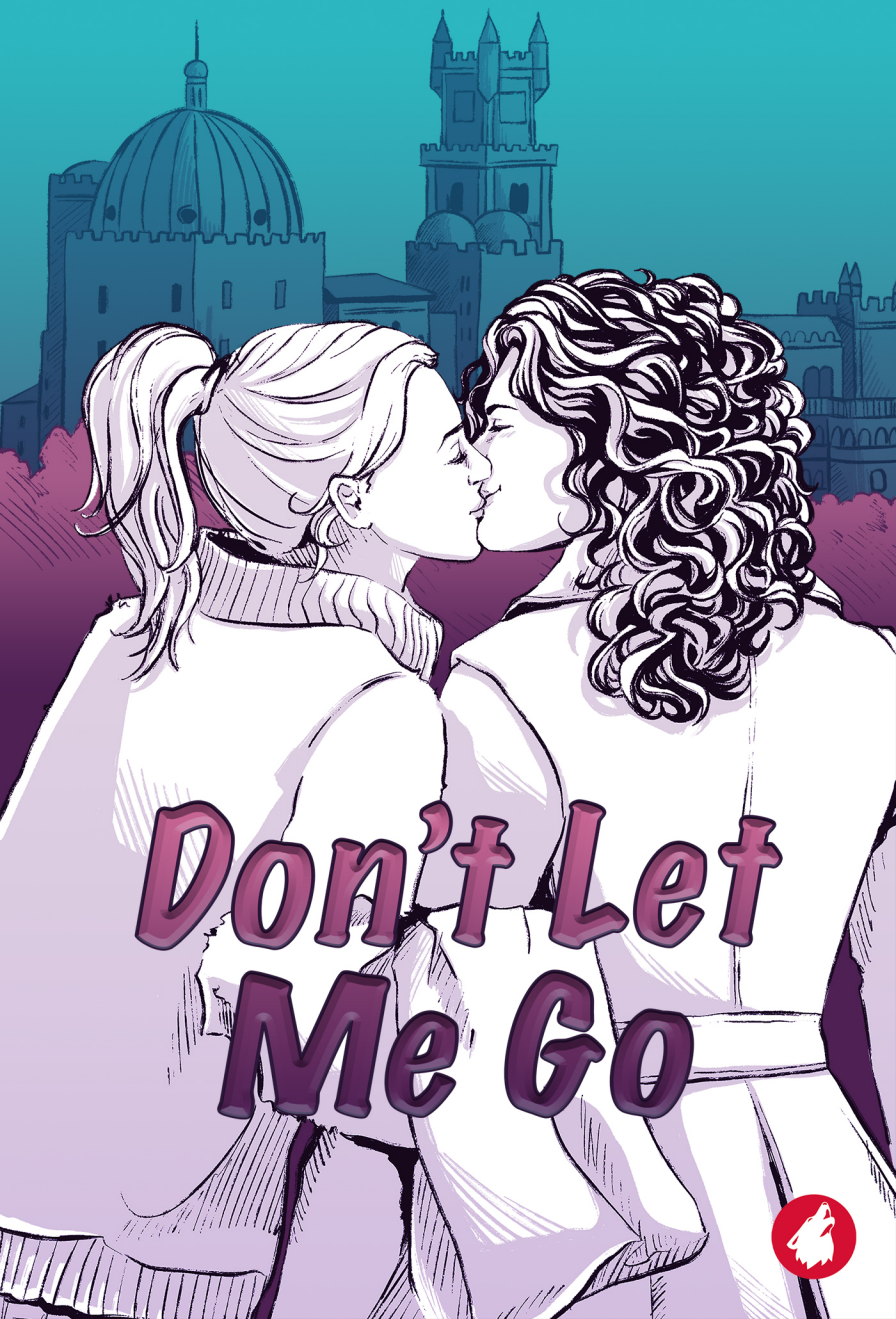


Rachael Sommers





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***Don't Let
Me Go***



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Chapter 1

TICK, TOCK.

The noise of that goddamn clock grated on Carolina's nerves as she sat in an uneasy silence in the office of one Dr. Jada Campbell, watching the minutes tick by behind Jada's head.

Was it supposed to be comforting? Encourage Jada's clients to want to spill their guts?

All it ever served was to make Carolina want to stick her fingers in her ears. Which, considering the ridiculous amount she was paying her therapist for her time and discretion, would be a waste for them both.

The room was warm, the heating cranked up to ward off the icy chill of the November Manhattan air outside. Carolina tugged at the collar of her pressed white shirt, which suddenly felt suffocating. She was glad she'd discarded her blue pinstripe blazer before settling into Jada's comfortable armchair.

"Was there something in particular you wanted to discuss today, Carolina?" Jada was the first to break the barrier. Her voice carried the hint of a Jamaican accent, though she'd been raised in Brooklyn. "We've been sitting here for," Jada glanced at her watch, "ten minutes so far, and you haven't said a word. Is it your mother? Are you regretting your decision to not go to her funeral?"

Carolina curled her lips into a sneer. "No." Call her cold-hearted, but hearing the news her mother had passed away—twenty-four

years after tossing Carolina out of her house with a warning never to darken her door again—hadn't filled Carolina with the desire to hop on a plane and fly across the Atlantic. She'd only gone to her father's funeral at the tender age of seventeen because her mother had dragged her there. Safe to say she'd never had a good relationship with either of them. "Though I suppose it is related." With a sigh, Carolina pulled out her phone and set it on the low coffee table between herself and Jada, the screen open on an e-mail from her oldest sister.

Since receiving it two days ago, Carolina had read it so many times she could recite the damn thing word for word.

Carolina. I understand why you didn't come to the funeral. If I were in your position, I probably would have done the same. But now she's gone...I was hoping we could make amends. Do you remember the Christmases we used to spend in Sintra when we were younger? The whole family, all together for a few weeks of the year. Clara and I are planning to start the tradition again, now Mother is gone, and we thought it would be a good opportunity for us to re-connect. We'll be there with our families from December 6th for four weeks. There won't be many of us—just Clara and Chris, me and David, and our daughter, Alice. I'm not sure if you remember her. She was just a baby the last time we saw one another. Plus an old family friend. I hope you might be able to bring yourself to come along, too, if only for a little while. It would be good to see you. Please let me know what you decide to do. Mariana.

"Ah."

Was that all Jada had to say? She'd been treating Carolina for five years, knew all of her miserable history with her family, and *ah* was all she got?

“So.” Jada pushed the phone back before tilting her head to one side, green eyes settling on Carolina’s face, her Montblanc pen poised above her notepad. “Have you decided?”

“I’m not going.” While Mariana was right—Carolina had spent countless hours in her parents’ house in Sintra, and some of the memories were fond—she hadn’t seen her sisters since she was twenty-two years old. Neither of them had been brave enough to openly defy their mother and keep in contact with their ousted sister.

Carolina didn’t need her family—and they sure as hell hadn’t been shy about the fact they didn’t care about her, considering twenty-four years had passed since they last spoke.

The purse of Jada’s lips told Carolina she disagreed with that decision.

“So why are you here?” Jada said. “If your mind is set, and you are sure in your decision, why bring it up at all?”

Carolina clenched her jaw, fingers digging into the arms of the plush leather armchair she sat in. Her black nail polish stood out sharply against the light gray material.

“Or is the issue that you’re not so sure you’re making the right choice?”

Tilting her head back, Carolina stared at the brilliantly white ceiling. Jada was one of the best of the business—it was why she commanded such a large fee—but to be read so easily, when Carolina prided herself on being a closed book, still stung sometimes.

“Is the issue that, despite all of the bad history between you and your sisters, a part of you misses them? Longs for some sort of familial connection?”

Carolina lifted her head to shoot Jada a poisonous glare. “I do not *long* for anything.”

Realizing her mistake, Jada extended her palms toward Carolina. “You’re grappling with the decision, though. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t. Do you want me to talk you into it? Give you confirmation that not going is the right choice?”

“You’re not going to do either.” Carolina had spent enough hours sitting in this chair being observed by Jada to know that. “Why am I debating it? Why does a part of me want to go? We haven’t spoken in years, I should want nothing to do with them.”

