which was impressive. He walked around the desk and extended a hand. "Alex Damon. Nice to meet you." This time the baritone was more modulated. It slithered over her like strands of supple leather.

"Nice to meet you too." Natalie shook his hand. It was slightly calloused and infused her cool skin with warmth.

He shut the door and gestured at a chair. "Please have a seat."

"Thank you."

She sat, putting her laptop bag and purse discreetly beside the chair and crossing her legs. She had the odd feeling that Alex was staring at them, but when she glanced up, he was busy pulling another chair from the other side of the office. God, she was ridiculous. Of course he wasn't looking at her legs. They were her best asset, but he'd dated models with legs up to their armpits.

When he sat across from her, barely enough personal space remained to be polite. She could feel a delicious heat coming off his body, smell a whiff of spicy cologne. Something stirred in her, sexual and dangerous. She stomped on it. This wasn't the time, this wasn't the place, and he definitely wasn't the right man to be attracted to. Business and pleasure never mixed well.

"Your assistant told me you had a doctor's appointment," Alex said, breaking her train of thought. "I hope you aren't coming down with something. You look a little flushed."

She suppressed a surge of mortification. She was usually better at

maintaining a professional façade.

“I’m fine,” she said, flashing him a quick smile. Danielle must have tried to cover for her, but Natalie could see that lying to this man would be a mistake. “There’s been some miscommunication, and I apologize. I was in a fender bender this morning.” She quickly added, “Nothing major, but you know how it is on the Beltway.”

He nodded, and she relaxed a little until he stretched his legs out. The fabric of his pants spread tautly over lean muscles, and his calves almost touched hers. The heat coming off him was like a furnace. She wanted to sink into it.

“Well, down to business. As I’m sure you’ve heard, there have been some changes here since I arrived this morning.”

It was her turn to nod. What was he trying to say?

“Ralph is no longer in charge of the operation. His replacement will come from Caissa Enterprises, one of Global Strategies’ European subsidiaries.”

An executive from Europe. She didn’t know what to make of that. There were undoubtedly people at DDE who were qualified to take over. But then, this wasn’t her company, and her opinion probably mattered very little to Alex.

“Since Vivien left with him, I have no choice but to rely on you. I believe you were her second-in-command?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Alex smiled. “Ralph’s replacement is expected later this week. Once he’s here, I hope you can help him with the transition.”

“Sure. No problem.” She suppressed a sigh of relief. So she wasn’t going to be let go.

“You also need to brief me on some of the major projects. I plan to be more actively involved for a while, until I’m satisfied with the operational efficiency here.”

She blinked. Yesterday’s edition of the *Wall Street Journal* had reported that he was returning to Shanghai to oversee several sweeping projects in the burgeoning Chinese market that could be very lucrative for Global Strategies. Although DDE was a profitable subsidiary, it was still only one of many mid-sized ones, not something that should consume much of his attention.

He shifted slightly in his seat, looking at her intently, and his legs brushed hers. She held her breath.

“Do you have any plans tonight?” he said.

She shook her head automatically.

Since her latest breakup six months ago, she'd devoted all her attention to work. Work didn't disillusion her like Marcus had. She still couldn't believe he'd proposed to another woman less than a month after they'd split up.

"Excellent." A charming smile appeared on Alex's lips. "Would you like to have dinner with me?"

She shot him a sharp look. She didn't indulge in interoffice dating, no matter how delicious the man in the question was. It was the stupidest CLM—career limiting move—she could think of.

"I'd like to talk more about DDE, but my calendar's full at the moment. We can discuss it over dinner. I hate to make you extend your workday, but unfortunately that's the only time I'm available."

Despite his smooth tone, she couldn't shake off the feeling that he was amused by her silent response. Was he laughing at her for thinking he might have romantic interests in her?

She straightened. "It won't be a problem." *I hope you won't be a problem.*

"Eleanor—my assistant—will send you an email this afternoon. How's seven for you?"

"Fine." She rose and shook his hand briskly, purposefully maintaining eye contact even as she felt her hand almost completely engulfed by his much larger and stronger one. Then she gathered her things and left.

* * *

Alex watched Natalie walk out. When the door had closed behind her, he inhaled deeply. A subtle floral scent lingered in the room. It was quite lovely. His investigators' report on her hadn't included any pictures, and a composed young Asian woman with a sleek chignon wasn't what he'd been expecting. Not at all the type who usually graced Charlie Rodale's arm.

The black skirt suit had flattered her lithe figure, although she'd done her best to appear serious and aggressive—a corporate Amazon look he found distasteful in general but singularly sexy on her. And those stilettos had done amazing things to her legs. Long, shapely, and deliciously erotic. A legman's fantasy come to life.

A woman who wore shoes like those had a streak of sensuality in her. He pictured her briefly in the shoes and a pair of thigh-highs and felt himself stir.

Alex shook his head sharply and walked back behind his desk. Now was not the time to indulge in fantasy. He'd been upset when Ralph hadn't been able to follow simple instructions... Did Natalie have something to do with Ralph's incompetence? She was, after all, the adopted daughter of Brian Hall, a powerful senator with a lot of connections and one of the reasons why it was proving so difficult to take over Rodale International. Or ruin it outright.

And Natalie was Emily Rodale's goddaughter.

His hands tightened at the thought of the woman he'd hated for so long, the one responsible for destroying his family and ultimately killing his father. Now Emily Rodale had family of her own—a son—and a company that allowed her an undeservedly wealthy lifestyle.

He wondered briefly if there was something going on between Brian and Emily. It would be just like that bitch to sell herself to a powerful protector.

But none of that mattered anymore. All the pieces were lined up. His position was fully developed, his strategy superior. After years of preparation and maneuvering, he was ready for the endgame.

He would take everything away from Emily Rodale. Everything.
And he would start with Natalie.

Chapter Two

NATALIE STEPPED OUT of her car in front of an upscale steak house near the Ritz Carlton. A valet took her key, and she hurried inside with her purse and laptop bag. It was three after seven, and she hated being late. Time was money. Although DDE was more relaxed than Goldreich Stanley, old habits died hard.

A smiling maître d' greeted her. She gave him Alex's name, and he nodded and led her through a dark mahogany walkway. There were little nicks in the wood here and there, each of them a testament to the restaurant's long history. Caricatures of de Gaulle and Churchill looked down at her from the yellowed wall above the wooden panels. Ceiling fans stirred the air, sending the smoky aroma of perfectly charred meat her way and making her mouth water.

Alex was at a small table for two. He rose at the sight of her, and she paused at the unexpected courtesy. She couldn't decide if he was just old-fashioned about certain things or if it had been a calculated move. Something about him suggested he never did anything without a reason.

"Sorry I'm late," Natalie said, sitting down.

When Alex settled across from her, she realized how intimate the situation was. His knees brushed against hers under the white tablecloth, sensitizing her skin and making her acutely aware of the proximity of his body. She shifted, sitting at an angle and crossing her legs to avoid touching him.

The silver gray of his eyes sparkled in the candle glow as he looked at her, like lightning reflected on diamonds, and their beauty caught her by surprise, made her mute. She felt herself flushing again and was grateful for the dim light inside the restaurant.

He placed his forearms on the table and rested some of his weight on them, the movement bringing his large shoulders in close. “So... Ready to bombard me with documents and PowerPoint presentations?”

“Well, now that you mention it, I do have some printouts for you in my bag. I also sent you a soft copy.” She reached down, glad for the distraction. Why did he make her so nervous and flustered and excited all at the same time? She’d had her share of handsome, sophisticated dates. The boarding schools she’d attended were full of the scions of wealthy and influential families, many of them European aristocrats. And the Halls circulated among the *crème de la crème* of society. It came with the family history of producing governors, senators, and diplomats.

“Work can wait.” He waited until she had sat up again, her hands empty, before he said, “I’m really hungry.”

The way his eyes darkened as he spoke made her mouth dry. She’d better snap out of it soon before she did something stupid. He was talking about *food*.

“Let’s start with some wine,” he said. “Is there anything in particular you’d like?”

Shaking her head, she gave him a bright smile. “I’ll leave the selection up to you.”

Alex didn’t bother to consult the wine list. He raised a finger, and a waiter materialized at their table. Alex murmured his choice. The waiter disappeared just as discreetly as he’d appeared. When he returned with a bottle of Perrier-Jouët, she gave Alex a questioning look. He answered it with a mysterious smile and waited until the champagne was uncorked and poured.

“To your promotion,” Alex said, raising his flute.

Natalie blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Someone has to replace Vivien, and I’ve decided you’re the best candidate. Congratulations.”

She automatically clinked her flute with his and took a sip. The cool bubbly vintage slid smoothly down her throat and warmed her.

Placing her glass on the table, she debated how she should feel about this unexpected turn of events. Part of her was thrilled, but another part was cautious at the unorthodox way Alex had given her added responsibilities. Every DDE employee was formally evaluated in July and promoted—if there was a promotion—in September. Her coworkers might see the way Alex

looked at her and draw erroneous conclusions.

And there was the disconcerting matter of her reaction to him. His effect on her was far more potent than the champagne, and she was fairly sure people around them could tell she wasn't immune to him, which would further fuel the gossip.

Alex smiled. "I drop in on various divisions and streamline their operations every so often. A sudden shift in resources isn't that unusual, if that's what you're worried about."

Natalie added *perceptive* to the list of qualities she was discovering about him.

"So, would you like to talk to me about your expectations?" she asked.

"No. That'll be Ethan's job."

She frowned. "Ethan?"

"The executive from the London office. He'll be replacing Ralph."

"Oh." She wondered where this was heading. Was this a congratulatory dinner? If so, wouldn't it have been more appropriate to wait until after her new boss's arrival?

"I don't think I've ever worked for a British man before," she said.

"Actually, he's American. I sent him to London to familiarize himself with our European operations and also to help straighten out some problems we were having there."

"Sounds like you trust him quite a bit."

"I do. He's a good man, and I think you'll like working for him." Alex took another drink of champagne, the corded architecture of his neck clearly visible above his collar and tie as he tilted the glass back.

She fidgeted idly with the flute stem, putting it between her thumb and index finger and moving her hand up and down the cool, smooth length of the elegant column. His gaze dropped to follow the movement, the eyelids lowering. She could sense something change in him, an elemental need surging up from somewhere underneath the polite layers of civilization, and it made her acutely aware of her femininity. The air in the restaurant seemed to grow hotter and thicker. How could a man she'd known for less than a day have such a powerful effect on her?

Thankfully, their waiter reappeared and shattered the hypnotic spell. They both ordered steak and a few side dishes, but while she had a small filet mignon, he ordered the largest slab of beef on the menu, an enormous porterhouse.

“I want it so rare it moos on the plate,” he said, and the waiter nodded.

When the waiter vanished, Alex turned his full attention back to her. “So tell me... How did a woman like you end up with a name like Hall?” There was a slight emphasis on the *you* and the *Hall* that might have been offensive, but he was smiling easily. His eyes went to her ring finger. “You aren’t married.”

Her personal life was one thing she didn’t want to discuss with anyone, especially the CEO of her company. Most especially one who somehow was making her think of tangled sheets. But how could she not answer without appearing rude?

She took a long swallow of the champagne. “I was adopted,” she said, her tone discouraging further questions.

“Korean descent?”

She shrugged, irritation surging inside at his refusal to drop the subject. Perhaps he wasn’t as perceptive as she thought.

It always bothered her that she didn’t know. Natalie’s younger sister—her parents’ biological daughter—Belle, was positive Natalie was either Korean or Japanese, while Louise always said she couldn’t tell one Asian from another. Brian hadn’t volunteered an opinion except to say: *It’s not that important what ethnicity you are, is it, sweetie? All that matters is that we found you, took you into our family, and raised you as one of our own.*

A political statement if ever there was one. But then Brian had made a career out of being circumspect.

Natalie shoved unpleasant thoughts of her family aside. Time to change the subject. “You’re not really interested in talking about work, are you?”

“No.”

“So why did you pretend otherwise?”

A hint of humor tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Would you be here if I’d told you the truth?”

“No.”

“There you go.” He gave her an unrepentant grin.

“Devious,” she said, her voice deliberately cool.

He spread his hands. “But hardly criminal. What *is* criminal is ignoring a smart, sexy woman.”

If he’d shown any sign of mockery or insincerity—even outright flattery—she’d have walked out on him, CEO or not. But somehow the simple way he spoke made her believe he truly found her desirable. His gaze roamed over

her as if he could impart the carnality of his presence onto her.

Sudden images of their bodies, naked and panting, raced through her mind, leaving her breathless. Every feminine intuition in her said that if she showed even a tinge of interest, he'd make love to her until she drowned in sensation. A man like him wouldn't want anything messy like emotional entanglement. Earth-shattering ecstasy was all he promised, all she could ever expect from him.

Well, too bad. Marcus O'Dell had been good in bed, and it just wasn't enough. She wanted a man who could love her unconditionally and for the long term.

"I don't do the interoffice dating thing," she said. "It's kind of a rule with me. So, although this is really flattering, it's not going to work out. Maybe you should find another woman who'll be happy with what you're offering."

He regarded her calmly. "I don't want another woman. And *I* think it is going to work out."

"You do?"

"Come on, you feel it. There's a lot of chemistry going on here."

True...but still. She gave him her best *oh-come-now* laugh. "I'm not a teenager anymore. I don't let my hormones make my decisions for me."

"Wanna bet?"

Natalie raised an eyebrow. "Do I want to *bet*?"

"I'll bet you that you'll have dinner with me again before the week's over."

"And if I do? Then what?"

"Then you lose the bet and owe me a full weekend to change your mind about this 'no interoffice dating' rule of yours."

"What do I get if you lose?"

"Oh, I won't lose. But if I do, I'll give you a million dollars."

Her jaw dropped so fast she was surprised it didn't hit the table. He couldn't be serious. *A million dollars?*

Their food arrived. Although it smelled absolutely tantalizing, her stomach was knotted too tightly to even think about eating. She could already feel the champagne churning dangerously.

The waiter left, and Natalie leaned forward. "You're joking, right?" she said in a strained whisper.

"About what?" He popped a chunk of steak into his mouth. The chef had taken his instructions seriously. The meat looked like it had barely touched

the grill.

“About the bet.”

“Not at all. One with six zeros behind it. Cash or wire, your choice.”

She stared at him. There wasn't even a trace of humor on his face. Her heartbeat accelerated a little, and she shook her head. “You're going to lose.”

Sighing, he put a hand over his heart. “You wound me. Would you truly condemn me to eating alone for the next four days?”

“Oh at least that, if not forever.”

A boyishly charming smile lit his face. “Is that so? Then it's a bet?”

As they gazed across the table, Natalie felt something stirring inside. It was more than just sexual attraction. Her feminine core was flattered that he found her desirable enough to risk a million dollars. And amused by and envious of his unshakable confidence that he could win her over in four days and a weekend.

Marcus's abrupt ending of their relationship had made her feel undesirable. She hadn't been able to muster much interest in men since. Not until now.

Would it be so terrible for her to indulge in a flirtation with Alex for a little while?

Her eyes holding his, she picked up her silverware, pushing the fork into her steak and then drawing the knife through it slowly and deliberately.

“You're on.”

Chapter Three

THE NEXT MORNING, Alex entered his office and saw Ethan Lloyd, his best friend and right-hand man. The morning sun gave Ethan a small platinum halo over his blond head. Thin wisps of steam rose from a mug of black coffee by the seat he was leaning in. Ethan never sat, but he didn't exactly slouch, either. It was an effect only he could create. The posture made him look lazy and easygoing. His golden choirboy looks and laughing blue eyes further disguised his true corporate-raider nature.

"You're getting indolent in your old age," Ethan said.

Although he was American, he'd lived in England long enough to pick up just a hint of a British accent. He adjusted his gray Savile Row suit jacket. Off-the-rack suits were not an option because of his enormous shoulders and narrow waist. It was the legacy of the amateur-bodybuilding phase of his life.

When Alex raised an eyebrow, Ethan added, "I've been here for at least half an hour."

Alex snorted. "Eleanor said ten minutes, max."

"Traitor." Ethan's affectionate tone belied his words. "I even brought her a box of Belgian chocolates."

"She knows who signs her paychecks." Alex walked around and sat behind his desk. "When did you land?"

"Late last night." Ethan opened a pocket-sized notebook and twisted his pen until the silver tip emerged. "So what is it that you want me to do here?"

"The Rodales."

Ethan's eyes sharpened for a moment before returning to their usual relaxed state. It occurred so fast most people wouldn't have caught it. Alex did.

"Is that why you got rid of Ralph and Vivien?"

“Partially.”

“I presume you’re going to handle the takeover personally?”

“Yep.” Alex could almost taste the victory, the completion of his revenge against Emily Rodale. An eye for an eye. He wanted her to suffer as much as his family had. No, that wasn’t true. He wanted to return the pain tenfold.

Alex’s fingers drummed on the thick sheaf of paper on his desk. It was a new valuation of Rodale International. “One way or the other, I’ll have it.”

Ethan sipped his coffee. “Okay. So I guess you’ll want Jennifer to work with us on this as well.”

“No. She’s staying in France.”

“Then who’s replacing Vivien?”

“Natalie Hall. She used to work under Ralph and Vivien.” Alex saw Ethan’s eyes narrow. “Don’t worry, she’s sharp. She’ll be fine.”

Actually, more than fine. Alex would have liked nothing better than to have had her for dessert last night. Only the knowledge that he would win the bet by the end of the week had prevented him from acting on his male instinct.

Ethan was looking at him. “You want to get her in bed.”

“Crossed my mind. So?”

“So she might be in bed with the Rodales.”

“Why do you think that?”

“It makes no sense that Ralph would make so many blunders and lose two big contracts to Rodale International. Someone must be feeding information to the Rodales, and Natalie is a logical choice. She has easy access to the right information.”

Alex leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. “I’ve considered the possibility.” That had been one of the reasons he’d sought her out.

“But you don’t think she’s to blame.”

“No.”

Ethan shook his head. “Don’t let your attraction to her cloud your judgment. Willing women are a buck a bushel,” he said, reverting to his Midwestern roots.

It was true that she intrigued him, and maybe that was affecting his thinking. But Alex’s instinct told him Natalie wasn’t the mole. Still, a woman had been the cause of his father’s downfall—a man who’d been invincible otherwise. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Okay.” And just like that, Ethan dropped the topic, his eyes turning

bland again.

“Invite Natalie to dinner later this week.”

Ethan’s mouth quirked. “Spanish Inquisition?”

“No. You need to brief her on her new responsibilities.”

Ethan rose from his seat, a lazy smile making him look utterly harmless.

“Thursday all right?”

Alex nodded.

“Should I let her know who’s coming?”

“Why would you want to do such a thing?”

Shaking his head and laughing, Ethan left.

Chapter Four

NATALIE COULDN'T DECIDE what she ought to feel. Alex had ignored her since Monday, and she was both relieved and disappointed. The whole bet had probably been a joke; he must have been having fun at her expense.

She was still in the same office, but now the plate on her door read "Senior Financial Analyst." None of her coworkers had said anything about her promotion except "congratulations," although Danielle had brought in a home-baked cake. Apparently there was a pay raise that came with Natalie's new responsibilities. Not that she would need it once Alex paid her her million dollars, haha.

"Almost done with the P&L?" Natalie said, stopping by Danielle's cubicle on her way out.

Danielle nodded. "Just a couple more adjustments."

"Thanks. Send me a soft copy when you're done." She said good night and left the office.

Ethan wanted the figures first thing the next morning. Natalie was finding him fabulous to work for. Unlike Alex, he didn't distract her with overwhelming sexuality. Not that he wasn't attractive, but he was just charming enough to make her like him without clouding her mind with lust. Although...he did have great shoulders.

Just before three, Ethan had sent her directions to a small but excellent Italian restaurant in Reston. Natalie knew the place; she'd been there once with Brian right before she'd gone to college. Louise and Belle, of course, had been too busy to spend the day with her. As usual.

The restaurant was a low, square building in the middle of an Etruscan-themed shopping center, orange lights glowing inside and casting the diners into silhouette. The evening breeze toyed with an Italian flag as Natalie

walked up the entryway. She pulled open the heavy cherry door and was immediately greeted by a tall man, all dark, wavy hair and white teeth, who called her signorina.

She mentioned Ethan's name and was led through the dining area back to a private corner where a horseshoe-shaped seat wrapped around the table.

Ethan sat—or was it lounged?—on one end of the seat. His face lit up when he saw her.

“Good evening.”

She returned his smile, sat on the other side, and ordered a glass of Chianti. “Sorry I made you wait. The meeting this afternoon lasted longer than expected. How long have you been here?”

“I just sat down, actually.” He sipped his red wine and gestured at the breadbasket full of crusty garlic bread. “Help yourself; they just brought it out. So, everything taken care of?”

She nodded and reached for a piece. It was still warm. “Danielle should have the numbers ready by tomorrow morning.”

“Excellent.”

A familiar baritone voice came from behind her, and Natalie's heart almost stopped. She turned around to see Alex looming over her. “What are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you again too,” he said in a bland tone that didn't quite manage to hide his amusement. “Didn't Ethan tell you? It's a welcome dinner for him.”

She gave her new boss a sharp glance. He responded with a smile, which somehow failed to work its magic this time. She turned back to Alex. “So, where is everybody?” She made a show of looking around. “It doesn't look like you invited anyone else from the office.”

“Well, you're the only one who'll be working closely with him.” Alex sat beside her, and she had no choice but to move closer to the middle to make room. Now she was sandwiched between the two large men.

Despite her apprehensions, Alex didn't seem to want to focus his formidable sexuality on her. But her senses were so acutely attuned to his presence that it didn't really matter what he did. The man had an animal magnetism that just wouldn't quit. How could one person exude so much masculine force? It made her want to wrap herself around him and luxuriate in hot, virile male flesh.

Doing her best to ignore him, she took a bite of the bread. Herbs and

butter created an exquisite blend of flavors on her tongue. Alex and Ethan started talking about a recent tennis match. The restaurant was too crowded for business conversation, especially anything confidential. And a lot of DDE's work fell into that category, given that the Department of Defense was the company's biggest client. She pursed her lips. Why was she here? She felt out of place and excluded, especially since she didn't know anything about tennis.

When their waiter returned, everyone ordered. When had Alex and Ethan figured out what they wanted? They'd been chatting the whole time, their menus untouched.

Ethan turned to her. "We never talked about your roles and expectations," he said. "We're consolidating the work of three people into two, so it's going to be more challenging, but also a great growth opportunity for you."

She nodded. Two people doing three people's job... Did it mean DDE didn't plan to fill her old position which was now vacant? Or maybe Alex would be leaving soon?

Ethan went on with her new duties. She tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but her mind wandered to Alex. If he was only going to be around for a short while, she was glad she hadn't given in to him. He'd undoubtedly been looking for a short fling, and that wasn't what she wanted right now.

The waiter returned to the table with a large tray balanced on his hand. His arrival pulled Natalie out of her gloomy thoughts. There was seafood pasta to be had, and it looked positively delectable, filled with the tiny peppers that she loved.

Ethan's cell phone rang. "Sorry." He glanced at the caller ID. "Juliane. *Guten tag.*" He made a face and excused himself from the table.

Natalie glanced at Alex. Ethan's presence had made her feel safer, but now...

"Ahh...Europeans." Alex smiled. "You'd think they'd have more respect for our business hours."

"Maybe it's really his girlfriend. She must be very sad to see him go to America."

"I've seen his girlfriend. She won't be lonely for long." Alex took a sip of his wine. "Ever been to Europe?"

"I went to school there for fourteen years." *Exiled* would be a better word. Shrugging, she pasted on a bright smile. "My parents wanted the best

education for me.”

“America has some fine private schools. Especially in this area.”

She fiddled with her napkin. “True. I actually was accepted at Exeter, but my parents wanted me to have a more cosmopolitan upbringing.”

“Hobnobbing with the likes of the Rockefellers and the du Ponts wouldn’t have been cosmopolitan enough?”

A slight hint of sarcasm in his tone made her pause, but she was probably projecting her feelings. She’d thought the same when Louise had made her speech about how Exeter wasn’t good enough. “Well, you know. The cachet of Europe.” Natalie rolled her eyes and took a sip of wine.

* * *

Alex didn’t buy Natalie’s act for a second. She was trying hard, but he could detect hints of embarrassment and injured pride in her voice.

He already knew a lot about her family. Her sister, the *real* Hall daughter, hadn’t gone to Europe to study.

“That was very nice of them,” Alex said. Time to switch gears. “Are you planning to resign anytime soon to join your father’s campaign?”

Her eyes widened, and she let out a short laugh. “I don’t think that’s something I want to tell the CEO of my company.”

“Why not?”

“If I tell you I’m going to quit soon, I’m lacking in company loyalty. If I tell you I’m not, I’m lacking in family loyalty. Either way I seem to lose.” She put a bite of pasta in her mouth, chewed, swallowed, and dabbed at her lips with her napkin. “Actually, I don’t plan to quit. Bri...Dad already has Belle—that’s my sister—and a very competent staff. I’m sure I won’t be needed.”

Interesting. Most politicians’ families tended to work together on campaigns to project a happy, wholesome image to the public. With Virginia’s conservative constituency, he would’ve thought her smiling, loving presence would have been required. Whether it was an election or a corporate takeover, everything had to be ready and lined up correctly in order to win.

A glimpse of wistfulness passed through her eyes, but she quickly lowered her eyelashes. The tightly coiffed hair made her features stark under the amber glow of the restaurant lights. She was an intelligent woman, highly

educated and experienced. Three years at Goldreich Stanley in Hong Kong, Wharton MBA, three years at DDE. Even her outfit said “I’m a pro.”

Still...there was a lingering vulnerability about her that made him want to reach out and protect her. The thought was disconcerting. Alex liked his women worldly, ambitious, and driven, ones who understood and were comfortable with the kind of relationship he preferred.

Ethan reappeared. “I have to go. An emergency conference call.” He turned to Natalie. “I’m sorry. Perhaps next time?”

She gave him a regretful smile. “Sure. Good night.”

After Ethan left, silence descended on the table. Natalie fidgeted with the bits of pasta left on her plate. Alex finally leaned back. “Dessert? This place is supposed to have the best tiramisu in town.”

“Why not? I never say no to dessert.”

He signaled the waiter, who cleared their table and went to get the tiramisu.

Alex held a bottle over her glass. “More wine?”

“No, thank you. I have to drive home.”

“Cab it and expense it, if you want.”

“I’d rather not.”

Shrugging, Alex poured rest of the Chianti for himself and placed the empty bottle at the end of the table. Their tiramisu appeared, and he took a bite of the moist, bittersweet treat.

“You’ve gotta wonder if they knew we’d order this all along,” Alex said.

“Mmmm. Probably.”

Alex watched her eat. Her full, red mouth looked startlingly erotic closing around the small silver fork. Her pink tongue darted out to lick it clean of cream and crumbs before she went for more. If it had been anyone else, he’d have found the move calculated, but with Natalie, everything was unconsciously done, which only added to her allure. He imagined all sorts of pleasurable things they could do in private.

“You owe me something,” he said.

“What?”

“Remember the bet we made on Monday?”

A frown appeared on her face, and he almost laughed. Obviously, she hadn’t been thinking about that at all.

“I thought it was only for a private dinner *and* only if you asked me out.”

“Uh-uh. The only thing we agreed to was another dinner before the week

was over.”

She pursed her lips. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Hey, all you had to do was say no to Ethan’s invitation.”

* * *

Natalie continued to frown at him, but he seemed completely oblivious.

“Unless you asked Ethan if he invited me and he lied outright,” Alex added magnanimously.

No, she hadn’t asked. Her mistake.

Alex laughed. “Don’t look so torn. We’re not getting engaged here. It’s just a weekend.”

“I guess. Still, a million bucks would’ve been nicer,” she said, her voice even.

“A bit mercenary, don’t you think?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t like money. Obviously you do.”

“And you do too. Fair enough. So, why didn’t you go back to Goldreich? They pay better than DDE.”

“Because I wanted a career change.” And because an ex—the mistake before Marcus—was still working there. Just thinking about Jack gave her the shivers now. “There’s a point where money can’t compensate enough for personal sacrifices.” She put her fork down and pulled out her slim PDA. “Let’s get this over with. When would you like to claim your prize?”

“That’s awfully...unromantic of you.”

“Oh, were you expecting romance? After all, we’re not getting engaged here.”

A corner of his lips quirked. “If the thrill of being pursued is what you want...”

