



Scandal Never Sleeps (The Perfect Gentlemen)

By Shayla Black, Lexi Blake

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From the *New York Times* bestselling authors of the Masters of Ménage series . . .

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Maddox Crawford's sudden death sends Gabriel Bond reeling. Not only is he burying his best friend, he's cleaning up Mad's messes, including his troubled company. Grieving and restless, Gabe escapes his worries in the arms of a beautiful stranger. But his mind-blowing one-night stand is about to come back to haunt him . . .

Mad groomed Everly Parker to be a rising star in the executive world. Now that he's gone, she's sure her job will be the next thing she mourns, especially after she ends up accidentally sleeping with her new boss. If only their night together hadn't been so incendiary—or Gabe like a fantasy come true . . .

As Gabe and Everly struggle to control the heated tension between them, they discover evidence that Mad's death was no accident. Now they must bank their smoldering passions to hunt down a murderer—because Mad had secrets that someone was willing to kill for, and Gabe or Everly could be the next target . . .

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Editorial Review

Review

“Shayla Black and Lexi Blake never fail to heat up the page, and the Perfect Gentlemen series is no exception. Hot and edgy and laced with danger, the stories in the Perfect Gentlemen series are just that---perfect.”—J. Kenner, *New York Times* and international bestselling author of the Stark series

“While there are certainly incendiary sex scenes at the top of this series opener, the strength is in the underlying murder and political mystery. The teens who were supposed to be the “Perfect Gentlemen of Creighton Academy” are now an appealing group of ultra-successful, powerful men who readers will absolutely adore.” —*RT Book Reviews*

Praise for the Masters of Ménage novels by Shayla Black and Lexi Blake

“Smoking hot! Blake and Black know just when to turn up the burner to scorching.”—*Under the Covers Book Blog*

“Well done . . . full of spicy sex, and a quick read.”—*Smart Bitches, Trashy Books*

“Steamy, poignant, and captivating . . . A funny, touching, lively story that will capture the reader from page one and have them wishing for more when it ends.”—*Guilty Pleasures Book Reviews*

“Very well written. With just the right amount of love, sex, danger, and adventure . . . A fun, sexy, exciting, hot read.”—*Girly Girl Book Reviews*

About the Author

Shayla Black is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of over 30 sizzling contemporary, erotic, paranormal, and historical romances, including the Wicked Lovers series (*His to Take*, *Theirs to Cherish*, and *Ours to Love*). She lives in Texas with her husband, munchkin, and one very spoiled cat.

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author **Lexi Blake** lives in North Texas with her husband, three kids, and the laziest rescue dog in the world. She is the author of the Masters and Mercenaries series, including *You Only Love Twice*, *Cherished*, and *A View to a Thrill*.

Together, Black and Blake pen the *New York Times* bestselling Masters of Ménage novels, including *Their Virgin Mistress*, *Their Virgin Secretary* and *Their Virgin Hostage*.

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PROLOGUE

Creighton Academy

22 years ago

Gabriel Bond really wanted to murder his best friend. He even knew how he'd do it—by beating Maddox to death with that damn camcorder.

“Do you understand the trouble you’ve caused, Mr. Bond?” The very fussy school counselor Mr. Ogilvie sat back, his bushy gray brows rising over his eyes like judgmental twin caterpillars.

Gabe had always loathed his last name since no one at the exalted Creighton Academy would call him anything but “Mr. Bond.” It made him sound like some kind of stupid secret agent. Currently, they'd come to the point in the James Bond film when the floor opened and dropped him into a vat of man-eating sharks while the bad guy monologued. Gabe was fairly certain he would rather swim into the Great White's mouth and allow himself to be eaten alive so he didn't have to hear the horror about to transpire.

He should have known nothing good would come from screwing a member of the rival debate team. Especially when it hadn't been a student of the all-girls Murray Heights Academy for Young Women, but their faculty sponsor. Damn, she'd looked maybe twenty, and in exceptional shape. She'd had the most gorgeous pair of breasts he'd ever seen in his young life.

Roman Calder stepped up beside him. “I don't think my client should answer any questions.”

Sometimes Roman took his position as the president of the Creighton chapter of the Future Lawyers of America way too seriously.

“Mr. Calder, you're in trouble, too. All of you boys are. This is a serious offense. While Mr. Bond has shamed our academy, the rest of you broke the rules as well. What did you think you were doing, sneaking off to a bar? What will your parents think?”

His father would likely high five him and breathe a sigh of relief because he now had confirmation that his only son was neither asexual nor gay. His mother would roll her eyes and take another drink from her ever present “coffee” mug that smelled suspiciously like vodka. Only his younger sister would worry.

This entire incident was Mad's fault. Mad the instigator. Mad, the dude who'd taped his best friend's one-night stand without bothering to ask first. Fucker. Gabe felt his face flush slightly, but he'd learned enough about the world to know when to bluster his way through.

Yeah, Mad had taught him that, too.

“Mr. Ogilvie, I don't understand why my friends are here. Maybe they were out after curfew, but it's no secret that nearly every student is from time to time.” Another thing Gabe had learned was when to throw himself on his sword. God, he was going to miss his friends. If his stupid dick got him expelled, he had no illusions about what would happen. His parents would ship him to another prep school, and he would have to start all over. “Please, if you'll let them off the hook, I'll admit to everything.”

“Martyr,” Mad coughed like the idiotic douche he could be.

Gabe very slowly lifted his hand behind his back and shot his bestie the middle finger.

Connor Sparks stepped up. “No, Gabe. We went into this together. We go down together.” He frowned. “I wish I could have played against Exeter. It's going to be hard to miss out on the league championship.”

Daxton Spencer shook his head, following Connor's lead. “Yeah, I think the whole school will be deeply disappointed. Without our captain, we're sure to lose.”

Smart bastards. Gabe repressed a smile and couldn't help but feel a spark of hope. Creighton took lacrosse and the league championship very seriously. It brought money and prestige to a school that valued both greatly.

The counselor, who in Gabe's opinion had always had it out for them, leaned forward. "If you think for one second that sports will save you from the punishment you've earned, you're wrong. This establishment has rules, and I follow them. I've seen the video evidence. It's disgusting. Perverse. What is wrong with you boys?"

Dax and Connor looked around, then at one another, and shrugged.

Mad grinned as if silently admitting their list of faults was long and distinguished.

"You think this is funny? Expulsion is the only acceptable outcome for this mess. We raise *gentlemen* at this school, and you six have proven you're anything but. And you, Mr. Hayes . . ." Ogilvie turned to Zachary Hayes, the quietest of the six.

Their contemplative buddy never made a move without thinking through the outcomes and consequences first. Zack frowned.

Gabe felt his stomach drop. God, he was getting Zack kicked out. Zack, the freaking class president and valedictorian. The one with the brightest future.

"I'm surprised at you," the counselor continued. "I knew you would find nothing but trouble when you fell in with this crowd. I believe I warned you."

All eyes turned back to Zack. With dark hair and winter blue eyes, Zack often seemed ready to permanently retreat inward. He'd been at Creighton for two months before Gabe had really talked to him. Mad had been the one to bring the quiet kid into their group. Gabe had soon realized that Zack was smart and funny . . . and could sometimes figure a way out of a bind. For five years, it had been the six of them against the world. They shouldn't have fit. Connor and Dax had naturally become pals because they were both athletes. Roman and Zack were the obviously ambitious types. And somehow he'd been the nerd taken under the wing of the most obnoxious, devious-minded rich boy at school, Maddox Crawford.

They felt like brothers, and he couldn't be the one who fucked up everything. In a year, they would graduate and they had plans to attend Yale together. They'd coached Connor through trig and made sure he'd gotten an A so they wouldn't be separated in the future. One for all and all for one, and all that shit.