“What they—and your parents—did to you is unforgivable. And you are well within your rights to never forgive them, or hear them out, or subject yourself to their presence. But...”

When Jada trailed off, Carolina met her gaze.

“You are also well within your rights to do all of those things. To try and mend the bridges that have been burned. All three of you are bonded by the trauma of your childhoods; perhaps this is an opportunity for you, now that both your parents are gone. They don’t have any power over you anymore.”

“But it won’t change anything. Won’t erase anything.” Wouldn’t take away any of the things that had led to her needing a therapist in the first place. “Not to mention the logistics of it all. The time difference, the meetings I’d have to re-schedule.” Running a tech conglomerate wasn’t without its challenges. “Plus leaving Andie to hold the fort on such short notice.”

Not that Andie would care in the slightest. She’d probably relish the challenge; Carolina had chosen her right hand precisely because she and Andie were so similar.

Jada acknowledged her with a titled head and a kind smile. “While that’s all true, those are minor inconveniences that are easily solved. And as for it not changing anything—you’re right. It won’t. But it could be healing. It sounds like your sister wants to try, and the fact you’re here suggests to me that, deep down, you want to try as well.”

* * *

“Well, I have a girlfriend, too.”

Kenzie glanced up from her book to frown at her roommate sitting on the couch beside her with her phone pressed to her ear. She knew for a fact Alice did not have anything of the sort.

Kenzie would be the first person she would tell if she did.

Alice told her everything.

Often more than she ever wanted to know.

Kenzie had tuned out of the conversation some time ago; Alice could spend hours talking to her mother some days. But at Alice's words, Kenzie listened more intently.

"I do." Alice's voice turned defensive, as it always tended to when she spoke to her mother. She wound a tendril of long blonde hair, dyed a shade or two lighter than Kenzie's, around her index finger—a telltale sign she was anxious. "I haven't told you because it's new. But maybe the family reunion would be a good time for you to get to know her."

What the hell was Alice doing? She didn't have a girlfriend. Certainly not one she could drag along on her upcoming family vacation. Which was a *month* long.

Kenzie shuddered, unable to think of anything worse than spending four weeks stuck in the same house as Alice's parents and her extended family. Even if it was in her family's house in the rolling Portuguese hills. The one and only time Kenzie had met Alice's intimidating mother, Mariana Costa, she'd been regarded with open disdain.

Alice herself didn't want to go; she'd been guilted into it by her mother, and had been whining to Kenzie about how much she wished she could stay with her in New York.

When Alice's gaze settled on Kenzie, she recognized the look in those emerald eyes.

It spelled trouble with a capital T.

With a sinking feeling in her stomach, Kenzie realized what Alice was about to say as her mouth opened.

"You remember my roommate, Kenzie?"

"Don't you dare. Alice, I swear to—"

Alice ignored her warning. "Like I said, it's new, but we're happy together."

Lunging across the couch, Kenzie flung her book down and attempted to grab Alice's phone.

She easily batted Kenzie's hands away.

"I'll be happy when I kick your ass," Kenzie hissed.

Alice scrambled upright and backed away towards her bedroom door.

Racing after her, Kenzie's socked feet skidded on the hardwood floor and she nearly crashed into their tiny dining table, catching herself with a hand on one of the chairs.

"So, she can come?" Alice's lips curved into a smile. "Excellent. Thank you, mother." Hanging up the phone, she pocketed it and turned to Kenzie with a sheepish expression.

"What the hell, Alice?"

"I panicked!"

"Well, un-panic!" Kenzie gestured toward Alice's pocket. "Call her back and tell her it was a joke."

"I can't do that. You know how badly she took me coming out as bisexual."

"Exactly! So you shouldn't lie to her and tell her you have a girlfriend when you very much do not!" Frustration bubbled through Kenzie as she followed Alice back to the couch; the green leather creaked as they sat. Kenzie wished she could say it was the first time Alice had tried to drag her into a wild scheme. "Why *did* you lie, anyway?" Kenzie should've listened to the beginning of the conversation, but she'd been too into her book. She couldn't imagine what could have possessed Alice to do something like this.

Alice bit her lip. "So...do you remember Jonathan?"

With a frown, Kenzie searched her memory. In the eight years they had been friends, they'd met a *lot* of people. Thanks to Alice, for the most part—she was much more of a social butterfly.

But the name did ring a bell... "Jonathan as in your high school sweetheart?" When Alice and Kenzie had met in Alice's first month at NYU—Kenzie had been a junior at the time—Alice had still been heartbroken. "What the hell does he have to do with anything?"

"He's coming. To Portugal. Our families have always been close. And his mum died a few months ago. Apparently his dad isn't coping well, so they've invited Jonathan to spend the holidays with us to try and take his mind off it, and give his dad some time to grieve alone." Alice sighed. "And he's bringing his new girlfriend."

"So? How does that result in you needing a fake girlfriend?"

"I can't turn up sad and single. I'm twenty-six! What will he think?"

"What's so bad about being single at twenty-six? I'm two years older than you—what does that make me, a spinster?" Kenzie ducked when Alice tried to sock her in the face with one of the couch cushions.

"Be serious!"

Kenzie wrestled the cushion out of Alice's hands. "I am! Why do you care what he thinks, anyway? Don't tell me you're still not over him."

Outrage crossed Alice's face. "It's been years, of course I'm over him."

"Doesn't look like it."

"I don't want to face him alone." Alice drew her knees to her chest, her bottom lip jutting out. "Or my aunts. You know I'm dreading this."

"So why on earth would I want to join you?!"

With a groan, Alice buried her face in her knees. "Look, I know I'm not exactly selling this, but please, Kenz? We can make it fun. And it'll be so much more bearable with you there."

Kenzie couldn't think of anything less fun. "I can't. I have a thesis to write."

"You could write it in Portugal," Alice said, far too reasonably. "You've finished your lab work, right? What does it matter if you're here or in Portugal?"

"I don't know what my advisor would say about that."

"He'd think it was a great idea, I bet. Doesn't he think you work too hard?"

Alice was right. He would encourage her to “see if she could find inspiration writing somewhere new”. It was the kind of philosophy that drove her crazy about him.

“Regardless, I can’t afford a month in Portugal.”

“My parents will cover most of it. And I can handle everything else. I’m getting my bonus soon.”

Kenzie sighed. While her doctoral program was fully funded, her wages were nothing compared to what Alice received as a junior lawyer, following in her parents’ footsteps.

“How have you managed to score a month off, anyway?”

Alice shrugged, expression turning sheepish. “Nepotism? My boss couldn’t exactly say no when two of the partners of Costa, Costa and Endrick requested my presence. I just have to keep on-top of my cases. But come on, Kenz. We’ll have a blast, I promise. We can escape the dreary December weather and soak up some winter sun. It’s beautiful there. You’d love it.”

Kenzie did love traveling and exploring new places, though her chances to do so had been few and far between.

Goddammit, how was her resolve cracking?

“I have met your parents before, Alice. They’re terrifying. I can only imagine that the rest of your family is the same.”

“They’re not so bad. And there won’t even be that many of them! Just my parents, and my Aunt Clara and Uncle Chris. And my Aunt Carolina...but *I* don’t even know her. She’s been estranged from my mum and Aunt Clara for years. I bet they’ll leave us alone for the most part.”

Kenzie shook her head. She didn’t want to go anyway, but add in awkward family drama? It sounded like hell. “Or they’ll be all over us because they disapprove. They’ll probably accuse me of turning you bisexual! Your evil lesbian roommate, turning you over to the dark side.”

Alice snorted. “Don’t be so dramatic.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me!”

"It'll be fine." Alice slung an arm around Kenzie's shoulders and squeezed. "Besides, think about it—this is a good opportunity to show them all how healthy and happy a same-sex relationship can be."

"Except it's a lie." Kenzie shook her head. "No. No way. This isn't happening."

"Please, Kenzie? I'll do anything. Anything you want. And won't it be nice to have some company for the holidays?"

Huffing, Kenzie leaned away and folded her arms. "Are you really pulling the sad orphan card?"

"I don't like thinking of you being here all alone for a month at the happiest time of the year."