She smoothed her hair. A superfluous gesture—not a strand was out of place since she’d applied extra strength gel to it that morning. “When and where?”

Alex waved at her gadget. “Put that thing away.” He signaled the waiter for the check, handed him several twenties, and rose.

The parking lot was dark, the late evening breeze unusually crisp but without teeth. Rows of cars gleamed under the pale street lights. Alex pushed his hands into his pants pockets.

“Where are you parked?”

“Over there.” She gestured at her Audi several yards away.

As he walked with her to her vehicle, anticipation hummed in her blood. Whatever he was planning wouldn't end the way he wanted; she'd make sure of that. But knowing that a pursuit had started and that this overwhelmingly sexual male wanted her made every female instinct of hers jittery with an excited trepidation.

When they reached the car, she turned to look at him. Something she couldn't identify glimmered in his eyes. She licked her suddenly dry lips.

Alex stepped closer, invading her personal space. She didn't move away. Even through the gap between them, she could feel his body heat. She shivered.

“Are you cold?” he whispered into her ear. His breath tickled the sensitive skin and melted her inside.

“No.” She sighed the word in a soft whisper.

Alex's head dipped, his mouth taking Natalie's. He was as aggressive as a warlord bent on subduing a rebellion. She responded with a thrust of her tongue, her eyelids drifting lower. He tasted like fine wine and man, and somehow the combination was more potent than anything she'd ever experienced before. Her head spun, and she clutched his shoulders. His hands roamed over her body, leaving a trail of delicious warmth in their path. She wanted to burrow into him.

There was a moan.

Natalie didn't know who made the noise and didn't care. Alex pushed her against the side of the car and brought their bodies closer. She felt the thick length of his erection against her belly through the layers of their clothes. It only intensified her desire. She moved against his sex and found herself wet.

She had a sudden picture of herself perched on the hood of the car, her skirt bunched around her hips and his hard length probing her. She whimpered, but his mouth on hers muffled the sound. Her greedy hands surveyed his body, and she bit back a moan of frustration at the crisp white shirt in the way. She'd kill to rip it off and put her hands on his bare skin. His breath, hot and fast, fanned the side of her neck where her pulse beat rapidly. She reveled in the maelstrom of sensation. This was like a drug—a mindless desire that nothing could stop, not his control or her caution.

His fingers dug into her hair and undid her chignon. He lifted his head briefly to look down at her.

“God, you're beautiful. You should never put your hair up,” he said, his

voice guttural.

Her knees felt unable to support her. Suddenly it seemed entirely possible that she would have sex with her CEO in a very public place.

A convertible drove by, honking. A couple of teenagers in the car catcalled.

And just like that, the magic vanished. Alex cursed under his breath. Natalie's chest rose and fell rapidly. She noticed his hand on her breast and shifted until it fell from her body. It amazed and frightened her how quickly he'd managed to strip her defenses and reach the core of her desire.

When he started to lower his head again, she said, "Don't."

He paused, his mouth only a hairsbreadth away from hers.

"I don't think the bet was for a kiss," she said, hating her shaky voice. She reached behind and touched her hair. After what Alex had done, it wasn't even repairable.

His eyes shuttered, but he didn't step away as she'd hoped. "You think you can control your reaction just like that?" he said, his breath on her lips. "On and off, depending on the situation and your mood?"

"I know I can." Natalie maintained eye contact and saw anger, then that iron control of his overruling it. It felt good to get a reaction from him. She shifted her hands, pushed him gently back. "I'm not a slave to sensation. Let me know what weekend is good for you." She unlocked her car. "Good night, Alex. Thank you for dinner. By the way, if you want to romance a woman, you should try just asking her out. You might be surprised at the result."

Alex rested his hands on her car and leaned forward. With the lights behind him, she couldn't read his expression. "Allow me to romance you, then. What are you doing on Saturday?"

"Sorry, but I have plans for the evening."

"As it happens, so do I. I meant during the day."

"Well, I'm not working," she said blandly. "Are you asking me out?"

"Isn't that what you want?" A quick grin flashed across his face, his teeth white in the darkness. "Come on."

An equal mixture of amusement and excitement made her want to laugh. Despite her misgivings, she wanted to see where this would lead. Surely, as long as she was completely aware of her emotions, she could stop it before she was in too deep. "What time?"

"Ten, if you're fashionably late for dates. Otherwise, ten thirty. Dress comfortably. I'll pick you up at your place."

This time, she allowed herself a small, throaty chuckle. “See you at ten thirty.”

Chapter Five

“DO HIM, QUIT your job when you’ve had your fill, and then come join me here in Hong Kong.”

Natalie almost spewed Diet Coke on her laptop. She’d forgotten how blunt Kerri could be.

“Uh, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“For God’s sake, you have a Wharton MBA. Goldreich would love to have you back.”

It was actually kind of tempting. Natalie wouldn’t have to deal with her family anymore. There were always convenient excuses for missing holidays when you were an investment banker: new deals to close, business trips, canceled vacations—all her boss’s fault, of course.

“So what are you still doing at the office?” Natalie asked. “Isn’t it almost eight p.m.? On Saturday?”

“Almost nine, actually. I’ve got this new deal with a Korean client. Freakin’ workaholics don’t take Saturdays off.”

Natalie laughed. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Kerri Wilson might as well have had a plaque on her wall that said Workaholic Extraordinaire. She was going to make VP this year, and Natalie predicted her best friend would increase her hours even more after the promotion. She felt sorry for the analysts and associates who were going to be working under her.

“Seriously, what are you doing at a government contractor? You belong with the big boys. I bet if you’d joined Goldreich right after you got your degree, you would’ve made VP last year...maybe sooner.”

Natalie leaned back in her living room chair. She watched the white ceiling fan stir the air gently. “Stop sounding like a high school guy on a date.

You're not going to flatter me into anything."

"Fine. But you know, it's been six months since that SOB—Marcus, wasn't it?—dumped you. There's nothing keeping you there. Think about what I said." Someone mumbled something in the background. "Gotta go. I'll call you later."

Natalie tossed the headset on the desk. Her cat, Matto, jumped onto the desk and stared at her Diet Coke.

"No!" Natalie said, grabbing the glass.

He meowed plaintively, and she placed him on her lap. Despite his long, lean lines, the Pixie-Bob was heavier and more muscular than most house cats—the legacy of his half-lynx heritage. She'd found him at a pet shop when she'd first moved back to Virginia and fallen in love with the incorrigible kitten. He had the additional advantage of keeping her family away, all of whom were allergic to cats.

Natalie scratched him behind the ears for a while, then rose from her seat, putting him down on the floor. Her hair was already almost dry from the morning shower. Matto followed her into the bedroom. For a male, he seemed awfully interested in her grooming rituals.

The master bedroom was mostly white and green. Crumpled pale yellow sheets covered her canopy bed, setting off an elaborate olive frame made of wrought-iron.

Do him.

Natalie shook her head. She had it bad if the sight of an empty bed made her think of getting hot and naked with Alex. Kerri was right; there was nothing holding her in Virginia. But Natalie didn't want to give the impression that she was running away because of her breakup with Marcus. What would people think? What would her family say? This year was just too important to cause any stir.

She walked into her closet and stared at the clothes hanging neatly on wooden hangers.

Dress comfortably, Alex had said. Did that mean jeans and a T-shirt? Or something comfortable but semi-dressy?

She put on a tight white baby tee and a pair of faded jeans after a moment of debate. If he'd wanted her to dress up, he would've said so.

The vanity was narrow and fit right against the wall between the doors to the living room and the master bathroom. She sat before the tall mirror and put on her makeup. The doorbell rang as she was pulling her hair back.

The clock over the mirror read ten thirty.

She went to the door, securing her ponytail with a pink barrette. Matto trotted in front of her.

She opened the door to find Alex standing in the hallway, smiling.

“Watch out,” she said, letting him in. “Matto sometimes pees on people.”

Alex frowned and squatted. The dark fabric of his jeans stretched over his muscular thighs, and he looked even better than the last time she’d seen him. Alex scratched behind the cat’s ears, the muscles in his forearm flexing as his fingers moved. Matto started to purr. “Seems friendly enough to me.”

“Wow. I guess you passed the test.”

“Ready?” Alex said, standing.

“Yeah.” She grabbed a small handbag on the couch and waved at Matto.

“Bye-bye, baby.” She locked the door. Matto mewled farewell from the other side.

“I didn’t know you had a cat,” he said. “You don’t seem like a pet person.”

“Matto’s my first.”

They walked down the stairs to the first floor, her casual beige wedge sandals making small *tok-tok* sounds against the steel and concrete steps. “So where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

The parking lot was mostly empty. With weather this nice, most people were out and about. Green leaves shaded the sidewalk as they walked to the car—a gorgeous bright yellow Lamborghini Murciélago.

Natalie suppressed a smile. She’d seen Alex drive a sedate black Mercedes at work, but for a date, he was going to play his automotive trump card.

Men and their cars and their egos.

He opened the passenger-side door, which swung up like an old mailbox flag rather than out. She levered herself inside and surreptitiously ran her hands over the butter-soft leather. The Italians somehow managed to make cars that were fuel inefficient but never failed to capture the male imagination.

Alex sat in the driver’s seat. The engine came to life and settled into a low, pulsing rumble. He touched the accelerator, and the car shot out from its spot. They dashed along the narrow streets and into the traffic of the Fairfax County Parkway.

“You’re driving way too fast,” she said. “This area is crawling with cops.”

He grinned at her. “What’s the point of having a fast car if you drive like an old lady?”

She laughed, relishing the power and speed, the feeling of being pushed back into her seat. She liked to drive fast but didn’t, again at Louise’s stern warning. *A Hall must maintain dignity and uphold the laws.* Natalie shook her head, trying to empty her mind of her family. Brian’s birthday was today, and she’d see them soon enough.

They turned onto a long, winding road in the outskirts of northern Virginia. Tree branches spread over their path in an endless green canopy. The sunlight peeked through small gaps between the leaves and dotted the asphalt. It would be gorgeous in autumn when the leaves started changing and turned into a kaleidoscope of colors.

Natalie watched the view change from suburbs to countryside. After forty-five minutes, Alex finally stopped at a wide meadow. He got out of the car and swung the door up for her. She stepped out and looked at the lake on the other side. The light played on the surface, crusting it with diamond brilliance.

“How did you find this place?” she said, awed by the natural beauty.

He hauled two huge wicker baskets out from the back. “I lived in the area for a while several years ago.”

“Do you need help?”

“I’ve got it.”

The muscles in his torso stretched and contracted under his white and navy blue Under Armour shirt. She followed as he walked into the meadow, admiring the masculine view. The jeans hugged his slim hips, and it looked like you could bounce quarters off his butt.

The soft grass tickled her toes and emitted a sweet scent as her feet crushed it. He spread a blue blanket under a big oak and placed the baskets on the corners. Out came two bottles of wine, a jug of water, three different kinds of cheese, *pâté de foie gras*, a small jar of pickled cucumbers, pimento-stuffed olives, a crusty baguette, sausage, crackers, fruit salad, utensils, napkins, wineglasses, and plates. She blinked. Obviously, he’d put in quite a bit of thought into this.

He started arranging everything in short, orderly rows. She stepped out of her shoes and sat cross-legged. The blanket was feather soft against her bare

feet.

“I never imagined you could take a picnic to this level,” she said. “You sure there isn’t anything else in the baskets?”

“If you root around long enough, you can probably find the Hope diamond.” He smiled and picked up a corkscrew. “Red or white?”

“White.”

Alex uncorked the blended wine, poured two glasses, and gave her one. The temperature of the wine was just right—neither warm nor cold. The liquid slid smoothly down her throat.

She glanced at the label on the bottle. “Virginian. I approve.”

“I got it from Jefferson Vineyards. Thought you might appreciate it since you got your bachelor’s from UVA.”

It surprised her that he knew. Of course her résumé was no secret, and he’d undoubtedly seen it. But then, he’d probably seen hundreds of others too. She was just starting to think about the ramifications of this when he spread a generous portion of foie gras on a cracker and popped it into her mouth.

The soft creamy texture of the foie gras blended with the crispness of the cracker and tasted heavenly. They started eating in earnest, the conversation moving easily from one topic to another. Alex was well informed about all sorts of things due to his constant travel, and he enjoyed sharing his knowledge. She got the feeling that to him the world was one enormous puzzle, and he was constantly arranging and rearranging the pieces of his businesses to take advantage of one situation or another.

The food he’d brought had been perfect, each flavor complementing another. When they were finally done, she reclined on her side, the wind teasing her hair, loose strands swaying. He lay on his back. A dreamy expression entered his eyes as he gazed up at her.

“How come you always put your hair up?”

Self-conscious, Natalie fiddled with her wineglass. “Because I want to look professional.”

“But you look better...well, more approachable...with your hair down.” He reached out and played with her ponytail. “Silky and touchable.” He undid the barrette, and the hair spilled into his hand.

Crushed grass, wild flowers, shampoo, cologne, man.

Time seemed to slow around them. The breeze came over the water, bringing with it a taste of spring on the verge of melting into summer. The

leaves above them danced, the shadows trembling over their bodies. His eyes darkened and lightened with each indolent movement of the branches. He raised his torso, his hand still caressing her hair. His lips were mere inches away from hers, but he didn't close the gap between them.

The warmth of the sun, Alex's eyes intent on hers, the whisper of the wind, his soft breathing, the staccato beat of her heart.

Natalie leaned forward and covered his mouth with hers.

He remained still, giving her the permission to explore as much or as little as she wished. Her tongue traced his lips, tasted a hint of wine, crisply acidic yet ripe. She probed, laid a gentle hand on his cheek.

The world stopped and tilted, as if time and gravity no longer mattered. Her hands skimmed the muscles of his body, tracing their taut lines through the soft fabric of his shirt. One brushed over a nipple; she felt his heartbeat accelerate. She ran the other down his tight abs; they jumped.

It was pure power, the ability to arouse a man, make him respond to her every little touch. The sexual side of her, denied since the breakup with Marcus, wanted to take advantage of the situation, make him lose control. Her fingers traveled down until they reached his belt buckle. She rested them there, putting just enough weight onto it that he would know where her hand was.

His desire for her was like a physical presence in the air. She wanted—

The sudden shrill ringing of her cell phone jerked her back to reality. She wrenched back from him and, before he could reach for her, fumbled for her purse. It was Louise.

"Ignore it," Alex said, his voice raspy. He laid a warm hand on her thigh, exerted a gentle pressure toward him.

Tempting, tempting, but if she gave in, Louise would demand to know why Natalie hadn't answered her call on a day as important as today. She was throwing Brian a birthday party, Natalie was going, and there would be no way to avoid facing her there. "I can't." Natalie put the phone to her ear. "Hello, Louise."

"Can you come early?" she said without preamble. "I need some help with the food."

"I thought you were going to cater."

Alex looked up at her, his eyes dark. She glanced away, tucked her hair behind an ear, and drew her legs up, hugging them with her free arm. It felt like he could hear everything from Louise's end.

“Well, I’m not going to cater *everything*. What would people think?”

“That you’re too busy to do everything?”

“Never too busy to help your father.”

Natalie’s hand tightened around her cell phone. “I wish you’d called me earlier. I can’t go right now.”

“I see.” Louise’s voice turned icy. “So you’ll be here to eat the food I’ve prepared, flaunt your boyfriend, and pretend you care when you can’t be bothered to do your share.”

Natalie’s head began to throb. “I told you Charlie isn’t my boyfriend.” As soon as the words left her mouth, she felt a slight tension from Alex. She scrunched her eyes shut; why did she have to argue with Louise about Charlie, especially in front of Alex? She took a deep breath and did her best to modulate her tone. “Look, I’m sorry I can’t help. I didn’t think you’d need it. It’s not like you’ve asked me for any before.”

There was a pause. “Yes. Well, normally I wouldn’t, but Belle’s handling some of the other arrangements and simply can’t spare the time.”

Naturally. “I hope she’s not too busy, since today is important. I’ll see—”
Click.

Natalie dropped the phone into her purse and sighed. She looked at her watch. It was already almost two, and she needed time to get ready before the party. She didn’t want to give Louise any more excuses to berate her.

“Who was that?” Alex said. He sounded neutral, with just a hint of curiosity.

“My...mother.” She drained her glass. The wine was too warm now, but she didn’t care. She’d give anything for time to just...stop.

But it wasn’t going to be. Natalie started to pack the baskets. “If it’s all right with you, I’d like to get going.”

Alex took her wrists gently. “What’s wrong?”

She tried to free herself, but his grip firmed. “Nothing,” she said more sharply than she’d intended.

Something irrational and crazy tempted her to confide in him. But she didn’t know where to begin or how to tell him her adoptive mother hated her, and that whenever they talked, she felt as though her ribs were being tightened in a vise. It wasn’t something she’d ever told anyone. Natalie preferred to pretend that everything was fine in front of other people, and of course her family had never objected to the pretense.

Alex was frowning now, and he dropped her wrists. “What the hell’s the

matter with you? One minute you're hot, and the next you're cold. Is this some kind of game?"

"Isn't it a game for you?" she shot back. "You want to know how long it's going to take to seduce your new senior lead financial analyst, right? Isn't that why you promoted me the second you came in and made that ridiculous bet?"

His face lost all expression, and his eyes went the color of slate, as dangerous and unpredictable as a rockslide. "Let's pack." The unexpectedly soft tone to his voice intensified her guilt and unease. "I'll drop you off at your place."

Shame heated her cheeks. She wasn't being fair to him. He hadn't done anything wrong.

"Alex..." What could she say to salvage the situation? "I—"

He dumped everything into the baskets and took them to his car. Tension hummed in sync with the engine on the drive back. He didn't say a word. It was as if he'd erected an impenetrable wall around him. And for some reason, she wanted the barrier gone.

"Alex, about what I said—"

His hand tightened over the shift, and the car swerved dangerously, cutting her off, making her gasp. The Lamborghini screeched to a stop in front of her condo. He reached over and opened the door.

"Here you are," he said, his voice cold.

She bit her lower lip and got out of the car. "Thank you and I—"

The car took off, the door slamming down shut from the momentum. She found herself looking at a flash of yellow vanishing around the corner. "—'m sorry."

* * *

Damn. What a frustrating woman!

Alex had had to leave before he did something that would permanently damage the fragile relationship between them. He had begun his strategy of seeking revenge against the Rodales, but something about Natalie made him doubt his assumptions.

He knew who she was, what she was supposedly capable of. But a woman who had no problem betraying her employer and coworkers wouldn't have done her duty for a family she clearly seemed to feel uncomfortable

around. She could've told him about how she'd truly felt, but she'd defended them at the restaurant...and again at the picnic.

It wasn't supposed to be this way.

The Murciélago ate up the road like a cheetah flying over the savannah. He had hoped for a cool, calculating bitch. Someone who cared only about herself. Like Emily Rodale. Or his mother. That would've been easier to deal with.

Natalie could certainly be cool, but she didn't seem to be the calculating type. He'd been planning to make a late entrance at Brian Hall's party today with her on his arm. A politician in Brian's faction owed him a favor and had secured him an invitation. Now Alex would be going there alone. Damn cell phones!

Still, it wasn't a major setback. Far more urgent was the need to understand the situation surrounding Rodale International, the Halls, and DDE. Without accurate information, it would be impossible to predict the various players' moves and develop contingency plans.

Why had Natalie turned away from him the second she'd talked with her mother? The Rodales were one of the largest contributors to Brian's campaign. And Emily Rodale was Natalie's godmother.

Something wasn't right. Was Natalie working for them, giving them confidential information about DDE, as Ethan suspected? It could well be. The Rodales seemed to know far too much about what DDE was doing.

Still, that didn't make any sense. If she got caught, it wasn't just her ass on the line. The scandal could end Brian's career. *Would* end it, Alex thought savagely. He would see to that.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Like all political events, this party would be boring, but he needed to be at the Hall mansion to watch Natalie interact with everyone. Something about her gave him the impression that she wasn't like Emily, and his gut told him it was imperative to confirm it.

Alex wasn't sure why it mattered so much. But he was sharp enough to realize it wasn't just Natalie's importance to his plans that was creating this feeling within him. And that made him worry a little.

Chapter Six

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Natalie found herself next to Charlie Rodale in his glossy silver Porsche convertible. The sun warmed her cold skin but did very little to soothe her churning stomach. Trees blurred into an endless stretch of green as the car sped along the highway. As a family friend, a generous contributor to Brian's campaign, and Emily's only son, Charlie had received a gold-embossed invitation to Brian's barbeque party. He had accepted, of course, and asked Natalie to accompany him.

Natalie was still upset with herself about the picnic, for taking her frustration with Louise out on Alex. That had been wrong. She smoothed a hand over her hair and her white dress. She couldn't afford to dwell on Alex right now. She was going to have to face Louise in less than fifteen minutes.

"What are you thinking?" Charlie said.

"Nothing."

He glanced over at her. "We don't have to go."

His golden hair was tousled as if he'd just gotten out of the bed. It made him look absurdly endearing, and she smiled. "Yes we do." She didn't even want to imagine the kind of tongue-lashing she'd get from Louise if she skipped the event.

"I hear there are a couple of new hotels that are paying couples to test their mattresses for them. You know, gauge ballistic reaction, that sort of thing. We could maybe help them out. Do our bit to contribute to the success of local companies."

Natalie shook her head and laughed, the knot in her stomach loosening a bit. Charlie always did help her to relax.

Charlie shrugged and smiled gamely. He'd never made it a secret that he was interested in her. She refused to encourage him, but since her breakup

with Marcus, he had become more aggressive in his pursuit of her. It made her sad sometimes. Although she loved him dearly, it was purely platonic on her side.

He drove into her parents' immaculate neighborhood, with its perfectly trimmed, perfectly green lawns and elegant, moneyed mansions. He parked his car in their driveway, got out, and opened the door for her.

"It's still not too late to ditch the party."

Her lips twisted. "You don't have to deal with Louise afterward. I do." She took his hand. "Come on."

American dogwoods, the Virginia state flower, grew on the front lawn of the Hall residence. The wind carried the sweet fragrance of roses growing in the back. Natalie saw a man in black semi-casual clothes walking toward the house from the opposite side. Her heartbeat skipped once, then accelerated.

"Alex," she said.

"Natalie." His gaze dropped to her hand, which was still holding Charlie's, and the timbre of his voice changed. "Rodale."

She felt herself flushing, hot and cold all at once. Why did she feel bad? It wasn't like they'd ever agreed to see each other exclusively.

"Damon." From Charlie's tone, it might as well have been *Demon*.

She tightened her hand around Charlie's. "Come on, we're late. Let's go."

Alex stepped in front of them and preceded them up the walkway. His gait was casual, as if he didn't give a damn about what she was doing with Charlie. She concentrated on not noticing the way his broad shoulders and hips moved under the perfectly fitted clothes.

They stopped in front of the white, paneled door. Alex rang, and Natalie and Charlie waited behind him. Louise appeared, decked out in a gorgeous lavender dress that showed off her slim legs. Her face lit in a polite greeting, the perfect politician's wife's mask that never wavered in public.

"Thank you so much for coming. You must be Alex Damon," she said. "So glad to meet you in person."

Alex favored her with a smile. "The pleasure's all mine." He shook hands with her and slipped inside.

Louise turned to Charlie, hugged him, said something while pointing at a group of men who were talking farther into the house, and gently pushed him toward them. She turned to Natalie once he was out of hearing range.

"Thanks so much for your help, Natalie."

Natalie gave her a tight smile. She no longer tormented herself about why

Louise treated her like a pest she couldn't get rid of. It was simply one of the indignities of life. Louise, of course, would deny to her last breath that she treated Natalie any different from Belle.

"Well, come in and say hello to everyone. Mix around. You know how critical this year is."

Natalie stepped into the ivory marble foyer. Gold-trimmed chair rails ran around the walls, dividing them into unequal halves: champagne on top and pastel blue on the bottom. Louise had redecorated not too long ago. She claimed it was important to have a "dignified" home.

Natalie thought it was rather pretentious. In good taste, of course, but pretentious, nonetheless.

She went to the living room, where the majority of the guests had congregated. There was an overabundance of fifty-something men, all silvering hair and golf tans. Many of them were with thirty-something women. Everyone had drinks in their hands.

Framed family portraits and photos sat on the gigantic fireplace mantel. The pictures showed a happy and well-adjusted family. Looking at them never failed to stir a bitter mixture of sadness and disgust in Natalie.

She plucked a flute of champagne from a tray and scanned the area. She knew almost all of the guests, but she suddenly felt too tired for superficial chitchat. Finally, her eyes zeroed in on Emily Rodale. Thank God. Like Louise, she was a petite blonde. But her heart was much warmer.

"Oh, there you are," Emily said as Natalie approached. "More and more beautiful every time I see you. How's work?"

"It's going well. I just got promoted."

Emily's eyebrows, already plucked and painted into high arches, gained a bit more altitude. Despite her ultra-conservative high-society background, she'd been a feminist since day one and always showed a keen interest in Natalie's career. "Really? So now you're...what?"

"Senior lead financial analyst. First-in-command in my department, so to speak. I still report to the company president, though."

Emily laughed. "Well, perhaps not for long, knowing you." She raised her wineglass. "To success."

Natalie clinked her flute with Emily and took a deep swallow, suddenly feeling better. Sometimes she wished she were Emily's adopted child instead of Louise's. Who knew where she would be now if she'd had this sort of support and encouragement when she was growing up?

“So, now that...” Emily’s words trailed off as her eyes focused on a spot beyond Natalie’s right shoulder. The transformation was immediate and dramatic. Her eyes shuttered, ice replacing the warmth in them, and the smile left her lips.

Natalie turned her head and saw Alex standing behind her. A dash of insolence twisted his lips.

“How did *you* get in?” Emily said. Despite her size, she managed enough condescension to outdo any member of the French aristocracy.

“The same way you did, I imagine. Massive donations, friendships based on mutual blackmail, wrecking the lives of those around me to satisfy a ruthless ambition...” He smiled charmingly. “The usual.”

What the...? Natalie glanced from Alex to Emily and back. How *had* he gotten an invitation? Maybe he knew Brian...or Belle, although she doubted it was the latter.

“Don’t be so shy, dear.” Alex put his arm around her. “You didn’t tell me you knew Emily.”

Natalie didn’t understand his game, but she had no intention of getting caught in the middle of it. “You didn’t ask.” She ducked out from under his arm and made a quick exit, heading toward the kitchen. Maybe a small bite before dinner would help settle the tension that had returned to her stomach.

When she was almost to the kitchen door, Belle suddenly appeared in front of her. She was a fifth-carbon copy of her mother, from her blonde hair all the way down to her size-five shoes. Natalie gave Belle a curious look, then paled when she saw the couple coming up behind her.

“Marcus,” Natalie whispered.

She’d done her best to avoid any social situation where she might cross paths with her ex and his new wife. But here they were, directly—unavoidably—in front of her.

Marcus saw her and paused, then put a hand on the small of his wife’s back. “Hi, Natalie.”

A bright smile curved Belle’s lips. “You know Marcus, of course, but have you met Sandra? She’s expecting. Already! Isn’t it wonderful?”

Natalie smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle on her dress. “Congratulations.”

She couldn’t believe Belle was doing this. Belle had always enjoyed tormenting her, but this was taking things too far. It was one thing to be a malicious teaser, another to be downright cruel.

Sandra looked at Natalie with an uncertain smile, then at Belle, then

returned her attention to Natalie. “Thank you. This is a lovely party. You must be very happy for your father.”

“Yes.” Natalie glanced at the vulgarly large diamond ring on Sandra’s finger and then to her slightly protruding stomach.

Loved, married...and now pregnant.

Jealousy should have been eating at her, but it wasn’t. Although she was sure that Belle had intended to embarrass and humiliate her, Natalie didn’t feel anything except relief that things hadn’t worked out between Marcus and her. Why had she feared facing him again so much? She couldn’t even remember what had been so dazzling about him.

“There you are, darling.”

Natalie felt Alex come up behind her. Before she could protest, he turned her around and planted a kiss on her cheek. Even though it was a casual peck, her senses came instantly alive. It was all she could do to keep her hands from reaching for his shoulders, her body craving another dose of the delicious heat from the morning. How could she have compared him to Marcus? Marcus paled against the intensity of Alex’s magnetism, like a match against a bonfire.

She settled for slipping an arm around him, sensing Belle’s gaze boring into the back of her head and feeling a small bit of satisfaction and gratitude, along with an equal measure of confusion. Alex had been angry hours ago, cold and remote just minutes before. Why was he helping her?

