

Tab 1

Chapter One

How to Love the Rich Without Loving Them

I have always hated rich men, which is inconvenient, because most of the things I love most in this world require at least one of them standing nearby with a signature pen.

It isn't a cute personality quirk or one of those ironic little statements women make at dinner parties to sound complicated and interesting. It isn't the kind of hatred that dissolves after a glass of champagne or a charming smile across a white tablecloth. It's older than that. Deeper. Bone-deep and stubborn and strangely principled. I hate the way they enter rooms like gravity tilts in their favor. I hate the lazy certainty in their posture, the unconscious assumption that doors will open, that seats will be offered, that people will adjust themselves to accommodate their existence. I hate the inheritance boys who mistake luck for intelligence and the loud ones who think volume is a substitute for character. I hate the ones who believe buying you dinner counts as personality and the ones who talk about "hard work" with trust funds sitting quietly behind their teeth like unpaid interns.

I hate rich men.

Which would be noble, almost admirable, if I weren't currently standing barefoot in a forty-two-floor glass penthouse worth more than a small country, sipping vintage champagne at eight in the morning while the Manhattan skyline unfolds outside my windows like a private performance staged exclusively for me.

Hypocrisy, unfortunately, looks spectacular on me.

From this high up, the city doesn't feel real. It feels curated. Composed. Like a film set waiting for actors to hit their marks. The sunrise spills between the buildings slowly and luxuriously, gold light pouring over steel and glass until the river ignites and the windows across the skyline flash like a thousand discreet signals. Steam rises from the streets in soft white ribbons. Traffic murmurs instead of roars. Everything looks quieter, prettier, more obedient, like distance has filtered out the ugliness.

It feels almost illegal, the beauty of it.

Like I bribed the sky.

The apartment behind me is silent in that distinctly expensive way that only money can manufacture. No humming pipes. No neighbor arguments bleeding through drywall. No footsteps overhead. Just stillness. Thick, velvety stillness, the kind that exists when everyone around you owns three properties and is never actually home long enough to make noise in any of them. The marble floors stay cool beneath my feet, smooth and indulgent. The air smells faintly of citrus and polished stone. Every surface gleams as though it's being photographed at all times. Cream limestone. Chrome fixtures. Sculptural furniture that looks less like seating and more like a warning that poor decisions are not allowed here.

Nothing in this apartment is sentimental.

Sentiment creates clutter.

Clutter creates weakness.

And weakness is expensive.

I prefer control.

I pause in front of the window and catch my reflection layered over the skyline, my body superimposed against towers of glass and light like I personally own the horizon. My hair falls loose down my back in dark, heavy waves, still warm from sleep. My mouth is soft, but my eyes aren't. My eyes are sharp and observant and a little dangerous, like I'm constantly calculating something no one else can see.

People always tell me I'm beautiful like it's an accident, like I tripped and fell into symmetry.

They never understand.

Beauty isn't luck.

Beauty is leverage.

Beauty is watching powerful men lose their train of thought mid-sentence. Beauty is security guards opening doors without asking questions. Beauty is waitlists disappearing and reservations appearing and people assuming you belong exactly where you are. Beauty is influence without paperwork.

It's not a gift.

It's a weapon.

And I have never once been careless with weapons.

Behind me, on the long marble kitchen island, sits the real center of my universe.

My planner.

Cream leather. Gold-edged pages. Immaculate.

Some women keep journals filled with feelings. Messy ink and tear stains and midnight confessions about boys who don't text back.

I schedule mine.

Because when you're dating one powerful man, you have romance.

When you're dating eight, you have logistics.

I open the planner and the week unfolds with the precision of a military operation. Times staggered across boroughs. Drivers arranged through different services so no one recognizes patterns. Charity galas carefully separated. Restaurants rotated. No overlapping neighborhoods. No suspicious coincidences. No chance encounters that could implode my life like a badly timed bomb.

It looks less like a love life and more like air traffic control.

Honestly, the CIA should hire me.

People assume women like me stumble into luxury. That we're lucky. That some billionaire tripped over our heels and handed us a black card out of destiny or divine intervention.

Please.

Men like these don't fall.

They're hunted.

Carefully. Patiently. Strategically. With excellent lighting and better timing.

Every single one of mine was selected like an acquisition. Vetted. Studied. Evaluated for long-term stability and projected returns.

I didn't choose them because they were hot.

That was a bonus.

I chose them because they were useful.

Powerful.

Untouchable.

Men whose lives came with infrastructure.

And then, extremely inconveniently, they turned out to be wonderful.

Which frankly feels unfair.

My finger taps the first name on the page, written in neat black ink.

Adrian Wolfe.

Sebastian Hale.

Roman Kade.

Elliot Park.

Victor Lang.

Matteo Cruz.

Theo Laurent.

Dr. Alexander Vale.

Captain Lucien Moreau.

Eight men.

Eight empires.

Eight entirely different kinds of power orbiting me like planets that somehow believe I'm their sun.

And the most ridiculous part?

Every single one of them thinks this is fate.

That I'm simply charming.

Simply lucky.

Simply irresistible.

No one suspects the truth.

That every smile was calculated.

Every encounter engineered.

Every relationship negotiated like a merger.

I lift my champagne and watch the city glitter below, the glass cold against my fingers, the morning light catching the gold bubbles like tiny, rising stars.

I still hate rich men.

I hate their confidence and their ease and the way the world rearranges itself for them.

But I love being rich.

I love the quiet.

I love the marble.

I love the view.

And if mastering eight of them makes me a villain?

Fine.

At least I'll be a very well-dressed one.

Tab 2

Chapter Two

Adrian Wolfe, or The Man Who Builds Foundations Instead of Fireworks

By the time Adrian texts me, the morning has fully ripened into that particular brand of quiet only expensive neighborhoods seem capable of producing, the kind where even the traffic sounds curated and the sunlight looks filtered, as though reality itself passed through a designer lens before touching anything I own. The city hums far below, distant and softened, like someone turned the volume down on the world out of respect for my sleep schedule, and I'm leaning against the marble counter with a cup of black coffee warming my palms, watching reflections slide across the glass towers outside like slow-moving currency.

His name lights up my phone with no fanfare.

No emojis.

No theatrics.

Just two clean words.

Adrian Wolfe.

There are names that feel like people.

And then there are names that feel like institutions.

Adrian is the second kind.

You don't date Adrian Wolfe.

You interface with him.

Tech empire. Venture capital web. Silent partnerships in half the startups currently pretending they're self-made. The sort of man senators "happen" to have lunch with and reporters "can't quite confirm" owns certain things. He's not flashy rich. Not yacht-and-fireworks rich.

He's infrastructure rich.

The kind of rich that quietly builds the world and lets everyone else think it appeared naturally.

Dating him isn't romance.

It's urban planning.

His message is exactly what I expect from him.

Polite. Precise. Almost annoyingly considerate.

Good morning. I'm at the new building. Would you like to come by later? I can send a car, or you're welcome to come on your own. Whatever's easier for you. No rush.

I read it twice, my mouth curving slowly.

God.

He does this every time.

The choice.

Always the choice.

Men at his level usually assume. They dispatch drivers like summons. They treat women like calendar blocks to be confirmed.

Adrian asks.

Would you like.

If it's easier.

No rush.

Like my time belongs to me.

Like seeing him would be a favor.

Which, strategically speaking, is genius.

Because nothing makes me show up faster than a man who acts like I don't have to.

Of course I'm going.

Not because I'm eager.

Not because my heart flutters.

Because Adrian Wolfe is essentially a walking expansion plan.

One afternoon with him equals three introductions, two investment opportunities, and a table I'd otherwise wait six months to sit at.

Romance is adorable.

Access is currency.

I type back that I'll come myself, that I prefer arriving on my own schedule, and he simply replies:

I'll be waiting.

No follow-up.

No tracking.

No "text me when you leave."

Just trust.

Quiet confidence.

Perfect.

Dressing for Adrian is less about looking desirable and more about looking formidable, which sounds counterintuitive until you understand men like him. He doesn't respond to glitter or sweetness or anything that feels like it's trying too hard. He notices structure. Intention. Clean lines.

Competence. He likes women who look like they could run a board meeting, not chase a boyfriend.

So I give him architecture.

A silk blouse the color of fresh cream that skims my skin like water. Tailored black trousers that lengthen my legs and sharpen my silhouette. Heels that click decisively against marble. Gold jewelry minimal enough to whisper instead of shout. My hair straight and glossy down my back, makeup precise and restrained.