"Funny. I don't recall it bothering you the last few years we've lived together when you've spent them back in London."

"We don't have to spend that much time with my family. I promise it'll be great."

Kenzie thought about it. Without Alice around, the apartment did start to feel lonely as Christmas crept closer. She enjoyed having the place to herself at first, but walking to campus past all the brightly decorated houses and the families playing in the snow often left her with a pang in her chest.

It had been six years since she'd said goodbye to her mom, and the ache was still hard to bear.

And while Alice's parents would be last on her list of people who would make the holidays feel warm and homely again, Alice was high on it.

Kenzie had always wanted to travel more. And an all-expenses paid trip to Portugal was a once in a lifetime opportunity. It would be stupid for her to let it pass by, right?

Kenzie sighed. "All right, fine. But you owe me. Big time."

With a squeal, Alice threw her arms around Kenzie's neck. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. Kenzie James, you are the best fake girlfriend a girl could ask for."

“Yeah, yeah. You just have to promise you won’t fall in love with me,” Kenzie said, the words muffled, her mouth pressed against Alice’s shoulder. “I’ve seen how those movies end.”

Alice laughed. “Please. You aren’t my type.”

“Rude! You’re not my type, either.”

“I know, I’m much too young for you.” Alice stuck out her tongue. “How much older was your last girlfriend again?”

“Ten years.” It had been almost a year since she’d broken things off with Louisa. Time she started to dip her toe back into the dating pool. A fake relationship hadn’t exactly been what she had in mind. “I’ve never dated anyone younger.”

“Well, you have now.” Alice shifted to curl into Kenzie’s side, grinning. “You have a twenty-six-year-old new squeeze. This is going to be fun.”

Kenzie wasn’t sure she agreed.

* * *

Carolina tossed her glasses on her desk and rubbed her eyes, suppressing a long groan.

It was 7 p.m., and her day showed no sign of ending soon.

She supposed this was what happened when people claimed someone was married to their job. Not that she could begrudge anyone saying so; it was the only constant in her life.

Unlike lovers, her career could never leave her.

And being the CEO of a multi-million dollar tech company, she had no intention of ever giving it up.

Her office door opened, and Andie swaggered inside with far too much pep for the time of night.

“Why the long face?” She flopped into the chair on the opposite side of Carolina’s desk. Andie ran a hand through her black bob, which framed cheekbones sharp enough to rival Carolina’s—though Andie’s Mexican heritage meant they weren’t as pale. “It can’t be the

latest financial report. Our profit margins are even higher than we predicted.”

Carolina lifted a shoulder in a shrug. “They could always be better.”

“Anyone else would be over the moon.”

“Yes, well. I’m not anyone else, am I?”

Andie inclined her head. “No, and I wouldn’t have you any other way. So, what’s wrong? Not looking forward to your vacation?”

With a grimace, Carolina stood and padded over to the bar in the corner of her office. She poured two glasses of whiskey and allowed herself a moment to bask in the view of downtown Manhattan out of the window. “You know I’m not.”

“I don’t know. A few weeks in Portugal sounds idyllic.” Andie accepted her glass and eyed her warily.

Carolina knew Andie couldn’t understand why she was going, given her obvious reticence. Sometimes, she wondered herself. Self-doubt wasn’t an emotion Carolina was used to dealing with, but she’d been doubting her decision since telling Mariana she would join her and Clara in Sintra.

“The logistics alone are a nightmare.” The whiskey burned the back of Carolina’s throat as she took a long sip and sat back behind her desk. “Are you sure you’ll be all right without me?”

Andie waved a hand. “Oh, please. Don’t worry about me. You know I relish a challenge.”

One thing Carolina didn’t doubt was Andie’s capabilities. As fiercely independent as Carolina was, it hadn’t taken her long to realize she couldn’t run a tech conglomerate without the support of people she trusted.

Which were few and far between.

But Andie had impressed Carolina from the moment they’d first met, starting life as her assistant, and persevering where so many others had failed. Within ten years, Andie had gone from fetching Carolina’s coffees to being her right hand.

“Are you trying to talk yourself out of going?” Andie raised an eyebrow. “Because you do know you don’t have to, right?”

“I’m well aware, thank you.”

The cool tone of her voice was enough to make Andie back off with an apologetic duck of her head.

Yes, Carolina didn’t have to go. She didn’t have to listen to Mariana’s apologies, didn’t have to hear her out, didn’t have to see if broken things could be put back together again.

But...why now? Was it really the fact that the shadow of their mother no longer hung over them? Did Mariana want to assuage some of her guilt, or did she genuinely want to try and repair their relationship?

Carolina couldn’t cope with the uncertainty of it all. And crossing the Atlantic would be worth it if she could get some answers.

“Besides, my long face, as you so call it, has nothing to do with my family. It’s the acquisition.”

“Ah.” Finished with her whiskey, Andie set her glass on the surface of Carolina’s mahogany desk. “What now?”

Carolina rubbed the bridge of her nose. “After weeks of negotiations, and now our lawyers have completed their due diligence checks and given the deal the go ahead, their weasel of a CEO is stalling and refusing to sign the contracts. I suspect he thinks if he waits long enough, we’ll offer them more money.”

“Clearly, he doesn’t know who he’s messing with. You’re more likely to pull the plug.”

“Mm.” Carolina hadn’t gotten to her position by being soft. Ruthlessness had been instilled in her by her father—one of the few traits of his she’d been happy to inherit. Without it, she wouldn’t have climbed to the dizzying heights she’d managed to reach, armed with nothing but sheer grit and determination after being abandoned by her family. “Except I want this deal to go through. If only so I can see the look on his face when I remove him from his position.”

Chuckling, Andie clasped her hands together. "That's the spirit. Though I still don't understand why you're so invested in this one. A dating app, really?"

"Match.com has a revenue of billions." In the reflection from her monitor screen, Carolina could see a gleam in her eye—the sign of a deal close to completion, and banking a few more million dollars. "Tinder has similar. In the right set of hands, this deal could quadruple its worth in two years."

"Yeah, yeah, I read the proposals. It just doesn't seem very you." Andie wiggled her eyebrows. "Planning on joining it yourself?"

Carolina scoffed. "Please. You know I don't date."

"I know you're allergic to it," Andie said. "That's partly why I was so surprised when this acquisition crossed my desk."

"Just because I don't partake in it, doesn't mean I don't see the value. People are desperate for love. We can use that."

A wry smile crossed Andie's lips. "There's the Carolina I know."

Chapter 2

AS ALICE PULLED THEIR RENTAL car to a stop outside of her family's home in Sintra, Kenzie gazed at the building with wide eyes. "Holy shit."

Towering above them, the bricks an orange-brown and the windows outlined in dazzling white frames, it stretched out left and right, surrounded by green gardens. She'd known Alice's family was rich, and that this house had been in her family for generations, but knowing that and being slapped in the face with it were two entirely different things.

The place looked like it had honest to God *wings*.

"This isn't a house. It's a goddamn palace."

"Technically, it's a Château," Alice said, grinning when Kenzie glared at her.

"I should not be here." Ever since agreeing to Alice's ridiculous plan, Kenzie had been trying hard not to think about what they intended to do. But sitting in the passenger seat, watching the front door open to reveal Mariana Costa, Alice's incredibly imposing mother, panic clawed at Kenzie's throat.

"It'll be fine. I promise." Alice's voice sounded so sure. "Besides, we're already here now. And I'm not taking you back to the airport. Seeing as you can't drive, I guess that means you're stuck here."

"I hate you."

Alice patted her back, knowing she didn't mean it. "I know. Come on."

Kenzie stepped out of the car, heels of her worn Doc Martens crunching on the gravel drive. At least the temperature was hotter here than New York, the sun warming Kenzie's cheeks. The air smelled of freshly cut grass, and birds chirped nearby. Overall, it should have offered serenity, but she couldn't quell her rising fear. "Please tell me you don't have servants."

"...Does a chef and cleaners count?"

Kenzie wanted to die.

"Give it a chance, Kenz," Alice said, opening the trunk and hauling out their bags.

One belonged to Kenzie; the other four were Alice's. She'd never been able to travel light.