Alex turned to the trio before them, his hand burning a brand into her waist. “Sweetheart, who are these people?”

“This is Belle, my sister. And this is Marcus O’Dell and his wife Sandra.” Natalie cleared her throat. “Everyone, this is Alex Damon.”

Belle’s eyes widened a bit. “I *thought* you looked familiar. How did you two meet?”

“Work,” Alex said. His eyes were cold as they gazed at Belle, who seemed to draw back a little. He turned back to Natalie. “I’ve yet to be introduced to your father, darling. Would you mind?”

She drew him away from the group. Natalie still didn’t know what to think about Alex’s behavior, but anything was preferable to giving Belle time to come up with something new. Her hand in the crook of his arm, they went to the french doors in the living room that connected to a small wooden platform with steps to the backyard. Several men were gathered around a huge barbeque grill, from which gray columns of smoke rose. Most of them

held beers, and Brian was laughing at something one of them said.

“Natalie.” Louise’s voice came from behind them. “Would you take this bottle of barbeque sauce to your father?”

Natalie was looking for an opportunity to ask Alex about his capricious behavior, but it didn’t look like she was going to get one. She sighed and squeezed his arm lightly. “Can you wait for just a minute?”

“No problem.”

She went back and into the kitchen. State-of-the-art stainless steel appliances shone like alien jewels beneath cherry cabinets. The counters groaned under the weight of enough cheese to permanently clog every guest’s arteries. Louise’s heels clicked on the hard tiles as she moved around. She handed Natalie a large glass bottle. “Here.”

Natalie took it and turned to leave, then stopped. “Did you know the O’Dells were coming?”

Louise concentrated on uncorking a bottle of Riesling. “Of course I knew. I made up the guest list.”

“Did you see how Belle made sure to introduce me to his new wife?”

“I noticed the group of you talking. Why?”

Natalie knew she shouldn’t pursue the subject. She would only get shot down and made to feel silly and small. In all her years, she could never remember winning an argument with Louise. But something about Alex’s earlier support emboldened her.

“It was stupid to stage that scene, don’t you think? It embarrassed them.”

“No,” Louise said, still working on the cork. “*You* embarrassed them. They have every right to be here.”

“And I don’t?”

“It was necessary for you to come. People would have noticed your absence.”

Natalie tightened her hand around the barbeque sauce bottle so hard it began to tremble. Decades of frustration welled up inside her until she could no longer suppress it like she usually did. “Why do you hate me so much? What have I ever done to you?”

Louise gave her a tiny smile. “Must we discuss this *right* now?”

“Yes, Louise, I think we must.”

Louise sighed, put the wine aside, and faced her, hands folded sedately against her dress. “Very well, then. No one ever told you the truth about your origins, but Brian *found* you.” Louise’s voice was as cool and even as paving

stones. “That’s right. He found you in a *trash bin* in DC and brought you home instead of waiting for me to give him the child he so wanted.”

Natalie stood absolutely still. She felt as though someone had punched her in the solar plexus and couldn’t get enough air into her body.

“So don’t presume to tell me of the rights you supposedly have in this family. Your very presence is like a poison to me.” Louise’s face was completely composed and placid, but the words hit Natalie like bricks. “What kind of people throw their child away in a trash bin? Brian should’ve listened to me and given you up to an orphanage. It’s no wonder you couldn’t hold on to Marcus. Blood will out, and a man of his breeding can tell.”

Natalie swayed. She could barely think. This couldn’t be true. But...

“Now that you know, dear, do call off your hounds. We wouldn’t want the others to sniff out even a hint of trouble on our side,” Louise said, her eyes arctic.

Hounds? Wha —?

Suddenly, Alex appeared at the archway that connected the kitchen to the living room. Louise’s aspect changed instantly and completely, as though a movie had skipped a few frames. She glanced at his empty glass. “Would you like more wine?” Her voice was sweet, the very definition of hospitality.

He shot her an unreadable look. “I don’t believe so, no.” He placed his glass on the counter and pried the sauce from Natalie’s grip. “If it’s all right, I want to steal Natalie away from you to get an introduction to Brian.”

“Certainly,” Louise said, the picture of graciousness.

Natalie hurried outside with Alex, her mind reeling. The afternoon sun had warmed the temperature in the backyard, but she felt cold inside. *Found?* She had been thrown away and *found?*

Brian waved at her, gesturing at her to come to the grill. They walked toward him. His face was flushed from the heat of the grill and the beer. “Hi, honey. How’s my favorite girl?”

Louise had been needlessly cruel, but Brian had always tried to make her feel at home. She couldn’t ruin his party, no matter how disoriented she felt. She mustered a smile. “Hi, Dad.”

“Who’s your friend?”

* * *

Friend? Brian Hall was either stupid or diplomatic. Alex chose the latter.

“This is Alex Damon,” Natalie said.

Brian extended his hand. Alex put the barbeque sauce on a table next to the grill and shook it, carefully keeping his face pleasant. He resisted the urge to grind the older man’s knuckles together. That would be petty.

“Welcome.” The politician’s face never wavered, although he had to know about Alex’s relationship with the Rodales. “I heard you might drop by. Thanks for coming.”

“The pleasure’s mine.” Alex smiled, but he was sure it didn’t reach his eyes. “Nice party.”

“Thank you. Beer?”

Alex nodded and took an ice-cold green bottle from Brian. Not a bad guy, per se, but someone with something to hide. Wonder how he would react if he knew that Alex already had his men digging up facts. Evidence to stop him from meddling in something he had no business getting involved with in the first place.

“I didn’t know you were politically active in Virginia,” Brian said. “You’re from San Francisco, aren’t you?”

“Virginia’s on my radar at the moment, especially now that one of my companies here is poised for a big growth spurt. I think this year’s senatorial election could get very interesting, don’t you?”

Brian considered, then nodded. “Possibly. It’s hard to tell.”

“Incumbents always have the upper hand. But I also have a soft spot for underdogs. It’s hard to decide who should get my support.” Alex felt Natalie tense.

Brian smiled with genial good humor and took a drink of his beer. “As an incumbent myself, of course, I think I know what my constituents want better than someone with no experience.” There was a general murmur of agreement from the other men present.

“Of course. But a fresh perspective might be good for the state. Something a little more international. Although you were in China for a while, isn’t that right?”

Alex was watching carefully, and so he caught the infinitesimal narrowing of Brian’s eyes. “Yes,” the senator said. “You’ve done your homework, I see. Not many people remember that these days.”

“I try to understand people as best as I can. It helps when you need to ask a favor or get someone to see things your way.”

“I imagine it does, young man.” Brian was looking at Alex very directly

now, the intensity of his gaze beginning to disrupt the genial expression on the rest of his face. “Let’s hope that you don’t ask for too much.”

Natalie began to tug discreetly at Alex’s sleeve. “There are some other guests I’d like to introduce you to. Let’s let these guys get back to their grilling, or we’ll never eat.”

Alex smiled and allowed her to draw him off. He’d pushed enough for the time being and had no intention of causing a scene at this early stage of the game. Brian had turned back to the grill, but his gaze never left them as they walked away across the lawn.

* * *

“What was that all about?” Natalie said.

“Nothing. I just wanted him to know I wasn’t going to let his family bully you.”

“Oh.” She blushed, embarrassed. So he’d heard what Louise had said. She cleared her throat. “Thank you for helping me out with Belle and Louise. I thought after what happened this morning... Look, I’m sorry.”

Alex made a dismissive gesture. “Let’s start over, shall we?” He held out a hand as they walked. “I’m Alex.”

She took it with a small smile. “Natalie. Enchanted, I’m sure.”

“Well, I certainly hope so. So, Natalie, tell me something. Why didn’t you stand up for yourself back there, especially against your sister?”

“It’s...complicated.”

“Try me.”

She squinted up at him in the afternoon light. “You really want to know all this?” Apparently he did. “Well... Marcus—he’s my ex. We dated for three years and broke up six months ago. He immediately got engaged to Sandra.” She paused and shrugged. “Now they’re married, and she’s pregnant.”

Incredulity mingled with wry curiosity. “You still have a thing for him?”

She let out short laugh. “Uh, no. I guess I wonder what would’ve happened if we’d stayed together. But I’m not crying over him. It’s over, breaking up was the right decision, and I’ve moved on.”

“So what’s wrong with standing up to Belle?”

“What’s wrong is I’m not going to make a scene, especially when there are guests around. It would only make me look silly and make her want to get

back at me. It wasn't the first time she's tried something like this. I'm used to it. And as for Louise... Well, she's still my...mother."

Natalie closed her eyes. It was difficult to get the word out. Even though she'd done her best to win Louise's approval and affection during the first twenty or so years of her life, she'd never considered Louise her "mother." More like a woman who tolerated giving her room and board, nothing more. She had a suspicion that if it wouldn't have made the Halls look bad, Louise would have thrown her into a trash bin herself.

Natalie didn't want to be morose around Alex. She took his arm and led him away from the other guests. "Can I ask you something?" she said, deliberately making her tone light.

"Hmm?"

"Do you have some kind of white-knight syndrome?"

He quirked an eyebrow.

"You seem very quick and eager to help. Twice in a row."

Alex stopped and drew her to him. "I happened to see a damsel in distress and merely rose to the occasion."

"You do that often?" She allowed her body to lean into his a bit. "Rise to the occasion?"

He looked directly into her eyes. "Whenever it's required."

She should feel scandalized. After all, this was her parents' backyard. Instead, she felt nothing but feminine satisfaction that the attraction she felt for him wasn't one-way. His breath tickled her skin, and she shivered.

"Cold?" he murmured.

She shook her head.

"Mmmmm..."

Alex skimmed her bare arm with his hand. It was an innocent gesture, but the tenderness of it was as intimate as a kiss. Glancing around, Natalie pulled him into the shadows under the deck. Sweet-smelling roses climbed the wooden beams that supported the structure and shielded them from the other guests' view. Everyone was basking in the sun, and nobody paid attention to the shaded spot.

No wonder you couldn't hold on to Marcus. Blood will out, and a man of his breeding can tell.

Natalie shut Louise out of her head and drew Alex closer. She could feel his strong heartbeat through his shirt, smell the man and a hint of subtle cologne. There was something about him that conjured up decadence and

velvet and silk and sex and thrills and safety all at the same time in her mind. His arms circled around her, effectively caging her.

His head dipped, and his lips touched the hollow of her neck. He nosed the strand of white pearls around her throat out of the way, and his tongue darted out and licked her skin gently, then more firmly. She flexed her fingers against his shirt, grabbing a handful of the silky fabric. He let out a soft breath, as warm as melted chocolate.

She heard herself sigh. He responded by tightening his arms around her and tilting her face up for a kiss. She opened her mouth, inviting him inside, and felt him take control, tracing her upper lip, then her lower one, while his hands brought her pelvis closer to his. He was rock hard.

A slick heat began to gather between her legs. The sensation was pleasurable but also dissatisfying. She shifted, trying to quiet the building demand of her body, but it was no use.

She needed more.

His mouth was too leisurely to appease the greedy monster in her. He sipped her as if he had all the time in the world, as if he didn't have a redwood digging into her belly.

She moaned and let go of his shirt. Her fingers tunneled into his hair. Rising on her toes, she pressed herself against him, and her tongue invaded his mouth for the unrestrained kiss she wanted.

He raised the hem of her dress, the air cool on her suddenly exposed skin. His hands massaged her upper thighs and grazed her bare butt. She hadn't wanted lines and was wearing only a tiny thong under the dress. One hand traveled up her torso and lightly skimmed her breast. Her knees almost buckled; she tightened her arms around him.

"God, you're sexy," he rasped, his mouth hot on her neck.

Suddenly, steps pounded on the deck above them. Belle's voice shouted, "Dad! Everyone! Dinner is served!"

Natalie jumped at the announcement and stared at Alex's shadowed face.

He cursed softly. "This is the second time your family has interrupted us."

His gaze lingered on her mouth, her breasts, her eyes. She smoothed her dress down and swallowed hard. The thin fabric showed the outline of her pebbled nipples. She was in no condition to join the others.

"You go first," Natalie managed to say. Despite her effort, her hands trembled.

“Natalie—”

“Go on,” she said. “I’ll follow in a minute.”

He nodded, but there was a decisive glint in his eye. “There’s not going to be a third.”

Oh God. She shivered and watched as he retreated into the sunlight.

Chapter Seven

CHARLIE DROVE NATALIE HOME. Alex had been a perfect gentleman throughout the meal, though there was a simmering hostility between him and the Rodales. She had no idea what could've caused it. Sometimes Rodale International and DDE bid on the same projects, but surely that couldn't be the reason.

The moment Alex had excused himself from the table after the meal was over, Charlie had dragged her out. He hadn't even given her a chance to say good-bye to anyone except her family and Emily. Once they'd gotten into the car, he hadn't said anything. The ride home passed in a cocoon of silence. He hadn't even turned the radio on.

Now, sitting in the Porsche in front of her condo, Natalie felt uncomfortable. And somewhat disappointed that it wasn't Alex taking her home. Maybe she could call him later. But then...she didn't know his number. She should've insisted on staying until she could make her farewells properly...or something.

"What were you doing with Damon out there?" Charlie said suddenly.

"Huh?"

"You disappeared with Damon for a while. Went out in the yard. When I tried to find you, I couldn't." Charlie was looking straight out the windshield.

Natalie suppressed an inward sigh. She wasn't in the mood to endure another session of accusations.

"Where were *you*?" she said. "You were my escort but disappeared for God only knows how long. You know I had to deal with Marcus O'Dell and his pregnant wife? Thank God Alex rescued me from that embarrassment. You were nowhere to be found."

"I had important business to discuss. I—"

“You mean more important than being by my side when I needed you?”
He slapped the steering wheel. “I thought you were over O’Dell.”

“I *am* over him.” Suddenly, she was angry at Charlie. If he’d been around, she wouldn’t have succumbed to Alex...or used him to bandage her ego after seeing Marcus’s wife and dealing with Louise’s cruel comments. The memory made her hot and embarrassed. She should’ve known better. “Why are we even arguing? Alex just did something you wouldn’t do.”

“Hey!” Charlie yelled, surprising her. He rarely lost his temper and never with her. “You think it’s easy? That bastard’s trying to steal my company.”

“What?”

“That’s right. He’s been trying to take us over. Oh, it’s all behind-the-scenes, but make no mistake, it’s happening.”

She frowned. “That can’t be right. I know what’s going on at DDE, and Rodale is priced too high for us.” Alex was far too business-savvy to go after Rodale International. He hadn’t built his empire by paying more than he could afford.

“I’m not mistaken about who wants to fuck me over.”

She gasped. She’d never heard him curse like this before.

“And you”—Charlie raked his hair—“I know you didn’t just have a nice chat with him outside. I’m not stupid. You were pretty close to doing him. Or maybe I’m wrong and you did him already.”

“*Doing him?* Oh for—! Sure. Right in my-dad-the-senator’s yard. In front of all the guests.”

“I saw the way he was looking at you.”

“That’s your evidence? A man looks at me, and I’m ready to jump him?” She glared at him with a mixture of outrage and guilt. “What kind of woman do you think I am?”

Clutching her purse, she opened the door. Charlie’s hand snaked out and grabbed her wrist before she could step out of the car. She struggled to free herself, but it only made his grip tighten.

“You’re hurting me!”

Suddenly, he let go. She jumped out of the car.

“Natalie—” Charlie began.

The emptiness inside her heart ached, and she was sick of Charlie and her family and everything. Charlie was one of her closest friends—actually, her only close friend from the Halls’ social circle. He’d been nice to her, been there for her when Louise and Belle did their best to make her feel

inadequate. He was like a brother to her. How could it come down to this?

“I don’t want to talk to you right now.” She took a step back. “You should go home.” She turned around and stalked toward her condo.

“I’m sorry,” he called out from his car. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He didn’t have to say it; she knew. She even felt a little guilty, because she knew why he was acting this way. It wasn’t fair to him that she couldn’t return his feelings, no matter how safe her heart would be with him. But she couldn’t pretend to feel anything beyond platonic love for Charlie.

Not when another man filled her thoughts.

Chapter Eight

NATALIE PADDED BAREFOOT around her condo, opening all the windows to air the place out. She'd been cleaning since breakfast. It was amazing that so much dust could accumulate in two weeks, but she'd finally gotten it all. Now all that was left to do was to shove the vacuum back into the closet by the bedroom, which she did.

Matto rubbed his body around her ankles. She picked him up and scratched behind his ears. He purred, his eyes turning into two thin slits. She lay on the pale green couch in the living room, with him still in her arms. The light yellow curtains danced in the balmy breeze, and she closed her eyes.

Someone rang the doorbell. Natalie frowned. She didn't normally have visitors on Sundays.

It was probably some salesman. She curled up and ignored it.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong ding-dong.

She opened her eyes and glared at the door. What was wrong with people these days? She put Matto on the floor. He growled with annoyance and ran over to the door. If he peed on whoever was there, it would serve them right.

Ding-dong!

"Coming!" She yanked the door open and gaped. "Belle. What are you doing here?"

Belle pushed past her and marched inside. "Isn't it obvious?"

Despite her heeled sandals, she was still shorter than Natalie. Like Louise, Belle had excellent taste in clothes and accessories and just the right sort of wholesome blonde looks to be the angelic daughter of a U.S. senator, a mask that vanished like a crab into a hole whenever she was alone with Natalie.

Natalie shut the door and crossed her arms. “No. And I think it’s rude that you kept ringing my doorbell.”

“Oh please.” Belle spun around to face her. “I saw your car outside.”

“I could’ve been out with someone. Like Charlie,” Natalie said, feeling catty. It was no secret that Belle had a crush on him.

Belle glared at her. “You’re such a bitch. A mean bitch.”

“Original.”

Belle calling her names was nothing new. They’d never been very close, and once Charlie had made it clear that he was interested in Natalie, their relationship had deteriorated rapidly.

“Do you have to rub it in that you have *everything*?” Belle said, continuing to glare.

This was new. Belle had to be feeling more self-pity than usual if she thought Natalie had more than she did. Except maybe for Charlie’s affection, Natalie had always had less. The Halls had given her money, but they’d never acknowledged her. She’d made excuses for her family when they hadn’t come to her high school graduation. After all, it was Europe. But it had become painfully obvious how little she’d mattered to the Halls when nobody had shown up at her college graduation except Brian. The University of Virginia was only a two-and-a-half hour drive from the Hall residence.

Natalie kept her voice cool. “I don’t imagine you came all the way out here to call me a bitch or compare notes on what we have or don’t have. What do you want?”

“How could you?”

“Just what I wanted to ask you,” Natalie said. “How could you bring Marcus and his wife to me? That was cruel.”

Belle’s eyes widened. “I can’t believe you’re blaming me for that. They just happened to be there.”

“Naturally.”

“Don’t you try to turn this around. This isn’t about me. It’s about you.” Belle punctuated her last statement by pointing a manicured nail at Natalie’s chest.

“Belle. What you do *want*?”

“You hired a private investigator to find out about your past, didn’t you?” Belle said.

“What?”

Belle sneezed. “Do you still have that damn cat?”

“Yes. And you’re lucky he didn’t pee on your sandals. Now, what are you talking about? What PI?”

“Whatever you’re doing is going to hurt Dad.”

That made Natalie pause, but she quickly recovered. It was just like Belle to exaggerate and blame everything from crappy weather to world hunger on her. Natalie had no idea what this private investigation stuff was about, but obviously the only way to find out was going to be to play along. “And you know this...how?”

“I overheard him talking on the phone in his study.”

“You heard one side of a conversation, and you know it was my fault?”

“He specifically mentioned your name. Don’t think I’m stupid. I know you. Always acting like you’re better than all of us.” Belle fluttered her eyelashes and her voice turned falsetto. “I have the highest grade in all my classes, and I didn’t even have to study that hard. And this guy I dated in Europe is soooooo interesting. And his family is soooooo nice and rich. Very classy and traditional. Do you know his father is an Italian count?” Belle would probably have continued with her impression, but she sneezed.

“I never called you stupid or bragged about my grades or boyfriends.”

“Might as well have.” Belle dug into her purse, pulled out a tissue, and blew her nose. “The thing is, if it weren’t for Mom and Dad adopting you, you’d be nothing!”

“So we’re back to that again?” Natalie compressed her lips. The guilt-trip and the demand for gratitude had been going on ever since she could remember.

“Because you act like you don’t *get it!*”

“Careful, Belle. If anyone hears you scream like that, it could damage Brian’s reputation.”

“You’re the one who’s going to ruin Dad! Stop your investigation before it turns into something more serious.”

“For your information, I didn’t hire anyone. So if someone’s snooping for dirt, it’s not my fault. I don’t even talk to reporters.” Natalie threw her hands up in the air. “I don’t know why everyone wants to blame me for everything, but I’m not the cause of this particular problem. If you want to help Brian, you can start by not barging into my place and making groundless accusations.”

Belle took a single step toward Natalie, giving her a look that was equal parts disdain and disgust. “Just. Call. It. Off.” Then she turned on her heel

and left, slamming the door after her.

Natalie took a deep, calming breath and went to the kitchen to put a kettle of water on the stove. The purple flower prints on the cream wall sat like dark shadows.

Now that you know, call off your hounds.

Louise's comment the day before made more sense now—she also apparently thought Natalie was to blame for the problem and had probably decided to send Belle to make sure she got the message loud and clear. Paranoid, all of them. She hadn't hired anyone.

The doorbell rang again, and Natalie glanced upward in mute appeal. She briefly debated ignoring it, but Belle would just keep ringing.

She yanked the door open. "What?"

"No need to be hostile." Alex stood in the entryway, with a black shirt covering his V-shaped torso and a pair of dark blue jeans hugging his lean hips. He held up both hands, palms toward her. "I'm not here to make you work."

Heat rose from Natalie's neck and spread to her cheeks. "Sorry. I thought you were someone else." She smoothed her hair and realized that it wasn't bound. And she didn't have any makeup on. Great. She stared down at her pink manicured toes. "Umm... What are you doing here?"

"I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop by... Is there something on the floor?"

She raised her head. "No, nothing."

"Okay." He stood there for a moment. "Are we going to talk out here?"

"Oh, sorry. Come in."

Matto came out from wherever he had hidden and trotted toward Alex. She shut the door before the cat decided to explore the neighborhood on his own. But he sniffed Alex once and walked away, tail held regally high.

"I was just making tea. Want some?"

"Do you have any coffee? Otherwise, no thanks."

"Sorry, I don't."

On cue, the kettle whistled. She went to the stove, poured herself a mug of green tea, then took it into the living room where she sat on the Turkish rug in front of the coffee table. Alex was examining a set of jade figures on the rosewood shelves. There was something erotically disconcerting about such a dark, masculine figure in her bright, feminine living room.

He pointed at them. "May I?"

She nodded.

His finger skimmed over the scales of the coiled dragon. Two delicate stag antlers grew out of its head, and a red pearl glowed between its teeth. Then he explored the smooth contours of the piece next to it—its tortoise back, snake neck and stag’s hindquarters.

“What’s this called?”

“A *fènhuáng*. I think Americans call it a Chinese phoenix, although it’s nothing like the western version. A dragon and *fènhuáng* set represents a harmonious relationship between a man and a woman.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Hong Kong.”

He smiled. “Kind of whimsical.”

“Maybe.” Natalie sipped her tea. “I thought I would give the dragon to a man I lov—a worthy man.”

Alex picked up the dragon and glanced at her, his expression unreadable. “But you still have it.”

“Yeah. I thought I’d found one, but I was mistaken.”

Marcus had returned it when they’d broken up.

I...well, I never knew what you wanted me to do with it. It doesn’t go very well with my apartment. I guess it’s good that it’s going back to you.

Natalie stared at Alex. The dragon seemed to fit well in his hands, but she wasn’t sure if she wanted to give it to anyone now.

His lips curved into a slight smile. “What?”

She hid behind the mug. “Nothing. I was just thinking... Well, it’s just interesting to have the CEO of my company in my living room on a Sunday.” She fidgeted and smoothed her hair. She really wished she’d put on makeup.

“Is that all you see when you look at me?” He came closer and leaned forward. “Your CEO? When I look at you, I see a smart, beautiful, passionate woman.”

Natalie looked at him. She wasn’t particularly embarrassed by what had happened in her adoptive parents’ backyard. Alex was an attractive man. But what if she was doing this on the rebound, or as a selfish act of salvaging her pride after Louise’s vicious words at the party? She didn’t want to be a user.

“Alex...”

“Shh...” He moved closer and placed his index finger in her lips. She closed her mouth. “I could’ve strangled your sister yesterday.”

Oh, I wish you had.

“And Rodale for sneaking you away.”

“Sorry—”

“What’s up between the two of you? Dating or something?” His tone was casual, though his gaze was probing, sharp.

Had Louise said something? Talk about giving the wrong impression.

“No, just friends. We’ve known each other for years.”

“I see.”

Natalie relaxed a little bit. Of course he wasn’t going to be like Louise, who insisted on being right no matter what.

“Come on, pack whatever you need for a day and let’s go,” he said.

“Go?”

“Since we can’t seem to do anything without your family interrupting us, I want to take you somewhere private. A small cabin by the place we went yesterday. And no cell phones.”

He held her hand and caressed her palm with the calloused tip of his thumb. She shivered. Amazing that her palm could be so sensitive.

As tempting as his suggestion was, she hesitated.

But the feeling of being desired so intensely...

As if sensing the cause of her indecision, he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll behave.” Then his eyes crinkled slightly. “At least, as much as you want me to.”

“You should let go if you want me to pack,” she managed to say, despite the sudden dryness in her mouth.

He released her, triumph glittering in his eyes, and watched her go to her bedroom.

She didn’t have enough time for full makeup so she settled for powder and lipstick. Moving quickly from bedroom to bathroom to closet, she threw her toiletries, tubes and jars of cosmetics, a change of underwear and a couple of tops and bottoms into a small black duffel bag and returned to the living room.

Matto lay on Alex’s lap while Alex scratched him gently. The cat’s eyes were closed, and he was purring. The sight softened her heart so quickly and so absurdly, she paused there and soaked in the peacefulness, the odd sense of domestic harmony.

It was such a cliché for a woman to fall in love with a man who loved her pet. Of course, she was far too practical to fall for Alex just because he scratched Matto’s ears, but this felt like something faintly ominous—a crack

in the wall surrounding her heart. Thunder off on the horizon.

Alex looked up. "I think he likes me."

"Seems that way," she said through a small lump in her throat.

He looked at the duffel bag in her hand. "Is that all?"

She nodded.

"Light packer. A woman after my own heart." He took the bag from her.

"After you."

Chapter Nine

THE CABIN WAS surprisingly rustic, not at all like the slick modern cottage the Halls owned in British Columbia. It was surrounded by maple and oak trees and had a nice view of the lake.

Alex closed the Mercedes trunk with a soft thud. Natalie turned away from the water and looked at him. Somehow, she was glad he hadn't driven his Lamborghini. The sun seeped through the gaps between the leaves and dappled his tall figure. He held a bag in each hand, one hers, one his. She couldn't see his eyes through the dark sunglasses he wore.

The woods were full of small chirps and chitters as they went up to the cabin door. Alex unlocked it and shouldered his way inside. Natalie followed him, her sandals making light tocking sounds as she walked across the wooden floor. The scents of beeswax and pine swirled in the living room as a bit of the outside breeze came in with them. Sunlight poured in like honey through a wide skylight in the sloped roof.

Alex walked to a bedroom on the right and dropped the bags in there. "If you're hungry, feel free to raid the fridge."

"Okay. Thanks."

Natalie poked around the place. The living room and the kitchen were surprisingly spacious, with only a rectangular marble-topped island separating them. There wasn't any formal dining area, although the backyard had a small picnic table and a fairly large herb garden with basil, sage, and rosemary.

Through the gaps in the trees, the lake sparkled like sapphires. She'd thought she would see people around—it was a beautiful place—but only a doe came by to drink, disappearing into the woods after having her fill.

The faint sound of water running in the bathroom sink made her aware of

what was to come. Suddenly nervous, she rubbed her palms against the soft fabric of her jeans. A small part of her cautioned against what she was about to do. It wasn't like her to fall into bed with a man she'd met only a few days ago. Yet no man had been able to break down her defenses so quickly. Alex had been the only one to make her feel truly desirable. Wanted.