Maybe his dream was about to be dashed, but he wasn't going to screw over his friends. They had a pact.

"It's my fault. I blackmailed them into sneaking out with me." He was willing to tell any lie that might work.

"Dude, that was weak." Dax rolled his eyes. "Like anyone would believe that. Look, Mr. Ogilvie, you know how the press is, willing to say anything salacious about us rich boys to make a buck. Do you really want *People* magazine running an article that exaggerates about Creighton's super entitled boys running wild and taking women who have barely given their dubious consent to bed?"

Gabe gaped at his friend. *What the hell?* "Her consent wasn't dubious, asshole."

"The press won't care," Roman pointed out, then turned to the counselor. "That scandal won't look good for the school, either."

"I don't make my decisions based on the press, only the rules of this school. And I fully intend to talk to my counterpart at Murray Heights this afternoon. Miss Jones will be dismissed by the end of the day. I have no doubt they will call the proper authorities as well. No school worth a whit wants a sex offender working on campus."

Shit. He'd landed a nice, remarkably limber young lady in a heap of trouble. Hell, *he'd* come on to *her*. She'd simply been trying to help a guy have fun. Why should her good deed be punished?

Gabe raked a hand through his hair. His day sucked. He needed to hang it up and become the loner he'd been before Mad had taken him in and shown him how to stand up for himself. "Please don't do that."

"He can't for two reasons: First, the age of consent in the state of New York is seventeen, so engaging in sexual relations with Miss Jones wasn't illegal, and she is, therefore, not a sex offender. Second, I don't recall that sexual intercourse with another consenting adult is an offense one can be expelled for. If that's the case, Ogilvie would have to expel most of the senior class, especially if they've met Augustine Spencer."

"Hey! That's my sister you're talking about," Dax objected.

"What? She's a giver. I mean that in the nicest possible way," Roman assured. "But back to the point. Ogilvie could probably have Ms. Jones fired . . . but he has no proof the incident ever occurred."

"Of course I have proof. I saw the tape."

Roman turned with the smooth expertise of a kid who'd spent his share of time in mock trials and won them all. "Mr. Bond, did you sign a release or in any way give Mr. Crawford permission to tape you in coitus with the lovely Miss Jones?"

He shot a nasty look Mad's way. "No. Hell no, and don't be stupid. If I had known, I would have clocked the fucker." Ogilvie's bushy brows slashed down in a judgmental scowl, and Gabe remembered where he was. "I mean, I was entirely unaware and would have protested vociferously had I realized the encounter was being taped."

Gabe *had* decked him afterward. He'd broken Mad's nose, but Mad just seemed to view it as one more story he could tell over beers someday. He'd shrugged it away, like he did everything else—with the negligent grace of a man who knew there was a billion dollar trust fund waiting for him at the end of the yellow brick road of prep school.

"I might have forgotten to ask." Mad smiled benignly. "You know art doesn't apologize."

And neither did Mad.

Roman slapped his hands together in jubilation. "I believe we'll discover that Miss Jones was unaware as well. In this state, no recordings, video or audio, may be made or used as evidence in a civil trial without the informed consent of one of the participants. They can fire her for moral turpitude, but they need that tape to hold up in a court of law. Since there was no consent to tape the encounter and it happened out of the public eye, that tape won't hold up and Murray Heights lawyers will likely advise the administrators not to open the school to a lawsuit they can't win. I'm afraid you don't have a tape."

Ogilvie's face had turned a florid shade. "Listen here, you little shit, this isn't some court case. I don't need permission. You're all being expelled and there's not a damn thing you can do about it. This school turns out not simply gentlemen, but *perfect* gentlemen. Do you know how long I've wanted to get rid of you, Maddox

Crawford? I've anticipated this day, longed for it, since the moment you walked through those doors, you overindulged bastard. I'm taking you down—and sending your friends with you just to make you miserable.”

“Is this because I pulled that prank on your car your first year here? You need to get over that.” Mad rolled his eyes.

Of course this was happening because Mad had done something stupid.

What the hell was Gabe going to do without them? He couldn't fathom it. He even hated summer breaks. He would go to his parents' place in the Hamptons and sit like a piece of furniture because he didn't fit in there. The only part of going home he enjoyed was seeing his little sister, Sara. Besides her, he'd only ever fit with these five guys. One way or another, they'd all been on the outside. Gabe studied too much. Zack was an introvert. Roman spent much of his time with his head in a law text. Dax's father was some bigwig in the navy and his mother was a New Orleans socialite. Connor was a scholarship kid with nothing in his pockets. And to most, Mad was an asswipe . . . though a strangely likeable one. Gabe had never been more attached to other people in his life and he had zero idea how he would survive without them.

They all stopped, looking at each other as though trying to process the fact that their prep school cocoon was over.

Ogilvie took a long breath. “Good. Now you understand how the world works, boys. When you fall in with a bad crowd, you get taken down with them. You may all go and pack. I'll be speaking to your parents this afternoon. And good riddance to you, Crawford.”

For once, Mad didn't have a pithy comeback. He'd gone stony, his eyes blank.

How was this happening? They weren't bad guys. They looked after each other. They'd only wanted a drink, and Emily Jones had been so damn pretty, Gabe hadn't thought twice.

Gabe was about to turn around and walk out when Zack finally spoke, his voice low and filled with an authority none of them had ever heard before.

“I know how the world works, Mr. Ogilvie.” Zack stood and straightened his tie. “Do you know about the Brighton Endowment?”

The counselor snorted. “Of course. It's an annual three-million-dollar grant. It means a great deal to this school.”

“It does. Did you know my father is very good friends with the donors responsible for that endowment? They listen to him. William Markovic considers me a second son, in fact. If you go through with this, I will have a long conversation with Mr. Markovic, and this school will find itself three million dollars short next year—and every year thereafter. I'll ensure the rest of the staff and faculty know exactly why. I think you might find yourself out of a job as well.”

“You don't have that kind of power,” Ogilvie blustered.

“You think I don't? My father was the ambassador to Russia for years. He's been close friends with the last three presidents, including the current commander-in-chief. My father wants one thing and one thing only from me. Everyone who's met him knows that he gets what he wants. My future is mapped out. If I do the right things—get the grades, remain class president, go to the appropriate college—then I accomplish everything I should. If you derail me from this path, I'll get my ass kicked in ways that would make your

head spin. But it will end even worse for you. I recently got my SATs back. I had a perfect score. I'm getting into Yale, and Skull and Bones will be waiting for me senior year because they know what my father's friends have already figured out: I will be the president of the United States one day. Now, you can be my friend or my enemy. You decide."

Ogilvie said nothing for a long moment, then he cursed under his breath, not quite meeting Zack's gaze.

"I'm glad you understand me. You're a low-level counselor, so I'm going to stop wasting my time here and make an appointment with the dean. He takes my calls, you see. You can't get rid of us. I'll also make sure the lovely Miss Jones suffers no ill effects. Since my friend here was smart enough to use a condom, I don't expect any other complications. I'm also going to assume that Dax and Connor did the right thing and destroyed that tape."

Connor gave him a thumbs-up. "We burned it early this morning, but we'd planned to mention that later." Because they'd had to break into Ogilvie's office to finish the deed.

"Damn it," Mad cursed. "That was a good piece of film."

Zack sighed. "Someday you're going to go too far, Mad, and I only hope we can save you then. As for this time, we didn't do anything but be young and stupid. Miss Jones is single, and because Gabe has a five-o'clock shadow by noon and a surprisingly large dick, I understand how she might have believed he was older. The only one who did anything criminal was dumbass over here." He pointed to Mad.

"It was?" Mad tossed his head to flip his hair out of his eyes. "I just thought it was a beautiful act that should be recorded for posterity."