"It'll be okay." Alice's fingers curled over Kenzie's shoulder and squeezed. "Honest."

As she followed Alice toward the front door, helping to carry some of her bags in the hope it might endear her to Mariana, Kenzie wasn't so sure.

"Alice." Mariana swept Alice into a stiff hug the second she was close enough. "It's good to see you."

"You, too." Alice stepped back and nudged Kenzie forward. "You remember Kenzie."

"I do." Mariana's eyes—a steely gray—seemed to stare straight into Kenzie's soul. God help the first woman Alice brought here who was actually her girlfriend. Kenzie was glad she didn't have to win Mariana's approval for real. Standing at five foot eight, the woman towered over Kenzie. "Welcome to our family home."

"Thank you for having me," she said, tongue feeling leaden. "I really appreciate you letting me join you for the holidays."

"Yes, well." Mariana pursed her lips. "Alice didn't give us much choice in the matter."

Ouch.

Mariana turned and strode inside the house, leaving Kenzie and Alice scrambling after her.

Inside the entrance hall, another woman stood. Kenzie had had enough of a run-down of Alice's family members on the seven-hour flight to know that she was Clara, one of her aunts. She and Mariana shared more than their eye color and dark hair—both had an aura of standoffishness that made Kenzie want to inch her way back toward the car.

Kenzie hovered awkwardly one step inside the house as Clara and Alice exchanged a hug and tried to force a genuine smile as she was introduced. Clara, at least, didn't try to stare her down.

"Your father and Uncle Chris won't be here for another two weeks," Mariana said. "Someone has to hold the fort at the law firm while Clara and I are away. And... your Aunt Carolina will be here sometime later this week."

Mariana's English accent would take some getting used to. It was one of those posh Southern ones—not Cockney, despite Kenzie knowing they were from London. Alice's had faded the longer she'd spent in the States, and aside from the occasional British English—she never could get Alice to call it soccer—sometimes Kenzie forgot she wasn't American.

"Can you call her my aunt when I've never even met her?" Alice tilted her head to one side. "Why is she even coming, anyway? You've barely mentioned her for years. Now she's spending the holidays with us?"

A few moments of awkward silence filled the hall as Mariana and Clara shared a glance.

"Yes, well." Mariana cleared her throat. "We've decided to make amends. Put the past behind us."

"But what happened?"

"None of your business." Mariana's tone brokered no room for argument, her jaw held tense. "That's between me, Clara, and Carolina."

Clara ducked her head, examining her shoes.

Fascinating. Kenzie bet a family like this had some deep, dark secrets. Was Carolina one of them? She doubted she'd ever find out. If Mariana didn't want to tell her own daughter, there was no chance she'd say anything to Kenzie.

"And when is Jonathan arriving?" Alice sounded like she was trying hard to keep her voice casual.

"Next Saturday," Mariana said, her face brightening. "Along with Beth."

Kenzie still thought it was weird to invite your daughter's ex-boyfriend and his new squeeze on a family vacation—old family friends or not—but she didn't pretend to understand the Costa's logic.

At least she and Alice would have a week together before he got there.

"Alice, why don't you give Kenzie a tour? I know it's been a few years since you were last here, but I'm sure you remember where everything is. And we wouldn't want her to get lost." Mariana said it with an air like she wouldn't mind if Kenzie did indeed get lost for the whole duration of her stay.

Knowing it was time to begin her starring role as the perfect girlfriend, Kenzie plastered on a smile. "A tour sounds great."

"Excellent. Oh, and your rooms." Shrewd eyes glanced at Alice. "You'll be in your usual one of course, and Kenzie will be in the one at the end of the hall."

"What?" Alice frowned. "Why isn't Kenzie in my room?"

Kenzie tried not to tense. Much as she loved Alice, she did *not* want to spend a month sharing a room, and a bed. She snored and kicked in her sleep.

"Because that's not appropriate. You aren't married, or engaged." Mariana raised an eyebrow. "Unless there's something you're not telling me?"

Alice rolled her eyes. "No. What about Jonathan and Beth? Are they in separate rooms?"

"I didn't think Jonathan would want to be alone, given the circumstances. So no, they aren't." Mariana held out a hand when

Alice's mouth opened again. "Enough. We were kind enough to let Kenzie come along, despite hearing about it last minute. If you can't follow the rules, you're free to stay elsewhere."

"Fine," Alice said, pouting. "Come on, Kenz." She slid her hand into Kenzie's. "Let's go put our bags in our rooms and then I'll show you around."

Alice pulled Kenzie toward the elaborate spiral staircase in the middle of the hall. At the top, hallways extended to the left and to the right. Alice headed left.

"What was that?" Kenzie said once they were out of hearing range, though she made sure to keep her voice low. "I don't want to share a bed."

"Relax. I knew mum wouldn't go for that. I'm just trying to make it convincing."

The hall was full of endless closed doors, and Kenzie had no idea how she was going to remember which was which.

"This is my room." Alice paused in front of a light blue door. "So if you ever need me, just knock." Alice opened the door a crack and set her bags inside. "And then you're down here."

At least Kenzie's room was the last on the left, nice and easy to remember.

The last thing she wanted to do was wander into someone else's room. She doubted that would endear her to the Costas.

"Wow. This is amazing." The bedroom was nicer than most hotel rooms Kenzie had been in. Spacious with a four-poster double bed, a mahogany closet and a matching set of drawers set against the wall. A thick blanket sat at the end of the bed.

"It can get cold overnight," Alice said, noticing the path of Kenzie's gaze. "The floor is stone and the walls are thick, which keeps the heat out in the summer but doesn't help much in the winter. There'll be more blankets in the closet if you need them."

"Thank you."

Alice glanced out of the small window. "There's not much of a view, I'm afraid. But you probably won't be in here too much."

"I mean, the view out of my window at home is of the apartment block opposite, so anything is an improvement on that."

"True. Come on, leave your stuff and I'll show you around while the place is quiet."

The nearest bathroom was their first stop—which had a gigantic walk-in shower and a bathtub big enough for three—before Alice took her back downstairs.

Off the main hall was the biggest kitchen Kenzie had ever seen. The granite island in the center of it was probably the size of their kitchen back home, with a double stove sitting behind it, and more cupboards than Kenzie cared to count.

"I think the next room will be your favorite." Alice beckoned her toward the heavyset door next to the kitchen, and pushed it open. Kenzie let out a breath when she stepped inside.

It was an honest-to-God *library*.

Floor to ceiling bookcases lined the walls, a rich walnut, filled to the brim with books of all different colors. Some were well-read, their spines creased, but countless others seemed untouched. Huge windows looked out onto the grounds beyond, and sunlight streamed into the room, lighting up dust motes in the air.

"It's stunning." Kenzie didn't want to leave, but she was sure the rest of the house had gems to offer as well.

"Knew you'd like it. And wouldn't working in here be an upgrade from your dingy office back home?"

"I'll say." Resting a reverent hand on one of the two desks in the room, Kenzie was already relishing the opportunity.

When her inevitable bouts of insomnia hit—she rarely slept well in new places, let alone places where she was uneasy—Kenzie knew where she was going to find solace. Curled up in one of the creaky leather armchairs, whittling away the final few chapters of her thesis.

Despite her impromptu vacation, Kenzie was getting her goddamn PhD, even if she had to rely on spite and stubbornness to crawl over the finish line.

Sitting behind the wheel of her leased Audi, Carolina stared at the front door of her family's house in Sintra, anxiety making her stomach churn. Her throat was so tight she struggled to draw breath, overwhelmed with the rush of memories that assaulted her when she glanced at the ornate wooden doorway.

Twenty-four years.

That was how long it had been since Carolina had last stepped inside.

Twenty-four years since her mother had tossed her outside—literally, barely giving Carolina a chance to gather her belongings—and told Carolina she'd do well to never show her face again.

That a degenerate *dyke* like her was no daughter of Cecilia Costa.

Twenty-four years since both Mariana and Clara had stood idly by, not standing up for their youngest sister, not standing up *to* their mother, despite all the abuse and trauma she and their father had put them through over the years. Bile rose in Carolina's throat. Was this a mistake? Should she turn and flee, head back to Lisbon, where she'd spent the last twelve hours since her plane had landed, dragging her feet over making the journey out into the hills?