And no one before him had stood up for her. Her old boyfriends had been too busy trying to impress her important family.

As she stood leaning against the doorjamb and gazing out at the lake, warm arms came around her from behind. "What are you thinking?" His soft breath tickled her ear, as close and intimate as her own heartbeat.

She tilted her head back until she could look up into his eyes. Gray-blue in this light, they seemed to hold the essence of the man. There was desire, yes, and steel but also something forthright that said he wasn't making pretty but empty promises—the passion he was offering was all that she was getting.

And it was up to her now. Take it or leave it.

Natalie turned in his embrace until she faced him and tiptoed so she could brush her lips against his. She felt him smile as they kissed. Then his mouth was moving leisurely over hers, his moist, hot tongue licking and tasting.

Impressions came in waves. Overwhelming masculinity. Tightly controlled, raw sexuality. Her hands traveled the vast, hard plane of his back. His tongue probed, penetrated her mouth. Her fingers dug into him.

His big hands skimmed her shoulders, her sides, under her breasts. They branded her through the cotton baby tee she wore. Her nipples hardened, aching for a direct touch.

His fingers circled around her breasts, climbed up the delicate skin, then ran down the length of her spine. She shivered and broke off the kiss.

"Alex."

Natalie didn't recognize her own voice. She fought for control as her body remembered yesterday and demanded satisfaction.

He paused.

"Don't..." Her fingers buried themselves in his hair and pulled his head toward her roughly. "Don't you dare stop."

She fused her mouth to his. This time, he didn't hold back. Maintaining the kiss, he lifted her and carried her back into the cabin's main room. It seemed about as difficult for him as carrying Matto would have been.

The power in his body stunned her. It was as if she were made of papier-

mâché and he of oak. She liked her men strong, but this was almost frightening.

His hands were everywhere, fueling an inextinguishable fire in her. Despite the breeze stirring the air, a thin film of sweat covered her body. He pulled her shirt up and unclasped her bra. His mouth took her nipple, the touch she'd been aching for, and she cried out.

She moved her legs restlessly. Her sex was slick and ready. Switching to the other breast, he put a thigh between hers. She rubbed herself against it shamelessly. But it wasn't enough. Far from it.

"Now," she said. "Now."

With his mouth still on her nipple, he picked her up again and took several steps until her back touched the island between the kitchen and the living room. Wordlessly, she put her hands on the smooth top to brace herself. He unbuttoned and unzipped her jeans. Her entire body tensed in anticipation of total possession. But instead of ripping her pants off and taking her, he drew her jeans down slowly, then paused and fingered her through the thin lacy fabric of her panties, moist with her heat.

"Alex!"

Natalie wanted the panties gone. Impatient, she pulled the underwear down herself and placed her feet widely apart.

Alex's eyes turned to glittering slits. Two fingers entered her, and his thumb rubbed the little sensitive nub.

Her back arched. The sensation was almost too much. His mouth, his hands—they all moved to drive her relentlessly toward the edge, and she was helpless to stop it.

Her body tensed, rock hard, and she screamed her pleasure. But this was just the beginning. He pushed her again, farther and faster. He pressed his clever mouth against her sex, sensitive after the incredible orgasm.

"I can't," Natalie moaned.

He showed her she could.

She fought to breathe. She had no control over her body or its response to him. When she clenched her hands around the edge of the counter and convulsed, she found herself flung so far and so fast that if he hadn't been holding her, she would have fallen.

Alex finally moved away from her, and Natalie gulped in air. He pulled his clothes off. His erection jutted out.

At the sight of it, she found her desire rising again, a monster that

should've been appeased after two explosive orgasms.

"Turn around," he said, his voice rough.

Her brain was slow to comprehend, but he didn't bother to wait. He turned her, bent her over the counter, and placed her hands on the edge.

"Spread your legs."

Mindless with need, she did as she was told. She heard the sharp tear of a condom package. He rested his hands on her hips and caressed them before he pushed inside.

He felt enormous, but he entered her in one smooth stroke. Her entire body quivered.

"Tell me what you want," he whispered, his breath warm against her neck.

"Take me."

"How?"

God, how could he expect her to talk when she had to fight for every breath? She wanted everything he had to give. She tried to move, but he held her tightly.

"Hard. Fast. Front, back, side, I don't care how you do it, just do it!"

She could feel his triumph as he began to plunge in and out of her, hard and fast just like she'd begged him to. With each thrust, he seemed to enter deeper. She arched her back. Her insides wound tighter, and incredibly, she found herself climaxing again. Holding back was impossible. A sob tore her throat as she surrendered to another tide of pleasure. Before she could catch her breath, he flipped her around, leaving her legs dangling off the island, and entered her again, face-to-face. He gripped her hips hard and pumped into her. She was nothing but a trembling mass of overly sensitized nerve endings. He was ruthless, as if he was trying to brand her as his.

And she didn't care. Her brain had ceased to work a long time ago, and there was only her body and its insatiable need for the sensation only Alex could give her.

The sound of flesh slapping against flesh. Harsh breathing. Her own voice in another piercing scream.

He gave a guttural groan and one final thrust. He leaned heavily against her, and she welcomed the solid reality of his body on hers. As the tides of sensation receded and she slowly came back to her senses, she was surprised and a little frightened to realize that Alex had reached something inside of her that was far beyond the physical.

* * *

She didn't know how long they stayed like that. When he got his breath back, he gave her a kiss and went to the bathroom. Sated and sleepy, she followed him to the master bedroom and leaned against the door frame. She'd thought the cabin was a hunting lodge and expected a decapitated stag head mounted over the bed or something. But instead there was a modern painting. Oak walls gave the room a light touch, with a large window that faced the woods. The sunlight filtered through the pale emerald drapery and dyed the ivory sheets on the bed green.

Natalie heard the toilet flush, and Alex reappeared with a small towel. He cleaned her gently, and she sighed. Even the soft fabric was too much for the sensitive junction between her legs.

"Let me take you to bed," he murmured.

Alex picked her up, carried her to the bed, and laid her on the cool sheets. She curled into a fetal position. He spooned her, and she relaxed into his body heat. After their passionate lovemaking, his presence next to her felt like the most natural thing in the world.

They lay there for a few moments, his hands skimming her curves. Then he murmured, "You mentioned something about doing it from the side...?"

There was a slight but slowly increasing pressure along a cucumber-sized length of the back of her thigh. Her eyes widened.

"You don't need to...rest?"

She didn't need to turn around to know there was a smile on his face. "Apparently not."

Chapter Ten

IT WAS THE damnedest thing.

What had happened in the Halls' backyard had stayed with Alex through the rest of the day and far into the night. When nothing, not even an arctic shower, had worked, he'd thought he could sate the need if he slept with her.

What a huge miscalculation.

What they'd just done was more than sex. He'd never been so attuned to another person. And when she'd demanded that he take her...he'd been filled by a savage exhilaration he thought would kill him.

Look at what she was doing to him without even touching him. His teenage years were well in the past, but she made him feel like he was back in high school, hormones running rampant. He wanted to mark her as his. Make her forget Charlie Rodale, that moron Marcus O'Dell, and every other man on the planet.

The ferocity of his possessiveness startled him. He didn't get involved this deeply this quickly. The primary reason for approaching Natalie in the first place had been to strike at the Rodales. But now he found himself stricken.

Bitterness filled his mouth. Hadn't he learned from what happened to his father?

Emily Rodale, young, beautiful, and ambitious, had slept with James Damon only for the business secrets that had enabled Charles Rodale Sr. to destroy the Damons' company. When the family lost its fortune, Alex's mother hadn't been able to deal with the situation. She had loved James only for the financial security he had provided for her. Being poor hadn't been something she could understand. Growing up rich tended to do that to people.

And look how everything had turned out for James himself. Destitute and

alone. Alex's mother had been able to find someone else. She'd been a beautiful woman, after all, with zero maternal instinct; Alex had woken up one day to find her gone.

She'd never come back. Had never written or called or sent him Christmas cards or birthday presents.

He still remembered the humiliation and the terrible, racking pain. The feelings of helplessness and inadequacy.

Emily would feel them tenfold. A hundredfold.

Natalie rolled over and looked at Alex with wide eyes, dark and clear, and he was immediately jerked back to the present. "What are you thinking?" she said.

"Nothing." Then he smiled. "Well...maybe something."

He reached for a condom. The second he was protected, he grabbed her and parted her thighs. He entered smoothly, finding her ready and hilding himself in one exquisitely long plunge.

She adjusted to his invasion. He kissed her, and it was as if he hadn't had two killer orgasms in the past hour.

It took longer this time. She cried out at the end, back arched and face contorted, and he gave in to the wave of desire consuming them and let himself go, falling forever.

* * *

Natalie opened her eyes. The dim light in the room told her some time had passed. Her hands crept to the other side of the bed and touched the cool pillow. Just that small movement made her wince. Her entire body felt sore and abused...but it was a good soreness. Grabbing a fistful of the sheet, she raised herself up and blinked.

The bed looked as if it had gone through World War III.

"You're up."

She turned her head. He walked through the door, only a pair of loose black shorts covering his naked body, and kissed her mouth. The mattress dipped as he rested his weight on the edge.

She closed her eyes, savoring the brief, tender touch. When he lifted his head, she said, "What time is it?"

"Quarter after four." He wrapped her hair around his finger. "Hungry?" he said, his eyes on hers.

Her stomach growled before she could respond. She put a hand over it guiltily, and he laughed.

“I guess that answers that.” He kissed her again. “Come to the kitchen. I’ll whip something up.”

She watched him disappear. Dragging the sheet, she looked for her clothes until she remembered that the last time she had them on, she and Alex were...in the kitchen. The memory of what had happened there sent a tremor through her body. Apparently, the pyrotechnic quality of their lovemaking had done nothing to blunt the sharp edge of her desire.

The scent of food called out to her, and she made her way to the kitchen, the sheet draped across her naked body in a makeshift toga. She picked her clothes up from the floor and put them on her lap as she sat down on one of the stools by the island. Alex’s mouth quirked into a smile as he placed a plate piled with ham and cheese sandwiches on the smooth top in front of her.

“I can’t eat two of those,” Natalie said. Then she eyed his plate. *Four?*

“Sure you can. Gotta keep your strength up.”

She bit into her sandwich. Salty ham and sharp cheese melted on toasted rye bread created a nice harmony of flavors. She sipped her Diet Coke, looking at Alex through her eyelashes. He seemed casual and relaxed as he munched on his food. The man could eat. He must’ve found Louise’s bird-sized, high-society portions from the night before sorely lacking.

After he finished his meal, he came around the island and gently massaged her shoulders and neck. His touch loosened her muscles and made her sigh. And just like that, she turned into a puddle of needy flesh. This time, they made it to the bedroom.

Now they were able to go more slowly. A gentle touch here. There. Her fingers skimming his muscles. A brush of silky sheet on bare skin. The feel of his hair against her cheek, her stomach, her thighs.

The intoxicating scent of desire and heat.

His eyes, lit with passion, watched her, his caresses shaped by her subtlest responses.

This was everything Natalie thought a physical union between a man and woman should be and more. It went beyond physical pleasure to emotional bonding.

It frightened her.

She rolled him over until she was on top. Then she pulled his arms up until his hands grazed the wooden spokes that formed the headboard.

“Hold these,” she said.

He obeyed with a bemused look on his face.

She used his belt and a scarf that she’d brought along to tie his wrists to the spokes. She’d seen how strong he was, but they looked sturdy enough to hold him. Not that he seemed to be in any hurry to get away.

“You were in control last time. Now it’s my turn,” she whispered and kissed his lips.

He kissed her back, but when she finally broke off, he glanced up at the restraints.

“Not used to this?” she murmured.

“I prefer being on top.”

“Mmmm. Maybe later...if you’re very good.”

First with her hands, then with her mouth, she explored every inch of his body and felt satisfaction at every muscular tremor, every hiss of his breath. After a time, she didn’t know where her pleasure ended and his began.

She covered him with a condom and sat on him. His thick length filled and stretched her. She gulped for air and began to move, then ground her hips against his pelvic bones. This was her show: she set the pace, and he had to follow. Just the thought was intoxicating—the billionaire at her mercy.

Desire grew and threatened to split her. She moved faster over him, pulled herself completely off, reinserted him instants later, pulled off him again. His breathing grew rough and gasping, tremors shaking his body at every clasp and release, and he began tugging at the restraints. She savored every moment of it.

“Stop.”

Natalie didn’t even bother to dignify that with an answer. He was going to come when she wanted him to.

One more stroke pushed both of them over the edge. He let out a guttural shout, and she bit her lower lip hard to contain her scream while her entire body spasmed as a powerful climax hit her.

She collapsed on him, post-orgasmic euphoria turning her body into mush.

“God damn it!”

The words rang like a gun shot. Natalie raised her head, frowning.

“What’s wrong?”

“Untie me!”

“Okay, okay.” She fumbled with the restraints, finally getting the scarf to

unknot. “What’s wrong?” she asked again.

“The rubber broke.”

* * *

Alex left her on the bed and went to the connecting bathroom, threw away the useless ring of latex that was still on him, and cleaned himself off with a towel.

“Maybe the timing’s off,” he said, pacing back into the bedroom. He was hoping she wouldn’t panic. She was just staring at him, her eyes blank and wide.

He wanted to punch something. Who the hell had a condom break like that in the middle of an orgasm? Didn’t companies do quality assurance anymore?

He raked his hair and cursed. Despite all his careful planning for contingencies, a broken condom had never entered his mind.

“You don’t happen to be on the pill, do you?” he said.

She shook her head. “I don’t do that well on it.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “You know...uh...the timing could be totally off. And there’s no reason to think it’s going to lead to...unintended consequences.”

“Probably not.” That polished mask he’d seen on Louise’s face descended over Natalie’s. Maybe they weren’t so different after all. “You’re probably right. It’s just not the right time.”

It’d better not be. Fathering a child wasn’t part of the plan. Not any plan he’d made.

Still... He had to make sure she wasn’t going to do something rash. He had a feeling she cared a lot about her reputation. Maybe more than she should. The last thing she would want was a pregnancy when her father was trying for reelection in traditionally conservative Virginia. So if she were pregnant, she would run and hide. It wasn’t difficult for someone like her—moneyed, highly educated, and well-connected.

“Yes... Not the right time. But if there are any...problems, we’ll get through them together,” he said, making his promise as vague as possible but with just enough to let her know that he would be her ally. To make any concrete commitment would be foolish. Unlike the Rodales, he kept his word and didn’t give it lightly. But that empty look on her face was driving him

crazy. He wanted her to know everything was going to be okay...that he wasn't a complete bastard.

She blinked once, then shook her head as if to clear it of clutter. "Um... I think you should take me home. There's no point in discussing this until we know for sure." She started getting dressed.

Something about her voice—despite its smoothness—warned him to stay away, but his instinct told him to stay with her. The wall around her now was stronger and higher than the one he'd had to breach to get to her, and it made his guts twist. Suddenly, it wasn't just his revenge at stake. This was more.

"Please," she added.

Somehow that one word made all the arguments he was marshalling disappear. He stood indecisively for a moment, then put on his clothes and went outside. She followed him silently, her bag in her hand, and they started back.

"Natalie, what's wrong?"

She shook her head. He found he couldn't read her expression. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel. What was wrong with him? He knew how to deal with women. He shouldn't be fumbling for words.

He'd overcome her defenses before, and there was no reason he shouldn't be able to do it again. He was nothing if not persistent.

She unbuckled when they reached her condo. He jotted down a number on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

"This is my personal cell phone. Only about five people have the number. Use it anytime you want," he said.

She nodded and folded the note in half.

"Natalie..."

"Thank you for a lovely day," she said, the smooth mask still intact. "I'll see you tomorrow." She climbed out of the car before he could say anything else.

* * *

Natalie walked into her condo, shut the door, and leaned against it. This wasn't happening. She didn't want to even think about the possibility of getting pregnant.

Matto came to her and mewled. She sank down and scratched his head absently.

How did everything go so quickly from scorching intimacy to a desperate need to be alone?

It wasn't Alex's fault that the condom broke, and she didn't blame him.

Blood will out.

God, she didn't want to have a baby. Not because she would be an unwed mother, which would already pose more problems than she knew what to do with, but because she didn't know if she could handle being a mother at all. If she was going to bring a child into the world, it would be for love and after careful deliberation, not because of a defective piece of latex.

What kind of baby would she have?

But if there are any...problems, we'll get through them together.

Of course it would be a problem if she got pregnant. A big one. She rose to her feet and paced back and forth in the living room. She hadn't been lying when she told him the timing was wrong. Her period wasn't regular, but she really dou—

Her cell phone went off, and she picked it up. It was Kerri.

“How come you never log onto Skype?”

Natalie took a deep breath. She didn't want to start weeping all over her friend. Most likely Kerri was calling from her office. “I'm not at work right now.”

“Neither am I, but I'm logged in.”

Natalie began to tremble. It was almost like an invitation to pour all her problems to Kerri. “You home?”

“Yeah. But I can't fall asleep.”

“Oh God,” Natalie said and sat back on the floor.

“You all right?”

That did it. Natalie told her everything, including the defective condom.

“Wow,” Kerri said when Natalie was done. “You should sue the company even if you don't get pregnant,” she added, her tone deliberately light. “For pain and suffering. I mean, you have to go through the mental anguish of wondering.”

Natalie let out a tremulous laugh. “You know I can't do that.” She smoothed her hair. “Just imagine what it would do to Brian. This is a *condom* company.”

“Well, maybe if he loses the election.”

“Right.”

Kerri sighed. “You could just come to Hong Kong and avoid the situation

altogether.”

“How does that solve anything?”

“One, Alex will have to leave you alone. I can’t imagine him following you all the way to Hong Kong. He’s got a company to run.”

Natalie nodded although Kerri couldn’t see her. That made sense.

“Unless you want him to not leave you alone.” Kerri hummed a little tune, a sign that she was thinking. “Do you?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Since their first dinner, she’d been fascinated by his confidence and intensity and that bit of devil-may-care attitude he had. And now...

“Huh. Not like you to waver. Anyway, moving on while you think about that—two, you can discreetly either get rid of the baby or give it up for adoption or something here. Since it’s halfway around the world, I doubt the media would follow you. Unless your dad decides to run for president, that is.

“Three, we can hang out all the time. Think of all the fun things we can do.

“Four, you’ll be away from your god-awful family.”

Natalie opened and closed her mouth. “How...why would you think that I’d want to be away from my family?”

Kerri snorted. “Come on. How many years have we known each other? You told me enough for me to know what’s really going on. Most likely you’ll let your family walk all over you out of some weird sense of duty. Like I always say, you gotta take care of yourself first. Besides, you can start fresh here. Annnnnnnnd...” Kerri paused dramatically. “You-know-who’s going to get canned.”

“What? Seriously? No way!”

“Oh yeah. Some ethics violation or other. Seems good ol’ Jack touched something he shouldn’t have.”

“I can’t believe that. I mean, he seemed okay when we were dating.”

“What can I tell you? I guess getting promoted to VP gave him just a liiiittle too much power. His new nickname around here is Jack-in-the-Box.”

Natalie shook her head, laughing despite herself. “Thank God I had the good sense to get away from him when I did.”

“Oh, the touching isn’t all of it. Come on out and I’ll tell you the rest.”

“Tease.”

“Always. Hey, look, I know it’s a big decision. Just think about it, okay?”

Natalie said she would. But more urgent than mulling over a possible move was figuring out how she was going to face Alex tomorrow. She couldn't believe she'd been so rash. This was one of the biggest reasons why she shouldn't have gotten involved with the CEO of her company in the first place.

The wrong timing. The stupid condom. And everything else. She breathed in deeply.

It won't happen to me.

Yeah... Famous last words.

Chapter Eleven

THE NEXT MORNING at DDE, Natalie glanced at Alex's office on her way back from the bathroom and paused. The door was closed, and it didn't look like he was in yet. She glanced at her watch. Nine forty-five. Shouldn't he be there by now? It was the third time she'd gone past his office since nine. A few of her coworkers were giving her looks.

Ethan walked by with a couple of manila folders stuffed full of documents. "Looking for Alex?"

She nodded. What was the point of denying it? She bet the entire office knew.

"He's not coming in today. He's probably on his flight to Hong Kong right now."

"Hong Kong?" Natalie had a moment of disorientation. Hadn't Kerri been talking about Hong Kong just last night?

"Uh-huh. He left early this morning."

Don't freak out. At least not in front of Ethan.

"Do you know when he's coming back?" Natalie was pleased at how casual and even she sounded.

Ethan shrugged. "He said he'd get back when he could."

"I see." Actually, she didn't. She didn't know what to think. She'd asked him to leave her alone for a while, not disappear off the continent!

Had he known about this trip before he came to her condo yesterday? "I hope it's not an emergency."

"Oh no. It's been on his calendar for weeks." Ethan handed her one of the folders. "By the way, I want you to work on the new National Security Agency bid," he said. "I'll need the final figures by Wednesday morning."

Alex knew. And he'd never mentioned he was leaving the country.

“...Natalie?”

“Uh...yeah. Got it.” She took the folder from him. “By Wednesday.”

Several coworkers craned their necks as she returned to her desk. It was the same look they’d given her last week when she’d been called into Alex’s office for the first time. Their nosiness irritated her, but she ignored it. It wasn’t the first time she’d been at the center of speculation. Part and parcel of being an influential politician’s daughter, albeit an adopted one.

She shut her office door and checked her email. Nothing from Alex, although she had fifty-six new messages, bringing the unread total up to one hundred and nine. She drummed her fingers on her desk.

Next, she checked her voicemails. There was a new message. Her heart thudded at Alex’s familiar voice.

“Natalie, it’s me. It’s about seven. I should’ve gotten your number, but I forgot and...damn. I need to go to Hong Kong.”

And to think Kerri had suggested she move to Hong Kong to get away from him.

Alex continued. “From what I can tell, the whole thing’s going to take about a week or so. Maybe longer. We need to talk. Call or email me with your cell number, okay?”

“And Natalie, let me know if there’s any...ah...well, you know. If there’s anything you want to tell me.”

The voicemail prompt asked her to either save or delete. She put the receiver back in its cradle with the utmost care, not giving in to the temptation to slam it down.

Great. Now that he’d had his fun, he was running off to Asia. For a week for so, maybe longer.

Given her history with men, she’d bet on *longer*.

And he seemed most worried about a possible pregnancy. Was he afraid she would demand child support?

Her rational side kicked in. Instead of getting angry, she should be grateful he had left before she could become too attached to him. Alex had been honest about what he wanted. He’d never promised her anything except hot sex, and she’d certainly gotten that. Imagine if he’d stuck around and their relationship—did one day of mind-blowing lovemaking qualify as a relationship?—had dragged on for months...even years.

Maybe Louise was right after all: *Blood will out*.

Natalie’s relationship with Jack at Goldreich had been a total mess.

Thank God she'd been able to get out gracefully. Leaving Hong Kong to get an MBA would've sounded like the lamest of excuses if it weren't for the fact that she'd been accepted to Wharton, and she would've died before asking Brian to pull strings for her. While her next involvement with Marcus had been less than perfect, at least she'd been smart enough to keep her work and personal lives separate. Now she felt like she'd regressed. She'd mixed business with pleasure again, and the result could get really sticky. Far worse than dating an associate at Goldreich.

Natalie sighed. Alex should've told her he was going to Hong Kong face-to-face. Okay, so she'd made it clear that she wanted to be alone, but it wasn't every day when a man she'd just become intimate with had prior plans to fly halfway around the planet. Even Marcus had stuck around for three years. She didn't want to admit it, but since Brian's party she'd been beginning to like Alex. There was something very sweet about him coming to her rescue... No one had done that before. Certainly Marcus never had. He was too caught up in his own political ambitions and fled at the barest hint of scandal.

Everything that had happened between her and Alex had probably just been a ruse to sleep with her. What a fool she'd been!

Determined to forget him, Natalie opened the folder from Ethan and looked at the figures. They didn't seem all that complicated. Maybe Danielle could work on them instead. She was smart and would be an asset to the company with proper on-the-job training. A few more opportunities and projects would be just the thing to bring her along.

She went to Danielle's cubicle with the NSA bid folder. It was right across from her office. Ethan was there, leaning over the partition. Danielle was blushing at something he'd said and turned to Natalie with a slightly guilty look.

"Hi, Natalie. What can I do for you?" Danielle adjusted her glasses and rested her hands on her laptop keyboard.

"I have a bid for you to work on," Natalie said, extending the folder.

Ethan's gaze dropped to the papers, a frown appearing. "Is that the one I gave you this morning?"

"Yes."

"I prefer that you work on it alone."

"Danielle's very thorough. I think—"

"Yes, I know. But this is important, and I want *your* full attention on it."

Danielle visibly shrank, trying to make herself invisible. Natalie controlled her anger. Did he realize the implication of what he was saying and how it made Danielle feel?

“But—”

“In my office.” He gave her an unreadable look. “Please.”

She followed him, her lips set. He shut the door and didn’t bother to offer her a seat. She remained standing and would’ve crossed her arms if she hadn’t been carrying the folder.

“When I ask you to do something, I mean exactly that.”

“I understand, but Danielle’s at the point in her career where she should —”

“Natalie, I know. But there’s a reason why I asked *you* to do it. We have to win this. Rodale International’s bidding too, and it’s going to be competitive. There can’t be any mistakes.”

She looked at her boss. He seemed tired and irritated, which somehow surprised her. Ethan was the sort of debonair, lazy-mannered man who was difficult to upset.

“Furthermore, security on the project is very tight. The folder contains several proprietary technology specs we own. Only you and I have seen what’s in that folder. Danielle is too junior, even if she has her security clearance. She’s just not right for this particular job.”

If he felt this strongly about it, there was nothing Natalie could do. Maybe he was being this controlling because of the way his predecessor had gotten fired. “Okay. Sorry.”

He relaxed a bit. “Thank you. Let me know if you have any questions.”

As she was walking back past Danielle’s cubicle, her assistant rose. “Natalie.”

“Yes?”

“I...I’m sorry.” Danielle dropped her gaze.

Natalie smiled at her. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not your fault, and there will be other projects.”

“Sure.” Danielle shot her a grateful look. “I appreciate the support.”

* * *

Alex collapsed on the king-size bed in his hotel room, loosening his tie and feeling the muscles in his back unkink. Thank God he was done for the day.

Since his arrival in Hong Kong, he'd had nothing but endless conference calls and meetings. It was already eight p.m., and he hadn't had a single break.

Natalie hadn't contacted him. He wanted to talk to her, but he hadn't been able to get a moment alone, especially with all those pesky business dinners to attend. They normally lasted until one or two in the morning and filled his belly with more alcohol than he would have liked. The Chinese drank like fish, especially the older men, their faces shining and laughing.

Given how they'd parted, Alex wanted to be one hundred percent sober when he spoke with Natalie again. He stared at his cell phone and thought about giving her a ring but gave up on the idea. Maybe she was still upset with the way he'd left...even though she was the one who had made it clear he'd better let her be alone for a while.

He sighed. Women.

Two white envelopes on the nightstand caught his eye. He rolled across the mattress and picked one up. The discreetly embossed logo of a famous Hong Kong jeweler was in the upper left corner. Bless the concierges of the world. He always asked them to select and send expensive trinkets to whichever woman he happened to be involved with at the time. Some men liked to travel with their lovers on business. Alex preferred to keep women and work separate.

Until Natalie. She was beginning to blur some of the internal lines that had always been very clear.

He opened the envelope. Inside, there was a bill and pictures of a gorgeous ruby choker. It would look spectacular on Natalie's graceful neck, complement her vivid coloring.

Vaguely dissatisfied, he shoved everything back into the envelope and tossed it on the nightstand. Although the jewelry cost a fortune, it didn't seem good enough for her. He'd thought this was an excellent idea when he'd talked to the concierge during check-in, but now he couldn't remember why. It was too impersonal.

Still... She would probably like it. Once they saw the expensive, sparkly stones, none of his ex-lovers had complained that his gifts weren't personal enough, well thought out enough.

Alex opened the second envelope and read the contents. At last! With the information contained in these investigative reports, he'd be able to squeeze Brian Hall so he'd stop giving the Rodales political support. Hall had helped the Rodales one too many times behind the scenes and spoiled several of

Alex's well-planned moves against them. The only way to stop him was to find something that would ruin him forever if anyone knew about it. And after several months of probing, Alex had what he wanted.