With a shake of his head, Zack went on. "We're finished now, gentlemen. I believe it's lunchtime and the cafeteria has likely done something amazing with gelatin. Let's go."

Zack started for the door, and Gabe watched him openmouthed. Where the hell had that confident, convincing speech come from?

"This isn't over," the counselor swore.

Zack sent him a pitying look. "It is. I have a surprisingly shitty life, but this is one case where I have power and I'm going to wield it."

They followed Zack out, Mad nearly pulling Gabe along. Ogilvie didn't challenge them. Lightning from the heavens didn't strike them.

"Guys, it can't be that easy," Gabe said as they emerged into the sunlight. They were suddenly surrounded by classmates pointing at them and chattering about the scandal.

"Dude, did you really screw that blonde?" one asked.

"I can't believe you got into a bar," another stated.

Zack put a hand on Gabe's arm as the rest started receiving high fives for sticking it to the man—and the chick—though Gabe was sure they meant two different things. "It is that easy. Let it go. You bent a few rules but didn't do any real harm, man. It's going to be okay. Ogilvie needs to understand there are no gentlemen here."

“That’s not true. Bond was a gentleman and allowed the lady to come first.” Maddox snorted. “I think I should get T-shirts made, plaster ‘Perfect Gentlemen of Creighton’ across our chests. The old curmudgeon would love that . . .”

Gabe prayed the stupid moniker didn’t stick. “I’m still going to kill you, Mad.”

Mad put an arm around him. “Promises, promises.”

ONE

New York City

Present day

Gabe stared at the urn and wondered what had gone so wrong. One minute, life had been something resembling normal. Well, normally fucked up. The next minute, he was standing in a church full of somber shock and lilies with at least seven hundred people at his back, waiting for the proper reaction to hit him. “You son of a bitch. How could you leave like this, Mad?”

He kept his voice low, given the fact that most tabloids would love to run a story about Maddox Crawford’s best friend cursing his very name before he was laid to eternal rest.

Damn, but Mad would have hated the idea of eternal rest, of peace. The fucking bastard had never rested. He’d always been scheming up a new plan and forever instigating chaos.

He’d also left behind problems Gabe didn’t even want to think about. But he would have to in about six months, when his sister had her baby.

He stared at that ridiculously expensive urn and thought about smashing it in rage. It would serve Mad right to be vacuumed up by a handheld sweeper.

He turned away and caught a glimpse of his sister. Sara sat in the well-polished pews of the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola. She was discreetly in the middle, not wanting to call attention to herself. Wearing a black Prada sheath, with her tawny hair in a neat bun, she looked like she belonged amid the marble finery of the Upper East Side church because she did. Sara was Manhattan born and bred. Unlike her older brother, she’d never been shipped off to boarding school. Even in the face of grief, she comported herself like a lady.

Her eyes might be red, but she stared straight ahead, her shoulders back and her head held high. And she was carrying Maddox Crawford’s baby. That fucking asswipe hadn’t kept his promises—any of them.

I’ll watch after her, Gabe. You don’t have to worry. I love her. It’s stupid but for the first time in my life, I’m in love. You’re my best friend in the world. I know I’ve been a jerk in the past, but I’ve always taken care of you. Now I’ll take care of her, too.

He’d been a dumbass to let Sara date Mad. It should have been a no-brainer that the asshole would seduce and dump her. Mad hadn’t been as faithful to Sara as he had been to his MO. Christ, everything about their relationship had been utterly predictable—except Mad’s die-in-a-plane-crash routine, but the rest of it . . . Fuck, he could have written that book.

“Hey, I think they’re ready to start the service,” a quiet voice said from behind him.

Gabe turned. There stood Roman Calder in his customary three-piece suit, which Gabe knew he purchased from a London tailor twice a year. He made the voyage from DC to the UK under the auspices of diplomacy, but it was really about those suits. And now that Roman was here, Gabe wanted to know one thing. “Is he coming?”

Roman sighed, his face falling slightly. “You know how busy he is. He sent me. And you’ll have me for a few more days. I’m staying over for a fundraiser.”

Gabe shouldn’t have expected a different answer. Mad had been a terrifically controversial figure. In a world where the one-percenters were vilified, Mad had been the poster child for rich, bad-boy behavior. If he wasn’t screwing some small company out of its profits, he’d been humping a supermodel.

Gabe wished he’d stuck to those women and left his sister alone. “Let him know we missed him.”

He turned and started back down the aisle. There wasn’t a family pew. Mad had been the last of his line, his father having died of a heart attack two years before. That had struck Gabe as odd, since he’d been sure Benedict Crawford hadn’t possessed a heart.

“You have to forgive him. You know he’s torn up. He got the news during a press conference,” Roman said under his breath. “A fucking reporter brought it up after his speech on the immigration reform bill. He was completely caught off guard.”

Gabe had seen the news clips. Hell, everyone in the country had seen the president of the United States stop in the middle of a Q and A with the press, turn, and walk away. “Tell Zack not to sweat it. We all get it. He’s got huge responsibilities.”

Roman followed him down the second pew, where Dax had reserved their seats. “You have to understand how the press would interpret his attendance. After the way Mad lived the last couple months of his life, I couldn’t advise it. He hates that he can’t be here.”

Gabe knew exactly how the last two months had gone. After Mad had dumped Sara, he’d gone a little crazy, drinking by the gallon and painting the town red with models and actresses. But Gabe suspected what others couldn’t: Mad had been protecting someone. No idea who. His best guess was that, after dumping Sara, he’d found a new mistress and used all the other women to divert the tabloids’ attention from the new object of his desire. That had been Mad’s MO, and he’d heavily relied on bait-and-switch tactics when he had been hounded by the press. Gabe should probably let it lie, but he wanted to know the identity of that woman. He wanted to know if Mad’s new mistress had any inkling of the pain she’d caused by luring Mad away from Sara.

“I hate that I have to be here in the first place.” Dax stood and stuck out a hand. Like everyone else in the church, he looked grim.

Gabe shook it, studying his old friend and wondering where the hell the years had gone. It was hard to believe they’d all been kids together, their worst problems being math tests and how to sneak over to the girls’ school so they could make out. So many of his childhood memories were shared with the other men in this pew. And the one in that damn urn. “Brother, it’s good to see you. I thought you were somewhere in the Pacific.”

“I came home the minute I heard. I had some leave.” Dax’s gaze shifted as he stared at the place where Mad’s coffin lay. “Why the coffin? He’s not in there. From what I understand, there was barely enough left to cremate.”

Gabe's stomach threatened to turn. He didn't want to think about how Mad had died. Sure, in his darkest moments he'd thought about killing the fucker himself, but damn, he'd loved the guy, too.

Never let 'em see you sweat, Gabe. That's the key to bullies. You walk by. You flip 'em off. If they give you real trouble, you take them down in a way that ensures they stay down. You go for the kill because that's the way of the wild, my man.

Gabe had learned that lesson from him. At the time, Mad had been talking about the bully upperclassmen at their school, but Gabe had taken that lesson into business. If he was going to take down someone, he made damn sure they couldn't get back up. Ever.

"The coffin is there for show. Apparently, people want something substantial to stare at during the service. That's what the coordinator said." Gabe sighed. "The picture doesn't count, and the urn is too small."

There was a large poster of Maddox in front of the empty coffin. He was dressed in a custom-made Brooks Brothers suit, smirking at the camera like a douchebag. But then, he'd always looked like that.

Would his baby inherit that smirk? That never-ending thrill for life Mad had possessed?

Damn you for leaving us behind. And damn you for what you did to my sister, but I fucking wish you were here.

He sat on the pew, his brain buzzing. He'd gotten the news five days ago and it still hadn't quite penetrated. He kept expecting to turn around and see Mad walking toward him with that damn smirk, drink in hand. It was wrong to consider someone as alive as Maddox Crawford dead.