No, she didn't run, or back off. She'd made her mind up, gotten on a plane, and now, she needed to see it through.

While the ghost of Cecilia Costa still haunted Carolina—despite five years of therapy to try and rid herself of the shackles weighing her down—the woman herself no longer resided within the halls of the house she sat looking at.

It was time for her to face her past.

No matter how difficult.

With a resigned sigh, Carolina straightened her spine and approached the front door. The spare key was exactly where Mariana had said it would be—unoriginally hidden beneath a potted plant on the stone steps outside—and Carolina pushed the door open with the palm of her hand.

Inside, silence greeted her. Not unexpected—it was 2 a.m., and everyone should be in bed.

The place hadn't changed. The same stone floor, covered with a plush red rug that led to the elaborate staircase, the walls lined by an array of pretentious artwork—not a family photograph in sight.

Carolina wasn't sure how she felt about staying in her old bedroom. She'd been a different person entirely the last time she'd slept in that bed—but she supposed enough were going spare if she wanted a change of scenery.

Approaching the staircase, Carolina paused at the sliver of light spilling out into the hall from the library.

Her favorite room in this godforsaken place.

"How difficult is it to turn off the light?" Carolina muttered as she pushed open the door.

She didn't expect anyone to be inside—and certainly didn't expect to find a figure lying prone across one of the desks, cheek pressed to the wood and mouth open in a snore.

Her blonde hair and pale white skin gave away the lack of Costa genes, and Carolina frowned. Who was the interloper? Why hadn't Mariana mentioned this wouldn't be a family affair?

"Who the fuck are you?" Carolina said before she could think, voice sharp in the otherwise quiet.

The woman sat bolt upright. Her mouth opened—then snapped closed once their eyes met.

She was young, and pretty, her face free of blemishes and wrinkles, straw-blonde hair scraped back into a high ponytail. Blue eyes were bright despite the late hour and just having woken from a nap.

"I-I'm Kenzie."

Like that meant anything to Carolina. She raised an eyebrow.

Kenzie's throat bobbed as she swallowed. "Um, Alice's girlfriend."

Shock rippled through Carolina. She refused to let it show, though she couldn't stop her fingers digging hard into the wooden doorframe. "Alice has a girlfriend?" Carolina made a conscious effort to keep her voice even, while her mind was spinning a mile a minute.

A girlfriend. Christ, Carolina hoped Mariana had reacted better to Alice's coming out than to Carolina's. Then again, the fact said girlfriend was joining them for the holidays spoke volumes.

Was *that* why Mariana had invited her? To flaunt the fact she wasn't homophobic anymore? Carolina refused to believe it was a coincidence. But Mariana hadn't mentioned a Kenzie in her e-mail. Unless she was the old family friend?

"Uh, it...it's new. But she thought bringing me here would be a good opportunity to meet the family."

"Hm." Carolina wasn't so sure. "And why are you drooling on my desk instead of safely tucked away in bed?" Of course, Carolina had no right to that desk anymore. It had been an age since she'd last sat there, but still. It was the principle of the matter.

"S-sorry."

God, the stuttering. The nerves. They radiated off her. The girl needed to grow a backbone, or she would never be able to make it a month around the Costas.

"I didn't realize it was your desk," Kenzie continued. "I was under the impression this is the first time you've been around here for a while."

Maybe the girl did have a backbone after all.

Though the way she quailed at the snarl that rose from Carolina's throat suggested she quickly regretted speaking out of turn.

"That may be so, but everything in this house is a third mine." Kenzie didn't need to know Carolina had been written out of the will. "So, chop, chop. Scurry off to bed."

With wide eyes, Kenzie scrambled to her feet and snatched up her laptop before hurrying from the room, brushing past Carolina and racing up the stairs.

Carolina watched her go, shaking her head. She'd be surprised if the poor girl lasted the week.

Flicking off the light, Carolina followed Kenzie up the stairs, traipsing toward her old room.

She was halfway there when a door opened, and she froze when Mariana stepped in front of her. A fluffy white robe was wrapped around her shoulders, fuzzy slippers on her feet to ward off the chill from the stone floors. Despite her attire and bleary eyes, she still appeared perfectly put together—and like one look could turn Carolina to ice.

And she would know. It was a stare she'd perfected herself.

"Carolina... I can't believe you're here."

"Neither can I." With her heart pounding in her ears, Carolina couldn't escape now. She'd been spotted, and couldn't run from her past any longer.

"It's so good to see you."

"Is it?" Carolina couldn't help the sharpness of her voice, and Mariana flinched like she'd been struck.

"Yes." Mariana drew her robe tighter around herself, like it was a suit of armor. "I meant what I said in my message. I...I shouldn't have left it so long to reach out."

"And why did you? Reach out, I mean. Why now?" Carolina's gaze flicked to one of the canvases on the wall, a garish mishmash of colors that had no right going together. Carolina had always hated it; her mother had adored it. "Because she's gone, and you can finally crawl out from beneath her shadow?"

Rocking back on her heels, Mariana drew in a breath. "I know how she treated you wasn't right."

"How she treated me?" Keeping her voice low, to not draw any attention from the slumbering occupants in the other rooms, became harder and harder for Carolina every time Mariana's mouth opened. "She tossed me out on the streets like I was a dog for daring to fall in love with another woman. And you and Clara just...stood aside. Like I meant nothing to either of you. You chose her over me. After everything she did to us." Carolina ran a shaking hand through her hair. "Why did I come here? I knew it was a mistake."

Carolina took a half-step backwards. Was it too late for her to get on the first plane back to New York?

"I was never as strong as you were," Mariana said, stopping Carolina in her tracks. "Clara wasn't, either. You were the youngest, but you were..." Mariana swallowed, hard. "You were fearless. No matter what mother or father did to you, you brushed it off. You defied them again. You refused to fall in line, you refused to let them break you, and I...I envied you for it. I also hated you for it."

Carolina swallowed, unsure if she was ready for the answers she'd been seeking after all.

"When she found you with Rebecca—"

Even after twenty-four years, the sound of her name made the air whoosh from Carolina's lungs like she'd been sucker-punched in the stomach. Her family hadn't been the only thing she'd lost that day; she'd lost the woman she loved as well.

Mariana didn't seem to notice her discomfort. "—I didn't know what to do. I knew what I *should* do, of course I did, but I...I'd never been able to stand up to her. She said if Clara or I ever spoke to you again, she'd cut us off." Mariana's gaze fell to the floor. "So I took the coward's way out."

"And in the years since?" Carolina pressed, knowing Mariana's excuse was weak. "Once you had a foothold in the company, she couldn't have done shit to you."

"I didn't think you'd want to hear me out. I followed your career, and I knew you were flourishing without us. I didn't want to drag you back down." Mariana drew a shaky breath. "And then she died. After the funeral, Clara and I came here, and we started to clear out her things, and we found some of the old photograph albums. And I realized how much she'd taken from all of us. I had to see if there was a chance we could fix things."

Mariana took a step closer.

Carolina tried not to flinch when Mariana reached for her hand.

"I am so sorry, Carolina. I understand if you want to leave and never see us again. But I hope you don't. At least stick around long enough to join us for breakfast tomorrow morning. Clara has been looking forward to seeing you." With one last squeeze of her hand,

Mariana melted back into her bedroom, leaving Carolina alone in the hall.

She took a deep breath. Well, that was one sister—the worst sister—down, and nothing terrible had happened. The gates of hell hadn't opened. She was still standing.

And for the first time, Carolina felt a flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, they would be able to salvage some kind of relationship after all.

Chapter 3

KENZIE LOWERED HER HEAD WHEN Carolina swept into the dining room at breakfast.

Wearing a long, black, woolen cardigan that swished around her as she moved, her presence was undeniable, filling the room. Kenzie hadn't known what to expect from Alice's mysterious second aunt, but she hadn't expected her to be so...striking.

Her eyes were a piercing gray, her cheekbones angular, and she had a jawline to die for. A mess of untamed curls sat atop her head, and she had a pair of black-rimmed glasses on her nose.