But mingled with his sense of triumph was one of outrage. The bastard had bought—no, *won*—Natalie! No wonder Louise and Belle treated her like dirt. Hard to respect something you won in a game of chance.

Suddenly, his cell phone vibrated. Alex answered it immediately. "Damon."

"How's Hong Kong treating you?" came Ethan's familiar voice.

Disappointment deflated him. "It's all right."

"Just all right? I thought you liked it there."

"Maybe I'm getting old."

"Uh-huh. So it has nothing to do with our newly promoted senior lead analyst?" There was a pause, and Ethan laughed. "You don't have to pretend. We all know it's Natalie."

"We?" He didn't believe for a second she'd bragged about dating him. Most likely her sister had spread some vile rumor.

"It was in the papers. Gossip rags. They also had pictures of her with Charlie Rodale. Are they lovers?"

"No." Alex could feel his mood darkening. "I don't think so." She'd said they were friends. If they'd been more, she wouldn't have responded to him like that. Would she? Just thinking about it made his body stir. He shifted uncomfortably.

"They must have some history. At least it looks that way from the photos."

"Why are you so interested in her?" Alex said, getting irritated. Ethan was supposed to be helping him take over Rodale International, not reading the scandal sheets.

"I think someone's tipping Rodale off."

"But what does this have to do with Natalie?"

"Because of what Charlie Rodale said to his investors last night. He specifically mentioned the Hong Kong consortium. How could he have got wind of it unless someone tipped him off about our plans?"

That was a blow. In order to start buying up Rodale stock without alerting the management, Alex had set up ten separate companies, all of them private, all of them small, spread out over seven different countries. They were unofficially coordinated through a Hong Kong consulting firm, but he'd paid

a lot of money to make sure the companies' activities were kept absolutely secret. But now it seemed the secret was out. "That's not good. Still, it doesn't have to be Natalie. As a matter of fact, nobody at DDE knows about it."

"Natalie might. Her senator father and all. Besides, she worked for Goldreich in Hong Kong and more than half her MBA class went into consulting or investment banking. She's got the connections to get whatever the Rodales need."

Alex found he was holding his breath. "Is she the only one? There could be others—"

"She's the only one besides me who has access to the information. And she's close to the Rodales." Ethan's voice cooled. "If she's the leak, we can't let her get away with it."

Alex gripped the phone. Natalie couldn't be the betrayer. There were other people who were capable of accessing information about Alex's plans. For all he knew, the Rodales could've hired someone to hack into his personal computer.

"Also, the Rodale BOD just approved a flip-in," Ethan said, dragging Alex's attention back to the conversation.

Alex swore. A flip-in was an effective poison pill. There wasn't any good way to fight back unless he wanted to start a proxy battle and put his people on Rodale's board of directors.

Ethan continued. "I know you want to get Rodale, but it doesn't make sense to force it. It's going to cost too much and take too long."

Alex closed his eyes and thought. Finally, he said, "Agreed. I'll have to come up with a countermove. Find out who the mole is, if you're so sure it's someone in DDE. And I don't want you focusing your investigation just on Natalie. It could be anyone."

There was a pause. Then Ethan said, "Will do."

Now in a foul mood, Alex changed shirts and stalked out of the hotel. The weather was unusually hot and muggy. Still, the crowd bustled, merchants showing their wares to everyone who walked by. The smell of freshly baked bread drifted from a small shop packed with people. Garish neon signs flashed on tall buildings, and with each burst of light, shadows jumped out in the corners and alleys.

Natalie wasn't like that conniving, family-rending bitch Emily Rodale. She wasn't.

He stopped in front of a store display. In the window was a silk robe of the fieriest crimson. On its back a golden embroidered *fènhuáng* spread its wings. The workmanship was extraordinary. The mythical bird looked as if it would soar into the sky at any moment. It reminded him of how Natalie had seemed to soar when they were making love. Usually, she was somewhat guarded, but he had seen her spirit, joyous and giving, unleashed in bed.

A dragon and fènhuáng set represents a harmonious relationship between a man and a woman... I thought I would give the dragon to a man I lov—a worthy man.

But who would give Natalie a *fènhuáng*?

Alex stood, gazing at the robe. After several moments, he walked inside. A clerk wearing metallic green eye shadow greeted him in British-accented English. He told her what he wanted.

The robe came in one size, and there was only one left. Each design on the back was one of a kind, handmade by a local artisan. The store didn't give refunds or exchanges. Would he take it?

He nodded and handed over his credit card. The clerk wrapped the robe in gorgeous gold and red paper and tied a silk bow around it. The package was light but beautiful and somehow seemed like exactly the perfect gift for Natalie.

His mood vastly improved, Alex returned to his hotel.

* * *

It was already Thursday, and still there was no word. Natalie hadn't asked Ethan directly again, but it looked like even he didn't know when Alex would be back.

Fool, fool, fool!

Finished with work and back inside her condo, she kicked off her shoes and let her feet sink into the thick carpet. Matto came out to greet her—or, more accurately, to demand a fresh serving of his favorite treat.

“Not right now.” She tossed her purse on the couch and was heading to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Her heart leapt.

“Who is it?” she said, walking quickly to the door.

“FedEx.”

Her shoulders slumped at the chirpy voice. She opened the door and saw a delivery woman in a uniform.

“Natalie Hall?”

“Yes.”

Matto trotted out, stood between her feet and hissed at the woman. She glanced down and dismissed the cat. “Can you sign for this?”

Natalie scribbled her name on the delivery form and took the box. The address label didn’t indicate the sender, and she didn’t remember buying anything online recently. “Who sent it?”

“If it’s not on the label, I don’t know,” she said with an apologetic smile. “Thank you. Have a nice evening!”

Before Natalie could ask any more questions, the woman disappeared. Natalie sighed and shut the door.

Back in her living room, she shook the box. Something moved, but nothing rattled. Hmm. She went to the kitchen, heated some water for tea, and grabbed a knife to cut the double layers of tape around the package... then encountered more tape and wrapping.

Just what was inside? A national secret?

The kettle started to whistle, and she poured the hot water into a small teapot. Dried tea leaves began to plump out, a few floating up to the surface. After placing a lid on the pot, she ripped the rest of the packing open. Inside was a beautifully wrapped oblong box. An elegant, dark navy ribbon with gold trim made a festive bow around it. She examined it from various angles, then went carefully through the wrapping paper. No card.

And the brown carton contained nothing inside except bubble wrap. Strange.

She unwrapped it and saw a dark navy velvet box. In the center, a gold emblem gleamed under the kitchen light.

Her hands stilled. It was a jeweler in Hong Kong. She’d seen the logo during her tenure at Goldreich. Her heartbeat accelerated.

She opened it and frowned at a row of exquisite rubies glittering like fat drops of blood. She picked up the choker. It felt icy against her hand. Finally, she found a small, heavy stock card engraved with an elaborate copperplate script:

To Natalie

From Alex

She stared at it for a moment, unbelieving. Then, taking a deep breath, she put the choker back in the box and snapped it shut.

Her hands shook so much she spilled tea on the counter as she poured it

into her cup. She gripped the teapot, oblivious to its heat. How could he think that a string of rocks would make everything all right? And that card! Couldn't he have said something little more personal than "To Natalie"? Obviously, he couldn't even bother to write it himself. Who'd selected the choker and sent it? Natalie wondered if he'd even seen the gems.

Alex was just like her family, keeping her at arm's length and sending her money and gifts to avoid having to deal with her. Brian was the only one who had ever occasionally spared an hour or two for her, but even he was usually too busy.

Her sense of betrayal and disappointment was so strong it was almost hallucinogenic. It was as though a strong wind had suddenly blown her off a high balcony, the support under her feet sliding away and disappearing in an instant.

Still, in the midst of her outrage, there was a small voice in the back of her mind asking why Alex's cavalier treatment hurt so much more than it should.

Chapter Twelve

“OH, HE DIDN’T!” Kerri said.

“He did,” Natalie said and leaned back in her office chair.

“At least they were expensive rubies.”

“I guess. But it’s not about that.” Was their weekend quantifiable, able to be reduced to a string of sparkly rocks? *Expensive* rubies, indeed. To someone like Alex, the price wouldn’t mean anything.

“Get a new boyfriend. He isn’t the only one around who can give you multiple Os.”

Natalie snorted.

“Seriously. I wasn’t joking last time when I asked you to join me here. Who needs men when you can have a career?”

“I *have* a career.”

“Sleeping with the boss? Working for a boring government contractor?”

“Hey, not everyone’s born to be an investment banker.”

Kerri made a rude noise, which was somehow more eloquent than speech. “If you don’t want to be in Hong Kong, fine. Go to New York City. Ignore the tax benefits.”

“Yeah, yeah. You just want to boss me around at work.” Natalie swiveled in her chair. “Unlike you, I actually need to sleep, so banking is out.”

“Uh-huh. Hold on.” Kerri said something to someone in her office then came back on the phone. “So what are you going to do about this...Alex?”

Natalie tapped her desk. “I don’t know. But I don’t want him to think I’m running away.”

“Natalie, you’re always worried about proving something to the people around you. There’s nothing to prove. They either accept you the way you are, or they don’t. Either way, it’s got nothing to do with you. Hold on.”

There was another pause with muffled conversation in the background. “I gotta go. You’d think the second-year analysts would know what I want them to do without my having to spell it out. I’ll catch you later.”

The cubicles were deserted when Natalie finally emerged from her small office. She didn’t blame her coworkers. It was already a little after six on a Friday, and even the janitorial staff was gone. One of them had come into her office about half an hour earlier. He’d given her a look, then shaken his head while dumping all the papers from her trash bin into a milky plastic shredder bag. She bet even that old man thought she was insane to stick around when everyone else was enjoying their weekend.

As she walked through the mostly empty parking lot, Natalie rummaged around in her purse. She found her keys, pressed the unlock button. There was the usual electronic chirp, and ahead of her the Audi’s headlights flashed.

“Natalie.”

She turned and saw Belle approaching. She had on a small black dress and a pair of stilettos, but the nervous way she moved reminded Natalie of a Chihuahua. It always had.

“Aren’t you a little overdressed for a parking lot?”

Belle walked right up to her. “I told you to leave Dad alone.”

Oh, for pity’s sake. “Belle. I haven’t seen Brian since the party.”

“I didn’t say you saw him. Stop siccing your nasty boyfriend on him.”

“I really do not know what you’re talking about. If you’re going to accuse me of something, why don’t you do it in writing so we can minimize our contact time? We always fight whenever we’re together.”

“You condescending bitch.”

Whatever bee had gotten under her bonnet must be killing her. Her face was so red Natalie wondered if her sister was going to keel over from a heart attack.

“Don’t you care about anyone but yourself? After what Mom and Dad did for you, this is how you repay them?”

“Belle, either tell me what this is about or get out of my face. I want to start my weekend.”

She glared at Natalie. “I’m warning you. You’ve done enough. Don’t hurt Dad.”

“You mean like the family’s hurt me?”

Suddenly, tears welled in Belle’s eyes, and Natalie blinked. Belle hadn’t

cried since they were kids.

“You had *everything*. You still do.” Belle sniffled. “Fancy European boarding schools. Top graduate in your class. Dad was so proud of you, he gave you everything you asked for. You even got to go to Hong Kong and do whatever you wanted to do. And look at me.” Natalie looked. Belle’s eyes were red, the color stark against her black eyeliner. “I have *nothing*. I wasn’t good at sports. I wasn’t the smartest kid. God, I’m a stereotype. The dumb blonde of the family.”

Belle looked so small and lost, all the fight went out of Natalie. “Belle... Come on. Louise loves you so much more. That’s why she couldn’t bear to send you anywhere too far from home.”

Tears started to fall from Belle’s eyes, and she wiped them away furiously, smudging her makeup. “Yeah, right.”

“It’s true. Did you know that Louise had problems conceiving? She blames Brian for adopting me instead of waiting for her to give him a child of her own. As far as she’s concerned, I represent her failure, while you’re her vindication and revenge.”

Belle stared at Natalie, then gave a short, harsh laugh. “Oh please. You don’t really expect me to believe that, do you?”

“What do you want me to say? It’s the truth. I know I’m not really a Hall, and Louise only tolerates me out of duty.” Natalie shrugged. “Look, I want to go home. You should get going too. I’m sure you have a lot of work to do for Brian’s campaign.”

“Natalie—”

She shook her head. She didn’t want to talk about the loneliness and guilty resentment she’d harbored against her family. How could Belle think her parents loved her less? She was the flesh of their flesh. A real Hall.

Belle hesitated, then turned away. Natalie waited until the golden Mercedes was gone before leaning against her Audi. Her chest rose and fell in a long, shuddering sigh. Something would set Belle off every now and then, but hopefully this would last her for the year. Maybe for the decade.

She was still standing there when a Lamborghini drove up and screeched to a stop next to her. The door opened, and Alex climbed out.

She crossed her arms. This simply was not fair.

“What are you still doing here?” he said, his expression unreadable in the fading light.

Didn’t expect to see me? “I had a lot of work to do,” she said casually.

“Ethan is a slave driver. You just get back from Hong Kong?”

“About an hour ago.”

And he’d come to the office first. He hadn’t called her from the airport. Not that she wanted him to call her. God, he looked good in his slightly rumpled charcoal gray suit.

“How was your trip?” she asked, her voice steady.

“Typical. Nothing special.” He reached inside his car and took out a wrapped package. “I thought of you when I saw this. I was thinking I could give it to you later, at your place, but...”

“Another present? For me?” She took it from his hand, put it over her heart and fluttered her eyelashes. “How thoughtful.”

He frowned slightly. “What’s wrong?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said, opening her car door.

“No, I—”

She threw the present at him, slammed the door shut and drove off, leaving him behind.

Oh, the nerve of the man! As if he’d done nothing wrong. He’d known he was going away for weeks but never said a word. Why not? If she’d learned about his plans, maybe it would’ve been harder for him to seduce her.

She might have been able to forgive him for going to Hong Kong. After all, he had responsibilities to his company and shareholders. But that stupid choker. And that stupid message.

I thought of you when I saw this.

Yeah, right. Had he expected her to throw herself at him for bringing another present? If so, he wasn’t as intelligent or perceptive as she’d thought.

It didn’t take much time to reach her condo, mainly because she sped most of the way home. She parked and started gathering her things. The Lamborghini pulled into the empty spot next to hers, its headlights dying immediately.

Alex got out of his car, the package in his hand. “Don’t you drive off like that when I’m talking to you. And don’t you dare throw my present back at me!”

“If you’ll wait a minute, I’ve got *another* present to throw at you!” She spun and marched to her condo.

* * *

Alex was so furious, he couldn't think straight. He'd worked like a demon to wrap everything up in Hong Kong so he could see her again, and this was the welcome?

Women. The hotter they were, the crazier they acted.

He followed Natalie to her unit. He didn't want to create a scene. What he was about to tell Natalie wasn't any of her neighbors' business.

Throw his ruby choker back at him... Ha! The damned thing cost a fortune, probably more than she made in a year.

The gift you couldn't bother to buy for her yourself.

He stomped on the bit of guilty conscience. He'd brought her another gift, hadn't he?

She unlocked the door and went inside. He followed her in, his big hand flat against the door when she tried to shut it on him.

"You are *not* invited," she said coldly.

He ignored her and threw the robe on the couch, the package spinning like a crimson and gold pinwheel.

"Pick that up," she said. "And before you go, take this."

She stalked to the shelf where Matto was sitting on a velvety box. She pulled it out from under her cat, who hissed in outrage, and tossed it at Alex.

He caught it by reflex.

"Next time you decide to try to make things right, give it a little more thought. And don't look so shocked. I know what you're doing. My family's been doing it for decades, and throwing money at me isn't going to win you any points."

"I'm not your family, and I'm not throwing money at you!"

"Then what do you call that?" She gestured at the box. "One afternoon of sex and suddenly I'm worth tens of thousands of dollars in jewelry?"

Put that way, it did sound bad. But no woman before Natalie had ever complained about his lavish gifts. The fact that she had to be the exception made him angry. And absurdly pleased.

"If I'd considered you a whore"—she stiffened, but he didn't care what he said at this point—"it'd have been a lot cheaper and easier for me to deal with you. I've gotten less than twenty hours of sleep in the past five days so I could come see you, and this is how you greet me? Accusing me of throwing money at you? If I wanted to throw money at you, I'd do *this!*" He grabbed his wallet and took out a fistful of bills, then hurled them at her. They separated in the air and barely made a noise as they hit her face.

Her eyes widened, then narrowed to a hard glint. “Of all the—”

“And I don’t want to hear about how you thought I should’ve called before I left. I didn’t have your cell phone number, and you made it clear you wanted me to leave you alone!”

“But not leave the continent!”

“Does it matter? I left you a message.”

“And didn’t call or email me afterward!”

“The only time I could have called would have been three in the morning here.” He raked his hair with his hands. “Did you want me to email you? Isn’t that a bit too impersonal? And using the company network? Anyone in IT could have read it. And why couldn’t *you* call? You have my private number.”

Her expression hardened. “Well, for your information, the timing’s wrong, and I’m quite sure everything will be fine. So don’t worry about getting stuck with a kid you don’t want.”

Damn, she was dense! He let out a breath, trying to regain his equilibrium, and glared at the jewelry box, his hand tightening on it. It was either that or throttle her. This whole situation was a mess. He hadn’t necessarily been expecting a welcome with open arms, but he thought he deserved something more than getting his presents thrown back at him. And being compared to her abominable family.

Natalie’s cat had gone over to the couch and was sniffing the package. He began scratching at the wrapping paper.

“Matto, no!”

She snatched it away from him, but the paper got caught under his claws and ripped open. The silk robe spilled onto the floor. She picked it up before Matto could reach it, and the robe unfurled, the gold *fènhuáng* vivid against the crimson.

Natalie’s eyes traveled over the embroidery, her lips making small, soundless movements. “Where did you find this?” she whispered finally.

What was this, some kind of trick question? “In Hong Kong,” he said warily.

“It’s...beautiful.”

“I just thought you’d look good in it.”

She blinked rapidly, and Alex frowned. Was she going to cry?

Things were not working out as he’d planned. He felt like he was playing a game of chess where every other move, the pieces changed positions at

random.

She launched herself at him, knocking the breath out of him. His arms closed around her automatically.

“That was all I wanted,” she said, her voice muffled against his shirt. “I wanted you to give me time, not money.”

The confusion was still there, but a bit of happiness seeped in and started replacing the anger. Everything she did was a surprise. He dipped his head and breathed through the fragrance of her hair. “I wanted to give you both,” he murmured. “The *fènhuáng* just took me longer to find.”

Her arms tightened around him, and he wanted to strangle her parents. They must have done a real number on Natalie if she equated extravagant gifts with attempts to buy her off.

Having Natalie wrapped around him like this seemed right somehow, like a homecoming...but there was a little fear, as well. He didn't want to depend on her for his happiness. He didn't want anyone to hold that much power over him.

Despite it all, running his hands down her spine, he couldn't stop himself from saying, “I missed you.”

* * *

He rubbed her lower back, his strong hands stroking her gently, and Natalie sighed with contentment. The clean scent of his cologne and maleness teased her senses, and she trembled slightly.

He kissed her forehead, then her nose. His mouth found hers and shaped itself around her smaller, softer lips. She wanted him right now, but at the same time, she wanted to take it slow, just the two of them and their sweet need.

Their clothes fell in a haphazard trail as they moved to her bedroom. She didn't know when or how he did it, but her panties were gone, and his clever tongue and fingers were pushing her higher until she was ready to go over the edge. Her skin seemed to stretch tighter over her body and burn as they fell onto the bed. She cried out when he thrust inside, and it didn't take much for them to cling to each other and lose themselves in the violent maelstrom of ecstasy.

They lay on the bed, panting. She jumped when something cold touched her bare skin. It was the choker.

“Even if you’re mad at me for buying this for you, I think you should keep it,” he said. “It suits you.” He considered for a moment. “Plus, the jeweler won’t take it back. And I can’t possibly wear it.”

Natalie laughed. He put the jewelry around her neck. She kissed him.

“You know...I never had a woman jump my bones over a robe and kick my butt over a bunch of expensive gems.” A faint smile curved his lips. “You are truly one of a kind.”

She grinned back at him. “Thank you. I really do like the robe.”

He stretched lazily and ran his hand down her side, tracing the curve of her waist. “I was right. You look good in rubies.” His gaze sharpened a bit. “*Really* good.”

She sighed as the magic began all over again.

Chapter Thirteen

NATALIE FOUND HERSELF HUMMING. The weather was perfect, her outfit was perfect, and nothing could spoil her mood. Even the traffic was perfect.

Alex had lingered until the next morning, then had to go to work. But that didn't bother her. He'd promised to come back as soon as he could.

The spacious café in Tysons II mall that Emily had chosen for their lunch had an understated elegance and lightness that appealed to the moneyed conservative set. Emily waved as Natalie walked inside.

"You look lovely, dear," Emily said.

"Thank you. So do you."

And it was true. She was remarkably well-preserved. There were only a few lines around her eyes, and even her hair still retained its golden hue, although that could've been a dye job. But if it was, it was a good one. Emily Rodale had always been a handsome woman, and that hadn't changed as she'd entered her sixties.

The waitress took their order for salad and sandwiches. Emily and Natalie chatted about acquaintances until they got their food. Then the conversation drifted to Natalie's work.

"So how's your new position? Do you enjoy it?"

"It's very nice." Natalie sipped her sparkling water. "I never thought I would be promoted so quickly."

Emily smiled. "I did." She carefully speared a small piece of chicken in her salad with her fork. "So tell me. If it came down to me or this new job of yours...which would you choose?"

Natalie looked up to find Emily gazing at her steadily. She frowned. "What do you mean?"

Emily sighed and put down her fork, the chicken still on it. “You know I’m not one for games. We’re in trouble, Natalie. Alex Damon wants to take over Rodale International. A hostile takeover. It might as well be a declaration of war against my family. He’s been maneuvering for months, targeting our clients, undercutting us at every turn. We’re at the point now that if we don’t get this DOD contract, we may very well be too weak to resist.”

Natalie smoothed her hair. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“I want to know what that man is up to. You know, don’t you?”

“Emily, he doesn’t discuss his plans with me. I work mostly with another executive.” This was the truth, after all, and she wasn’t betraying anyone by revealing it.

Emily’s eyes turned impassive. “Not even pillow talk, my dear?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Please. I saw the way he looked at you at your parents’ party. I’m neither naïve nor stupid, and I’m not so old that I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be the focus of a man’s attention. I know what he’s thinking, and I’m sure you didn’t object to being in his bed.”

Natalie’s lips parted, but no sound came out. Of all the people she knew in the Halls’ social circle, Emily was the nicest and usually one of the most circumspect. It took her a moment to recover.

“Who I sleep with—or don’t—is none of your business.” Natalie’s voice was cool, but polite. “And the details of my work and projects are confidential. I love you, Emily, and I don’t want to choose.” Her lips tightened. “I shouldn’t have to choose.”

A bit of red was starting to tinge Emily’s pale cheeks. “It’s just a job, dear. You can always get another. In fact, I can guarantee you another, and at a higher salary. But if you don’t help me, I could lose everything. Charlie could lose everything. Rodale International is my legacy to him. I won’t allow it.”

“I know how you feel about the company.” Natalie reached across the table and laid her hand over Emily’s. “But this isn’t something I can do for you. I’m sorry.”

“I see.” Emily slowly drew her hand out from under Natalie’s. “So we must do this the hard way.”

Why was Emily being so obtuse? “There is no hard way. I’m not going to do it.”

“Even if it means Brian’s ruin?”

“Your family’s contribution to his campaign is significant, but I don’t think withholding it is going to ruin his career. And do I really have to remind you that my father’s influence has also benefited you and your family?”

“I didn’t say his career. I said *him*. And your family too.”

Natalie felt like she’d suddenly stepped into the Twilight Zone. This couldn’t be Emily talking to her. “Are you threatening me?”

“Simply stating a fact, my dear. I know enough about what your father’s done to ruin him, socially and otherwise. He’ll never be able to hold public office again.”

Natalie clenched her hands. “How can you even think about something like this? Brian’s always been fair to you. Louise is your best friend.”

Emily leaned forward, her face radiating intensity. “Which is precisely why I’m giving you a chance to stop this. Louise and Belle treat you rottenly, but Brian’s been good to you. As much as he could be. Think about it. You get to protect him, I get to protect Charlie’s inheritance, and we’ll all gain from it.”

This was surreal. But of all the emotions churning in Natalie’s mind, outrage was the strongest. “Really? Tell me something: how is losing the job I love a gain?” *How is betraying Alex and throwing away my self-respect a gain?*

“Oh, don’t you worry. I’ll make it worth your while.”

Emily pushed a slim white envelope across the table. Natalie stared at it as if it were a scorpion.

“Open it,” Emily said.

Natalie picked it up. It was light. Most likely it didn’t contain any damning pictures. She looked inside.

“Do you see the cashier’s check?”

Without taking it out of the envelope, Natalie used a finger to bend the check back so she could read the numbers printed on it. My God, she thought. It was a million dollars, payable to her.

“Keep it. It’s yours. It should be more than enough to pay off your mortgage. Or go on a shopping spree. You can do whatever you want with it.”

Natalie withdrew her fingers, folded the flap back down, and carefully placed the envelope on the table. “I’m surprised you think you can buy me.”

“Buy you?” Emily laughed. “I’m ensuring that you benefit from helping me and Charlie.” She pursed her lips. “If you’re thinking that you can get a better deal from Alex, like marriage, forget it. He’s what you young people call a user, just like his father was.”

“It doesn’t matter what Alex is. The answer is no.”

Emily smiled. “You always were a good girl. I rather thought that you’d turn the money down. But there’s something else.” She leaned forward. “I can help you find the truth behind your adoption and who your real parents were.”

Natalie’s heart began pounding so hard she was sure the couple at the next table could hear it. “You know? You know about my biological parents?”

“You help me, Natalie, and I will help you. Think about it and call me.”

* * *

Although it was Saturday, Alex strode down the hall at DDE, on his way home after reviewing some confidential documents that couldn’t be taken out of the building. Sometimes company policies were annoying, he thought, but rules were rules. He should know—he’d set them.

All the cubicles were deserted, as were most of the corner offices. But Ethan was in. Alex shook his head. The guy never seemed to rest.

“Hey.”

“Hey, I was hoping to see you here,” Ethan said. “You never answered your cell phone.”

“The battery died.” A lie, but what he’d done last night was none of Ethan’s business.

“Got a couple minutes?”

Alex entered his best friend’s office, shut the door, and sat down. “What’s up?”

“It’s about the Rodales and Natalie.”

“What about them?”

“Emily and Natalie were together in Tysons today. They were having an early lunch.”

That had to have been only hours, if that, after he’d made love to her and come to the office. “So?” he said, keeping his voice deliberately casual.

“Alex... I’m pretty sure she’s the one leaking the information.”

“Having lunch together is hardly damning.”

Ethan nodded. “You know Murchison, in security? Used to be a private investigator? No? Well, I had some suspicions about Natalie, so I had him follow her. Put him in a suit and he blends in pretty well with the business crowd.”

Alex held up a hand. “When did you start the surveillance?”

“Last Wednesday.”

Alex looked steadily at his friend. So Ethan knew. “Go on.”

“He saw Emily give Natalie an envelope at lunch today. He couldn’t see what was inside, but he said that Natalie seemed upset by it, whatever it was.”

“That’s your proof? It could have been anything.”

“Anything that could have upset her. A payment that wasn’t what had been agreed on earlier. Some sort of blackmail, maybe.” Ethan tapped his desk. “What’d you send her from Hong Kong?”

Alex started to deny it but then stopped. Ethan knew him too well. “A ruby necklace. But she didn’t like it. Threw it back in my face, actually. Would someone who wanted money do that?”

“Maybe not. Then again, maybe she’s getting enough from the Rodales that she can afford her own rubies now.”

Alex felt himself start to come to a boil. “If you’ve got proof, give it to me. If not, stop wasting my time.”

“Alex, I’m sure about this. All we’ve got is circumstantial evidence so far, but it’s starting to add up.”

“But you’re sure?”

Ethan nodded. “If I’m wrong, I’ll resign from the company.”

Alex swore. Had he missed something because he was too close to her? Was he making the mistake his father had made when he’d trusted the wrong woman?

“I thought you might feel this way,” Ethan continued. “So I had Natalie work on some numbers for the NSA contract. Only I didn’t give her the real numbers.” He paused a moment to let that sink in. “No one else has seen those numbers. I made sure of that.” Ethan paused again, giving Alex a sympathetic look that nonetheless was full of resolve. “When Rodale International makes its bid, you’ll have your proof.”