When I look in the mirror, I don't look soft.

I look expensive.

There's a difference.

Soft invites protection.

Expensive demands respect.

Men like Adrian don't fall for dolls.

They fall for equals.

Which is infinitely more useful to me.

His building rises out of midtown like a blade, all glass and steel and quiet arrogance, sleek in a way that doesn't beg to be noticed because it already assumes you're impressed. There's no giant logo, no dramatic signage. It doesn't scream wealth.

It simply stands there, immaculate, like the physical embodiment of competence.

Inside, the lobby smells like espresso and polished stone. Everything gleams. Floors so clean they reflect the ceiling lights like water. Staff who move efficiently and speak softly. No chaos. No noise. Just money behaving itself.

The receptionist smiles the second she sees me.

“Good morning, Miss Liliene. He’s expecting you.”

Of course he is.

I’m waved straight through to the private elevator without signing anything or explaining who I am.

I never asked Adrian to arrange that.

He simply anticipated it.

That’s how he loves.

Not with gifts.

With friction removal.

Doors unlock before I reach them. Lines disappear. Problems quietly solve themselves.

It’s so subtle it almost feels accidental.

Which makes it infinitely more intimate.

Honestly?

More intimate than diamonds.

When the elevator doors open, he's already there.

Waiting.

Not at a desk.

Not on a call.

Not surrounded by assistants.

Just standing near the windows with two coffees in his hands like a normal man expecting someone he genuinely wants to see.

For a split second, the image almost makes me laugh.

This man commands thousands of employees and probably moved three markets before breakfast.

And yet here he is.

Waiting for me.

When he spots me, something shifts in his face, a softening so slight most people wouldn't notice it. His shoulders drop a fraction. His mouth curves gently. Like the day just improved.

"Hi," he says.

Just that.

No performance.

No charm routine.

Just warm and real.

It's disarming in a way that feels mildly unfair.

"Hi yourself," I reply, accepting the coffee.

It's exactly how I take it.

Black. No sugar.

A detail I mentioned once, months ago, while distracted.

He remembered.

Men who remember details are dangerous.

Anyone can buy you things.

Only invested men memorize you.

And investment?

Investment is leverage.

He takes me upstairs to the rooftop where the city stretches endlessly in every direction, all glass and light and movement, the wind lifting my hair as if the skyline itself is trying to touch me. There's a small table set up near

the edge with breakfast laid out simply and beautifully, nothing over-the-top, nothing theatrical. Just two plates. Two chairs. Coffee. Fruit.

Intimate.

Intentional.

“I thought you might want to see the place before the board does,” he says, almost shy. “Before it gets loud.”

I watch him while he talks through the plans, the pediatric wing he’s funding, the research spaces, the equipment he’s already paid for outright. He explains it like it’s no big deal, like donating millions to children’s healthcare is just something you do between meetings.

I’m not swooning.

I don’t swoon.

I’m evaluating.

A man who builds hospitals quietly is a man with real influence. Real respect. The kind that lasts decades.

Long-term stability.

Excellent asset.

Still, there’s something unfairly sincere about the way his eyes light up when he talks about it, like he genuinely cares, like he forgets he’s supposed to be intimidating.

Perfect men are so inconvenient.

There's nothing obvious to exploit.

They're just... good.

It's terribly annoying.

At some point the wind lifts a strand of my hair across my face, and before I can fix it, his hand rises instinctively. His fingers brush my cheek with absurd gentleness as he tucks it back, the touch careful, almost reverent, like I'm something fragile he doesn't want to mishandle.

He never grabs.

Never assumes.

Never pulls me closer.

Everything he does feels like a question.

His eyes drop to my mouth.

There it is.

The moment.

The gravity shift.

If I leaned in, he'd meet me halfway. Soft. Patient. Devastatingly tender.

Most women would close the gap.

Most women would take the kiss.

But here's the thing about me.

If you give men everything they want immediately, they relax.

And relaxed men stop investing.

So instead, I step closer slowly, letting the space between us heat, my fingers smoothing the lapel of his jacket like it's absentminded, intimate, nothing at all. I feel his breath change. Feel his composure slip just slightly.

God.

I love this part.

Watching powerful men unravel quietly.

Right when he starts to lean in, giving me every opportunity to meet him, I turn my head just enough that my cheek brushes his instead of my lips, a soft ghost of contact that promises everything and delivers absolutely nothing.

When I pull back, his expression is wrecked in the most beautiful way.

Not frustrated.

Not entitled.

Just... wanting.

"I can wait," he says softly.

Like it's the easiest decision he's ever made.

And that right there?

That's why Adrian Wolfe stays.

Not because he's rich.

Not because he's powerful.

But because he looks at me like waiting is a privilege.

Which means by tonight, he'll still be thinking about the almost.

And tomorrow, he'll want me more.

Desire compounds.

And I have always preferred my investments compounding.

Tab 3

Chapter Three

Sebastian Hale, or How to Make Old Money Kneel Without Ever Asking

Tuesday mornings have a different texture than Mondays.

Monday still pretends to be disciplined. Productive. Virtuous.

Tuesday drops the act.

By Tuesday, Manhattan is already tired of itself.

The sidewalks grow sharper. The taxis meaner. Everyone moves like they're late to something vaguely important and deeply unnecessary. Men in navy suits power-walk with Bluetooths blinking in their ears like tiny life-support systems. Women clutch iced coffee like oxygen tanks. The entire city smells faintly of espresso and ambition and quiet desperation.

Everyone is chasing something.

I don't chase.

I select.

Which is why, while the rest of the island is sprinting toward quarterly reports, I'm still in bed at nine-thirty, wrapped in silk sheets the color of champagne, sunlight pouring lazily through my glass walls like it personally approves of my lifestyle.

My phone buzzes once on the nightstand.

Then again.

Unhurried.

Civilized.

Like the sender has never rushed a single day in his life.

I don't even need to look.

Only one man texts like the nineteenth century never ended.

Sebastian.

I roll onto my stomach, hair spilling over my shoulders, and finally pick up the phone.

Are you awake, or are you still terrorizing the world from under silk sheets?

I smile immediately.

God.

He's insufferable.

And I adore it.

Another message follows before I answer.

Harrington's is opening the Renaissance collection privately this morning. Thought you might like to criticize dead Italians with me. Lunch after? I promise not to duel anyone.

Who talks like that?

Who casually says privately like it's ordering takeout?

Old money does.

Generational wealth does.

Men whose families have owned land since before maps were accurate do.

Sebastian Hale doesn't invite you places.

He grants access.

Dating him isn't romance.

It's inheritance by proximity.

The first time we went out, I skipped three velvet ropes and somehow ended up drinking wine in a room with a duke. A literal duke. I still don't know where people purchase dukes. Do they come with certificates? Are they seasonal?

Sebastian navigated the whole thing like it was CVS.

"Hello, Arthur."

"Of course we'll take the private entrance."

"Yes, send up the '82."

Like the world is just... his living room.

Useful man.

Very useful man.

I stare at the message a second longer, because Sebastian enjoys the dance. If I answer too quickly, he'll tease me for a week about my eagerness, and I refuse to give him that satisfaction.

So I type, deliberately slow:

Convince me.

Three dots appear instantly.

Of course.

There's a Caravaggio they're not showing the public. I want your opinion. You're the only person I know ruthless enough to critique saints.

I laugh into my pillow.

Flattery, but customized.

He doesn't call me pretty.

He calls me ruthless.

Which, frankly, is much hotter.

Fine, I type back. **But if you're late, I'm stealing something.**

His reply comes immediately.

Darling, if you want something, I'll simply buy the building.

The audacity.

The sincerity.

The absolute lack of irony.

Perfect.

Dressing for Sebastian is an entirely different sport.

With Adrian, I sharpen.

With Sebastian, I melt.

He doesn't respond to structure or power silhouettes. He responds to softness. Texture. Fabric that moves when you breathe. He likes women who look like they belong in oil paintings and candlelight, not boardrooms.

He appreciates aesthetics the way other men appreciate stocks.

So I give him poetry.

A cream silk slip dress that pours down my body like liquid. Thin straps. Bare shoulders. Cashmere draped loosely over my arms. Gold rings stacked lazily on my fingers. Hair left soft and slightly tousled, like I woke up beautiful by accident.