"Hey," a familiar voice said. Gabe turned to find Connor, dressed in a button-down shirt and pressed slacks. Just another normal guy—except for the fact that Gabe knew he was Agency. The CIA had claimed Connor long ago, and any illusion of normalcy he donned was really a mask. "Sorry I'm late."

Gabe stood and put his hand out. Connor took it. "It's good to see you."

It had been at least a year since they'd been in the same room. They kept up via e-mail and the occasional phone call where Connor never mentioned what country he was in. "You, too."

"Do you know anything about his death?" Gabe murmured. "Have you looked into the incident?"

They all leaned in. Connor dealt in secrets. Oh, he might say he was simply an analyst, but there was no way Connor wasn't an asset, as they would call him in the Agency. Even though they'd been friends for years, Connor had changed, become more distant, colder. Deadlier. No, Gabe didn't buy that Connor sat in front of a computer. Connor got his hands dirty.

"I don't know anything, guys," he said with an apologetic frown. "I'm sorry."

Roman shook his head. "It's not a CIA matter. The FAA is handling it. Trust me, I've been up their ass about it. So has Zack."

"I called in my contacts," Connor said. "They told me the investigation is in its early stages. They have the black box and they're carefully probing the wreckage. There were reports of high winds in the area where he went down. The working theory is the plane hit a storm system and the pilot lost control."

Gabe had heard that theory. It was difficult to think that a storm had taken down Maddox Crawford. He'd

been a force of nature himself. Mad should have been shot by a furious husband—or brother.

“I promise, I’ll make sure you all get the final report,” Roman murmured. He nodded toward the aisle. “Is that who I think it is? What’s her name? Tavia?”

Gabe looked up. A gorgeous blonde with killer cheekbones strode quickly toward the coffin. Mad had hired Tavia Gordon—and paid her well—to be his public relations guru. And he’d kept her hopping. From what Gabe could tell, Tavia had spent all her waking hours putting out the fires Mad had been prone to start. Though a bit tall and fashionably thin for his taste, she had a delicate, aristocratic face. No denying she was an icy beauty.

He’d wondered more than once if Mad had thrown Sara over for Tavia. Because there must have been a woman. With Mad, there always had been. Had his buddy worked his playboy angle to throw the paparazzi off his PR Girl Friday/mistress so she wouldn’t be inundated? He’d wondered if Mad had been trying to protect Sara, but given the cruel way he’d cut her out of his life . . . Gabe gnashed his teeth. He couldn’t focus on that now or he’d think very ill of the dead.

As Tavia dashed to her seat, she pulled a tissue out of her Gucci bag. He’d never seen her look less than perfect, but today her eyes were a bit puffy, her nose red.

The pastor stepped out, and the great organ began a mournful dirge. The Mander Organ, one of the most famous organs in North America, now played for Maddox Crawford. He would have enjoyed that.

“Hey, should we bring Sara up here?” Roman asked, his eyes straying back. “It looks like she’s alone.”

Oh, she wasn’t alone. Not in the strictest sense, but he wasn’t going to mention her pregnancy to anyone yet. “No, we chose to sit apart. The tabloids tend to ignore her. I’d like to keep it that way.”

They wouldn’t ignore him. He tried to keep a low profile, but Mad’s death would likely send the damn tabloids into a feeding frenzy. The last of the Crawfords gone to his just reward, marking the end of an era.

God, when had he gotten so fucking old?

Dax settled in. “Why here? I never imagined Mad having a church funeral. I always thought when he went, we’d give him a Viking funeral in the swimming pool at some swanky hotel in Vegas. Seriously, I looked up how to loop those pool noodles together to make a proper raft for his corpse. I was thinking of killing him at the time. It was right after he hired those hookers, then stiffed me with the bill for both of them.”

Connor’s lips turned up briefly. “That send-off sounds fitting. Mad never wanted to be predictable. Or we could have an Irish wake. But I can’t believe he wanted all this pomp and circumstance in a house of God.”

Only because the others hadn’t known that deep down Mad actually adored all the attention from reporters and TMZ. He’d laughed when the paparazzi chased him down Park Avenue. The man had never met a scandal that hadn’t flipped his switch. He’d also had a deep devotion to history. Sort of.

Gabe snorted. “Jackie O’s funeral was held here. You know he always thought he should have been born a Kennedy. Since he hadn’t been, he decided to one-up her with more spectacle.”

Roman groaned. “Dumbass.”

Connor took a deep breath, obviously stifling a laugh. “He always did think he was American royalty, the bastard. So are you giving a big speech?”

“No. Since Mad planned this whole shindig before his death, he farmed that out. His lawyer hired a Broadway star to read the letter he left behind to the world. Can you believe that? The fucker wrote his own eulogy and hired a Tony winner to read it.”

Roman looked down at the pew, repressing a laugh. “I thought I recognized that guy. God, Mad was such a douchebag. I miss him already.”

“The priest is going to say a couple of things, after which I was supposed to persuade Christina Aguilera to sing a moving hymn. Yeah, that didn’t happen. Apparently she’s got a life and a career. So Mad will have to settle for the Met’s new diva. She was available—but not cheap. I ignored his request for a burlesque dancer and an open bar in the sanctuary.” Gabe rolled his eyes, not even asking what Mad had been thinking. Anything to raise a brow . . . “The good news is, there’s no reception line and none of us have to speak. We can keep a low profile.”

“Maybe he knew what we’d say if given a mic and the chance,” Connor muttered.

Someone shushed them, and that had them all grinning. It was good to know that twenty plus years later, they could still get into trouble.

Gabe sighed as he caught sight of the urn again. They’d always been good at getting into trouble. Now Gabe would have one last opportunity to clean up Mad’s mess.

• • •

An hour later, Gabe settled his sister into a limo. The crowd was finally starting to thin out. So many people, and they were all a blur to Gabe. He’d kept his head down, hoping he didn’t have to talk too much. Funerals, he’d discovered, annoyed him mightily. Just when he needed to be alone to mourn and think, he found himself surrounded by others. He didn’t need to comfort a bunch of people who hadn’t really been close to Mad. He needed to comfort the one who had been the closest.

Or at least she’d thought so. But his sister was overwrought and battling morning sickness that lasted long into the afternoon, so he was letting her go.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay out at the beach? I’m sorry I can’t leave the city for a couple of weeks. There’s too much to do. I’m meeting with Mad’s lawyer Monday, and I need to spend the weekend prepping. At the very least, I’m going to have to deal with the foundation or whatever group he left the company to.”

Sara nodded. Her demeanor appeared perfectly calm, but he didn’t miss the way her hands fisted around the handkerchief on her lap. “We’ll be okay. The Hamptons are quiet this time of year. I’ll stay for a while and think things through. After the news has died down, I can come back and have the baby. If anyone asks, I’ll say I had a fling when I traveled to Paris on business in June.” Her eyes took on a faraway look. “I really believed that if he had time to think, to miss what we had, he’d come back. That will never happen now.”

“Sara, I know you loved him, but he was only a man. And not always a good one.”

Tavia Gordon, racing from the building, snagged his gaze. He wondered vaguely how she ran in those towering shoes. Shaking his head, he stepped between Sara and Tavia to block his sister’s view. He didn’t want her to be hurt any more by coming face-to-face with Mad’s possible mistress.

Sara frowned, the cool breeze tugging at the few loose tendrils of her golden hair. “Are you all right?”

“Fine. You go on. Take care. I’ll call you after I meet with the lawyer.” He needed to figure out how big the clusterfuck was. Crawford Industries should go to Mad’s heir. Gabe intended to fight the will to ensure his niece’s or nephew’s future.

She nodded. As Gabe closed the door, she turned to the driver. Then the limo pulled onto Eighty-fourth Street. As he watched the car roll out of sight, another woman caught his eye.