Chapter Fourteen

HOW COULD EMILY know about my biological parents?

Natalie asked herself the question for the thousandth time as she jogged down the neighborhood running trail. No matter how she looked at it, it made no sense. It was unthinkable that Brian—even if he knew something about Natalie’s biological parents—would have told Emily and not Louise. And if he really did have some information, and for some unimaginable reason couldn’t share it with Louise, why not just tell Natalie herself?

The easiest explanation was that Emily had simply been lying, that she really didn’t know anything except that Natalie might well be susceptible to the lure of finding out about her biological parents when she wouldn’t be tempted by money. But that didn’t ring true, either. She knew Emily well, and the older woman hadn’t seemed like she was lying.

You help me, Natalie, and I will help you. The look in Emily’s eyes had been absolutely steady.

One thing was for sure: lying or not, Emily had to be desperate. Otherwise she wouldn’t have come up with a proposition like that.

Natalie slowed to a walk two blocks away from her condo, inhaling deeply and trying to catch her breath. She was coming up the sidewalk when she saw a familiar figure.

“Charlie. What are you doing here?”

“Waiting for you. I figured you’d be back soon.” He pushed away from the tree he’d been leaning against. He was dressed in a dark blue silk shirt and a pair of khakis—a typical casual weekend outfit that set off his blond looks to good advantage.

“If Emily sent you...”

“Sent me? About what?”

The surprise in his tone was enough. She relaxed. "Want to come in?"
"Sure."

She led the way and unlocked her condo. Alex hadn't returned since he'd left that morning. Thank God she'd straightened the living room. At least Charlie wouldn't know what she'd been up to the night before. Although he probably suspected she wasn't living a nun's life, she didn't want to provide confirmation for anything.

"Something to drink?"

He shook his head and sat on the couch while she got herself a tall glass of water. Matto trotted out, glanced at him and then disappeared. Her cat had never cared for Charlie one way or the other.

Charlie rubbed his temples. As Natalie took a seat, she noticed for the first time that there was a little gray in his hair.

"Are you okay?" Natalie said.

"Yeah." When she raised an eyebrow, he let out a dry laugh. "Ha... Who am I kidding? No. I feel like hell."

"What's wrong?"

"Everything. God, I hate that company."

"That company" could only mean Rodale International. He'd let her know several years ago how he really felt about having to be in charge of the corporation. Besides, if he'd wanted to mention DDE or any other business rival, he would've said "those bastards."

"Mother's driving me insane. We think Damon may be trying to take us over, but she'd rather die than let anyone else have it. Or bankrupt it herself. Either way, it's going to be ugly."

"Well...you have to do what's right for you and the shareholders."

"You mean Mother?" The Rodales were their own largest shareholders, although they were unable to control the company as tightly as Emily would've liked. "Nothing seems to satisfy her."

"Could you take some time off? Go on vacation?"

"Can't. I need to find a buyer or a partner or something. I haven't told her, but the company's not doing well. She doesn't know how bad, though. Otherwise she would go berserk."

The lines bracketing Charlie's mouth seemed deeper than before. Natalie knew he wasn't interested in running the company. He'd wanted to be a painter. Of course that hadn't gone over very well with Emily, and he'd had to give up on his dreams when she had conveniently collapsed, claiming

some dire illness.

“Charlie...”

Elbows on knees, head held in his hands, he looked at her from under his eyebrows. “You have to help me, Nat. Please.”

Natalie’s insides turned cold. “If you’re asking me to give you confidential information from DDE, the answer is *no*.”

“Just this once. We have to win this defense contract. I know Damon’s bidding too. And you know the details of the bid, don’t you?”

“Obviously, Emily did send you here. Get out.”

“Come on. How long have we been friends?”

Natalie began to tremble. “*Friends?* I don’t know. A friend wouldn’t ask me to give up my self-respect and compromise my ethics.” She pointed at the door. “Get out. *Now!*”

Charlie stood up suddenly and came toward her. Natalie started to get to her feet as well, but he crossed the distance between them, grabbed her arms, and began shaking her. “Goddamn it, Nat!”

She pushed against him, trying to get away, and instead tipped her chair over. It fell with a loud crash. “Charlie! Let me go!”

“No! I need to know the—”

“Take your hands off her, Rodale.”

Oh my God. Alex.

His eyes were blazing, his hands clenched so tightly his knuckles were white. The custom-tailored suit he was wearing seemed a size too small, and his normally erect posture had deteriorated into a feral crouch.

Charlie turned his head. “And if I don’t?”

Alex gave him a very tough grin. “I’ll break your face with your leg.”

Charlie shoved her behind him, making her stumble and fall onto the couch. “*Oh good.*”

They launched themselves at each other. “Stop it!” she yelled, but she might as well have been a mosquito for all the attention they paid her. Fists connected with flesh, skin broke, blood oozed. Her first impression of Alex had been right. The veneer of civilization was exactly that: a façade. He was savage in his violence, and she flinched as he landed blow after blow on Charlie’s body.

Charlie kned Alex’s thigh, and she suddenly remembered that Charlie had studied Muay Thai for over ten years. Alex landed a retaliatory elbow on Charlie’s jaw.

Out of options, she tried to get between them. “I said *stop!*”

Something hit her in the temple, and she pitched forward. A large hand caught her before she fell to the floor. Stars flashed before her eyes; she felt like a truck had run into her.

“Good God, Nat! Why did you get in the way?” Charlie said, his voice hoarse.

Alex’s body shook. “You moth—!”

She moaned and tightened her grip on the hand, which she now realized was Alex’s. “Just stop,” she whispered.

“Are you okay?” Alex said.

“I...think so.”

That was a lie. She felt nauseous, shaken. Why hadn’t she let these two testosterone-laden idiots bash each other to a pulp?

“Charlie...leave,” she said. “Please.”

He hesitated but walked out when she gestured weakly at the door. She sagged against Alex.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Alex said harshly. “You almost got yourself killed.”

She tried to laugh, but she ended up sounding like a moaning hyena instead. “I don’t think a punch is going to kill me. Anyway, at least my furniture’s safe now.” Her upper lip was swollen, and she touched it lightly. Then she looked at Alex, inspecting his damage. “You’re bleeding.”

“Yeah, but Rodale’s going to have a hell of a shiner tomorrow.” Alex looked pleased with himself.

She rolled her eyes and tried to stand straight, but her legs wouldn’t support her. Alex carried her to the couch and laid her there.

“If he touches you again, I’ll kill him, and no one’s going to stop me. Not even you.”

“Yes, Og,” she muttered. “What are you doing back so early? I thought you weren’t coming until dinner.”

“I thought we’d spend some time together before going out. What was he doing here?”

Natalie didn’t want to talk about her conversations with Emily or Charlie with anyone, most especially Alex. In his current mood, he would probably go after Charlie if she told him everything. She didn’t want to think about the consequences.

“He was in the neighborhood.”

“Obviously. My question is why.”

“It’s not important.”

“Isn’t it?” He shook his head, his eyes hard. “I don’t want you seeing the Rodales anymore.”

“What?” Natalie jackknifed into a sitting position, then immediately put a hand to her temple and moaned. “Of all the foolish, arrogant...” Her lips tightened. “In case you don’t know, Emily’s my godmother, and Charlie’s a good friend of mine.”

“Funny way of showing his friendship.”

“That was a mistake.”

Her stubborn defense of Charlie Rodale was irritating enough, but Alex went cold as Ethan’s words came back to him: *If I’m wrong, I’ll resign.*

Damn it. He couldn’t dwell on what Ethan said. Ethan had to be wrong.

“Mistake or not, I don’t want you seeing them anymore.”

“Alex. We may have slept together, but that doesn’t give you property rights. You don’t get to tell me who I can or can’t see.”

Why was she making it more difficult than it had to be? If she stopped seeing the Rodales, Ethan would back off, and everything would be fine.

“Just do it,” he said, his voice sharper than he intended. “Besides, it’s a conflict of interest for you to see them. Rodale International is DDE’s rival.”

Her jaw dropped. “Don’t be ridiculous. I had friends in other investment banks when I worked for Goldreich.”

He hated this. He couldn’t tell her the real reason and felt like a fraud.

“Okay. Then just do it for me. Please.”

“Alex,” she said softly. “No. You either trust me or you don’t, but you don’t own me.”

Wasn’t that the truth. He didn’t own her. And seeing her with Rodale... and how she’d defended him even though the bastard had manhandled her...

Alex’s hands tightened. He should’ve ripped Rodale into pieces.

Was Ethan right? Was he repeating the same mistake his father had made decades ago?

Alex wouldn’t be able to stand it if Natalie turned out to be like Emily. God, he couldn’t bear to look at her right now, not when he was wondering if Charlie and Natalie were more than the friends she claimed they were and whether she was working for Emily.

He had to leave before he did something stupid, like telling her how crazy he was about her and that he would forgive her for anything as long as she

confided in him. His weakness and obsession with her was making him sick to his stomach. It made him feel stupid to think he might be making exactly the same mistake as his father. And he didn't like feeling stupid. Not at all.

He released her and stepped back a pace.

“Put some ice on your...injury. It's probably going to bruise and swell up. I'll see you on Monday.”

He left.

Chapter Fifteen

NATALIE WALKED TO the small conference room listed on Ethan's meeting invitation. The bright morning sun streamed through the frosted glass and lit the hallway. Despite his parting remark, Natalie hadn't seen Alex since the fight, and it had been almost a week. She didn't know what to make of his mood. Was he avoiding her? She understood he'd been upset about her getting hit, but Charlie hadn't done it on purpose. To demand that she not see the Rodales over something so relatively trivial was unreasonable. Surely, Alex would have realized that by now.

His attempt to dictate who she could see brought back unwelcome memories of Marcus, who'd always tried to control her social life to make sure she was surrounded by people he approved of. He was ambitious, with political aspirations of his own, and that had been the reason for everything he'd done. She could understand the impulse, even if it seemed somewhat silly. But what was Alex's reason? That line about a conflict of interest between DDE and Rodale International didn't ring true. And Natalie was starting to get the feeling that Alex had known about her connection to the Rodales before they'd met in person.

Well, whatever the reason, she wasn't going to repeat the same mistake where men were concerned. What had her spineless compliance with Marcus's demands gotten her? Not a single real friend, just casual acquaintances from the right families.

Charlie had been the only one in her original social circle to pass Marcus's litmus test: the right pedigree. Charles Montgomery Rodale the Third. And hadn't he always been a good friend to her? Maybe that was why she was so disappointed by his request on Saturday.

Sighing, she brushed her hair back from her face as she walked. As she

did so, her thumb skimmed over her right temple, which still hurt a little.

She got to the conference room and paused when she saw Alex in it. Ethan hadn't said anything about Alex coming to the meeting.

He made her breath catch in her throat, sitting there like a god who owned the world, but his unreadable expression almost made her falter. "Good morning," she said, flashing an uncertain smile.

"Good morning." His voice was pleasant, but his face was barren. "Please have a seat."

Natalie swallowed and took a chair across from him. She noticed with surprise that her hands were trembling and placed them on her lap. "So how are—"

Ethan's entrance interrupted her, and their meeting began. She could barely concentrate. This was one of the few rooms that had real walls instead of frosted glass, and she began to feel suffocated as the minutes ticked by. There was some kind of odd tension—and understanding?—between the two men, and she felt left out. It didn't help that Alex was abrupt and Ethan bored. Maybe they had argued. Or maybe Alex was taking his frustration with her out on everyone.

Finally the meeting ended, and Ethan walked out, leaving Natalie alone with Alex. When Alex rose from his seat, Natalie said, "Wait!"

"Yes?"

"We need to talk."

He remained standing. "Do we?"

"I know you're upset about what happened on Saturday, but Charlie didn't mean to hurt me, and I'm fine."

That wasn't one hundred percent true. It still required a little makeup to hide the bruise, but Alex didn't need to know that.

"I'm glad to hear it."

"So...are we all right?"

He raised an eyebrow. "*All right?*"

She nodded. There was something awful in his eyes, but she couldn't tell what it was. She wanted him to look at her with warmth and heat, the way he had before. Natalie wished she could erase Saturday from his memory.

The silence stretched. Two heartbeats turned to three...then four...

"Is that all you had to say?" Alex's voice held no inflection.

She bit her lower lip. What more did he want? A promise never to see the Rodales again?

He glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry, but I have another meeting. Excuse me."

* * *

So...are we all right?

No, Alex thought savagely. He wasn't all right. Not since Saturday. Not since Ethan had reported her meeting with Emily.

He'd told himself he wasn't like his father, that he was too smart, too careful, to be conned by a beautiful woman. But when Natalie walked in, his mind just...stopped somehow, and all that existed was an image of how good she looked, a feeling of how much he wanted her, and a wish that she wasn't who she was.

He paused in the hallway and gazed sightlessly through the hazy glass panes. Why couldn't he purge her from his mind?

His father had told him something once, on his way down. It had been as much an apology for the failure that ruined him as passing advice from one generation to the next. *The truly important decisions are made somewhere beyond logic and reason.*

Alex, whose favorite game was chess, hadn't believed it when he was younger. But now... Thinking things through didn't seem to help. It was as if there was a huge elastic band around his chest, and the other end was attached to Natalie. The farther he got from her, the greater the pressure, and the more difficult it was to breathe.

The more it hurt.

The truly important decisions...

His legs carried him back to the conference room of their own volition. Natalie was just gathering her documents. Her eyes widened when she saw him, but he didn't give a damn as he kicked the door shut. A primal instinct to mark her as his overwhelmed him, stripping away all restraint. He grabbed her and covered her mouth with his before she could protest. He didn't want to talk. He wanted her unconditional surrender.

Total acceptance.

She tensed, her lips refusing to part and let him in. That only made him more determined. She finally yielded, shuddering as his hands caressed every inch of her body, bringing out the sensuality buried deep inside her core. He tunneled into her chignon with his fingers until her hair came loose and swept

around her head. He pushed her skirt up and almost lost control when he saw the racy garter belt holding her thigh-highs. He ripped her panties off and went down on her, drinking in the heady scent of her desire.

He couldn't get enough of her. Her every moan, the slightest twitch of her muscles as she inched closer to climax, whipped his desire to the brink of madness. When she came against his mouth, he didn't stop. He wanted her to remember this. Remember she was his.

When he could no longer wait, he entered her slick depths. Her breath hissed, and her back arched. She held on to him as if she couldn't bear to let him go. If she screamed, the entire would office would hear her. And he didn't care.

He pounded into her, drove her to another climax and exulted in the expression of tortured ecstasy on her face. As he emptied into her, the only thing his brain could register was how much he still wanted her.

As they lay recovering on the beige carpet, it suddenly hit him.

You love her.

He inhaled sharply. Where had that come from?

No matter how much he wanted to deny that he loved her, he couldn't. Not when her seminude body still lay next to him, her eyes glazed with the aftermath of passion. A woman who planned to betray him simply could not have responded to him like that. He didn't care what Ethan said or had seen. Natalie couldn't be the traitor.

Alex gathered her in his arms. She felt weightless, as light as balsa wood. She burrowed into his chest.

He kissed her head and ran his thumb over her smooth cheek. "We're all right," he said.

She let out a soft sigh and melted against him. "I'm glad." Then she laughed. "You sure know how to make a point."

* * *

Natalie had a secret smile all day. She had no idea what had prompted such sudden passion from Alex, but she didn't care. His ardor, plus the added spice of knowing they could have been caught in the act, had been almost too much to bear. She'd had to wait a full twenty minutes after he left before she felt composed enough to exit the conference room.

It felt odd walking around the office without any panties on, though. She

didn't do commando, and every time she sat, it made her feel self-conscious.

She uploaded the NSA bid information to the server storage space registered under her name. Ethan was the only other person who could access it.

Danielle came into Natalie's office and placed a manila folder bursting with documents next to her laptop. "Here's the contract you asked for."

"Thanks." Natalie frowned. Danielle looked pale and withdrawn. "Are you okay?"

"Well...I have cramps, and I'm out of Advil." She placed a hand over her stomach. "Maybe I'll go pick up a bottle."

Natalie rose from her seat. "I've got some in my purse." She dug through her bag and handed Danielle a couple of pills. "Is that enough?"

"Yeah, thanks. I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't normally have cramps this bad."

"If you don't feel better after about an hour or so, why don't you head home early?"

"Well...maybe that's... Well, I have a lot of work to do."

"It's okay. Really."

She nodded. "Thanks, Natalie."

"By the way, love your new hair. It looks really good on you," Natalie said. The cut was stylish and framed Danielle's face delicately. It came very close to making her look cute.

"Oh. Thank you. The stylist said I really should cut it differently, and I wasn't sure. It looks a little...I don't know. Kind of dramatic?"

"No, it looks really good. Like a whole new you."

"Really? Thanks." Danielle smiled and walked out gingerly.

Natalie played with the painkiller bottle lid, watching her assistant leave. Suddenly, she stopped. Although she was pretty sure she wasn't pregnant, she hadn't shown any symptoms of PMS. But then, her periods had always been irregular. It was about time she got the early pregnancy test kit she'd seen in one of magazine ads. It could supposedly tell you six days before a missed period, and she wanted to make sure there hadn't been any unintended consequences to Alex's condom breaking back at the cabin. Not to mention what had happened that morning.

Natalie shook her head, amazed at her own behavior. Louise had drilled into both her and Belle that—whatever else happened in their private lives—getting pregnant was simply Not An Option before marriage. This morning

had been the first time she had ever given in to the heat of the moment. She knew it said a lot about what she was feeling for Alex, but the depth of the change in her was still a little shocking.

At five o'clock sharp, she left the office. Danielle's cubicle was empty, but most of the other staff was still working. Natalie drove to the closest drugstore, a CVS in the Tysons I shopping center. Thankfully, the mall wasn't too crowded. She just wanted to get in and out.

She grabbed a pregnancy test kit and was walking toward the register when she saw Emily. *Of all the luck.* The older woman's eyes dropped to the box Natalie held, and an eyebrow went up.

"Emily, I really don't have time to talk." She brushed past her godmother, wishing that she'd gone to a different drugstore.

Emily followed her to the cashier, hovering as Natalie paid. Finally, she sighed. "I can't let you make the same mistake I made. Come on. Let's talk."

Oh no. They weren't going to discuss betraying Alex again. "I don't think we have anything to talk about."

"Yes, we do. I promise you'll never view Alex Damon the same way again."

Looking at the determination on Emily's face, Natalie knew she had no choice. She wasn't going to be able to get rid of her godmother without listening to whatever she had to say.

Chapter Sixteen

NATALIE AND EMILY sat inside Natalie's car in silence. Emily smelled of a nervous tension not even Chanel No. 5 and the right pedigree could disguise. Natalie stared straight ahead at the concrete wall less than a foot from the front bumper of her Audi.

"You're not going to make it easy for me, are you?" Emily said finally.

"Emily, you asked me to compromise my principles for you on Saturday. You attempted to blackmail and bribe me. I don't know how I can make this easy for you."

The older woman let out a short laugh. "Fair enough." She leaned back and stared out at the thick columns supporting the parking garage ceiling. "I don't want—" She sighed. "I can't lose Rodale International."

Natalie glanced at her godmother. "If this is for Charlie—"

"Oh, it would be nice to say that it's for him. That would at least give a veneer of motherly concern and altruism to the whole sordid business. But no. It's for me."

Natalie was seeing a whole new side of her godmother. Rodale International had provided Emily with a lifestyle most people would envy, but to go this far...

"James owes me this much."

Natalie was momentarily at a loss. "James?"

"James Damon. Alex's father. I was his secretary way back when I decided to rebel against my family. He said he was in love with me, you know."

Emily and...Alex's *father*?

The older woman's eyes were focused on something far away. "I believed him. He could be very persuasive when the mood struck him." She turned to

Natalie. “Did you know he was married when we met?”

Natalie shook her head.

“He told me he didn’t love his wife. Said he was going to divorce her. I believed that too. I was such a naïve fool back then.” The corners of her lips twisted down, giving Emily’s face cruel lines. “In the end, he didn’t leave his wife, of course. Even though I was pregnant with his child, she too was expecting. I hated him for it. I could’ve killed him. I was not going to be any man’s *mistress*.” Her eyes flickered. “That’s when I met Charles. I didn’t love him, but he had the right drive, a hunger to succeed. I did everything in my power to ruin James, to take from him what he’d promised me.” She laughed, but the sound held no humor. “I destroyed his family, you know. His wife couldn’t bear it that he lost everything. I knew she never really loved him. She never loved him, and he chose *her*. I was glad when he finally broke. He had it coming.” She paused. “I drank champagne the day she divorced him.”

Natalie felt sick. “What happened to the child? The one you had with James Damon? Did you... Did you give it up for adoption?”

“No.” Emily’s lips turned flat. “The child has always lived with me. As a matter of fact, he now heads Rodale International.”

“Oh my God.”

“So now you know.” The intensity of Emily’s gaze belied her years. “Do you still think we should lose our company to Alex? Charlie doesn’t know what he’s dealing with. I have to help him.”

“You’re denying Charlie his half-brother.”

“Don’t call him that! If I could, I would ruin him too. He’s *her* son.”

Emily’s eyes were hard as diamonds, her mouth as thin as the edge of a razor. Natalie felt like vomiting. This venom...this old, festered wound wasn’t something she’d ever suspected Emily carried under her benevolent, society-matron exterior. Now Natalie understood why Alex hadn’t wanted her to see the Rodales again. But did he know that Charlie was his half-brother?

Natalie came to a decision. “If you don’t tell him, I will.”

“Tell who?”

“Alex. And Charlie too.”

Emily looked at her. “What are you trying to accomplish? Do you think that once they know the truth, they’ll just smile and become friends? Silly girl.” She reached down and straightened the crease in her slacks. “Whatever

you're trying to do will be futile anyway. Charlie won't believe you because I'll deny it to my last breath. As for Alex, he hates me. Probably doesn't think much of Charlie, either, given his feelings for you. My advice is to worry about yourself instead."

"Myself?"

"Of course. If you really are pregnant, you'll have to find some sort of solution quickly. You don't actually believe that Alex is going to take care of you and your baby, do you? Perhaps even make an honest woman out of you?" Emily laughed. "My dear girl, the apple never does fall far from the tree. James abandoned me, and Alex will do exactly the same thing to you if you give him the chance."

"I think you should go, Emily."

"Don't forget that you're not alone." Emily reached out, but Natalie shrank away. Emily's eyes turned angry, then quickly cooled. "I know what it's like to be cast aside by the person you've given your heart to." Emily opened the car door and got out. "You know how to reach me."

* * *

Natalie collapsed on her couch. She didn't remember the drive home. Everything had been a blur until she found herself in her condo. One thing kept going through her mind: *How could Emily have been so cruel?*

She dug into her purse and searched until she pulled out the home pregnancy test, then went into the bathroom and used it. She had to blink several times before she could focus on the rectangular section where lines were supposed to appear.

Negative.

She stood, one hand on her forehead. Was she relieved? Disappointed? Her thoughts were jumbled like a jigsaw puzzle.

Matto meowed, and Natalie picked him up, absently scratching behind his ears. She thought about telling Alex about Charlie. Or should she tell Charlie first?

But would Charlie believe her if Emily denied everything? For that matter, would Alex? There wasn't much physical resemblance between the two men.

There was another possibility as well. Emily could have made the story up to compel Natalie to help the Rodales. The older woman truly believed

that Rodale International belonged to her family. And Natalie was starting to wonder how far Emily would go to protect what was hers.

* * *

“This confirms it all,” Ethan said, entering Alex’s office.

It was late in the evening. The entire floor was empty except for the two of them and an old janitor pattering around the cubicles. The rush-hour traffic was waning outside the windows.

Alex looked up from the email he’d been reading. His stomach knotted. Did Ethan actually have something concrete?

“Natalie left work earlier than usual. She met Emily Rodale and talked to her for about fifteen minutes.”

Alex waved his hand dismissively. “That could’ve been anything. Did your PI get anything specific?”

“That’s the thing. They met at a mall but went to Natalie’s car to talk. It’s like they didn’t want anyone to hear their conversation.”

“That still doesn’t prove anything. Natalie’s known Emily forever.”

“There’s more.” Ethan took a deep breath, his eyes full of sympathy. “I have a contact in the NSA. The Rodale bid... They undercut the number I gave Natalie by just enough to win the project.”

“It still—”

“And the scope of the work is exactly the same as the specs I gave her.”

Alex’s hands tightened into fists. “Are you sure? Can you trust this NSA person?” He shook his head. “It could’ve been a coincidence.”

“Alex, come on! This is the third time Rodale’s been able to send in bids like thi—”

“Shut up,” Alex said softly.

“I’m sorry.”

“*Shut up!*”

Ethan nodded and left.

Alex felt sick. He couldn’t believe Natalie was the mole. Even though Ethan had warned him, he’d rejected the idea.

The weather outside the window was overcast, the city lights reflecting off low, pewter clouds. Alex watched them as they slid slowly to the west. He wished Ethan weren’t so good at his job.

Now Alex had no choice. He had to deal with the situation, and no matter

what move he played, he was going to lose.

Chapter Seventeen

LATE THAT NIGHT, Natalie opened her condo door in her bathrobe and was shocked when she found Alex on the other side. He looked awful and reeked of alcohol. He waved at her, swaying slightly, and gave her a lopsided grin.

She took his arm, helping him inside. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Not enough.” He fell onto the couch. His head rolled and rested against the back. “You look good, Natalie.”

She stood in front of him and crossed her arms. “Thank you,” she said dryly. “Is everything all right?”

He laughed. “You tell me.”

She sighed. Whatever had prompted him to get wasted like this, there was obviously no point in talking right now. “I think you should sleep it off. Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He gave her an exaggerated frown. “I don’t feel too sleepy.”

“You can go to sleep, or I’ll call you a cab. I don’t approve of drunkenness.”

“Oh, I forgot. The Rodales would never get drunk, huh?”

An internal alarm went off. Had he found out that Charlie was his half-brother? Or was it something else?

“Cat got your tongue?” A nasty little smile twisted his lips. “Got anything to tell me?”

She fidgeted under his gaze. Finally, she blurted out, “I’m not pregnant.”

It took a while to penetrate. “Well! That certainly is a relief. Nothing to bind us now.”

She blinked furiously as tears suddenly stung her eyes. He couldn't possibly mean what she thought he did.

He shrugged and muttered, "Probably wouldn't have mattered anyway."

Her insides grew cold. "Why are you doing this, Alex?"

"Don't you know?"

"I don't like playing games."

"Games?" He rose, his eyes growing alert and sharp. He reached out, framed her face roughly with his big, warm hands. "I hate you so much it *hurts*," he said between clenched teeth.

Natalie couldn't breathe. It was as if she'd suddenly been transported into a nightmare.

"What did Emily promise you? Is Charlie going to marry you for betraying me? Gonna get yourself a big piece of that Rodale pie?"

How did he know Emily and Charlie had asked her to help them?

"How much are they paying you to sell me out?"

"What?"

"Don't pretend. You're the one who's been spying for them all along. You gave them the bid figures."

"No!" She couldn't believe this. "Is that what this is all about? Of all the stupid things to—"

"Don't lie to me!" He pushed her away from him, making her stumble. "The NSA bid file you worked on wasn't even real! We know the bid Rodale submitted. It was just enough to beat the numbers you gave them."

Suddenly, it was freezing in her condo, and Natalie hugged herself. Alex thought she'd betrayed him. She remembered Ethan giving her the manila folder right after Alex had gone to Hong Kong, how he'd insisted that she work on it alone. Humiliation suffocated her as she recalled how she'd given herself to Alex so wantonly. "You faithless bastard! You were planning this even before we slept together!"

"I'm the faithless one? You're a good actress, and a hell of a lay, but don't think that's enough to fool me."

She pointed at the door with a shaking finger. "Get out!"

"Oh, I'll go. But before I leave," he said, his face contorted with rage. "There's something you should know. You weren't a foundling. Your lofty father *won* you. On a bet. In China."

Blood roared in her ears, and she could barely hear anything over the pounding of her heart. "Wha—what? How...how do you know?"

“Brian’s been in my way one too many times, protecting the Rodales. Nothing would make him back off. So I had to find something bad enough that he’d have to abandon them.”

Stop siccing your nasty boyfriend...