Around a mouthful of scrambled eggs, perfectly prepared by João—Kenzie could get used to this chef thing, even if being served meals was taking some getting used to—she watched Carolina gracefully skirt around the edge of the table and sink into an empty seat.

Which just so happened to be opposite Kenzie.

Great.

"Carolina." Clara blinked at her sister in astonishment. "I didn't know you were here."

"I got in last night." Carolina eyed Clara and Mariana like one would a dangerous animal.

The dynamic between the three women fascinated Kenzie. Each looked cagey, on edge, their restless gazes darting around the room and their shoulders tight with tension. Alice had told her they were

estranged, and Kenzie wondered what had happened between them—and why they'd chosen now to fix it.

"Well, it's good to see you," Clara said, her smile strained. "It's been a long time."

"Yes." Carolina reached for a glass of orange juice, a tremble in her fingers. Her nails were painted jet black, matching the color of her hair. "So, what's new?" The tone was blasé, but she didn't look settled, a muscle in her cheek twitching as she clenched her jaw.

"A lot." Mariana, too, sounded like she was trying hard to be casual.

Kenzie would love to be a fly on the wall when the three sisters were alone.

"I suppose we should do introductions." Mariana's gaze flickered toward Alice and Kenzie. "My daughter, Alice. She was a toddler the last time you saw her."

Alice waved, the movement awkward.

In return, Carolina offered her a taut smile.

"Beside her is her girlfriend, Kenzie."

Carolina's eyes met Kenzie's, painted red lips curving from a smile and into a smirk. "Oh, we've already met." Carolina lifted a sculpted eyebrow. "Sleep well?"

Her gaze wasn't any less daunting in the cold, harsh light of day. If anything, it was more intense—and disparaging. Kenzie wasn't sure she liked being the subject of Carolina's laser-focus. She had the distinct feeling she was being used as a distraction.

Embarrassed and with heated cheeks, Kenzie stared at her mug of coffee. Trust her to pass out halfway through her thesis chapter. Half-asleep and caught snoring, Kenzie had made a terrible impression. Carolina probably thought Kenzie was a bumbling idiot.

"I slept fine, thank you."

Alice looked at Kenzie strangely. She was sure she was going to get a grilling later.

"How was your flight, Carolina?" Mariana pulled Carolina's attention away from Kenzie.

Thank Christ. The intensity of her gaze was something else.

"It was fine, thank you." Carolina's voice was lyrical. She lacked the English accent of her two sisters, sounding as American as Kenzie—with a hint of a New York accent. Had she moved away from London like Alice had?

Mariana turned to Alice. "Do you girls have anything planned for today?"

"I was going to take Kenzie into Sintra town center. Show her the sights."

"Oh, but you should wait until Jonathan and Beth arrive later this week," Mariana said. "The four of you can go together."

Kenzie couldn't think of anything worse, but the helpless look Alice threw her suggested she didn't know how to turn her mother down.

"Maybe we can go into Lisbon this afternoon instead," Alice said.

Kenzie could get on board with that. Anything to have her out of the house for a few precious hours.

"Sounds lovely. How long has it been since you last saw Jonathan, Alice?" Clara asked. "It must have been a while."

"It's been a few years." Alice stared at the slice of toast she was pushing around her plate.

"Such a shame you two couldn't make it work," Clara said. "You made such a lovely couple."

Kenzie cleared her throat. Her and Alice's relationship might be a farce, but she was playing the part.

"Oh, not that you and Alice aren't," Clara added hastily.

"Thanks, Aunt Clara," Alice said, with a tight smile.

Kenzie made the mistake of glancing across the table, and found Carolina smirking back at her.

That shouldn't be so goddamn attractive.

And also shouldn't be what Kenzie was thinking about.

* * *

“Surviving so far?” Alice tossed her legs over Kenzie’s lap.

They sat in one of the house’s three lounges, the one tucked away in the farthest corner. A fire burned in the hearth, warming the air. Wide windows overlooked the grounds, and Kenzie couldn’t keep her gaze away from the magnificent trees swaying in the breeze.

The gardens were huge, bright flowers flourishing despite the winter weather, and the leaves of the trees were lush and green.

“It’s not been so bad,” Kenzie said. At least the surroundings were beautiful; she couldn’t wait to explore more.

Speaking of beautiful...Kenzie’s gaze travelled to the painted ceramic tiles, featuring blue and yellow flowers, above the fireplace. She’d noticed similar murals around the rest of the house

Alice noticed the path of her gaze. “Impressive, isn’t it? They’re azulejo tiles. You’ll see them in a lot of places around here.”

“It’s beautiful. The whole place is. How did it end up in your family?”

“Ah, you want a history lesson? I’m afraid it’s not a very long or interesting one.” Alice nestled further into the couch. “Sintra used to be made up of royal summer residences—places where the nearby royal families would retreat to in the summer when the temperature in Lisbon grew too hot. It’s why all the buildings are like this—old and grand.”

“Because they were fit for royalty.” Kenzie glanced around, wishing it were possible to flit back in time, if only to see this building in its heyday. “Is this where you tell me you’re descended from a Portuguese king?”

Alice shot her a wry grin. “Just a rich ancestor—my great-great-grandfather made his fortune as a banker in Lisbon. When he retired, he wanted a quieter life, so he bought this house. It’s been passed down through the family ever since. After my grandmother died, it belongs to my mum and her sisters now. And I guess it’ll pass down to me one day.”

“Have you spent a lot of time here?”

“Nah. Used to more when I was younger. But when my grandmother got sick, she moved out here and didn’t want as many visitors. It’s nice to be back though.” Alice sniffled, then coughed.

Kenzie looked at her in concern. “Are you okay? You’re not sick, are you?”

Alice shook her head. “Nah, I’m good. Probably just picked up a cold on the plane. You know what those things are like—seven hours breathing in other people’s air.”

“Well, let me know if you want me to make you some tea,” Kenzie said. “Or some soup.”

“You’re a great fake girlfriend.”

“Shush.” Kenzie glanced toward the door. “Someone might hear you.”

“Ah, they’re all miles away.” Alice lifted her head, her searching gaze on Kenzie’s face. “So, want to tell me how you’ve already met my Aunt Carolina?”

Kenzie knew it wouldn’t take long for Alice to ask.

She should have timed it.

“We met when she got here last night.” Kenzie picked at a thread in the sleeve of her sweater. “I kinda fell asleep in the library and she found me.”

“Trust you. What did she say?”

“‘Who the fuck are you?’ were her first words, I believe.”

Shoulders shaking with the force of her laughter, Alice patted Kenzie on the back. “I’m sorry. But that’s so funny.”

“It is not!” At the memory, Kenzie’s cheeks warmed. “Can you imagine waking up to her standing in the doorway?”

Alice grimaced. “No, I suppose not. But on the plus side—that’s more words than she’s said to me? She does seem pretty intimidating.”

“That’s an understatement,” Kenzie muttered, thinking of the way Carolina had looked at her last night. Standing in the doorway like an avenging angel, beautiful and terrifying.

“Oh, no.” Alice scrutinized Kenzie’s face. “I know that look. Please don’t tell me you think my aunt is hot.”

Kenzie's cheeks warmed. "What? I don't think she's hot."

Alice, who had always been able to tell when she was lying, groaned and put her head in her hands.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay, but you know I have a weakness for attractive older women who look like they could crush me beneath their shoe."

Groaning again, Alice lifted her head. "Kenzie, you can't ruin this because you have the hots for my aunt."

"I won't ruin anything," Kenzie said, affronted. She leaned back against the arm of the couch, and tried not to think about Carolina's gray eyes. "And I don't have the hots for her."

"If you say so." Alice didn't look convinced. "How weird were the vibes between everyone at breakfast?"

"Glad I'm not the only one who noticed. What the hell happened between her, Clara and your mum?"

With a shrug, Alice reached for the TV remote and started flicking through channels. "No idea. You saw how squirrely Mum was when I asked her about it. She's never talked about her much. And Carolina was a banned subject around my grandmother. As far as Cecila Costa was concerned, she only had two daughters. Something big happened, but I don't know what."

Kenzie sucked in a breath, unable to imagine being cast aside by her mother. "Wow." What could have happened to cause such a rift in the Costa family?