I didn't.

Nothing about me is accidental.

But Sebastian loves the illusion of effortless.

So I curate it carefully.

When I look in the mirror, I don't look sharp or intimidating.

I look expensive.

Like a secret.

Like someone men write wills about.

Perfect.

Harrington's Gallery hides between two townhouses like it's embarrassed by the concept of the general public. No big signage. No banners. Just a small brass plaque and a doorman who looks like he's personally rejected presidents.

He opens the door the second he sees me.

No questions.

Sebastian effect.

Inside, the air smells like old paper, polished wood, and money that's been quiet for centuries. The floors gleam dark and rich. The walls are heavy with gold frames and soft lighting designed to flatter both the art and the people wealthy enough to see it.

And there he is.

Leaning against a marble column like he stepped out of a historical drama.

Navy suit. No tie. White shirt open at the collar just enough to be indecent. Signet ring glinting lazily. That sinful, knowing half-smile already in place like he timed my entrance down to the second.

Sebastian never fidgets.

Never checks his phone.

He just waits.

Like time belongs to him.

When his eyes find me, they drag slowly over my body with undisguised appreciation, and honestly?

If anyone else looked at me like that, I'd file a complaint.

From him?

It feels like worship.

"Well," he says softly, pushing off the column, "you've just ruined every painting in this room."

"Tragic," I reply. "They seemed nice."

He laughs under his breath and offers me his hand like we're about to waltz instead of walk.

His fingers are warm, guiding but never pulling.

Sebastian never pulls.

None of my men pull.

Pulling is for insecure boys.

Powerful men simply assume you'll come with them.

And I always do.

The gallery is empty except for us and one discreet curator pretending not to watch.

Private viewing.

Just like he promised.

We move slowly from piece to piece, our footsteps echoing softly against the wood floors. Sebastian talks the entire time, but not like a lecturer.

Like a storyteller.

He tells me who funded which painter. Which aristocrat cheated on his wife with a sculptor. Which piece was stolen during a war and quietly bought back by his grandfather.

History, but gossipy.

Centuries reduced to drama.

It's absurdly charming.

Every now and then he glances at me instead of the paintings, like I'm the real exhibit.

“So,” he murmurs in front of a massive canvas, “what’s the verdict?”

“The lighting is criminal,” I say. “And the proportions are trying too hard.”

He grins slowly.

“God, I adore you.”

Not you’re pretty.

Not you look nice.

Adore.

My brain.

Men who admire intelligence stay longer.

Long-term retention.

Excellent.

I tuck that away mentally.

At some point we end up too close together.

It happens the way these things always happen.

Gradually.

Naturally.

His hand settles lightly at the small of my back as he leans in to point something out, warm through the thin silk of my dress. Not possessive. Not claiming.

Protective.

Gentle.

Like I'm porcelain.

God.

If I were sentimental, this would ruin me.

Instead, I analyze it.

Sebastian Hale, heir to centuries of wealth, touching me like I'm rare.

Power dynamics are fascinating.

His thumb brushes my waist absentmindedly.

His gaze drops to my mouth.

Slow.

Intentional.

There it is.

The moment.

The lean.

The almost.

He moves closer like he's approaching something sacred, not something he's entitled to.

Soft.

Reverent.

If I let him kiss me, it would be devastating.

The kind of kiss that makes women forget their own names.

Which is exactly why I don't.

Instead, I turn my head at the last second so his lips brush my cheek instead, warm and fleeting and absolutely infuriating.

When I pull back, his expression looks almost pained.

"You're wicked," he murmurs.

"I prefer strategic," I say sweetly.

He laughs, low and helpless, like he's already lost something he never even had.

Perfect.

Because here's the truth about Sebastian Hale.

He's owned everything his entire life.

Land.

Art.

History.

Cities.

So the one thing he can't quite have?

The one thing just out of reach?

That's what obsesses him.

Which means the less I give, the deeper he falls.

And the deeper he falls,

the more doors open for me.

Love stories are cute.

But leverage?

Leverage lasts centuries.

And Sebastian, darling old-money prince that he is,

understands centuries very well.

Tab 4

Chapter Four

Roman Kade, or How to Tame a Storm Without Ever Getting Wet

By Wednesday, Manhattan stops pretending to be civilized.

Monday wears a tie.

Tuesday carries a book.

Wednesday rolls up its sleeves and breaks things.

The city feels sharper somehow, like the air itself has teeth. Taxi horns sound less like requests and more like threats. Coffee tastes stronger, meaner. Everyone walks faster, talks louder, guards their space like territory. Deals collapse. Markets twitch. Tempers shorten. You can feel the aggression humming just under the surface, like the entire island is one bad email away from a fistfight.

I like Wednesdays.

Wednesdays are honest.

No silk.

No manners.

No heritage.

Just power.

Which is why Wednesdays belong to Roman.

And Roman has never pretended to be anything he isn't.

I'm barefoot in my kitchen, laptop open, spreadsheets glowing faintly against the marble like something illicit, numbers stacking and sliding as I rebalance three small investments Adrian's people quietly flagged for me yesterday. The espresso machine hums softly behind me. Sunlight cuts across the counter in long golden bands. My hair is still twisted up, glasses perched on my nose, my brain fully in math mode.

Then my phone buzzes.

No name banner.

Just him.

Roman doesn't decorate texts.

He sends information the way soldiers send coordinates.

Two words.

Eat yet

No question mark.

No hello.

Just: survival check.

I smile before I can stop myself.

Working, I type.

Three seconds later:

That wasn't the question

I actually laugh out loud.

God.

If Adrian is precision and Sebastian is poetry, Roman is blunt force trauma.

There is nothing decorative about him.

He doesn't charm.

He doesn't perform.

He doesn't flirt in metaphors.

He just... shows up and makes sure you're alive.

Which, frankly, is deeply inconveniently attractive.

I sigh dramatically at my empty counter, grab a strawberry, bite it like it personally offended me, and text:

Eating now. Happy?

His reply:

Come out. Sun's decent

That's Roman for:

Let me take you somewhere nice but pretend it's casual because I don't know how to be romantic without feeling stupid.

It's ridiculous.

It works every time.

I close the laptop.

Because here's the thing about Roman.

Time with him isn't networking.

It isn't strategy.

It isn't access.

It's peace.

And peace, when you live like I do, is a luxury item.

Roman wasn't hunted like the others.

He wasn't researched or targeted or gently maneuvered into my orbit.

He happened.

Which makes him more dangerous than all of them.

We met at a bar during a charity afterparty, the kind of place where the lighting is flattering and the men are handsy and everyone's pretending

they're less drunk than they are. I was halfway through a very expensive whiskey when someone grabbed my wrist like I belonged to him.

Before I could even process it, Roman stepped between us.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically.

Just stepped in.

Solid.

Still.

Calm.

He didn't shove the guy.

Didn't threaten him.

Just looked at him and said, very quietly, "Don't."

That's it.

Don't.

The man apologized.

Apologized.

Like Roman had just shown him a preview of his funeral.

Later someone leaned over and whispered, "That's Kade. Private equity. Ex-military. Owns half the security contracts downtown. You don't mess with him."

I looked across the room at him then, broad shoulders, tattoos slipping from under his sleeves, talking softly to a bartender like nothing had happened.

And I remember thinking:

Ah.

Human shield.

Extremely useful.

I got his number before the night ended.

Obviously.

Dressing for Roman is different from the others in a way that feels almost funny.

If I showed up in silk and diamonds, he'd look at me like I was headed to court.

He likes real.

Comfortable.

Touchable.

Things you can run in if necessary.

Roman's ideal date outfit probably includes sneakers and a knife.

So I compromise.

High-waisted jeans that hug just right. Thin black knit top. Leather jacket.

Low boots. Hair in a loose ponytail. Minimal makeup.

Effortless.

Approachable.

The kind of look that says I could either kiss you or steal your motorcycle.

Balance.

Always balance.

He's waiting outside my building when I step out.

Of course he is.

Leaning against his matte black car like he accidentally wandered out of an action film.

Dark jeans. Fitted tee. Jacket. Boots. Tattoos down both arms like inked secrets.

Objectively?

Terrifying.

Subjectively?

Disgustingly hot.

But it's not his size that makes people move out of his way.

It's his stillness.

Roman stands like a man who has already calculated every exit.

Like he knows exactly how many people are on the street.