“I had several investigators dig into his past,” Alex continued. “They finally found something I could use against him—winning you on a bet. Imagine the scandal it would cause—‘Senator Wins Daughter in Game of Chance’. He’s been blustering, but I know he’ll stop protecting the Rodales. He’ll be lucky to avoid jail. Is there a statute of limitations on human trafficking?”

“Still, raised by a man like that...” Alex shook his head. “I should’ve known you’d think nothing of sneaking around, spying for money. I want your resignation first thing tomorrow morning.”

His eyes raked her, left her raw and bleeding. Then he left, slamming the door shut behind him.

* * *

Stumbling along the sidewalks, Alex let out a few choice words. He needed to call a cab. Even if he hadn’t been drinking, he was in no condition to drive. He was too angry...too emotional. His whole body was shaking uncontrollably.

God. He hated her and the way her chocolate eyes seem to draw him in, even when he knew her for what she really was. He hated himself for wanting her despite all she’d done to him. He’d wanted her to tell him the truth. Everything. He would’ve covered it up. Pretended nothing had ever happened, no harm done. She would have had to resign, of course, but he could’ve still been with her, found it in his heart to forgive her.

He hadn’t intended to tell her about the adoption, but when she’d ordered him to get out, acting like some kind of queen, something had snapped inside his heart. His face twisted into a snarl. *Where were the damned cabs?*

He would ruin the Rodales and take the Halls down too, for good measure. He wanted them all to burn in hell, especially Natalie. That way, he’d have some company.

* * *

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Natalie put a hand on her churning stomach and then, covering her mouth with the other, ran to the bathroom and threw up until there was nothing left. When she was finished, she half-knelt, half-sat on the floor next to the toilet, the cool porcelain under one elbow, her head in her hand. Finally she stood and stared at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face blotchy. She began cleaning herself up.

Your lofty father won you. On a bet. In China.

Tears of frustration and anger welled in her eyes. All it had taken was an instant for her life to be completely destroyed. Her lover, her career, even her identity—nothing was ever going to be the same. For a time, despair threatened to overwhelm her. But then another emotion began to well up from deep inside, from the strongest and most resilient part of her. Slowly, then more quickly, anger took her over, pushing the despair aside.

She wanted answers.

She threw on some clothes and rushed out, her feet so quick that she almost tripped. Her car beeped as she disabled the alarm and climbed inside. The Halls' house wasn't that far, and traffic would be light this time of night.

The halogen lamps over the highway blurred into bright orange streaks as she sped onto I-66, then the Beltway. The speedometer was close to triple digits, but she didn't care. She needed to see Brian.

Now.

And then what? Could she accuse him of *winning* her like she were a...a thing?

Her car lurched to a stop in front of the opulent mansion. A few windows were lit, including Brian's study. Louise's Mercedes wasn't in the driveway. Good. Natalie didn't want to deal with her right now.

Natalie rushed to the house, still holding her car keys. She pounded on the door until it opened.

"What are you doing here at this hour?" Belle's eyes flashed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I just might be."

Natalie pushed past her and moved to climb the staircase to the second floor, where Brian's study was, but Belle ran and got in front of her.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"None of your business," Natalie said. "Get out of my way."

Belle put her hands on her hips. "You want to see Dad. You won't bother to help out with the campaign, but you don't mind coming over in the middle

of the night. What makes you think you can just barge in and demand to see him whenever you want?”

Something snapped inside Natalie.

“Why should I be part of the campaign? You and Louise made sure I wouldn’t feel welcome anywhere around this family. I can’t even come and go freely here, because I had to give my house key back when I moved out! Seriously, you don’t really consider us sisters, do you?”

She felt a small satisfaction as Belle’s jaw dropped. Capitalizing on her temporary shock, Natalie ran around her and up the stairs until she reached Brian’s study. She didn’t bother to knock, just opened the door and walked in.

“Natalie.” Brian looked up from his desk with a hint of a smile on his face, the patrician forehead wrinkling up above his glasses. “What a surprise.”

He was the only one in the family who indulged her infrequent lapses in social propriety. Was it because she had been won and he felt she couldn’t do any better?

“Have a seat. What brings you out at this hour?”

She closed the door but didn’t sit down. Now that she was face-to-face with Brian, she hesitated. There was the heavy smell of books and wood. His boldly carved mahogany desk dominated the area near the off-white bay windows, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves groaned under the weight of leather-bound volumes. This was his inner sanctum and the seat of his power, a place Natalie had rarely visited.

“I was just about to have a nightcap. Would you like something?” he said.

When she didn’t say anything, his smile slowly shrank. He stood behind his desk, peeling his glasses off. “Is something the matter?”

Seeing the stolid bulk of her father standing there, Natalie knew Alex was wrong. He had to be. He must have said those horrible things because he thought she’d betrayed him.

“Did you...” Natalie shook her head. “Tell me how you found me,” she said, her voice hoarse.

Brian frowned slightly. “I’ve already told you that, sweetheart.”

She stared at him. She knew his face as well as her own—the compassionate blue eyes, the mouth that could convey friendliness or steadfast resolve, depending on the situation. It was a perfect politician’s face, and looking at it, she decided that she would never be able to read it if

she gave him time to prepare.

“Did you win me on a bet in China?”

A fine tremor went through his body, and his features seemed to freeze in place.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “How could you? You *bought* me?”

Brian started to come around his desk. His hip hit the edge, and he almost tripped. “Natalie. That’s not how it happened.”

“Then tell me!” Natalie put a hand over her mouth, horrified at how hysterical she sounded and how the life she’d known had been a lie. *A wager won*. That was all she’d ever been to the Halls.

“My lord. I never thought you’d find out.” Brian looked at her a moment, indecisive, then went to a small rolling bar and took his time putting a couple of ice cubes into a glass. He poured himself two fingers of whiskey, the ice crackling. Still facing away from her, he said, “Your great uncle was an ambassador to China thirty years ago. I accompanied him because I was thinking of joining the Foreign Service, although the family was pressuring me to follow in my father’s footsteps and go into politics.” He turned to her. “Louise couldn’t come because she was sure that... Well, it’s not important.” He paused and took a swallow of his drink.

Natalie’s lips twisted. She could imagine why Louise hadn’t wanted to go: she didn’t like any place that didn’t cater to her standards—that was to say, elite American standards.

“I met a local man there. He worked in a restaurant many of the expats liked.”

“My real father?” Natalie held her breath. “What kind of person was he?”

“I don’t know if he was your father or not. But he was quiet. Compact. Intense eyes. Looked young for his age.” Brian swirled his drink, his eyes focused on the past. “We called him Chang, but that may not have been his real name.

“Some of the Chinese resented our presence, but he was friendly enough. Showed me the city, taught me about the local customs. His English wasn’t good, but it was serviceable, and we became fairly close. He was taller than most of the others, almost my height, and I gave him one of my shirts as a present once.” He took another drink. “About six months after we met, we went to a bar. We had some drinks—too many, when I think about it now—and played some Chinese games. You know, mahjong, like that. He wanted to bet, said it wouldn’t be fun otherwise. And I agreed. Why wouldn’t I? I

figured that I might lose maybe a hundred dollars at the most. It wasn't that much to me, even back then. And if I lost more, well, it would have been okay. I knew the family would bail me out." He shook his head. "Except they couldn't help me out at all. The scandal...God!"

"What happened at the game?"

"I don't remember. Don't look at me like that, Natalie, it's the truth. But the next day, an old Chinese *amah* delivered you to me with a note telling me I'd won and that Chang had to honor his debt. I was never able to find him again. He had disappeared.

"I'm ashamed to say I considered leaving you behind. But our maid told me you would most likely end up dead or sold into a brothel. There were no adoption families; China's one-child policy made it impossible. Even those families without children wouldn't have wanted a girl." Brian shrugged. "Knowing what would happen to you, I couldn't leave you."

Natalie stood stock-still. There was just too much to process. It was as though she was on a movie set that she had thought was real, and someone had suddenly started moving the false walls away, revealing an entirely different world. It took all her concentration to listen as Brian went on.

"I returned to America immediately with you." He was looking at her directly now, searching for something in her face. "I couldn't tell Louise what had really happened. Just the gambling would have been enough to... Well, I'd never have heard the end of it. I needed some time to think, and so I took you to Emily. She found a poor family that was willing to look after you for several months. Eventually, through intermediaries, I got you back and brought you home. I told Louise I'd found you in DC. The lie was so egregious that it was believable, at least to her. If I tell her the truth now... I don't know." He sighed, and his shoulders seemed to get a bit narrower.

Natalie felt sick. "You should've told *me*."

"Why? What could it possibly accomplish? We raised you as our own."

Was that what he really believed? Was he truly blind to how Louise and Belle treated her?

Brian had been the only one Natalie had really liked in her family. But now she couldn't bear to look at him. She spun around and strode out of his study, only to come face-to-face with a deathly pale Belle.

"Natalie..."

Natalie felt herself go cold, as if someone had poured chilled oil down her spine. There was nothing to say between them.

She pushed past her and went outside. The evening breeze was crisp against her skin. When she finally unclenched her hand from around the car keys, they were slick with blood.

Chapter Eighteen

“YOU’RE A MESS.”

Alex jerked his head up. Ethan walked into the office and closed the door behind him.

It had been a week and three days since Alex had stormed into Natalie’s condo, a week and two days since she’d returned the ruby choker and silk robe to him via FedEx. She hadn’t come to the office to pick up her stuff. Not that it had been necessary; she hadn’t kept any personal belongings there. It was as if she’d known that she wasn’t going to be working there much longer. Another sign of her guilt? Had he missed it because he’d been dazzled by her?

“Thank you for your input,” Alex said dryly.

“Not a problem. I think you should get to the gym more often too.” Ethan leaned into one of the plush office chairs. “And not drink so much.”

“Keep it up.” Alex’s heart wasn’t in the banter. He looked pointedly at a pile of documents on his desk. “Did you want something? I’m kind of busy.”

“Yeah, you looked real busy with your head on the desk there.”

There was a knock on the door, and Eleanor walked in. “Sorry to interrupt, but have you signed off on those merger documents yet? I need to get them out today if we’re going to make the deadline.”

“Thank you. I was just telling Ethan here how busy I am today.”

“Fine, I know when I’m not wanted.” Ethan heaved himself up and started out, giving Eleanor a smile as he did so. “It’s like this sixth sense I’ve got.”

“He didn’t have to go,” Eleanor said when the door was closed.

“Yes, he did.” Alex rooted around until he came up with the documents. “Here they are. Is there anything else?”

“Jennifer Beringer called about the new project figures for London. The last one I remember is five million USD. Is that still the case?”

“It is, but the scope has changed. I’ll need to brief them on that as soon as possible, so set up a conference call. And I’m probably going to have to go out there myself next month. See what everyone’s availability is.”

Eleanor nodded. One of her best qualities as a secretary was that she had a superb memory. Alex had never seen her take notes, other than occasionally in meetings, and she never forgot anything.

He gave her instructions on other business, and she reminded him of an upcoming appointment. Then she left, and he concentrated on reducing the pile of paperwork in front of him.

Half an hour later, he suddenly raised his head. He sat frowning at the wall for a few moments, then got up and opened the door.

“Eleanor, how did you know what the figure was for London? Did Ethan tell you?”

She turned on her chair and gave him a puzzled look. “No, I saw it on your computer. When I was in last week. Remember, you asked me to make sure—”

He nodded, but he wasn’t listening anymore. “Thanks.” He started to go back into his office, then stuck his head out again. “Have I mentioned what a wonderful admin you are lately? Tell HR that I approved a pay raise for you. Ten percent, starting next month.”

Eleanor’s eyebrows climbed out from behind the round glasses she wore.

“And get Murchison on the line. He’s in Security.” He pointed at the phone. “Now. Please.”

Alex shut the door while Eleanor was just starting to move. Back in his office, he paced, index and middle fingers on his temples. Up until today, he had felt like he’d been playing with half the board hidden from his sight. But now things were beginning to fit. Still, it was a bit too soon to do anything. He needed to have everything lined up before he moved. And Murchison could help him do that.

* * *

When Ethan entered his office exactly one week later, Alex smiled and stood. “Thanks for coming.”

“No problem.” Ethan frowned. “You look...happy.”

“I am.” When Ethan made a move to sit, Alex waved his hand. “No, no, stop. You’re going to stand right there by the wall. If you want, you can lean against it. Cross your arms. Right, just like that.”

The frown deepened, but Ethan did as he was told.

“Perfect.” Alex turned to the intercom. “Eleanor, could you get Danielle to come in?”

A few minutes later, the door opened and Danielle entered the office.

“Um...I heard from your assistant... I mean, Eleanor said you wanted to see me?”

“Please come in,” Alex said with a smile. “Have a seat.” He offered her the chair Ethan had wanted.

“Thank you.” She practically tiptoed inside and seated herself as though there were paper on the chair and she was trying not to wrinkle it. But then, she seemed timid all the time. Her eyes darted between Alex and Ethan. Both men were standing, wearing black suits. Alex thought maybe it was too theatrical, but the effect on her would be worth it. “So...what can I do for you?” she said, her fingertips on her knees.

Alex rested a hip on the edge of his desk. He wanted to be close to her as he talked, without the bulk of the desk between them. “I’m thinking about taking Ethan out to a nice steak house for a special project well done. Do you know any decent restaurants in this area? Normally, I would ask Eleanor, but she’s not from around here.”

She looked perplexed. “Oh. Well, uh...The Palm’s nice. You know, the one by the Ritz? Or, um...Morton’s is also close by...near Tysons, and they always have wonderful steaks.”

Alex nodded. “Morton’s, huh? What do you think about the one in Reston?”

“Uh...it’s very good. You’ll never be disappointed at Morton’s. There’s one in Arlington too, if that’s, you know, more convenient.”

“But Reston is the one you know best, isn’t it?”

Danielle looked between the two men. “I’m not... Why would you say that?”

“I hope Rodale paid for the meal. That Cheval Blanc alone—1998 vintage, wasn’t it?—was close to three hundred bucks. Unless, of course, you treated him out of the money the Rodales have given you.”

She licked her lower lip. Alex made sure his face betrayed nothing.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. “I don’t... I haven’t

been to Reston since last Christmas.”

Alex shook his head. “Your best bet at this point is to cooperate fully with us.” He picked up a few photos from his desk and handed them to her.

“Looks remarkably like you, don’t you agree? They were taken this Thursday.”

Her fingers began shaking as she looked at the pictures. “I don’t...I don’t.... He said you wouldn’t find out.”

“Uh-huh. Because Natalie would take the fall.”

“How could you?” Ethan’s sudden question surprised Alex. “She’s been a fair boss to you, trying to bring you up as she moved up the chain of command.” Ethan hadn’t moved from where he was, and he hadn’t raised his voice, but Danielle flinched when she saw the expression on his face.

“It’s not like that. I didn’t want to do it, not the NSA job.” Her gaze dropped. One fat tear started rolling down the curve of her cheek. “But he said she would be okay. Her father’s a U.S. senator. I mean, her whole family’s ambassadors, senators, governors... She’d land on her feet.”

“So you framed her,” Alex said.

Danielle’s head snapped up. “No!”

“You let her take the fall.”

“Nobody was supposed to be hurt! But if it had to be someone, Natalie’s the one who can afford it.” She wrung her hands. “I don’t... I’m in love with Charlie.”

Alex looked at the homely girl, only now realizing that she had been taking more care with her appearance recently. Her nails were done, and she was actually wearing earrings. Still, she was never going to be a beauty. Rodale must have seemed like a dream come true when he expressed interest in her. Alex felt a stab of pity, but one thought of Natalie made it vanish.

“How did you get the data?” Ethan said. “Only Natalie and I had access to it.”

“She saw it on Natalie’s computer,” Alex said. “Didn’t you? You’re always in and out of her office, and she trusts you. It wasn’t that difficult, was it?”

“I think I want a lawyer,” Danielle said slowly.

“You can call one if you like,” Alex said. “But here’s what’s going to happen if you do. I will use every resource at my disposal—*every* resource—to make your life miserable. I’ll tie you up in court until you’re ready for a retirement home. Every cent of the money Rodale is paying you will be spent

on legal fees. You will have to sell your clothes, your jewelry, your car, and your house simply to stay afloat, and still it won't be enough. There is no place on this planet you can go to where I will not be able to find you." He gave it a moment to sink in. "Or, you can come clean with me right here, right now. Tell us what happened, and why, and I won't press charges. You'll have to leave DDE, of course, but I won't hinder you in a search for a new job. It will be over." He leaned toward her, bringing all the force of his personality to bear. "This is a one-time offer, and it's good for the next sixty seconds. *Decide.*"

Danielle looked from one man to the other, her eyes wide. Alex looked back at her steadily. Ethan's face seemed carved from stone. Finally she sagged. "It was like you said," she said in a small voice. "I knew when she was going to be working on the NSA bid, and I just created excuses to be in her office. Once or twice she would put something else up on the screen, but usually she just left whatever was on there to begin with. I'd get her to sign something, or ask her to help me with something." She shrugged. "It wasn't that hard."

Ethan swore. Alex experienced a brief soaring elation. Vindicated!

"You are hereby terminated, effective immediately," he began. "Empty your desk within the next fifteen minutes, and security will escort you out. If I see you anywhere near DDE again, I'll have you up on charges for corporate espionage. There is an eyewitness here and the intercom has been on this whole time, so my secretary also heard what you've said. Stay away, and we're done. Come back, and I'll make sure you'll never get a job higher than assistant burger flipper again. Am I making myself clear?"

She swallowed and nodded, her lower lip trembling slightly.

Alex stared at her. "You now have fourteen minutes."

"Damn, I screwed up," Ethan said when Danielle was gone. He stood up a little straighter. "About my resignation. I'll—"

"Forget it. *I'm* the one who screwed up. I've been unbelievably faithless." He recalled Natalie's stricken expression—the way he'd tossed out the truth about her adoption—and closed his eyes briefly. God, he'd been a bastard. Was it too late?

"Eleanor," he said to the air, "I'm canceling all my appointments for the day. I don't care who calls, I'm not available."

He needed to see Natalie. Now.

* * *

The convertible gleamed under the sun as it flew over the country roads. The wind tousled her newly cut hair and dragged at her silk top. Natalie felt chilled and exhilarated at the same time. And she was loving every second of the crazy fast drive.

She'd taken extra care to look her best this morning. Moping time was over—she was starting fresh. Away from the Halls, the Rodales, Alex, and everything else. She'd seen her lawyer earlier in the week to change her last name to Chang, thinking it was sufficiently Chinese-sounding and might suit her better. Besides, it was all she had of her real ancestry. She didn't want to be called Hall anymore. And two days ago, she'd contacted a real estate agent to put her condo up for sale. She didn't know where she wanted to go yet. Maybe back to Goldreich in Hong Kong, just like Kerri begged her to every time they talked. Maybe somewhere completely new.

When something wet trailed down her cheek, she brushed it away impatiently. This was her way of purging it all, reminding herself that she was strong enough to overcome her current difficulties and continue on her own.

A new life, like the open road in front of her, with the past forever left behind.

* * *

Alex checked the parking lot again. Natalie's car was missing, and her condo was dark and empty. Nobody from her family knew where she was. To make matters worse, her cell phone had been disconnected, and there didn't seem to be a new number. Alex resisted the urge to kick something as the sun began to set. It would've been satisfying but definitely not helpful.

Still, he kept the option in the back of his mind as he started to pace. It was difficult trying to predict her moves. There was a For Sale sign on her unit, which obviously meant that she was planning to relocate, but also meant that she hadn't gotten rid of the place yet.

So she had to come back eventually, didn't she? Maybe *he* should buy it, force her to meet him that way.

He rehearsed the speech he would make when she showed up. It needed to be sufficiently groveling, given what he'd done to her. Hopefully, she

would forgive him. No, no. She had to. He was crazy about her, and he knew the feeling would never go away.

He paused as a sudden thought struck him. Had she gone to China to find her biological parents? That would be insane. He hadn't been able to discover their identity despite all the money he'd spent.

A familiar convertible lurched to a stop in one of the parking spaces, and something inside him loosened when he saw Natalie in the driver's seat.

* * *

Sitting in the parking spot, Natalie gripped the steering wheel so tightly it started to shake. Was it really Alex? God, how could he show up here again? What did he want? Hadn't they said everything that needed to be said last time?

She considered driving away. It was extremely tempting.

Don't be ridiculous. This is still your home. Maybe he would ignore her. He'd made his contempt for her clear.

When he trotted toward her, her stomach knotted. So much for wishful thinking. She braced herself and looked straight ahead, her thoughts racing. "Natalie."

One heartbeat. Two. Finally, she glanced at him. She was thankful for the jet-black sunglasses she had on.

"You cut your hair."

She almost raised her hand to touch the short tips that brushed her neck. But there was no reason for her to finger-comb it. She no longer had to play the proper daughter of a powerful U.S. senator—and she had no reason to try to impress Alex.

"Can we talk?"

Alex's voice was gentle, and absurdly, it made her want to cry. It held the warmth that had never failed to make her insides melt. But that warmth had been a lie, hadn't it? To keep her in the dark while he was plotting behind her back...to set her up for something she hadn't done. Something she'd never even considered doing.

She took a deep breath and got out of the car. The four-inch dress sandals she wore added to her height, and she was thankful she had taken so much care with her appearance that morning. She knew she looked good. Eat your heart out, she thought. Now all she had to do was keep it together in front of

him.

“I thought we were done.” Her voice was steady. Her gaze was steady. Steady.

Alex reached out and gently took her wrist. “No.”

The contact seemed to burn her skin, and she almost cried out. What was he up to now? Hadn't he done enough?

“Let go.”

He kept his hand where it was. She could feel the heat and intensity of his gaze even through the sunglasses.

“Ethan turned in his resignation.”

She laughed. “And...what? You want me to fill his position?” God, she had to get away. A moment longer and she would crack, cry like some pathetic loser. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction, even if it killed her to hold everything inside.

“Natalie, I was wrong. I know you weren't spying on us. It was Danielle. She was the one who gave the numbers to Charlie Rodale,” Alex said quietly.

Natalie's lips parted. She hadn't suspected her mousy assistant even knew Charlie.

“Why?” she said before she could stop herself.

Alex shrugged. “Apparently, she's in love with him.”

“What?” Charlie could be very charming when he wanted to be. Still, how could he have used Danielle like that? And for her to betray Natalie's trust...

Suddenly, all emotion drained from Natalie. Why should she care about them? She was going to leave all this behind soon.

“I'm sorry,” Alex said.

The simple apology surprised her, but it was too little too late. “Well.” She tugged until he let go of her wrist. “It doesn't matter. Thanks for letting me know. If that's all, I think you should go.”

She walked to her condo, and he followed. She turned to him at the door.

“I'm not going to invite you in.”

He nodded silently but kept looking at her steadily with those beautiful, unreadable eyes. Was there more to his visit than an apology?

She straightened her spine. She didn't know what it was about him that made her do it, but she found herself saying, “I'm moving. Someplace far from here.”

“You can't go.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, I *can't*? Just watch me. I don't have a job or a family. The people I thought were my friends here are only out to use me. The man I thought I was in love with”—she stiffened as he inhaled sharply —“doesn't trust me.”

Something was tearing inside her, but the pain drove her relentlessly to end it on her terms. She wouldn't break down in front of him like last time and humiliate herself all over again. This time she would at least keep her dignity. “It doesn't take a genius to figure out that I have nothing to hold me here.” She shrugged. “I want to start over. It's as simple as that.” She turned her back to him and inserted the key into the lock.

“Natalie, I'm in love with you.”

That stole all the air out of her lungs. She gripped her key hard.

“Don't,” she whispered.

Life kept chopping at her, and she was tired of standing on her own. She leaned slightly toward the door until her forehead rested against its cool wooden surface, but that wasn't enough to stop her from trembling. Her heart hammered against her ribcage. “Just...don't.”

He embraced her from behind. Despite all her resolve, she melted against him.

“I'm so sorry, sweetheart. Let me make it up to you. Please.”

“I can't start over with you,” she cried out and put a hand over her mouth. God, it hurt so much. If Alex hadn't been holding her, she would've doubled over. “I can't start over with you.” Tears pooled into the curves of her dark lenses.

She wrenched herself out of his embrace, pushed the door open, and stumbled inside, trying to get away. From him or from the weakness that threatened to make her beg him to stay with her, she didn't know. She almost tripped over a box half-full of her things. Her sunglasses fell off, the tears that were in them making small dark spots on the carpet.

Alex followed her in and held her close, his arms going around her waist to steady her. She turned around and tried to push him away, but this time he was ready.

“Natalie...Natalie,” he whispered. “I'm so sorry. If I could undo it all, I would. Let me make it up to you.”

The kiss he gave her then was all she needed to release the pent-up emotions of the past ten days. She buried her face in his chest so he couldn't see her tears and beat his shoulder with a tightly clenched fist. All the mixed-

up feelings she'd had—the things she hadn't been able to articulate, not even to herself—gushed out.

Alex didn't try to defend himself. He held her tighter and let her pound on him until she went limp.

Then he carried her into the bedroom and worshipped her, showed her how much he loved her, and the hurt seemed to recede. His name was a sob on her lips as she climaxed, and she couldn't stop the tears that flowed from her eyes.

"Don't cry," he said, his voice ragged.

"If you ever doubt me again..." She sniffled and wiped her face.

"Never."

"All right." She lay quiet for a moment, then tried to pull away as a thought occurred. Alex tensed, holding her to him. "It's okay, I'll be right back," she said, running a fingertip over his cheek.

He let her go, somewhat reluctantly, and she hopped off the bed and went to the living room. The matching jade set of dragon and *fènhuáng* sat on the floor. She took them in her hands, their solid weight reassuring, and returned to the bedroom.

Alex sat up as she walked in. He looked at the figurines, then her. "I thought you'd packed everything."

"Not these." She sat next to him and rested the cool ceramic on her bare thigh. "I was going to leave them behind."

His hand almost reached to touch the dragon then stopped. "That's not good. Don't they mean a lot to you?"

"They do. But it seemed ridiculous to keep them. I've never had a really harmonious relationship with a man, and I figured it was time I stopped acting silly and went for something more attainable. Like a great job or money, like my friend always tells me."

"I"—his voice cracked—"Natalie, I'm sorry. I hurt you so much."

Pain had etched deep lines on his face, and the pale purple bags under his eyes made Alex look drained. She hadn't noticed the signs of his suffering earlier because she'd been too busy dealing with her own.

She brushed her thumb over the dragon's ears and handed it to him. "Here."

"Natalie."

"It feels right. I want to give us another chance."

His throat worked. "So...do you forgive me?"

She sighed. "I don't seem to have a choice. I'm in love with you."

Something hot and fierce came back into his eyes, but his voice remained gentle. "Come here."

They made love, slowly, tenderly, drawing out their pleasure and climaxing together at the end. Afterward, Alex brushed her hair back from her face.

"You okay?"

"Of course."

"Then why the pensive look?"

"Well...because you're still going to want to ruin the Rodales, and I can't decide how I feel about that. I know they tried to use me and all, but still... Emily had her reasons. So did Charlie."

Alex compressed his lips. "Natalie, I never told you why I want to—"

"You don't have to. Emily told me." She briefly debated with herself, then told him everything, including how Charlie was his half-brother.

When she was finished, Alex merely stared at her. "I don't believe it!" He quickly amended that to, "I mean, how can I trust what she says?"

"If you want, I suppose you can do a paternity test. That is, assuming Charlie wants to know as well." Natalie sighed. "I don't even know if the Rodales want to talk to me anymore, but it's a little sad to think that my own godmother was more intent on having her revenge than anything else."

Alex was quiet. Finally he said, "You want me to give up the takeover, don't you?"

"Do you want to give it up?"

His face remained unreadable, but finally he said, "If that's what you want. If that's what I need to do to make you happy, then yes. I'll...act civilized toward them."

Something loosened inside her, and she laughed. "Oh, Alex. We're going to be great."

Epilogue

NATALIE WANTED MORE TIME, but Alex wasn't in the mood to wait. She managed to get three months to prepare for the wedding after a week of intense negotiation, but it still didn't leave enough time to do everything.

First, Alex and Emily talked. Natalie didn't attend their meeting, but it seemed to have resulted in a grudging truce. At least they were civil toward each other. That was all she wanted for now. Charlie got to keep the company, although he hinted he might be open to the idea of a merger with DDE. Maybe he'd get to be a painter after all.