"Yeah. I still can't believe she came. How did she get the time off? As far as I know, she's the CEO of some multi-million technology company. Not bad for someone who got cut off from the family, and therefore the family business. Good way to stick it to my grandmother though, I guess." Alice flashed Kenzie a smile. "On the bright side, my mum and Aunt Clara will probably be too preoccupied with Carolina to pay attention to us. We're old news, now."

Kenzie supposed Alice had a point.

* * *

Carolina tried not to squirm in her seat as Alice and Kenzie left the dining room. The weight of Mariana's eyes on her, such a similar color to her own, managed to make Carolina feel like she was ten years old, being berated by Mariana for disturbing the delicate peace between their parents.

She'd always been the black sheep of the family, unwilling to fall in line and stick to the status quo. Refusing to bow to her father had made life difficult for them all. Their mother had often despaired, asking Carolina why couldn't just do what he asked.

But Carolina hadn't been willing to bend, nor break. He'd passed away when she was seventeen years old, but he'd left a mark on them all.

"It really is good to see you, Carolina," Clara said.

"Yes." Mariana's lips quirked into a smile. "I'm glad you decided to stick around for breakfast."

"Don't get too excited. I haven't decided how long I'm staying yet." Neither of them needed to know she was yet to book a return flight.

"Still. We'll take what we can get," Mariana said. "If you stay until Boxing Day, we're going on a horse trek. I know you used to enjoy those."

"When I was a teenager." Carolina sniffed, though a part of her would relish the experience. It had been a while since she'd last ridden, and she did miss it. She made a mental note to go on a trek the next time she made it to the Poconos. "I'm not the same person I was back then."

"No. None of us are," Mariana said. "But I would like to get to know the person you are today."

"We both would." Clara's expression was earnest. "We've kept up with your career from afar, but it would be nice to hear it from you."

Carolina supposed she should have expected to be the main topic of conversation, but the question made her uneasy. "What do you want to know?"

Clara leaned closer. "Everything."

“Or as much as you’d like to tell us, anyway.” Mariana tore the crust off a piece of toast, discarding it on her plate. She’d done that when they were younger—often sliding them to Carolina to polish off.

Some things didn’t change.

“Perhaps you could start with what happened the day you left us,” Clara said.

Carolina arched an eyebrow and sat heavily back in her chair. “Left implies I had a choice.”

“Sorry.” Clara ducked her head, avoiding Carolina’s gaze. “It’s just...we didn’t know what happened to you. How you got home. How you got by. How you managed to pop up a few years later with your own company.”

Carolina reached for the comforting weight of a coffee mug, holding it close to her chest as she forced herself to relive the worst few years of her life. “It wasn’t easy. I suppose I have our father to thank for being able to keep my head above water.” Leaving all three sisters a trust fund in his will had been about the only decent thing he’d done for them. Good thing he hadn’t known about Carolina’s sexuality when he’d set it up, or she never would have seen a penny of it. “Mother couldn’t stop me accessing the money he left. It was enough to get me a flight home, and for me to finish my final year of my business degree at Brown.”

Across the table, Clara leaned closer, hanging on to her every word. “I bet you were glad you went there rather than stayed in London like we did.”

“It helped matters, yes. But I was lucky, too. One of my professors helped me get an internship with a friend of hers. It was a tech start-up, and I was hooked from the first week.” Carolina lifted her phone. “Do you have any idea how much information is stored in one of these?” People were complex, but data? Algorithms? They were as uncomplicated as breathing.

“Considering how many times we enter a phone into evidence, yes.” Mariana’s lips curved into a wry smile. “Fascinating how much you can find on one.”

Even as a teenager, Carolina knew she wasn’t cut out for the family law firm. Mariana was, with her dogged tenacity to get to the bottom of each and every problem she encountered. And Clara, despite her softer nature, had a drive to help people.

But it had never interested her. Just another reason why she’d never fit in. Why both her parents had resented her.

“I worked hard, and I rose up through the ranks, learning everything I could. No one was surprised when I wanted to strike out on my own—even if on my own started out in the bedroom of my shoebox apartment in Queens. I won’t bore you with the exact details of what happened next, but after a long time, and a lot of outside investment, Caro Technology’s first successful app, FriendMe, was born.”

“Why social media?” Mariana tilted her head to one side. “What made you go down that route?”

“People crave connection. It’s highly marketable, plus it’s easy to integrate other applications into it—messaging services, second-hand marketplace, gaming. Even television. Our latest foray is into online dating; we’re in the middle of an acquisition of another company currently that could double our revenue.”

“You’re done well for yourself.”

Carolina set her empty coffee mug down on the table. “Failure wasn’t really an option.”

Clare avoided her gaze. “What about the rest of your life? Personally, I mean. A girlfriend? A wife?”

Trying not to scoff, Carolina shook her head. “I have nothing of the sort. I don’t really date. It’s hard to find the time when you work fourteen hour days. Plus, no one wants to feel like they come second place to a job.” Not to mention the emotional baggage that her parents had left her with.

"Oh." Clara tapped her fingers on the side of her mug of coffee. "Well, what happened with, um, you and Rebecca?"

Breathing in deep through her nose, Carolina stared at the grains of wood in the table, steadfastly avoiding her sister's gaze, and hating the fact that even after so many years, the name had such an effect on her. "After mother kicked me out and Rebecca saw how much I lost... she decided she wasn't willing to let the same thing happen to her. She broke up with me, retreated back into the closet, and twelve months later she was engaged to some stuck-up businessman." Carolina snapped her jaw shut, remembering holding the wedding invitation in her hands—one final blow from Rebecca, to drive the knife in deeper.

Clara's gulp was audible.

When Carolina chanced a glance at Mariana, she hated the look on her face. The pity. Carolina still wasn't sure what she needed from both of her sisters, but it certainly wasn't their pity. That was unacceptable.

"If you're about to ply me with apologies, save it. I don't want to hear them—they won't change anything. And it's not why I came here."

"Why *did* you come?" Mariana said. "Not that I'm not glad you did—I am—but I...I didn't think you would."

"I suppose I wanted to see why you invited me. I wondered if there was a catch." Staring Mariana in the eye, Carolina arched an eyebrow. "Does Alice have something to do with it? Did you invite her girlfriend as some sort of, what, token to show you're not as homophobic as you were twenty years ago?"

A flush crept across Mariana's cheeks. "I know how that seems, but honestly, I was as blindsided as you were."

"You didn't know? I hope you took it better than our mother did."

Both sisters winced. Good. Carolina wasn't going to shy away from the past.

"I knew she was bisexual, and I will admit I didn't take that as well as I should have." Mariana took a deep breath. "But with time, I knew if I didn't accept it, I was going to lose her, and I couldn't let that happen. Our relationship...hasn't always been plain sailing. And I will

admit that I haven't told her what happened between the three of us. I'm scared it might set us back."

"Because you knew you were wrong."

Mariana ducked her head. "Yes. But I appreciate if you would like everything to be out in the open."

"No." In Carolina's opinion, the less people who knew, the better. "It's none of her business, after all."

A flicker of a smile crossed Mariana's mouth. "That's what I said. And before, when I said I didn't know—I meant about Kenzie. I had no idea she was seeing someone. She sprung that on me, and I couldn't exactly say no. I don't blame Alice for not wanting to be here on her own with the three of us. Especially with Jonathan coming later this week."

Carolina remembered the name from breakfast, but had no idea who he was. "Who?"

"Do you remember Sarah? From when we were younger?"

A memory tickled at Carolina's brain, of Mariana arm-in-arm with a pretty brunette. "Vaguely. You brought her out here for a few summers."

"Jonathan is her son. Sarah passed away earlier this year and his father is not in a place to be there for him, so I invited Jonathan to join us for the holidays. He and Alice used to date, so it might be somewhat awkward."

"Well, at least ours won't be the only drama, hm?" Carolina said, much as she wished there weren't so many outside observers to her own family struggles. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll spend some time re-acquainting myself with the place." She pushed herself to her feet.

"Does that mean you're planning on staying?" Mariana said, a hopeful note in her voice.

"For now."