She stood out in the crowd. Short and curvy, with a massive amount of wavy strawberry-blond hair, she was like a sprite among the elven supermodels. Every other woman walking down the street looked emaciated and fashionably plastic to him, but Little Red was obviously not a devotee of surgical beauty. No, those breasts were real.

Gabe couldn’t take his damn eyes off them. They weren’t huge, but a nice handful, he estimated. They would be soft. He could tell from the way they moved. She wore a black dress with tiny white dots and a Tiffany blue belt that cinched her waist, showing off her hourglass figure. He pinned her age somewhere close to twenty-five, maybe a year or two older, but something about her—maybe her fair skin and curls—drew him in.

“Hey, I thought I lost you.” A young man in a stylish suit caught up to her and slid his hand into hers.

Had she been in the church? No. Surely he would have noticed her. Besides, he knew high-quality clothes when he saw them and hers, while pretty, were mass-produced and inexpensive. Her shoes were well made but not designer, and her purse looked a little like a burlap sack. Doubtful that she was one of the label whores exiting Mad’s funeral.

As they walked by, she smiled up at the man, her unabashed affection hitting Gabe straight in the gut. How long had it been since a woman looked at him while her obvious joy lit up his world? Maybe never. The women he dated always had their eyes on a prize: moving up in the world. No matter how nice they seemed, they were ambitious females on the prowl, always looking for more money, more power, a better social position. They didn’t want him; they wanted the life he could provide. Which meant that the women he dated didn’t hold hands as they walked down the street. Nor did they smile up at him brilliantly with undisguised sensuality. They sure as hell didn’t have soft, real breasts that bounced gently with every step.

Gabe watched as the couple made their way down the sidewalk and disappeared around the corner. He hissed. She had a spectacular ass, too. Simply watching her curves made his whole body heat up. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened.

Sex had become a rote activity, something he did because he needed it. But watching the girl with the strawberry-colored hair, he realized how long it had been since he’d simply wanted a woman because she flipped his switch. He hadn’t seen her at the funeral, so he had to think she was just another pretty girl taking in an autumn afternoon in Manhattan.

He stared at the space where she’d been standing. If she hadn’t been holding hands with another man, he probably would have been a schmuck and followed her. It was just as well she wasn’t available since he had a job to do.

Gabe sighed and started back up the steps. The others were waiting for him at a bar down the street. A good deal of Mad’s friends and coworkers were meeting for a few hours of drinking and storytelling and trying to forget that Mad was gone forever. He stepped back into the church and was assaulted by the silence. So quiet now. He could hear his footsteps as he crossed the floor.

The cathedral was beautiful with its marbled arches and bronze doors, but it seemed cold to him. Pretty and empty without people to animate it. A little like his life had become. Materially, he had everything a man could ask for, and he was starting to wonder if any of it was worth the work. He'd gone numb. That girl on the street was the first time in months that he'd felt something beyond anger, anxiety, and sorrow.

No matter what had happened between Mad and Sara, the grief over his friend's passing lodged in his gut—for the man he'd known more than half his life and for everything that should have been.

Damn, he wished the last words they would ever exchange hadn't been said in anger. He couldn't help but think that during his final encounter with Mad, he'd told his best friend that he wanted him dead.

That night, he had been.

Gabe stepped into the chapel, searching for the priest who had performed the service. Tradition required the family of the deceased to make a "donation" to the church. Mad hadn't had any remaining family, and he'd written Gabe a letter with the directions for his funeral, should anything happen to him. As pissed as Gabe had been at the man, there had been a time when they'd been closer than brothers. Executing this duty was up to him, so Gabe had a check for ten thousand in his pocket for the priest. If only he could find the man.

As he trekked inside and looked up the aisle, he stopped because he wasn't as alone as he'd thought. A man in a dark suit stood in front of Maddox's urn, his head down. His shoulders moved, and he turned slightly so Gabe could see his square jaw and the set of his brow.

An odd sense of relief swept through Gabe. He'd come. Somehow, even though he'd been told otherwise, he'd expected all his friends to be here to mourn the loss of one of their own.

"Mr. President, your detail sucks. I could have snuck up on you."

The president of the United States straightened but didn't turn. "I think you would find that task difficult, to say the least. My detail is surprisingly attentive."

That was when he noticed three red dots of light on his chest. He scanned the sanctuary and found the snipers. Yes, he could be dead in about two point three seconds. "Damn, Zack. Could you tell them who I am and not to shoot?"

Zack turned and flashed one of his rare grins. The quiet man had been cold and shut down since his wife's murder two years ago. Gabe couldn't think of the event in any other way. Joy Hayes had been cut down during a campaign rally. He'd been standing in the crowd with Dax and Mad. Sometimes, he could still hear that shot and the resulting screams. He could still see Zack's face as he realized Joy was gone. Sometimes, when he closed his eyes, he saw Zack holding his dead wife to his chest while the Secret Service did their damndest to haul him away. He'd won the election in a landslide three days later.

It was good to see his old friend smile again.

"Gentlemen, this is Gabriel Bond. I doubt he's here to hurt me. Please don't take out one of my oldest friends." Zack strode down the aisle and his grin faded. He put out his hand. "We've already lost enough today."

"We certainly have." Gabe took Zack's hand but hauled him in for a manly hug. "Damn, it's good to see you."

Zack stepped away, his eyes tired as he put a hand on Gabe's shoulder. "You, too. You have no idea. How

are you holding up? I know you two weren't on great terms when he died, but this has to be hard on you. You were the closest to Mad."

Gabe thought about lying, but he couldn't. "It's fucking hard. I'm struggling to believe that he's really gone. I looked at myself in the mirror after I got the news. Do you know what I saw? A man who learned how to properly knot a tie because Maddox Crawford taught him. I kissed my first girl because Mad engineered the situation."

Zack nodded. "And I found my first real friends because Mad sat next to me in class one day and cheated off my pre-algebra exam. That was the first time I sat at your lunch table. He told me he could use me so we might as well be friends. At least that's what he said. I found out later the asshole was a mathematical genius and he hadn't cheated at all."

"I figured his scheme out when we were in college. He came up with a reason for us to hang out together until the group was tight. Mad gathered us together. He wanted a family since his didn't give a shit about him, so he made one for himself. It's interesting that he chose outsiders. I guess he always considered himself one of us, even after we became the popular kids. Maybe because he knew he could count on us."

Gabe needed a freaking drink. Or twelve. God, he needed to sit and bond with his pack, to remind himself that he belonged somewhere.

"Is there any way you can ditch the snipers and come down to the pub with us?" he asked. "We're meeting at this place down the street. All of us. Me, Roman, Connor, and Dax. The guys would love to see you."

Gabe didn't mention that he needed Zack, needed the gang together even though they would never be whole again. What had happened? He'd thought they would go to each other's weddings. Dax had eloped in Vegas, and none of them had been there, though they had thrown him one hell of a divorce party two years later. Zack had been the only one of them who had gotten married with proper pomp and circumstance, before it had ended in horror.

Now Mad had suddenly met his maker after a tragic, unexpected death. They needed something good.

Zack's grin was back. "Roman won't be happy to see me. In fact, he'll be perfectly dismayed, but I think if we sneak in the back, we can manage an hour or so. Maybe two. I'm not due back in DC for a bit. What do you say, Thomas?" He looked to his left.

Gabe followed his line of sight and saw a tall African-American man in a black suit. He stood at least six foot five and was built like a linebacker. Even indoors, he wore mirrored aviators and looked like the badass he certainly was. "I think you've gone insane, Mr. President." He smiled, showing even, white teeth. "You also know I love a challenge. Give me five to scope the logistics, then we'll move. I smuggled you in here without the press noticing. I'll get you in there, too." He took a cell phone out of his pocket and hit a button. "The Professor is thirsty, boys. We're going to get the boss a drink."