Like if something went wrong, he'd solve it in under thirty seconds.

Crowds part around him without realizing they're doing it.

Instinct.

Predator math.

When he sees me, though, the entire edge of him softens.

Like someone turned the volume down.

"Hey," he says.

Not baby.

Not beautiful.

Just hey.

Like I'm home.

"You interrogating my breakfast habits again?" I ask.

“You forget to eat,” he says calmly. “Then you get dizzy. Then you lie about being fine.”

I blink.

Annoyed.

Because he’s right.

He opens the passenger door without flair, without theatrics, just quiet habit.

Like of course he would.

Like it’s not even worth mentioning.

I slide in and the car smells like leather and something warm and clean and distinctly him.

Safe.

God.

Roman smells safe.

Which is wildly inconvenient.

He drives one-handed, relaxed, the other resting loosely near the gearshift. Not touching me. Never touching unless I initiate.

For a man built like a tank, he’s absurdly gentle.

“Where are we going?” I ask.

“Food.”

“Poetic.”

“You’ll like it.”

That’s all.

And infuriatingly?

He’s always right.

The place he takes me isn’t fancy.

Of course it isn’t.

It’s a small rooftop diner near the river, half-hidden, all sunlight and metal chairs and coffee that tastes like childhood. No influencers. No paparazzi. No men trying to prove anything.

Just good food and air that doesn’t smell like ambition.

Roman doesn’t show off wealth.

He hides it.

His watch probably costs six figures, but you’d never know unless you looked closely.

Quiet money.

My favorite kind.

We sit across from each other and he orders for me without asking.

Which should be illegal.

But somehow isn't.

Because he memorized my preferences months ago.

Eggs like this. No mushrooms. Extra toast. Coffee black.

He doesn't assume.

He remembers.

Huge difference.

"You worry too much," I tell him.

"It's my job."

"To feed me?"

"To make sure nothing bad happens to you."

He says it like gravity.

Like fact.

Like the sky being blue.

God.

Men really out here being devastatingly competent for free.

After we eat, we walk along the water.

The wind lifts my hair. Sunlight flashes off the river. The city hums behind us.

He doesn't hold my hand.

Doesn't crowd me.

But he's always slightly to my left.

Always between me and the street.

Always half a step behind like a shadow.

No one bumps into me.

No one brushes past me.

The world rearranges itself.

Walking with Roman feels like diplomatic immunity.

At one point a bike flies too close and his hand slides to my waist automatically, steadying me.

Warm.

Firm.

Gone a second later.

Like he didn't even think about it.

My brain, traitor that it is, short-circuits a little.

Annoying.

Highly annoying.

We stop at the railing.

Water glittering.

Sun low.

Quiet.

He shrugs off his jacket and drapes it over my shoulders without asking.

Heavy.

Warm.

Smells like him.

Ridiculous how comforting that is.

“You cold?” he asks.

“No.”

He leaves it there anyway.

His fingers brush my collarbone as he adjusts it, slow and careful, like I’m breakable.

His eyes drop to my mouth.

There it is.

The moment.

The lean.

The almost.

Roman moves slower than the others.

Like he's afraid to scare me.

Like he'd rather step back than risk making me uncomfortable.

If he kissed me, it wouldn't be heat.

It would be warmth.

Steady.

Safe.

And safety?

Safety makes you stupid.

So instead of closing the distance, I step closer just enough to mess with his head, slide my hands into the pockets of his jacket, and smile up at him like I don't notice anything at all.

Coy.

Playful.

Untouchable.

His breath hitches.

“Angel,” he mutters.

God.

That nickname should be illegal.

I tilt my head sweetly. “Patience.”

He laughs under his breath, shaking his head like I’m impossible.

Not frustrated.

Not entitled.

Just gone.

Completely gone for me.

Perfect.

Because here’s the thing about Roman Kade.

He doesn’t want ownership.

He doesn’t want control.

He just wants me safe and near.

Which is the easiest kind of man to keep.

And as we stand there with the river blazing gold behind us and his jacket around my shoulders like borrowed armor, I feel that familiar, satisfied little click in my chest.

Another fortress.

Another storm tamed.

Another powerful man who would burn the world before letting anything touch me.

Feelings?

Optional.

Protection?

Priceless.

And I collect priceless things for a living.

Tab 5

Chapter Five

Elliot Park, or How a Genius Accidentally Makes You Feel Like the Smartest Girl in the Room

By Thursday, Manhattan changes its personality again.

The city has moods the way other places have weather.

Monday is ambition.

Tuesday is performance.

Wednesday is violence.

Thursday, though, is intelligence.

You can feel it the second you wake up.

The sidewalks are quieter. The suits softer. The buildings less aggressive, more glass and light and plants creeping up balconies like even the architecture has decided to breathe. Fewer hedge fund boys barking into phones. More people carrying canvas totes and talking about research grants and something called “ethical scaling.”

The air smells like coffee and printer paper and ideas.

Thursday is brain day.

Which means Thursday belongs to Elliot.

And Elliot, unfairly, might be the most dangerous of all of them.

Not because he's intimidating.

Not because he's powerful.

But because he's kind.

Which is honestly much worse.

I'm at my dining table with three open tabs of financial reports glowing on my laptop, half-listening to a podcast about biotech acquisitions while eating strawberries straight from the container like a raccoon in silk pajamas, when my phone lights up.

A small microscope emoji appears next to his name.

He added it months ago as a joke.

He never changed it.

It makes me irrationally fond of him.

Which is suspicious behavior.

Morning. Coffee later? There's a paper I think you'd love. Also... I miss your face.

I stare at the last line for a full five seconds.

I miss your face.

Not:

Are you free.

Want to meet.

Let's schedule something.

Just:

I miss your face.

Like a golden retriever with a PhD.

God.

Who raised this man.

I smile into my coffee despite myself.

Elliot Park is a biotech empire disguised as a cinnamon roll.

Stanford golden boy. Multiple exits before forty. Owns patents that probably saved more lives this year than most hospitals combined. Investors treat him like a prophet. Governments take his calls.

And yet he texts like a softboy who owns three houseplants and cries at Pixar movies.

It's deeply unfair.

And deeply effective.

I type back:

Only if the coffee's good and the paper isn't boring.

Three dots instantly.

Of course.

**I would never disrespect you with boring research. I can send a car.
Or I can come to you. Whatever's easier.**

There it is again.

That pattern my men seem to share like some secret club rule.

Choice.

Not command.

God, they're exhausting.

Perfect.

Infuriatingly perfect.

I'll come to you. I want to see the lab, I reply.

Deal. I'll be downstairs so you don't get lost.

Sir.

I own property in three boroughs.

But thank you.

I met Elliot at a medical fundraising panel nearly a year ago, the kind where everyone wears expensive glasses and uses words like “disruption”

incorrectly. A dozen men in suits were performing intelligence, tossing around jargon like confetti, trying to sound like they personally invented oxygen.

Elliot wasn't performing.

He was just... correct.

Soft voice. Calm answers. Real numbers.

The kind of intelligence that doesn't need to flex because it already won.

When the moderator asked about accessibility, everyone gave diplomatic non-answers.

So I asked a better question.

"What's the point of innovation if the people who need it can't afford it?"

The room went quiet.

Elliot looked at me like I'd just cracked open the sky.

After the panel, he followed me into the hallway, not to get my number, not to flirt, but to continue the conversation.

Actually continue it.

Like my brain was the interesting part.

Which, frankly, is rarer than diamonds.

Three dates later, he had quietly reorganized my investment portfolio and increased my returns by thirty percent “because your money should work harder.”

Thirty percent.

Casually.

Like he'd watered a plant.

I kept him immediately.

Obviously.

Dressing for Elliot requires softness.

Not weakness.

Warmth.

Approachability.

He doesn't care about couture or sharp silhouettes or looking intimidating.

He likes women who look like they read.

So I give him academia chic.

High-waisted trousers. Soft cashmere sweater. Low heels. Hair loose and touchable. Minimal gold. Lip balm instead of lipstick.

The kind of outfit that says:

I might help you cure cancer or ruin you emotionally. Depends on the day.

Perfect.

His headquarters is nothing like Adrian's glass fortress or Sebastian's old-money cathedrals.

It's bright.

Open.

Filled with plants.

Plants.

In a billionaire's building.

Insane.