* * *

On her third night in Sintra, Kenzie went to bed at a reasonable hour after a busy afternoon exploring Lisbon, and she tried to sleep. She did.

But after an hour staring at the stupidly high stone ceiling, or at the wall opposite her bed, getting freaked out by the woman in the oil painting looking straight at her, she knew it was futile.

A sentence raced around her head, an idea blooming for how she could close the chapter she'd been working on for weeks. The longer she thought about it, the more Kenzie realized she wouldn't be sleeping a wink until she wrote it down.

Though she hadn't thought for a second this vacation would be relaxing, Kenzie hadn't envisioned herself working into the early hours of the morning.

Sitting up in bed, she reached for her laptop. But when she switched it on, she saw that it had only a few minutes of battery left—and she'd left the charger in the library after her hasty retreat the previous night.

Crap.

Not to mention the Wi-Fi. Her phone barely picked up the signal. She wasn't sure if it was the stone walls, or her room being the furthest one along the hall, but even loading her e-mails was a challenge.

If she wanted to do more than five minutes work, it would seem she needed to venture downstairs. Plus, who was she kidding. She'd loved spending time in that beautiful room, and the chairs were ridiculously comfy. Much more so than resting her back against the old wooden headboard of her bed.

Decision made, Kenzie pulled on her comfiest sweater and padded down the stairs. At the foot of the staircase, Kenzie paused, but there was no sign of movement from any of the other occupants of the house.

The light in the library was off, the room inside empty, and Kenzie sighed. She chose the other desk this time, not wanting to risk Carolina's wrath, and got to work.

Barely ten minutes had passed before the door creaked open behind her. Kenzie turned. Through the gap, Carolina's disapproving expression loomed large.

She was just as beautiful at midnight, face wiped free of makeup, her pale skin glowing beneath the library's bright lights. A jet-black robe was cinched tight at her waist, her wild curls tumbling free around her shoulders. A steaming mug was clutched between her palms.

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

Well, it was a marginally better greeting than the one Kenzie had received the previous evening.

"Shouldn't you?" Kenzie had been caught off guard the night before, rendered speechless by the sight of Carolina standing in the doorway, but she wasn't going to be so meek this time. Kenzie had no intention of scuttling off into the night with her tail tucked between her legs.

"I have work to do," Carolina said. "So if you could just..." She waved past herself, like she was ushering Kenzie from the room.

Clenching her jaw, Kenzie shook her head. "I'm not going anywhere. I have work to do, too. And I need a proper desk."

Carolina raised a sculpted eyebrow. "What is so important that it can't wait until morning?"

"I could ask you the same question."

Carolina laughed, a sharp bark lacking any real amusement. "I am the CEO of my own company, sweetheart. I have e-mails to respond to, business meetings to run, investment portfolios to build. I doubt you can say the same." Condensation dripped from Carolina's voice.

It made Kenzie's blood boil, but she forced herself not to react. She had a feeling that was exactly what Carolina wanted.

"Well, I have a thesis to write." Kenzie turned her attention back to her laptop screen.

"You're really not leaving?" Carolina sounded astonished. "This is my family's house."

"I am painfully aware of that fact," Kenzie said, refusing to look away from the blinking cursor on her screen, "since you and your sisters have a similar way of conveying how unwelcome I am in it."

"I've barely spoken to you."

Neither had Mariana or Clara, which only served to prove Kenzie's point. "You kicked me out of here last night. And you're trying to get me out now, when the room is more than big enough for the both of us. There's even two desks. How is that welcoming?"

Kenzie jumped when Carolina appeared beside her. She wore fuzzy socks on her feet—bright red, standing out against her pale legs—which made her move soundlessly across the door.

Carolina narrowed her eyes. "I don't like to share."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Really?" Carolina looked at her like Kenzie had threatened to stab her.

Kenzie met Carolina's gaze. "Really."

For several long moments, Carolina stared at Kenzie. Then, with a heavy sigh, and a muttered "Fine," she turned on her heel and stalked over to the other desk where a MacBook sat waiting.

Whose bright idea had it been to position the two desks facing one another?

How was Kenzie supposed to concentrate on writing about the mechanisms of cancer cell death when she could see Carolina frowning at her screen with pursed lips?

Maybe she should have left.

But then Carolina would have won, and Kenzie was nothing if not stubborn.

No, she could do this. She could focus. She could—

Carolina let out a low groan of frustration, and Kenzie's eyes strayed across the room. Black-framed glasses sat on the end of Carolina's nose, her lips pursed as she muttered something under her breath.

Quick as a flash, Carolina raised her head, and Kenzie was too slow to look away.

“Can I help you?” Carolina said.

“S-sorry.” Kenzie forced her eyes back to her screen. The cursor continued to blink at her, mocking, her sentence still unfinished.

Focus. Don't look over there. Don't give her the satisfaction.

Kenzie could feel Carolina's gaze boring into her, but she didn't cave.

It was going to be a long night.

* * *

Carolina stared at the bowed head of her niece's girlfriend with pursed lips.

Where had the shy, timid girl Carolina had met last night gone? That girl never would have met Carolina's gaze head-on. That girl never would have refused to leave, despite Carolina's heavy hinting. Carolina couldn't remember the last time someone had challenged her so directly.

It was... oddly refreshing.

And a part of her couldn't resist seeing how far she could push before the girl snapped.

Everyone had a breaking point, and Carolina was an expert at finding it.

After catching Kenzie's attention with a groan while reading a particularly annoying e-mail, Carolina started small, with obnoxiously loud typing and the occasional heavy sigh. Some of the sighs weren't just for show. Carolina did hate taking her hands off the wheel, even though Andie was more than capable of managing the day-to-day running of things.

But Kenzie didn't react.

Or so much spare a glance in Carolina's direction, and for some reason that infuriated her. How dare she invade Carolina's space and refuse to leave? As a teenager, the library had been her sacred sanctum in this house. Her sisters never set foot in it, conditioned from their

childhood when it had been her father's favorite room, and no one else had ever been allowed inside.

Before his death, Carolina had always pushed her luck, of course. She loved reading, spending hours searching the shelves for new first editions.

But oh, when he caught her snooping... Well.

If Kenzie thought Carolina's reaction was harsh, then she should have met Nathaniel Anderson. Since he'd died, whenever Carolina squirrelled herself away in the library, it was one more fuck you to her father.

But her safe space was under threat.

And Carolina needed to do something about it.

Her mouse hovered over the Spotify icon, and Carolina pressed play on the first playlist she saw. It was innocuous, some pop rubbish she heard all the time on the radio, and she turned up the volume until it would be loud enough to travel across the room.

Glancing up, Carolina frowned when Kenzie's head bobbed along to the beat.

Goddammit.

Okay. Time for the big guns.

Carolina changed to the kind of music every single other person in her life hated, but she listened to before board meetings to fire herself up.

"I didn't peg you for a Slipknot fan," Kenzie said.

Carolina blinked at Kenzie in shock. "You recognize it?"

"I love this song." Kenzie met Carolina's gaze, a challenge in her eyes. "Are you getting any work done over there? Because it kind of seems like you're spending a lot of time trying to chase me out of this room."

"I'm getting plenty done, thank you," Carolina said, through gritted teeth.

"Uh-huh. Hey, could you turn the music up?"

Huffing out a breath, Carolina turned it off instead, and resolutely ignored Kenzie's smirk. *She* was supposed to be the one in charge here.

Unacceptable.

Carolina was trying to think of something else she could do to annoy Kenzie out of the study when another e-mail flashed on her screen. An urgent meeting request from Andie about an upcoming pitch to some of their investors that she couldn't ignore.

Looked like she'd have to resign herself to sharing the library with Kenzie and knuckle down and get some work done after all.

With one final sigh, Carolina plugged in her headset in preparation for Andie's call, forcing herself to focus on the thing she loved the most—her business—and not the woman sitting at the other desk.

Maybe Carolina's call would finally encourage Kenzie to leave. Concentrating when someone else was speaking was difficult, after all.

Or maybe she was nosy enough to listen to Carolina's every word.

Either way, as Andie's face came into focus on her screen, it wasn't Carolina's problem.

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

DON'T LET ME GO

BY RACHAEL SOMMERS

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