Zack sighed. "The Secret Service loves me. I hope this bar has a back room."

"If they don't, we'll make one, Mr. President." It was still surreal to think his boyhood friend was the most powerful man in the free world.

Zack shook his head. "Please don't call me that, Gabe. Let me pretend to be Zack for an hour or so."

Gabe knew exactly what Zack needed. "Oh, if you want to feel like one of the guys, we can do that for you."

In fact, we'll be happy to remind you of the days you were a dumbass kid, Scooter."

Zack groaned, but at least something besides desolation lit his eyes. "Don't call me that, either. It's bad enough that my Secret Service call sign is The Professor. I don't need to be reminded about that damn scooter incident."

But the scooter incident had been so much fun. "I promise nothing."

• • •

Everly Parker looked around the swanky bar and felt out of place. This wasn't her crowd, even though she worked with some of these people. She wasn't a big bar hopper. She didn't watch the clock and wait for five p.m. so she could hit her favorite watering hole. No, she was a work-long-hours-and-go-home-to-a-good-book-and-hot-bath kind of girl. But tonight she wanted to be someone else—anyone who hadn't buried her mentor and friend an hour ago and wasn't now staring down the possibility of losing both her job and the roof over her head.

"Hey, are you going to nurse that drink all night long?" Scott Wilcox leaned over and winked. He was on his third margarita. "Because I think you should down a few glasses of wine and be my wingwoman. Harry from accounting is here and I swear I'm going to die if I don't go out with that hunk of man soon. He's the only truly beautiful boy at work. He should be mine."

Everly smiled. After she'd started at Crawford last year, she'd met Scott during her orientation. Initially, she'd mistaken his playful nature for a come-on. But he'd finagled her into having coffee with him shortly thereafter and apologized for giving her the wrong impression. He'd admitted that he hadn't been himself because he'd recently been through a rough breakup with his boyfriend. Scott sometimes used his happy-go-lucky face to mask his somber moods. To finally see him let go of his lost love and dip his toe in the dating pool with a hot guy thrilled her.

Honestly, Everly wasn't sure she believed in true love. Attraction and affection, yes, but love? Her father had been burned by the concept. He'd taken the shock and sorrow of his wife's abandonment to his grave. Her mother had always seemed so distant, as though she'd spent her life up until the moment she'd walked out on them longing for something else.

She shook her head. "Scott, I don't even know what a wingwoman would do."

He sat back and thought about it for a moment. "Well, first you should go over there and talk me up. Tell him how perfect I am, what a great guy I can be. If that doesn't work, then slip him a roofie so I can have my wicked way with him."

She rolled her eyes. Sometimes Scott had a vivid imagination. "Sure. I'll get right on that."

"I tried," he said with a long sigh, his gaze trailing to the back of the room.

Everly followed his stare. A waitress in a female version of a tuxedo carried what looked to be a cheese plate past a large black man wearing a nondescript suit and aviators. He guarded a door that led to what she could only imagine was a VIP section.

"See that? I heard a rumor," Scott whispered in her ear. "While you were in the bathroom, Marty from processing stopped by and told me the craziest story."

"You shouldn't listen to him. He's a horrible gossip."

“Do you want the scoop or not?”

She was kind of afraid that the next big scoop after Scott’s would be “Wonder Girl Gets Fired After Kindly Employer Dies.” She’d shot through the ranks like a comet, and now she was going to hit the ground with a great big thud. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do when the new boss came in and found out his or her head of information security was a too-young-for-her-position hacker who everyone except Maddox Crawford thought couldn’t handle the job. Maddox had been her champion, her mentor in this crazy corporate world. He’d also been a surprising friend.

At first, she’d been so shocked by his death. The devastation still hadn’t worn off. But now, almost a week later, her brain had begun working overtime, and she had questions—the sort no one seemed to want to answer.

Maddox Crawford had been an experienced pilot. Had his death really been an accident?

Not according to that mysterious, inexplicable e-mail she’d received last night.

“All right. What’s the big scoop?” Everly decided to disregard her own advice. She would listen to any gossip that took her mind off her troubles. She needed one good weekend before she faced whatever crap Monday morning would bring.

She took a healthy gulp of the sauvignon blanc she’d ordered. Scott was right. She needed to live a little before the hammer came down on her head. If things went the way she suspected, she would be lucky to afford box wine next month.

“You know how the Great Crawford had some seriously powerful friends, right?”

She didn’t follow the gossip rags the way everyone else did. In fact, she purposefully avoided that tripe. Why fixate on the problems of celebrities when she had so many of her own? Besides, when it came to people like Maddox, more fiction than truth filled the tabloids. They wanted a good story, and real life tended to be too boring. The Maddox she knew had worked hard—twelve hour days, often six days a week. He’d cared about his employees. She bet no one reported that. “He knew a lot of people. Men in his position often do.”

“But he knew one very *powerful* person,” Scott whispered.

She wasn’t sure what he was insinuating. “I don’t doubt that. He was in a lofty position, Scott. It’s not so surprising he knew key players.”

Scott huffed, his frustration evident. “Damn it, don’t you know who I’m talking about? Zachary Hayes, the president of these United States, the hottest man to ever hit the White House. They were friends as teenagers, according to rumors. I’ve heard the president is a sentimental man. I think he secretly attended Crawford’s funeral and is even now somewhere in this bar.”

Maddox had told her once that he’d attended the same prep school as the current president and that they’d been close back in the day. The two of them had been part of a small group of friends who had dubbed themselves the Perfect Gentlemen. Everly wasn’t sure if they’d meant the name to be ironic, but she suspected so, given Maddox’s less-than-polite reputation. The rumors of their high jinks had been the stuff of legend . . . and they’d come up in some really low-blow campaign ads against Hayes.

She let out an exasperated sigh. “Yes, the president of the United States is here. I’m so sure.”

Scott looked pointedly back toward the VIP room. “Have you seen the surprising number of men in black

suits hanging around here?”

“Scott, the majority of people in this bar came straight from the funeral. Are you really shocked they’re wearing dark suits?”

“And the sunglasses?” Scott shot back. “How many people besides crazy, scary feds do you know who wear sunglasses inside a crowded bar at dusk?”

She turned and caught a glimpse of two overly large men standing by the entry to the back room. When a woman stumbled toward them, they gently but firmly turned her away. Everly caught a glimpse of metal. Maybe Scott was onto something. “Holy shit. I saw a SIG Sauer.”

Scott’s brow rose. “A what?”

Clearly, Scott hadn’t been raised around firearms. “It’s the weapon the Secret Service uses. I know because my father was a cop and a complete gun nut. I knew how to shoot practically before I could walk. I don’t know if that guy is actual Secret Service, but he’s carrying a similar piece.”

Scott stared at the doorway being guarded by the aforementioned black-suited, aviator-wearing bodyguards. “Think about it. The hottest of all the commanders-in-chief might right now be sitting in that room, downing shitty tequila.”

“Somehow, I think they’d give him the good stuff. And it’s probably not him. More than likely, it’s some pretentious CEO or trust-fund playboy Mad knew. Surely, the president would go someplace more secure. Besides, if he were here, the press would be crawling everywhere.”

Scott shrugged as if he saw Everly’s wisdom but still liked his own theory better.

Grinning, she canvassed the room to see who else from Crawford Industries had come to pay their liquid respects to Mad and noticed Tavia walking her way. The stunning, polished executive dashed toward them, her standard professional smile in place.

“Good to see you here, dear. I thought you’d go back to Brooklyn after the service.” Like many raised on the Upper East Side, she said the word *Brooklyn* as if it was a virus she didn’t want to catch. Those poor deluded people thought the city only existed between Midtown and Harlem, and wouldn’t dirty their designer shoes by walking on the rest of the island. But in every other way, Tavia had proven personable, if a bit high-strung. The woman could barely sit still.