Sunlight pours through huge windows. Researchers walk around in sneakers and hoodies. Whiteboards everywhere. The air smells like coffee and sanitizer and citrus cleaner.

It feels alive.

Useful.

Money being spent on brains instead of chandeliers.

Extremely sexy.

When the elevator opens, Elliot is already there waiting like an eager lab assistant who accidentally became a billionaire.

Sleeves rolled. Glasses today. Hair slightly messy like he's been running his hands through it. White shirt. No tie.

He looks like he belongs in a bookstore, not on Forbes.

When he sees me, his entire face lights up.

Not suave.

Not controlled.

Just genuine, unfiltered happiness.

Like I'm the best part of his day.

It's so unstrategic it almost hurts.

"Hi," he says, a little breathless. "You look... wow."

"Wow isn't very scientific," I tease.

He actually blushes.

Blushes.

A man worth several billion dollars.

Blushing.

Over me.

If this were anyone else, I'd weaponize it immediately.

With Elliot?

I just find it adorable.

Which is concerning.

He hands me a coffee.

Exactly how I take it.

"I remembered," he says quickly, like he's worried it might seem coincidental.

Of course he remembered.

Men in love memorize you like scripture.

It's honestly embarrassing for them.

Very convenient for me.

He gives me a tour like an excited kid showing off a science fair project, explaining everything with careful enthusiasm, never talking down to me, never simplifying unless I ask. He introduces me to researchers like I'm important, like I belong there.

"This is Liliene," he says. "She asks the best questions."

The best questions.

Not beautiful.

Not charming.

Smart.

God.

It's disgustingly effective.

He reserves a small conference room with a river view "because it's quieter when you're here," and I realize he blocked off half his afternoon.

Half.

For me.

Billion-dollar calendars bending like that?

Excellent ROI.

We sit close at the table, shoulders brushing, papers spread out between us as he walks me through some breakthrough like it's the most fascinating thing in the world.

His hands move when he talks. His eyes light up. His voice softens when he looks at me.

He smells like soap and paper and something warm.

Comforting.

Dangerously comforting.

If Adrian is power and Sebastian is legacy and Roman is protection, Elliot is possibility.

A future that feels gentle.

Which might be the most dangerous thing of all.

At some point he quiets.

Looks at me.

Really looks.

Soft. Fond. Like I'm something miraculous.

His hand inches across the table, brushing mine, hesitant.

Not grabbing.

Asking.

Always asking.

If he kissed me, it would be sweet.

Tender.

The kind of kiss that makes women cry in bathrooms later because they accidentally caught feelings.

Absolutely unacceptable.

So instead, I lace our fingers together for one brief second, squeeze gently, then pull away like nothing happened.

Affection.

Measured.

Controlled.

Just enough.

His breath catches like I handed him the moon.

God.

They're all so powerful.

So brilliant.

So terrifying to the rest of the world.

And yet one small touch from me turns them soft.

It's almost unfair.

Almost.

But life's expensive.

And I have extremely high standards.

So I'll take the genius billionaire with the gentle heart and the research empire and the coffee he memorized for me.

Feelings optional.

Access mandatory.

Always.

Tab 6

Chapter Six

Victor Lang, or How to Date a Man Who Could Legally Destroy You and Instead Brings You Tea

By Friday, Manhattan regains its posture.

The city straightens its spine, smooths its hair, reapplies lipstick.

Deals close on Fridays.

Wars end on Fridays.

Careers quietly die behind frosted glass on Fridays.

There's something polished about the air, something controlled, like the entire island collectively decided to behave itself before the weekend. The chaos of the week condenses into sleek black cars and low voices and restaurant reservations that require three assistants and a small miracle to secure. Men walk slower. Smarter. Like everything they say costs money.

Fridays don't belong to muscle or charm.

Fridays belong to precision.

Which means Fridays belong to Victor Lang.

And if I'm being honest, Victor might be the most terrifying man I date.

Not because he's cold.

Not because he's cruel.

But because he is relentlessly, surgically competent.

Nothing is sexier than competence.

Not yachts.

Not abs.

Not private jets.

Competence.

Competence will ruin a woman faster than lust ever could.

I'm at my dining table with contracts spread around me like tarot cards when his message comes through, the late afternoon sun slanting gold across the marble, turning the pages almost luminous. The apartment is quiet enough that I can hear the faint scratch of paper when I turn it, the soft hum of the city forty floors below sounding more like distant waves than traffic.

My phone buzzes once.

Victor never double texts.

He respects time the way surgeons respect arteries.

Carefully.

Deliberately.

One incision only.

Afternoon, Liliene. I reviewed the lease you forwarded. Two clauses concern me. I drafted revisions. May I bring them by, or would you prefer a summary first? Also, have you eaten today?

I stare at the screen and laugh softly to myself.

God.

Even his texts wear suits.

Everything about Victor reads like a perfectly formatted email with a pulse.

Romance, but make it legally binding.

I met Victor because I hired him.

Which feels aggressively on-brand for me.

A year ago, I almost signed a commercial lease that would have quietly gutted me over ten years with hidden escalations and termination penalties so predatory they might as well have had teeth. Someone recommended Victor Lang with the kind of reverence usually reserved for surgeons and hitmen.

“Best litigation attorney in Manhattan,” they said. “Expensive, but untouchable.”

I like expensive.

Expensive usually means effective.

He reviewed my contract in under an hour, called me personally, and said in the calmest voice imaginable, "If you sign this, you'll regret it for the next decade. Give me twelve hours."

Twelve hours later, the lease came back shorter, cleaner, and forty percent cheaper.

Forty.

Percent.

Other women get roses.

Victor saved me six figures.

Frankly, that's foreplay.

I never emotionally recovered.

Bring them, I type back. I trust you more than PDFs.

Three dots.

Then:

I'll be there in twenty. I'll bring tea. You sounded tired last time.

Tea.

Not champagne.

Not wine.

Tea.

Like I'm someone he wants comfortable, not impressed.

It's so offensively thoughtful I consider blocking him for my own safety.

Dressing for Victor is its own language.

With Adrian, I'm sharp.

With Sebastian, I'm art.

With Roman, I'm effortless.

With Elliot, I'm soft.

With Victor?

I'm lethal.

He likes refinement. Precision. Women who look like they read contracts for fun and win arguments for sport.

So I give him polish.

A fitted ivory blouse. Tailored pencil skirt. Nude heels. Delicate gold watch. Hair half-pinned back. Lipstick subtle but intentional.

The look of a woman who could absolutely destroy you in court and look polite doing it.

Perfect.

He arrives exactly on time.

Not early.

Not late.

Exactly.

When the elevator doors open, Victor steps out like a man who belongs in black-and-white films.

Charcoal suit. Crisp white shirt. Tie perfectly knotted. Leather folder tucked under one arm. Glasses in the other hand.

He doesn't look flashy.

He looks correct.

Like the human embodiment of a well-drafted clause.

Tall. Lean. Impeccable posture.

The kind of man who never spills anything.

His eyes sweep the room once automatically, cataloging everything, then land on me.

And immediately soften.

Every time.

Without fail.

“Hi,” he says, warm and low, like we’re mid-conversation already.

“Counselor,” I tease.

His mouth curves faintly. “If you call me that, I’m billing you.”

“Send the invoice.”

God, I love how easy we are.

No games.

No drama.

Just two intelligent people quietly dismantling the world together.

He hands me the tea.

Chamomile.

My favorite.

“I thought something calming might help,” he says.

Sir.

If you get any more considerate, I’m going to have to marry you
accidentally.

We sit at the dining table together, shoulders nearly touching, the late
sunlight catching in his glasses as he spreads the papers out with surgical

precision. Watching Victor work is borderline inappropriate. He doesn't shuffle. Doesn't hesitate. Every movement deliberate, clean, exact.

He explains each clause patiently, walking me through the logic like a professor who genuinely believes I'm capable of understanding everything.

Victor never talks down to me.

Never simplifies unless I ask.

He assumes competence.

Which is wildly attractive.

"They attempted an automatic escalation tied to market fluctuations," he says calmly, tapping a paragraph. "I capped it. Conservatively, you'll save around two hundred thousand over the term."

Two hundred thousand.

Casually.

Like he's discussing parking fees.

I lean back in my chair and study him.

"You know most men buy women handbags, right?"

He blinks. "Would you prefer a handbag?"

"No," I say immediately. "This is infinitely sexier."