Ethan tried several more times to resign, but Alex wouldn't let him. Natalie understood that Ethan had been the one behind the NSA bid trap and who had pointed the finger at her, but she didn't bear him much in the way of hard feelings. He'd been doing his job and trying to protect his friend. She might have done the same if the situation had been reversed. Besides, it made no sense to deprive Alex of his best friend and best man.

Danielle vanished, seemingly into thin air. Natalie asked Charlie about it twice, but he refused to discuss the matter. Finally, she dropped it.

As for the Halls, Brian announced that he would retire rather abruptly. The official reason given was so that he could spend time with his family. Belle decided to travel, although she promised to be back for the wedding. Louise said she would do her duty at the ceremony. After all, she was nothing if not responsible. Natalie couldn't decide if she should try to shut her adoptive mother out of her life or not, but she supposed Louise really was doing her best. Probably she was hoping Brian would change his mind and run for president...and wanted Alex's support.

"Hey," Alex said, embracing her as she walked into their penthouse in Arlington. She'd rented out her place and moved in with him as soon as

possible after their reconciliation. "I miss my fiancée."

"I wish we could just elope." Natalie fell onto the couch with him. "But I think Emily and Louise would kill me."

"Emily would kill *me*. She said if you're unhappy in the slightest, she'd see to it that I regret it." He got a slightly worried expression, but his eyes were twinkling. "Permanently."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

* * *

Alex hadn't told her all the details of his exchange with Emily, but she wanted to make sure her goddaughter got the best. As long as he did right by Natalie, Emily said she would learn to forgive the Damon men.

"After all, you are trying very hard...for a Damon," she'd said.

He'd just shrugged. "Being with Natalie makes it easy."

Emily had stared at him for a time. "You really love her."

"Of course I love her. Why else would I marry her?"

"Oh... People marry for many reasons."

"No doubt. So, do I pass?" Not that he'd really given a damn, but the old woman was important to Natalie.

"Did her cat urinate on you?"

What the...? "No. He likes me, and the feeling's mutual."

Emily had given him a slight nod. "Then I suppose you'll do."

Tomorrow was the wedding day. And then Natalie would officially be his. Lounging on the couch with the love of his life, Alex counted his blessings, pledging to love and cherish her forever.

Thank You

Thank you for reading *Vengeful in Love*. I hope you enjoyed it!

Would you like to know when my next book is available? You can sign up for my mailing list at www.nadialee.net and be the first to know.

Reviews help other readers find books. If you can take a moment to review this book, I'd really appreciate it!

You've just read the first book in the [Hearts on the Line](#) series. The other books in the series are [Reunited in Love](#) (Kerri Wilson & Ethan Lloyd; available now), [Redemption in Love](#) (Amandine & Gavin Lloyd; available now), [Sweet in Love](#) (Brooke de Lorenzo & Pete Monroe; out early 2014) and [Forever in Love](#) (Catherine Fairchild & Blaine Davis; out 2014).

I love to hear from readers. Feel free to write me at nadia@nadialee.net or follow me on Twitter [@nadialee](#), or like my Facebook page at www.facebook.com/nadialeewrites. Say hello and let me know which one of my characters is your favorite or what you want to see next or anything else you want to talk about! I personally read all my emails, Tweets and Facebook comments.

What's Next

Coming up next in the Hearts on the Line series is Kerri Wilson and Ethan Lloyd.

Reunited in Love

A temporary reunion...

Newly jobless and adrift, former investment banker Kerri Wilson travels to Virginia to see her best friend and regroup, only to run into billionaire playboy Ethan Lloyd. It's been years since she's snuck out of his bed after the most amazing sex of her life, and he's so not her type—she likes them tall, dark and *manageable*. But he's too hot to resist, and she succumbs to another sizzling, no-strings-attached (or so she thinks) night.

Unwilling to let her go this time, Ethan makes a simple proposition: a job, a place to stay, and an exclusive affair that will end when either of them finds someone else. But with her dark, painful past catching up to her, Kerri may have to bolt again—even though her heart is telling her to stay. And Ethan's not giving her up without fighting to make their “temporary” arrangement something far more permanent...

Chapter One

KERRI WILSON MADE her way out of the international terminal at Dulles International Airport after going through immigration and customs. The final leg of her flight was taking off in an hour, and she couldn't spot the two irritating men who had been tailing her since Hong Kong. She smiled to herself, the tightness around her shoulders easing. She'd never had any intention of getting on that Texas-bound plane.

She wasn't going home.

She touched the black wig lightly, making sure it was still on straight. Its short and blunt Cleopatra hairstyle changed her appearance completely. Certainly it looked nothing like her usual shoulder-length copper waves. That, combined with a change into atypically casual clothes and shoes that added a few inches to her height, made her look too different for anyone to recognize her at a glance.

She briefly regretted having to abandon her rolling carry-on in the ladies' room, but it was a small sacrifice to pay for anonymous independence. And now she was free again to do as she wished.

A big crowd was gathered on the other side of the black security line. A brunette in her early thirties rushed past Kerri to a group of three—one man and two little boys. The latter wrapped their plump arms around her, while the man took her bag and kissed her in greeting.

Time stood still for a moment, and Kerri stared. The scene reminded her of what her family had lost because of her, and the time away hadn't done a thing to dim the memory.

The brunette and her family started walking off. Drawing in a breath, Kerri tore her gaze from their retreating backs. Less than an hour back on U.S. soil, and she had to see that.

Oh well. Shaking her head, she scanned the waiting crowd for her best friend Natalie Hall...no, it was Natalie Damon now. She'd recently married one of the richest and most successful businessmen in America. Kerri had wanted to cab it from the airport, but Natalie had insisted.

I'm not letting my BFF take a taxi. Stay put for a pickup. Or else!

A frown creased Kerri's forehead as she scanned the area. She couldn't spot Natalie's familiar Asian face with its quick smile and warm dark eyes.

Maybe Natalie had needed to leave. The flight was more than an hour late. A newly-wedded woman probably had better things to do—like seducing her husband—than waiting for a friend's super-late plane to land.

Kerri looked around some more and noticed a sign with her name scrawled on it in block letters. She raised her eyes to the man holding it and blinked. He had his head angled away, but a vague sense of familiarity tugged at her as heat curled in her belly. The way his charcoal-gray Savile Row suit hung on his frame said not only did he work out, but the body underneath didn't have an ounce of excess fat. Her lips parted slightly as she tried to draw in more air to clear her suddenly foggy head.

Where had she seen him before?

His ensemble—the suit, discreet watch, platinum ring on his right middle finger and gleaming shoes—probably cost more than what most limo drivers made in a year.

No way he's my chauffeur.

Was this Natalie's idea of a joke...or help?

Kerri had everything except...well, a job, a home and a man. The first two were recent phenomena that hadn't made the gossip circuit yet—so she still had time to rectify them before word got around—but the last one was common knowledge among her friends and acquaintances. She wouldn't put it past Natalie to fix it. Fix her.

After all, Natalie was a woman in love. Who believed in the power of love.

Well, she'd have to do better if she wanted to recruit Kerri into the cult. She believed in many things, but love wasn't one of them. Actually, that wasn't technically true. She did believe in love. Just didn't think it was for her.

Dragging her lone suitcase, she approached the supposed chauffeur. Whatever he'd done to deserve this, it was time to end his misery. She wanted to check in and unpack her stuff for the week she was planning to

stay in Virginia. Then she could figure out her next step.

“Hi.” Despite her five-foot-nine height plus stiletto sandals, she had to tilt her chin upward to address him directly. “I’m Kerri Wilson.”

He held up a long, strong finger without turning to face her. It had a small white scar running diagonally down the fleshy pad. “Gotta go. We’ll finish this later,” he said.

The voice was low and matter-of-fact. But it intensified the sense of familiarity she’d felt earlier and made her toes curl. Good lord. He could’ve said, “I like eggs,” and her toes would still have scrunched up like shrimp tails.

For god’s sake, Kerri, get a grip!

In the last seven years, she’d never sighed over a man, lusted after one or wanted one with any degree of intensity. They’d been a nice addition to her life when she could spare the time and energy necessary to manage a romantic relationship in addition to the dozens of responsibilities on her plate. The result? Exactly three boyfriends since college.

Of course, she no longer had the job that had kept her so busy. Serendipity?

He turned around and the world seemed to go into slow motion. She noticed a small black earpiece, eyelashes whose length made her slightly jealous...and then a face that could cause a riot in a nunnery. All the air rushed out of her lungs as she stared at the blue eyes that belonged to Ethan, the only man who’d made her succumb to a white-hot passion one foolish night. The only man who’d succeeded in tempting her to be irresponsible.

And what a night she’d had in his arms.

The eyes narrowed as he studied her. The full intensity of his gaze prickled her skin. She had the oddest feeling that he was trying to see through her dove gray baby tee and short denim skirt. It wasn’t anything as clichéd as trying to strip her with his eyes. That she could handle. He was trying to see beneath her skin.

Sweat slickened her palms. She felt terribly exposed, especially without her power suit, but she couldn’t seem to erect a barrier fast enough to keep herself insulated.

Men never looked at her like this, like they wanted to see her soul.

Why would he want to do that? It had just been one night. And he’d known the terms of the deal.

She had to be imagining things. Most likely she was just tired from the

trans-Pacific flight. He probably didn't even remember her. Men like Ethan had harems full of willing women at their disposal.

"Jacqueline?" he whispered.

So much for him not remembering their night toge—

"No, wait." He glanced down at the sign he was holding. "You said Kerri Wilson."

She nodded, unable to speak. He'd become even more arresting since their one-night stand seven years ago. His voice had deepened, age and experience adding a dark timber to his tone; his body was wider, thicker through the shoulders, more powerful. Her body, meanwhile, was busy recalling every deliciously wicked thing he'd done. The flesh between her legs tightened, reminding her how long it'd been since she'd had any.

"Which one's the real name?" he asked.

"Both," she said faintly. "Jacqueline's my middle name." She'd gone by a different name in college to distance herself from her family, just in case they'd cared enough to...what? Come visit? Check up on her?

Yeah, right.

After graduation, she'd gone back to Kerri. It didn't matter what she called herself. Never had.

He shook his head. "No wonder."

"No wonder what?"

"Nothing." His tone said anything but that, but the firm line of his mouth indicated the topic was closed.

"You're still Ethan, I presume?"

"Correct. I don't usually give out my middle name to people I'm about to sleep with."

An awkward silence stretched. Her heartbeat skittered as more people moved past them. She didn't want to dredge up the past.

Well, it didn't matter what Ethan did with people he was about to sleep with. She'd never owed him anything, including her real name. She swallowed and forced a light tone. "Shall we?"

"Of course." He glanced at her suitcase. "Is that all?"

"I had my other bags Fed Ex'd to my hotel." She'd gotten one of the analysts to do the honors of sending her *real* bags directly to Virginia under a managing director's name. Then at Hong Kong International Airport she'd checked two large empty suitcases, and as soon as US customs cleared them in Dulles she'd handed them to the airline luggage workers and hit the ladies'

room to change. The private investigators would report everything to her family in great detail. It was important they didn't know what she was up to—that she was leaving Hong Kong for good.

Ethan nodded. “May I?”

He put his hand over hers on the smooth luggage handle. The instant of skin-to-skin contact felt shockingly good. Precisely because of this, she pulled away as if scalded.

He tossed the sign into the nearest trash can and led her into the parking structure, one hand dragging her bag and the other on her elbow, the contact courteous yet somehow more than that. He moved with confidence and an animal grace that said he was utterly comfortable in his body. This close, she could smell mouth-watering warm dark spice and male flesh. She wanted to lean into him, just melt against his towering height and strength. The thought sent a fissure of shock through her. This wasn't like her.

On the other hand, Ethan wasn't like any of the other men she'd dealt with.

Men didn't crowd her like this. When they came to her, it was because they needed something impersonal, such as an opinion on a merger or help with a spreadsheet. Even the ones she'd dated wouldn't have taken her arm after she'd withdrawn a hand, not without an encouraging signal from her first, which she hadn't always given. Relationships, when she had them, required careful planning and management.

Ethan had triggered her finely honed radar for unsuitable men. He would not only demand at least fifty percent input on both the planning and management, but expect more than what she was comfortable giving. As tempting as he was, those two things disqualified him from the pool of potential dating candidates, which was why she'd snuck out the morning after their one-night stand.

A subsequent encounter with a friend of his had further confirmed she'd made the right choice.

He wants you. Come on, Jacqueline. You work your ass off for shitty pay. He's fucking loaded. Why not give him a call and see where things go?

Had either of them thought so poorly of her? That she'd date a man so she could live the easy life?

Working every second of her free time to pay for her college education hadn't meant she was in need of a sugar daddy. If she'd wanted easy money, she would've run to her family. They redefined the term *loaded*.

Kerri shook off the memory. No point in letting it bother her. If Natalie thought Ethan was good enough to pick her up, then everything was cool. Natalie was an excellent judge of character. She'd probably sent Ethan for his mad driving skills.

They reached a shiny black BMW with temporary tags and he opened the door for her, then picked up her suitcase like it was loaded with helium and put it in the trunk. So. All that new muscle wasn't just for show.

She settled into the soft seat. Her fingertips tingled as they brushed over the smooth, luxurious leather. His car didn't have any personal clutter, not even a single receipt. But then it had that new car smell. He probably just hadn't had a chance to put his mark on it yet.

He got in, closing the door with a solid *thunk*, and turned the engine on. A powerful purr vibrated through her skirt.

The pleasant, warmly slick feeling between her legs must be from that, not from Mr. Gorgeous sitting next to her. No, not quite sitting, but not slumping either. She couldn't come up with an exact term for the posture, but he looked sort of boneless and utterly relaxed in his seat.

"You're at the Marriott, right?" he asked, maneuvering his car out of the parking garage. His large hands hooked casually around the steering wheel.

"Yeah, the one not too far from Natalie's." She checked her phone and rattled off the address. "Guess she told you?"

He nodded.

"So, what are you?" She wanted to understand the mystery that was Ethan. If she knew, maybe she wouldn't respond to him so strongly. It had to be the process of solving a puzzle that was intriguing her, not the puzzle itself.

He glanced over. She almost tugged on the hem of her skirt. Wearing the feminine clothing had seemed to make perfect sense earlier, when her primary objective was to lose the PIs her family had sicced on her. They'd never seen her in anything but power suits—with trousers, of course.

She hated how the skirt left her legs three-quarters bare and the baby tee clung to her torso. She couldn't have felt more exposed if she'd been sitting next to Ethan in her underwear.

His lips twitched in a suppressed smile as though he knew how much his presence unbalanced her. "What am I? I'm the guy who's picking you up from the airport."

"You're not a driver," she said, deciding to focus on anything but her

discomfiture. The drive would end soon enough, then she could change into something that would shield her better. “You’re also not Natalie’s friend because I would’ve heard about you. So I’ll ask again: what are you?”

He chuckled. “I was the best man at her wedding.”

Which probably made him the groom’s best friend. Since Natalie’s husband, Alex Damon, was one of the richest men in the world, Ethan must also be a member of the same upper echelon. Maybe “fucking loaded” hadn’t been an exaggeration. “Have the best man’s duties expanded to include picking up the bride’s friends from the airport weeks after the ceremony?”

“I owed her one.” His tone said the topic was finished. “And you?”

“I don’t owe her anything.”

He laughed. It was still the warm and rich sound she remembered. A dangerously seductive one too. It was part of the reason she’d succumbed to his charm.

“So what did you owe her?” she asked.

His eyes narrowed slightly, though the corners of his lips quirked. “I almost cost her her husband.”

“Wow.” This was totally unexpected. “Does Alex play for both teams?”

“Ah, no. It was a business thing. I told Alex she was involved in some corporate espionage, which he didn’t take kindly. We were certain—well, I was certain—that she was working for the enemy.”

Kerri gasped. “That’s ridiculous.”

He shrugged. “A monumental screw-up on my part, and I don’t screw up often.”

“Let me guess. She forgave you for everything until she decided she wanted you to do something for her.”

“Something like that.” He made a quick left turn. “Do you still play the violin?” he asked suddenly.

“No, I quit years ago. No time once I got into investment banking.”

“Natalie mentioned something about that. VP, right?”

“Actually...” She sighed. Well, she’d have to admit her unemployed status sooner or later. “I’m a bum at the moment. Between jobs.”

“A bum?” He gave her a quick once-over, head to toes. “I’m sure you could find work if you wanted.”

Her face warmed, and whatever thoughts she’d held in her mind evaporated. She couldn’t believe she was acting like a silly teenager with the captain of the football team. She was twenty-eight, far too old and sensible

for these kinds of feelings. If anybody other than Ethan had made the comment, she might have rolled her eyes or arched an eyebrow in silent reprimand.

But everything out of Ethan's mouth sounded like bedroom talk. Maybe it wasn't the words but the way he spoke, the way he looked at her, the way his voice hit her senses like the finest whiskey.

Damn, she needed to be more careful. It wasn't just the girly clothing making her feel vulnerable and susceptible. A ski suit wouldn't have negated the effect he had on her.

"Virginia isn't the first choice destination for most bums," he mused. "California beaches tend to be higher on the list."

"A beach bum?" She forced a light tone. Regardless of the effect he had on her, this was just banter. "Too bad I don't swim or surf."

"Seriously? You never learned?"

"Never had the chance." Not for the lack of desire. But what she wanted hadn't always been a priority for her family. Still wasn't. Everyone had more important issues to deal with than her.

Before he could probe, she said, "It sort of sucks, you know." She leaned against the door, trying to put some distance between herself and Ethan. The BMW was supposed to be spacious, but not with him inside. The cool glass felt refreshing against her heated skin. "If I'd been free just a little sooner, I could've been Natalie's maid of honor. You know, helped her plan the wedding of the century and everything."

No, you would've found an excuse to avoid her wedding at all costs since a few Sterlings were invited.

In fact, Barron himself had been invited, and there was no way she was going anywhere near her grandfather. Nobody knew she was Barron's only grandchild, and for good reason—she'd worked damn hard to keep it that way.

Ethan laughed. "She didn't have one. Didn't need one. She had a platoon of professionals working on every detail. It was what Alex wanted."

"What was the rush? She wasn't going anywhere."

"Probably wanted to make sure she was his."

"She's been his ever since they got engaged. Maybe even before." Kerri had heard everything her friend felt comfortable sharing about her romance with her billionaire boss. If he hadn't made things right at the end, Kerri might have flown out—job or no—and kicked his ass herself.

“Well, you know. Engagement isn’t the same, is it? Lacks the official tie, the legal bind.”

“Marriage isn’t as permanent as it used to be,” she pointed out, almost unable to help it since so many of her friends and coworkers had gone through separations and divorces. She sincerely hoped Natalie would never have a reason to even consider one. “Did you spend time in England or something? Sometimes you sound almost British.”

“I say, jolly good ear,” he said, hamming it up a little. “Yeah, I was there for a while on business. Speaking of which, how long are you going to be in the States?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a week?”

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s all?”

“Maybe longer,” she said. “I haven’t decided what to do yet, but I’m probably not returning to Asia for a while.”

“If you’re tired of Hong Kong, Tokyo’s not too bad.”

She flashed him a quick smile. “I don’t speak the language, and I’m not experienced enough to warrant a full-time interpreter.”

Ethan slowed down as they approached an intersection. “I don’t know about that. Natalie said you’re very good at your job.”

“Did she now?” Natalie didn’t know the full truth behind Kerri’s workaholic tendencies. Everyone thought she worked non-stop out of dedication to her career, when in fact she kept herself busy so she wouldn’t have time to think. “Nice of her to say so, but seriously, I’m not that special. I work hard, but then so does everyone else.”

The steering wheel glided under his palms as he released it after the turn. A sudden envy of the tightly stitched leather stole her breath away. She’d like to feel those strong hands on her as he reverently ran them over her back and legs. And a few other places.

She concentrated on breathing. It didn’t matter what she wanted. The only thing he’d found notable enough to comment on from their long-ago one-night stand was her name—Jacqueline.

But then, women throwing themselves at him and one-night stands were probably the norm for someone like Ethan.

He pulled into a parking lot in front of the hotel and handed the keys to a uniformed valet. Ethan climbed out, and the interior of the car seemed to expand. She let out a breath she hadn’t known she’d been holding.

“Feeling okay?” he said, opening her door for her. “You look a little

flushed.”

Oh god. “I’m fine. Just tired from the flight.” She got out of the car.

The bellhop took her lone bag, and Ethan escorted her to the lobby. His large hand resting at the small of her back seemed to sear her, and the heat streaked through her until her nipples pebbled and wetness pooled between her thighs. Legs clenched, she checked in. The desk clerk smiled and said, “You’ve been upgraded to our junior suite. We put your bags there this morning. Four, correct?”

“Yup.”

“Is Mr. Daniel Johnson arriving later today?”

She felt the curious stare from Ethan at her back. “No. There’s been a schedule change, and he won’t be able to come.”

“I’ll make a note of that.” She handed Kerri the room keys. “Enjoy your stay, Ms. Wilson.”

Kerri frowned as she walked toward the elevators. She couldn’t imagine why the hotel would upgrade her. She’d booked the cheapest room she could find.

“Natalie arranged for the upgrade.”

Startled, she looked up at Ethan. It was uncanny how he seemed to read her.

“So who’s this ‘Mr. Daniel Johnson?’”

“A managing director from my office,” she said.

“Do you often share a room on business?”

She snorted. “No. Besides, Dan’s got about as much interest in women as I do in astrophysics.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“None,” she clarified.

“Well, I didn’t want to assume. You could be a closet Stephen Hawking or something.”

“Ha. I can barely remember Newton’s Three Laws. Anyway, I’m sure you’re busy. Thanks for taking the time to come get me.”

“Oh no. I’m supposed to make sure you’re settled in.”

“It’s really not necessary.”

“Actually, it really is.”

Kerri stopped arguing. The determined look in his eyes said he’d do as he pleased. He’d leave faster if she just went along for the moment.

The elevator ride to the suite seemed interminable. His subtle cologne

was stronger in the close quarters, and her skin prickled with hypersensitivity. She could feel his gaze on her, speculative with unfathomable intent. She licked her lips as the elevator opened with a chime.

What did Ethan want? Surely he didn't think he really needed to help her find her suite. It wasn't like she'd get lost.

She turned around to face him in front of her room. "Again, thank you, Ethan."

"My pleasure. Just so you know, Natalie's been delayed in Italy, so she won't be back until the day after tomorrow." He pulled out a business card and jotted something on the back. "My cell, in case you need anything. And I'm leaving the BMW for you. Impossible to get around here without a car."

"I can just get a ren—"

He kissed her. Nothing passionate, nothing demanding. He didn't even try to press his tongue past her lips. It was just a peck, but somehow it was enough to make her tremble with unfulfilled longing.

Her knees weakened. She leaned against the door. What was it about this man that made her lose all her common sense and control?

"See you in a bit, Kerri." He walked away with a careless wave. "I'll pick you up for dinner later in the evening. Say seven?"

It wasn't even a question from the way he spoke. He acted as though she'd acquiesced.

And from the way half-dread, half-anticipation flooded her, she knew she had.

* * *

Ethan applied more pressure on the gas, driving a bit faster than usual. The Aston Martin sped away from the hotel.

Despite his pleasure at this unexpected second chance with a woman he'd thought he'd never see again, a small bit of disappointment permeated his mood. Jacqueline Wilson had never existed. No. It was Kerri Wilson. No wonder he hadn't been able to find her. But why had she lied about her name?

He remembered her, the violinist from a quartet at a friend's baby christening party. Her hair had been strawberry blonde then, her eyes full of an odd envy and sorrow as she'd looked at the infant boy surrounded by happy attendees.

And she'd slept with him—her body incredibly willing and responsive—then walked out in the middle of the night while he slumbered in post-coital bliss. Just disappeared, like fog before the sun.

His instincts had screamed at him to go after her, but circumstances had conspired against him. There was a month-long business trip, scheduled almost a year in advance, unbreakable...but she wasn't going anywhere, he'd reassured himself. He'd even given her his number via a friend, certain she'd contact him once she'd had a chance to think things through.

"She'll call you back," his friend had said, rather smugly, a few days later over the phone. "I made sure."

"How'd you manage that?"

"Told her you were loaded, of course. The girl works like crazy. Her coworkers say she doesn't ever go out, always scrimping for money. Sounds like she could use a sugar daddy."

Ethan had cringed. If she called, he'd always wonder if it was for the possibility of landing a rich boyfriend. If she didn't... Maybe his friend's insinuation had insulted her. If he'd been in her shoes, he would've been furious.

Either way, he was screwed.

To his mingled disappointment and relief, she hadn't called.

If his old college buddy Frank hadn't been such an idiot, would things have been different?

When he'd returned from his trip and tried to look her up, she'd disappeared. Graduated from college and left town—no forwarding address, no number, no email. And no one knew where she'd gone. What could've evolved into a relationship became just a one-night stand, and the sense of loss was surprisingly sharp. Ethan had hated the feeling of powerlessness, but he'd accepted it as a lost cause and never expected to see her again.

No, that wasn't entirely true. He had accepted the situation partly because he was afraid of repeating the mistake he'd made with Lisa. That had cost him a great deal and brought an enormous amount of pain and trouble to his family. It would have been selfish of him to move heaven and earth to find a woman who could be another Lisa.

"Don't get involved with anyone who seems even remotely broken. You can't fix them, and they don't want to be fixed," his brother Gavin had said.

Ethan's mouth twisted at the irony of having Jacq—*Kerri*—walk up to him at the airport after all this time.

Now she sported a chic black bob, and her gaze no longer held any shadows. Maybe the years had been good to her. Time healing all wounds and stuff.

Or maybe she'd just gotten better at hiding her pain.

He'd made a snap decision to not talk about the past. What had happened was over and done with. Nothing could change that, and there was no point in wondering about what-ifs.

What they had was the present, and Kerri was too dangerous for his equilibrium. Kerri with her soul-sucking eyes, sassy tone and a body that deserved to be admired and worshiped in every way. And there was the whole Natalie thing. He'd already messed up with Natalie once, in a fairly big way, and didn't want to complicate things by going after her best friend. That should make Kerri off-limits.

His fingers drummed the steering wheel.

Should.

But he couldn't ignore the undeniable fascination he felt. He hadn't been able to forget her after all these years. The impact she had on him was just as powerful as it had been at their first meeting. His body still throbbed when she was near, and her feminine scent lingered in his mind.

He wanted to start over with Kerri, see how far their attraction would take them. And this time she wouldn't be able to just walk away on a whim.

* * *

Want to read the rest? *Reunited in Love* will be coming to major ebook stores in January 2014. Sign up for my mailing list at www.nadialeee.net to be notified when it's available.

Titles by Nadia Lee

The Hearts on the Line Series

Book 1: [*Vengeful in Love*](#) (Natalie Hall & Alex Damon)

Book 2: [*Reunited in Love*](#) (Kerri Wilson & Ethan Lloyd)

Book 3: [*Redemption in Love*](#) (Amandine Monroe Lloyd & Gavin Lloyd)

The Ever After Series

Book 1: [*A Happily Ever After of Her Own*](#) (A retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*)

Book 2: [*One Kiss*](#) (A retelling of *The Frog Prince*)

[*Ever After Bundle: Books 1 & 2*](#)

Other Titles

[*Ashwyn: Cinderella Retold with an Erotic Twist*](#)

[*The Last Slayer*](#)

[*Destiny Entwined*](#)

[*How to Format Your Manuscript for Kindle and Nook*](#)

Acknowledgments

Vengeful in Love couldn't have been written and published without the help of the following amazing people:

My amazing and brilliant husband, whose capacity for beta reading, cheering me on and taking over the housework knows no bounds.

Jennifer Haymore who believed in the story, and Linda Ingmanson who did the most wonderful job with editing.

Moriah Jovan for her generous advice.

May Khaw for keeping me sane.

Awesome reviewers who championed the book when it was released as *Carnal Secrets*.

Thank you.

About Nadia Lee

Bilingual former management consultant Nadia Lee has lived in four different countries and enjoyed many adventures and excellent food around the globe. In the last eight years, she has kissed stingrays, got bitten by a shark, ridden an elephant and petted tigers.

She shares an apartment overlooking a river and palm trees in Japan with her husband and son. When she's not reading or writing, she can be found digging through old Asian historical texts or planning another trip.

To learn more about Nadia and her projects, please visit nadialee.net. To receive updates about upcoming works from Nadia, please visit www.nadialee.net to subscribe to her newsletter.