“Scott convinced me to stay for a while.” It hadn’t taken much. Her loft had been so quiet for the last five days. The silence had become intolerable. She hadn’t realized how much she’d come to depend on her boss’s friendship.

For the last couple of months, he’d shown up on her doorstep out of the blue and uninvited with some project to talk about. They’d spent hours gabbing and eating. At first, she’d worried that she would have to fend off a lecherous boss, but he’d actually been surprisingly sweet. Kind, even. He’d taken a profound interest in her, but not as a lover. Somehow they’d fallen into a comfortable companionship, as if she’d known him all her life. There had not been a single spark between them.

She was going to miss him so much. The ache she felt at not seeing him again definitely hurt. Everly took a sip of wine, wishing again that she was someone else and somewhere else. Escape sounded great about now.

Tavia tapped a Prada wedge against the floor. The shoes might have been a few years old, but they still

looked sleek and classy. “Hey, I wanted to pass on a little insider info. Crawford’s lawyer is meeting with the executor of his will Monday, so it looks like we’ll have some news about the company’s future soon.”

Scott went a little green. “So the pink slips could go out in quick order. God, I don’t want to look for another job. It took forever to find this one.”

Tavia shook her head, her pale hair jerking over her shoulders. “There’s always a shake-up after someone new takes the reins, but you should be fine in the executive development program. They usually take out the players at the top. The new guy tends to like to bring in his own leadership team. If anyone’s going to get the boot, it will be me and Everly.”

Scott rolled his eyes. “It could be any of us. I’m not exactly a peon, thank you very much. I’m rotating through all the departments until the program ends.”

Three margaritas and a funeral had left Scott prickly and morose.

“Which means you’ll be valuable, Scott,” Everly assured her friend. “You know something about every part of Crawford, having spent six months in most of the major departments. You’ll be fine.”

“Exactly,” Tavia agreed. “But before I’m kicked to the curb, I need to make sure the new boss understands the importance of the foundation’s work. It’s excellent PR, and we all know Crawford Industries needs that now. With all the turmoil lately, our stock is down substantially. I’m hoping the new head honcho will think it looks bad to fire me two weeks before the annual fundraiser. If he keeps me until then, I’ll have a little time to convince whoever takes over that I’m worth what Maddox paid me.”

The fundraiser was the most important social event of the year at Crawford. Two weeks didn’t seem like a long time to sway a new boss, but the woman was right. Crawford Industries’ support of the International Women and Girls Education Foundation Tavia’s family had founded was vital. It was a true public relations gem. For a playboy like Maddox to give generously to fund education for females in third-world countries had bought him a lot of good press and goodwill.

So why had Maddox told her privately that he wasn’t going to the gala this year? Everly frowned. He’d said it casually over dinner one night when they’d been going over her plans to strengthen their cybersecurity systems. He hadn’t exactly explained other than to say it was complicated. Then again, everything was complicated with Maddox Crawford.

He’d spent time with her, but he hadn’t trusted her with his secrets. And she’d understood that—right up until his plane had gone down and she’d received that mysterious e-mail.

Before his death, Everly had suspected he was hiding something. Now, she was almost certain of it. She wished she’d asked more questions and pressed harder.

But she wouldn’t be able to unravel all his mysteries tonight. Starting Monday, she’d probably have lots of time to figure out what Maddox had been up to because she’d be looking for a new job. Tonight, she wanted to get blitzed enough to sleep through the night.

One white wine wasn’t going to accomplish that.

“I’ll be right back.” She gulped the rest of the vino in her glass, then stood and scanned the place. The bar was packed and seemed hopelessly understaffed. It wasn’t likely the waitress would make it back any time soon.

Everly couldn't help but notice a couple of well-dressed waitstaff coming in and out of the back room, but they didn't stop to help anyone else. If she wanted another drink, she would have to fend for herself.

Everly moved past the tables of coworkers. She stopped and said hello to some, but could barely handle the speculative stares of the rest. She knew exactly what they thought. Despite the company being a large, multinational conglomerate, the corporate office of Crawford Industries still functioned like a small town. Gossip abounded, and there was no one they liked to gossip about more than the boss.

She'd been linked to Crawford from the moment she was hired. Her first day on the job, he'd shown her around personally, sparking rumors that she was his mistress. When he'd bumped her up to head of cybersecurity after only six months on the job, the chin-wagging had become unrelenting. Though that made her job difficult, Everly had put her head down and worked. She'd stopped a corporate spy and helped the FBI track down a ring that had used Crawford subsidiaries for phishing expeditions. Still, no matter how effective she'd proven herself, the employees still speculated that she'd slept her way to the top.

Everly sighed. What a joke. She hadn't slept with anyone in well over a year, and her long dry spell didn't look like it would end anytime soon. At least the tabloids hadn't printed the rumors of her nonexistent, torrid affair with Maddox. She had to be thankful for that small miracle.

She elbowed and nudged her way up to the crowded bar and tried to get the bartender's attention. Unfortunately, she only counted two people working.

She held out a hand as one headed her way. "Can I get a drink?"

He walked right past her, but he did stop for the two blondes at the end of the bar. They were thin and gorgeous. Story of her life. She'd always been short and slightly more plump than fashion dictated. Damn it, that didn't mean she didn't need a drink as much as the skinny chicks.

The bartender turned and headed her way again.

"I'd like a glass of wine, please."

Nothing. Not even a "Hey, I'll be with you in a minute" that she wouldn't believe anyway. He walked to the opposite end of the bar and started prepping what looked like cosmopolitans. The female bartender walked by, even more dismissive than the first guy.

The male walked by again and delivered the drinks to the two supermodels at the end of the bar. This time she was ready. She leaned over, hoping that maybe he hadn't heard her the first two times.

"Hello, could I get a glass of . . ."

He started to stride past her again, but a large hand zipped out beside her and over the bar, stopping him in his tracks. "I believe the lady needs a drink. I'd appreciate it if you would help her now."

That was the deepest, sexiest voice she'd ever heard in her life. It was attached to a really masculine-looking hand.

The bartender's eyes widened. "Of course, sir." He finally turned his attention to her. "What can I get you, ma'am?"

At the moment, Everly wasn't interested in wine.

She glanced over her shoulder at her rescuer. The sexiness didn't end with his voice. Vaguely, she noted that while she'd had to shove her way through the crowd, the mass of humanity had seemingly parted for him. He stood alone, though closer to her than strictly necessary. Tall and broad, with close-cropped golden brown hair and the bluest eyes she'd ever seen, her Good Samaritan stared down at her with a bit of a smile. Her tummy knotted.

"He needs to know what kind of wine you'd like. Let me guess." He gave her a considering stare. "A sweet red?"

She shook her head. "No. Um, a sauvignon blanc. I prefer white wine. Red tends to upset my reflux."

Way to go, Everly. That was a super sexy comeback to the hottest man she'd ever met. Of course he wanted to know about her digestive issues.

"Well, we wouldn't want that." A hint of amusement lurked in his voice. "The lady will take a sauvignon blanc, and I'll have a Scotch. The Glenlivet twenty-five."

The bartender immediately went to work.

"Thanks." She felt herself blushing. She probably looked like an idiot schoolgirl to him and could only hope she hadn't drooled. She'd never seen him before, but she would bet he belonged in the VIP room. Maybe he was an actor. He certainly looked good enough to be on the screen. "I couldn't seem to get him to hear me."

Mr. Gorgeous's lips curved up as he leaned against the bar. "I don't think his ears are the problem. The man seems a bit blind to me."

Everly wasn't sure what he meant, but she found it impossible to look away from him. "I guess he's really busy tonight. The place is packed. I even heard the strangest rumor that the president is here."