He laughs, surprised and soft, like the idea of being sexy never even crossed his mind.

God.

Men who don't know they're attractive are the most dangerous of all.

Later we move to the couch with our tea, the skyline glowing beyond the glass like scattered jewels. The apartment feels warm and still around us, the kind of quiet that encourages honesty.

Victor sits close but never touches unless I initiate. He gives me space like it's sacred. Like proximity is something I should choose, not be given.

He tells me about a case he won this week. Not bragging. Just sharing.

The way he talks about protecting clients, about outmaneuvering corporations that try to crush smaller people, makes something in my chest tighten unexpectedly.

Because here's the thing about Victor.

He could legally ruin almost anyone.

And he chooses not to.

He uses his power to protect.

Men like that?

Rare.

Men like that?

Stable.

Long-term viability.

Exceptional investment.

See?

Still strategic.

Always strategic.

Our knees brush lightly.

Then stay.

Neither of us moves.

He looks at me, quiet and steady, like he's memorizing my face.

Not hungry.

Not impatient.

Just certain.

Like he'd wait forever if that's what I needed.

His hand lifts slowly, brushing a strand of hair from my shoulder with absurd gentleness.

The air shifts.

Warmer.

Thicker.

If he kissed me, it would be slow.

Tender.

The kind of kiss that feels like trust.

Which is exactly why I don't give it.

Instead, I smooth his tie lightly between my fingers, letting the contact linger just long enough to make his breath catch.

Control.

Always control.

"Thank you for saving me two hundred thousand dollars," I murmur.

His gaze drops to my mouth.

"You're worth more than that," he says quietly.

God.

If I let lines like that land, I'd be finished.

So I smile, lean back first, sip my tea like nothing happened.

And Victor, perfect, patient Victor, simply smiles and keeps talking, like waiting for me is the easiest thing in the world.

Which means he's exactly where I want him.

Completely devoted.

Completely respectful.

Completely mine.

Not because he owns me.

Because he chooses me.

And honestly?

A top litigation attorney who adores you and casually saves you hundreds of thousands?

That's not romance.

That's strategy at its finest.

Tab 7

Chapter Seven

Matteo Cruz, or The Man Who Owns the Locks to the City

Saturday mornings in Manhattan feel like the city has finally taken off its shoes.

The horns quiet down. The sidewalks soften. Even the light changes, warmer and lazier, spilling between the buildings like honey instead of steel. Weekdays in this city feel like negotiations. Saturdays feel like exhale.

It's deceptive.

Softness always is.

Softness makes people careless.

Careless people get robbed.

Which is exactly why I keep Matteo for Saturdays.

If I'm going to relax, even slightly, I want the most dangerous man in the room on my side.

Not across from me.

The apartment is wrapped in gold light when I wake, the marble floors glowing faintly, the glass walls throwing reflections of the river across the

ceiling like liquid silk. The air smells faintly of citrus cleaner and expensive nothing, that curated stillness money buys you when you no longer share walls with anyone who screams or argues or slams doors.

I pad barefoot to the kitchen, pour myself coffee, and lean against the counter watching the boats carve slow silver lines into the water below. For once, the city isn't demanding anything from me. No texts. No meetings. No schedules breathing down my neck.

It almost feels like a day off.

Almost.

Then my phone lights up.

Matteo.

No emoji.

No greeting.

Just three words.

Downstairs. Take your time.

That's it.

Not "I'm here."

Not "come down."

Not "hurry."

Just information.

Like a weather report.

Like: the sun is out, the sky is blue, I exist near your building.

Matteo never commands.

He simply states reality and lets you decide.

Which is wildly attractive.

Confidence without possession.

God.

It should be illegal.

Matteo wasn't selected the way the others were.

I didn't research him.

Didn't position myself at the right gala.

Didn't engineer a meet-cute.

He happened.

And men who happen are far more dangerous than men you plan for.

We met at a tech launch party that got too crowded and too loud, the kind of place where champagne turns men sloppy and boundaries into

suggestions. Someone grabbed my waist like I was public property, fingers digging in just a little too familiarly.

Before I could even react, Matteo stepped between us.

Not violently.

Not theatrically.

He didn't shove the guy.

Didn't raise his voice.

He just... existed there.

Solid.

Immovable.

A wall where a man used to be.

The stranger let go immediately.

Apologized.

Actually apologized.

And walked away like he'd just remembered an urgent appointment somewhere very far from Matteo Cruz.

Later someone leaned toward me and said quietly, "That's Cruz. Security contracts. Corporate protection. Half the city pays him to keep bad things from happening."

Which is the sexiest job description I've ever heard.

He doesn't fix problems.

He prevents them.

Infrastructure.

You don't ignore infrastructure.

You integrate it.

So I did.

When I step outside my building, the morning air warm against my skin,
he's already there leaning against a dark Aston Martin like he's accidentally
part of the architecture.

Black T-shirt.

Dark jeans.

Boots.

Sleeves rolled just enough to reveal inked forearms.

No logos.

No labels.

Nothing loud.

Matteo doesn't advertise wealth.

He radiates competence.

It's subtler.

Much scarier.

People move around him without meaning to.

No one bumps into him.

No one stands too close.

It's instinctual, like animals avoiding a larger predator without consciously understanding why.

He's not the loudest man on the street.

He's the one the street adjusts for.

When his eyes find me, something shifts.

Just a little.

His shoulders relax.

His mouth softens.

Like he's been waiting without admitting he was waiting.

"There you are," he says.

His voice is low. Calm. Steady.

Like gravel smoothed by water.

“You say that like you ordered me,” I reply.

One eyebrow lifts slightly.

“I’d never insult you like that.”

God.

Do you hear that?

Not I wouldn’t dare.

Not sorry.

Just a quiet, factual refusal.

Respect baked into his bones.

It’s deeply inconvenient how attractive that is.

We don’t get into the car.

Matteo rarely drives me somewhere immediately.

He prefers walking first.

“Too nice out,” he says simply.

So we walk.

And here’s the thing about walking with Matteo.

It feels different.

The world rearranges itself.

Crowds split naturally. Strangers lower their voices. No one brushes against me. No one gets too close.

He doesn't touch me.

Doesn't hover.

But he's always half a step to my left, subtly between me and the street, like a living shield he isn't even aware he's being.

When a cyclist speeds too close, his hand appears at my lower back for half a second, guiding me aside before I even register the danger.

Warm.

Firm.

Gone.

Instinct.

Not performance.

My brain short-circuits a little.

Highly annoying.

"You're scanning again," I say.

"Always."

“For what?”

“Anything that shouldn’t be near you.”

He says it casually.

Like discussing cloud cover.

Like my safety is just... default.

God.

If I let myself be emotional about that, I’d be doomed.

Luckily, I’m practical.

And practically speaking?

A man whose nervous system is wired to protect you is an extraordinary asset.

We stop at a small café tucked near the river.

Nothing flashy.

No marble.

No influencers taking photos of croissants.

Just good bread and sunlight and real coffee.

The owner greets him by name.

Brings us food without menus.

Touches his arm like an old friend.

I glance at him.

“You own this place too?”

“No,” he says. “Fixed something for them last year.”

Of course he did.

Of course he quietly solves problems and people love him forever.

Matteo doesn't collect trophies.

He collects loyalty.

Which might be the most powerful currency in the world.

We sit across from each other and talk, and this is the part no one expects.

He's funny.

Dry, quiet humor that sneaks up on you.

Observant.

Sharp.

He notices everything.

The way I pick croutons out of salads.

The way I always steal the last fry.

The way I scan reflections in windows without thinking.

“You’re always calculating,” he says softly.

“Of course I am.”

He studies me like that’s fascinating, not alarming.

“I like that,” he murmurs.

Not threatened.

Not intimidated.

Just... admiring.

Men who admire your mind instead of trying to overpower it?

Rare.

Annoyingly rare.

Later, we stand by the water.

The wind is warmer now.

The river glittering.

The city distant and harmless-looking.

He reaches up to adjust my collar, fingers brushing the side of my neck so carefully it feels like he’s handling something fragile.

His touch is never greedy.

Never rushed.

He touches me like everything about me matters.

Which is frankly a terrible strategy for him.

Because that's how men get wrecked.

His eyes drop to my mouth.

Slow.

Intentional.

There it is.

The moment.

The almost.

But Matteo doesn't move.

He just waits.

Like he'd rather stand there forever than assume.