The man laughed and sidled closer. "I'm sure the leader of the free world can get better booze at the White House." He held out that big hand of his. "Name's Gabriel."

Like the archangel except in a really well-cut suit. His name was fitting. She put her hand in his, and he immediately covered it with his other. His palms swallowed her hand, the heat from his skin warming her own.

"I'm, um . . . Eve. I-it's nice to meet you."

She didn't like the idea of this man calling her the same thing as all her business associates. Only her family had ever called her Eve. Tonight, she didn't want to be the woman worrying about her job and how she was going to afford her loft. She'd rather be someone whose only pressing concern was to flirt with a hot guy. This conversation was likely to go nowhere, but she could fantasize about the handsome stranger.

Everly knew she was something of a wunderkind computer geek, but maybe Eve could be a flirty seductress. Eve could drink her wine and pretend that the gorgeous man beside her saw her as an irresistible woman.

Yes, she would like to be Eve tonight.

"It's nice to meet you, Eve. You live around here?"

She shook her head. "No, I have a place in Brooklyn. How about you?"

"I was born on the Upper East Side, but I get out as often as possible."

The bartender put the drinks in front of them. "Here you go, sir."

Gabriel passed him what looked like two hundred-dollar bills. "Keep the change."

So he was wealthy. It wasn't surprising since he'd admitted he'd been born in this part of town. She sipped her fifteen-dollar glass of wine. "You're a generous man."

He took a healthy swig of Scotch. "Not really. This is expensive booze. I can't help it; I'm a Scotch snob. I like it to be a single malt and at least able to vote. I'm more flexible on my other tastes." He cast a sidelong glance back toward the table she'd been sitting at. "Is that your husband over there?"

Everly looked back. Scott was sitting by himself again, Tavia now engrossed in another conversation at a nearby table with others on Crawford's management team, gesticulating as quickly as her lips moved. "No. He's just a friend. I'm not exactly his type."

"Then most men here tonight are blind it seems."

She could almost feel his gaze like a physical caress, moving from her eyes to her chest. His stare lingered there for a moment before he shook his head as though he was correcting himself. At his inspection, she stifled the urge to shiver. "Are you with the VIP party that's occupying all the waitstaff?"

He grimaced, though it did nothing to mar his beauty. "I'm afraid I am, but I needed to get out for a minute. I thought I'd stretch my legs and fend for myself. Now I'm happy I did. I saw you on the street earlier."

"Really?" He'd noticed her?

Gabriel nodded. "You were walking down Eighty-fourth. I suppose you were coming here. Were you with the crowd at the church?"

Nope, she'd hovered near the back, not wanting to see the casket that represented the death of a friend she would long mourn. She didn't want to talk about the funeral now. Since Gabriel lived in the area, he'd probably been doing something happier today. Why bring down his mood, too? Besides, tonight she was Eve—a woman without problems. "I was in the mood for a drink."

"Well, I was, too. Maybe we can share a couple. This place is crowded though."

Was he merely making an observation or actually suggesting she leave with him? Her heart rate tripled. Yes, she knew she shouldn't run off with a stranger. Serial killers could be beautiful, too. And yet, the idea of getting to know this man intrigued her.

"Gabe? Come on, man. We're waiting on you. They found the cigars, but Zack won't light up until you come back." A tall, muscular man with chocolate eyes and black hair in a buzz cut joined them, glancing at her with a smile. "Hello. My name's Dax. What's yours?"

Gabriel narrowed his eyes and put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Her name is I Saw Her First."

Dax put his hands up as if to concede the point. He looked terribly amused. "Well, that's a lovely name, but Gabe needs to go see our old friend, who won't be here much longer because he has important things to do. He's leaving in twenty minutes. Something about a crisis in the Middle East. Like that won't be there tomorrow."

“All right.” Gabriel sent her what seemed to be a regretful smile. “It was nice to meet you, Eve. I don’t suppose you’re hanging out here all night?”

She didn’t want to let him walk away, but apparently her little fantasy was going to end sooner than expected. And it was probably for the best. Running off with a stranger for a hot fling while her life was in turmoil wasn’t smart . . . though the escape would have been nice. “No. But it was nice to meet you. Thanks for the drink.”

Before she was tempted to blurt out her phone number, Everly turned away and rejoined Scott.

“Who’s the hottie?” He watched Gabriel and Dax disappear into the back of the bar. “Or should I say *hotties*, plural? I didn’t get a good look at them, but you can tell a lot from a man’s backside. Tell me one of them is gay and we’re about to get lucky.”

She sighed and took another sip of what would likely be her last glass of wine for the night. “Nope. We’re definitely not getting lucky.”

The kind of luck it took to snag gorgeous Gabriel only seemed to happen to other girls. She took another drink and wished she’d been able to play Eve a little longer.

TWO

Gabe couldn’t stop thinking about Eve. He tried to focus on the conversation around him, but all he could see were those wide hazel eyes and the way her reddish hair tumbled around her shoulders, curling down to those lush breasts.

It had been a very long time since he’d gotten hard simply by looking at a woman.

“I’m just saying, Liz is going to be pissed.” Roman had ditched his jacket and tie and looked every inch the Beltway player he was. He sat back and puffed on his cigar. “Did you tell her?”

Zack shook his head. “I’m not stupid. I’m going to tell her I came up here to meet with the UN delegation from . . . I don’t know. Pick some war-torn country. I’ll tell her I was trying to make peace or something.”

Elizabeth Matthews was Zack’s press secretary but she’d also served as his work wife since Joy’s death. Gabriel was grateful Zack had her to lean on. His old friend had been so hollow for the longest time. Even as he’d accepted the highest office in the nation, Gabe had known his friend felt dead inside. Two years into his first term, and he was finally joking again. Gabe suspected lovely blonde Liz had a lot to do with that.

“Zack, come on, man. You’re the leader of the free world and you’re scared of your press secretary?” Connor shook his head.

Roman patted his boss on the back. “We’re all scared of Liz. She might look cute, but that woman has three rows of teeth and they’re all razor sharp. Trust me. When she finds out—and she will find out because she’s also got eyes in the back of her head—she’ll kick his ass.”

“I’m sure kicking isn’t what Zack would like to do to her ass.” Dax winked. “Shit. Did I say that out loud?”

They all looked to Zack, but he laughed. “You’ve spent way too much time on that boat of yours, man. You’ve forgotten the fine art of diplomacy.”

"I don't think he ever had it," Gabe replied. "Don't you remember Dax was the one who got us all detention because he told the math teacher where to stick his calculator?"

Dax shook his head. "Yeah, that was not a fun day. Mad snuck out the back window because he had a date, and we had to cover for him. Asshole."

Connor laughed. "Damn, but I'm going to miss him." He shook his head as though clearing his thoughts. "So, are you ever going to give in to temptation and ask Liz out?"

Zack scoffed. "I don't know if you've noticed, but my job is kind of demanding. I don't have a ton of time for dating."

Gabe leaned forward, warming to the topic. "Excuses, man. We've all got demanding jobs. You know you like her."

"Yes, you all have demanding jobs. And how many of you are married?" Zack pointed out. "None. Zero. Zilch. Besides me, Dax is the only one of you to give matrimony a whirl, and that didn't work out so well."

"Hey, I am looking for the next Mrs. Spencer," Dax said. "Who will surely be an ex after a year or two on the job."

"Well, naturally, since you admit being your wife is work," Roman shot back. "Besides, I think it's traditionally called *marriage*."

"Hey, military wives call it a job. They don't have it easy. There's a reason Courtney left me," Dax admitted. "But that shouldn't stop Zack from sneaking around the White House and getting a little something-something. Tell me you haven't thought about doing it in the Lincoln Bedroom. Or in that room with all the china. Why the fuck do you need all that china? How many plates does one man need?"

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