Like consent isn't a concept but a reflex.

If I kissed him, it wouldn't be heat.

It wouldn't be chaos.

It would be safety.

Warm. Steady. Anchoring.

And safety?

Safety makes women like me forget to calculate.

So I smile instead.

Step just slightly out of reach.

Hook my finger lazily through the edge of his sleeve like I'm leading him
back toward the street.

Control.

Always control.

His gaze darkens.

Not frustrated.

Not annoyed.

Just wanting.

Quiet.

Patient.

Gone.

Perfect.

Because Matteo Cruz, the man who secures governments and billionaires
and entire city blocks,

is looking at me like I'm the only thing in the world he can't protect from himself.

And honestly?

That might be my favorite position to keep a man in.

Tab 8

Chapter Eight

Theo Laurent, or The Catastrophic Problem of a Man Who Is Too Easy to Love

By Sunday, Manhattan forgets who it really is.

All week the city struts around like a sharpened blade, all glass and steel and quiet threats, every sidewalk a negotiation, every restaurant a transaction, every conversation a subtle power play dressed up as networking. It is a place that eats the weak and applauds the winners and pretends the difference between the two is talent instead of timing. But then Sunday arrives and the whole island softens like butter left in the sun, like someone switched out its spine for silk. The traffic hushes into something polite. Church bells ring somewhere in the distance like a suggestion rather than a command. Couples walk slower, hands linked. Dogs outnumber bankers. Cafés drag tables onto sidewalks and suddenly everyone is drinking orange juice like it's a personality trait.

It is suspicious.

Manhattan should not look this gentle.

A city this ruthless should not be allowed to glow.

Softness is always a trap.

Softness makes people careless.

Careless people fall in love.

Which is why, strategically speaking, Sundays should be scheduled with the least emotionally threatening man on the roster.

Instead, like an idiot, I gave Sundays to Theo.

And Theo, unfortunately, might be the only man alive capable of dismantling me with nothing but a smile and a plate of pancakes.

Theo Laurent is the only billionaire I know who once knocked over my coffee and reacted like he'd just committed vehicular manslaughter.

That is not an exaggeration.

That is literally how we met.

No curated introduction. No charity gala. No engineered proximity. No silk dress and chandelier lighting and carefully staged destiny.

Just a crowded café in SoHo, one reckless elbow, and my oat milk latte exploding across the counter like a tragic dairy crime scene.

He spun around so fast he almost knocked over the sugar jars too, eyes wide, hands already reaching for napkins, words tumbling out of his mouth in one frantic, breathless stream. He kept apologizing like I'd been physically wounded, like coffee burns were fatal and he was about to lose me forever. He bought me another drink before I could even answer. Then another. Then another. Then said, very seriously, "Maybe six is safer. Six feels responsible."

Six coffees.

Who buys six coffees.

Psychopaths.

Or Theo Laurent.

At the time, I didn't know he owned half the shipping routes on the eastern seaboard. Didn't know his family's logistics company quietly moved more cargo than some countries. Didn't know the man standing in front of me, panicking over spilled foam, could reroute entire supply chains with one phone call. All I knew was that he looked genuinely distressed that I might be inconvenienced.

Not annoyed.

Not embarrassed.

Distressed.

Like my comfort mattered more than his dignity.

It was so disarmingly sincere it knocked the breath out of me.

We talked for two hours.

He missed a meeting.

Didn't care.

Sent flowers the next day with a note that said, You looked like someone who deserves flowers.

No pitch.

No agenda.

Just flowers.

Which, frankly, is an unfair tactic.

So yes.

I kept him.

Obviously.

By the time Sunday sunlight spills across my bedroom like melted gold, slow and lazy and indecently warm, my phone lights up on the nightstand with Theo's name and a ridiculous little sun emoji he added himself months ago and refuses to remove. The message preview alone makes me smile before I even open it, which is deeply concerning behavior and something I choose not to examine too closely.

Brunch. I found a place that makes those tiny pancakes you like. The ones that look illegal. Please come save me from eating alone.

I can practically hear him saying it out loud, dramatic and hopeful and already halfway out the door.

No strategy.

No manipulation.

Just enthusiasm.

It's honestly embarrassing.

Are you emotionally blackmailing me with pancakes, I type back.

Immediately:

Yes. Shamelessly. I'll pick you up. Wear something cute. Or don't. You're unfair either way.

Sir.

Calm down.

I set the phone aside and stare at the ceiling for a second, annoyed at myself for the small, traitorous warmth spreading through my chest. Theo has this effect on me, like my body reacts before my brain has time to install the usual defenses. It's wildly unprofessional.

I prefer men who make me think.

Theo makes me laugh.

Which is much more dangerous.

Dressing for Theo is the only time I don't feel like I'm assembling armor.

With Adrian, I'm sharp. With Sebastian, I'm art. With Roman, I'm effortless.

With Elliot, I'm soft intelligence. With Victor, I'm lethal polish. With Matteo,

I'm understated strength.

With Theo?

I'm just... me.

Which is terrifying.

I slip into a pale sundress that skims my thighs when I walk, light fabric that moves with the breeze instead of fighting it. White sneakers. Gold hoops.

Lip gloss. Hair loose down my back like I don't care.

I look younger like this.

Less strategic.

Like a girl who believes in things like fate and cute meet-cutes and text messages with too many exclamation points.

A complete lie.

But Theo loves this version of me.

And, annoyingly, sometimes I do too.

He's outside when I step onto the sidewalk, leaning against a vintage Porsche like it's a toy he forgot he owned, sunlight hitting him full in the face so he practically glows. Linen shirt. Sleeves rolled. Sunglasses pushed into messy hair. That stupid, brilliant smile that feels less like an expression and more like a weather pattern.

Theo doesn't enter spaces quietly.

He arrives.

Like someone threw open all the windows.

When he sees me, his whole face lights up like I just handed him a winning lottery ticket.

“There she is,” he says, pushing off the car immediately, like standing still is physically impossible for him.

“You’re very loud for a billionaire,” I say dryly.

He grins. “Money should be fun. Otherwise what’s the point?”

God.

Imagine having that much power and still sounding like a golden retriever.

It’s obscene.

Brunch with Theo feels less like dating and more like being gently adopted.

The hostess greets him by name. He asks about her kid’s soccer game. He tips the barista before we even sit down. He orders half the menu “just in case” and then immediately starts sliding the best pieces onto my plate like he’s feeding a small, beloved animal.

“Try this one,” he insists, cutting a pancake and holding it out. “No wait, this one’s better. Actually both. You deserve both.”

“You’re going to bankrupt yourself feeding me,” I say.

“I literally own cargo ships,” he replies cheerfully. “You’re safe.”

I laugh so hard I almost choke.

Not polite laughter.

Not curated, charming laughter.

Real, messy, head-thrown-back laughter.

The kind that makes your stomach hurt.

And that’s the problem.

Theo makes me forget to perform.

With everyone else, I’m aware of my angles. My timing. My voice. My leverage.

With Theo, I forget.

I just exist.

Which is wildly irresponsible.

We end up walking along the river afterward, the sun warm against our shoulders, the city slow and bright around us. He talks the entire time, stories spilling out of him about some ridiculous shipping mishap involving rubber ducks and a customs officer who apparently now sends him Christmas cards. He gestures with his hands. Laughs at his own jokes. Bumps into me accidentally because he’s too animated.

At one point, without thinking, he reaches for my hand.

Then stops midair.

Like he just remembered I'm not automatically his.

"Can I?" he asks softly.

God.

Who asks.

I roll my eyes and slip my fingers into his anyway.

His hand is warm.

Big.

Calloused in places that don't match his sunshine personality.

He holds on like I might evaporate.

Not possessive.

Not tight.

Just... grateful.

Like I did him a favor.

If he kissed me, it wouldn't be calculated or slow or careful like the others.

It would be spontaneous.

Happy.

The kind of kiss that happens because the world feels too good not to.

Which is exactly why I don't let it happen.

Instead, I bump his shoulder, teasing, keeping everything playful, just out of reach, like a string tied around a balloon.

He groans dramatically. "You're evil."

"Strategic," I correct.

"Same thing," he says, smiling at me like I'm the best joke he's ever heard.

And standing there in the sunlight, his hand warm around mine, his laughter still lingering in the air, I realize something deeply inconvenient.

Adrian gives me power.

Sebastian gives me history.

Roman gives me protection.

Elliot gives me brilliance.

Victor gives me stability.

Matteo gives me safety.

But Theo?

Theo gives me happiness.

And happiness is the one currency I never planned for.

Which makes him, by far,

the most dangerous man I've ever dated.

Tab 9

Chapter Nine

Dr. Alexander Vale, or How I Accidentally Cancel a Billionaire for a Man Who Cuts Open Hearts

Monday belongs to Adrian.

It has always belonged to Adrian.

The day fits him too well not to.

Mondays are sharp, efficient, merciless. They wake up early and drink black coffee and conquer things before noon. They don't ask permission. They don't linger. They don't romanticize. They simply execute.

Very Adrian Wolfe.

Which is why, for nearly a year now, my Mondays have followed a predictable rhythm: sleek car, glass tower, rooftop meetings disguised as breakfast, conversations about acquisitions and funding rounds and which senator owes him a favor this quarter. Adrian doesn't do dates. He does strategic intimacy. Coffee with city views. Private walkthroughs of buildings he hasn't opened yet. Quiet "come see what I built" invitations that somehow feel more personal than flowers ever could.

Dating Adrian feels like standing next to the future while it's still under construction.

It's incredibly on brand for me.

It's efficient.

Power-adjacent.

Low emotional risk.

Perfect.

Which is exactly why it's deeply irritating that at eight twelve on a perfectly organized Monday morning, I am staring at my phone like it has personally betrayed me.

Because Dr. Alexander Vale just texted.

And now my entire schedule is collapsing like a poorly diversified portfolio.

I'm barefoot in my kitchen, silk robe loose around my shoulders, the skyline outside still pale and half-awake, the city stretching itself into consciousness one building at a time. Steam curls from my coffee. The marble counter is cool under my palms. Everything feels quiet and controlled and exactly how a Monday should begin.

Then my phone buzzes.

Adrian's name.

Right on time.

Of course.

Car will be downstairs at nine. Thought we could see the new pediatric wing before the board arrives. No rush. I'd just like you there.

I smile automatically.

God.

He's so consistent it's almost erotic.

No pressure. No assumption. Just that quiet, devastatingly respectful tone like my presence is a privilege he's requesting, not demanding.

The pediatric wing.

Which means philanthropy.

Which means board members.

Which means donors and hospital executives and people with the kind of quiet, generational power you can't buy with startups alone.

Translation: extremely useful morning.

Excellent networking.

Strong long-term positioning.

Ten out of ten decision.

I'm already mentally choosing an outfit when my phone buzzes again.

Unknown number.

Normally, I ignore unknown numbers.

Unknown numbers are rarely good news.

But something makes me open it.

Dr. Vale here. Sorry for the early message. Surgery finished ahead of schedule. The new cardiac unit equipment just arrived. I thought you might like to see where your donation actually went. Coffee after, if you're free. If not, another time is fine.

I stare at the screen.

Read it twice.

Then a third time.

My brain, traitorous thing that it is, goes warm.

Because it's not a flex.

Not a performance.

Not a "look what I built."

It's just... I thought you might like to see.

Like he genuinely thinks I'd care.

Like this isn't optics or strategy or leverage.

Like it's personal.

Which is frankly unacceptable behavior from a man this attractive.

Here's the problem.

Adrian is power.

Alexander is purpose.

Adrian builds empires.

Alexander saves children.

Adrian's meetings shape markets.

Alexander's hands restart hearts.

One offers access.

The other offers meaning.

And annoyingly, meaning is very difficult to spreadsheet.

I lean against the counter and sip my coffee slowly, eyes flicking between the two messages like they're competing stocks.

Let's be rational, I tell myself.

Adrian equals infrastructure.

Alexander equals... feelings adjacent nonsense.

Feelings do not appreciate in value.

Feelings are volatile.

Feelings are how women end up moving into brownstones and baking sourdough for surgeons and forgetting they once dated eight men like a private equity strategy.

Absolutely not.

I am not derailing a perfectly profitable Monday for a pair of pretty hands and a stethoscope.

Be serious, Liliene.

Be disciplined.

Be—

My phone lights up again.

Another text from Alexander.

Also, one of the kids you helped fund asked who paid for the new machines. I told her “a friend.” She said to say thank you.

...

Sir.

That is not fair.

That is emotional terrorism.

You cannot weaponize sick children before 9 a.m.

I close my eyes.

Exhale slowly.

Because suddenly Adrian's glass tower and catered espresso and venture capital conversations feel very far away.

And this stupid, soft, impossible image appears in my head.

A kid.

Alive.

Because of something I did.

Because of him.

Because of us.

God.

I hate when men make me feel morally obligated.

It's such an unfair tactic.

I open Adrian's message.

Type.

Delete.

Type again.

Delete again.

How do you cancel on the coldest, most disciplined billionaire in Manhattan without sounding like you're choosing a field trip over him?

You don't.

You reframe.

Always reframe.

Emergency conflict this morning. Can we move to tonight? I don't want to rush the tour.

Technically not a lie.

Alexander is technically an emergency.

Emotionally speaking.

Adrian replies almost immediately.

Of course. Tonight works. Tell me if you need anything.

No jealousy.

No suspicion.

No pressure.

Just quiet accommodation.

God.

He's so perfect it's offensive.

And for half a second, guilt flickers.

Then I remember:

I am not cheating.

I am diversifying.

Big difference.

The hospital greets me with that sharp, sterile scent that always makes the back of my throat tighten, like the air itself has been filtered too many times. Everything is too bright. Too clean. Too honest. No marble. No chandeliers. No curated silence. Just fluorescent lights and polished floors and the quiet, constant hum of machines keeping people alive.

Hospitals don't care how rich you are.

Everyone looks small here.

Everyone looks human.

It's deeply humbling.

And I hate how much I like that.

Alexander is waiting near the nurses' station when I arrive, still in dark blue scrubs, surgical cap hanging loose around his neck, hair slightly flattened from hours under bright lights. He looks tired, but it's the good kind of tired. Earned tired. The kind that comes from doing something that actually matters.

When he sees me, something in his face softens so quickly it almost hurts to watch.

Not impressed.

Not dazzled.

Just... relieved.

Like I showed up and that alone improved his day.

“Hi,” he says quietly.

God.

Why does he always say it like that.

Like I'm something gentle.

“You look like you fought death and won,” I tell him.

He shrugs one shoulder. “It was a close one.”

A close one.

Casually.

Like he's talking about missing a train.

This man is insane.

And somehow still soft.

It's wildly unfair.

He walks me through the new cardiac unit slowly, explaining everything in that low, steady voice of his, pointing out machines and rooms and beds like they're treasures instead of equipment. Nurses wave. Interns straighten. Families glance at him with naked hope in their eyes.

Not fear.

Not intimidation.

Hope.

Do you understand how powerful you have to be for people to look at you like that?

Not like you can buy their future.

Like you are their future.

Adrian commands markets.

Alexander commands faith.

And faith?

Faith is terrifying leverage.

At one point, we stop outside a recovery room where a little girl is sleeping, wires everywhere, tiny chest rising and falling under a blanket covered in cartoon stars. Alexander's voice lowers instinctively.

“She had the first surgery with the new equipment,” he murmurs. “Would’ve been delayed months without the funding.”

I swallow.

My throat tight.

Which is stupid.

I don’t get tight throats.

I get contracts.

Returns.

Percentages.

Not this.

This soft, aching thing.

“She asked who helped pay for it,” he adds. “I told her a friend.”

Friend.

Not donor.

Not sponsor.

Friend.

God.

That word should be illegal.

If he kissed me right now, I might actually forget every rule I've ever made.

So I don't let the moment get that far.

I straighten my shoulders. Smile lightly. Tease him about his terrible coffee choice. Keep everything breezy. Playful. Controlled.

Because that's what I do.

I manage men.

I manage power.

I do not melt in hospital hallways because a surgeon with kind eyes looks at me like I'm something worth thanking.

Absolutely not.

Still.

As we sit later with paper cups of coffee, sunlight filtering weakly through sterile windows, his knee brushing mine accidentally, his fingers warm when they pass me sugar I don't even take, one thought keeps looping quietly in my head.

I canceled a billionaire today.

A self-made tech titan.

For a man in scrubs who smells faintly like antiseptic and exhaustion.

And the worst part?

I don't regret it.

Not even a little.

Which is deeply, catastrophically bad for business.