

A heart can
never be caged



When She Flies

LEE WINTER



CHAPTER 1

THE ACCIDENTAL INTERN

Sienna Fisher was a firm believer in fate. So being essentially abducted from the foyer of a fancy New York building one Monday morning did not come as big of a shock to her as it probably should have.

Of course, embracing fate didn't mean that being kidnapped by a short, husky Asian man in a sensational plum suit had been on her bingo card when she'd awoken in her loft this morning.

It was day sixty-two of being in New York and exploring the city she'd only read about as a girl growing up in England. Sienna's world travels so far had taught her that every city had something special about it, something she would come to love, no matter how deep she had to dig to uncover it.

And on this brisk morning, ambling about New York, Sienna couldn't believe her luck. She'd found herself in Noho—lower Manhattan—peering up at a Queen Anne-style building: ten floors of sandstone, terracotta, brick, and copper. It even had a cute little dome tower on top.

As she cupped her face to one grand, arched window, she spied artworks inside dotting the wall of an industrial chic foyer. She gasped. Sienna *had* to see those up close.

As if responding to the lure of a siren song, she strode inside, straight past a small blonde twentysomething receptionist, who looked up in confusion, and skidded to a halt in front of the wall of art.

Her eyes darted all over the collection of what seemed to be original works. Was that a...cheese-wrapper painting? Random! And, ohhh. A *Hom Nguyen*? She'd only seen the Frenchman's talented scribbles in art magazines.

A clearing throat was followed by a "Miss, can I help you?"

No, not now! Not yet! Sienna needed to absorb the art before she was kicked out! She let the receptionist's voice fade away, hoping to squeeze in a little more time with the canvases calling to her.

It was so captivating! The colors: reds, oranges, greens, and blacks, just scribbles, some people might think, people who didn't understand the work. Sienna breathed in deeply.

She heard murmuring. One-sided. The receptionist was probably on the phone. Calling Security? She could hardly blame her. After all, Sienna was just some random blow-in dirtying up their fancy foyer; a stranger with no need to be in here at all. Except she *did* need to be here. Fate wasn't wrong to pull her to this place.

Sienna inhaled. Maybe she should throw herself on the receptionist's mercy and argue that as an artist she needed to breathe in new experiences like air. Except, stopping to argue her case would waste valuable seconds that could be spent admiring this revelatory wall of art.

She wondered who had chosen this eclectic selection. Someone bold and creative with an eye for the interesting. No, this definitely wasn't a regular interior designer's pick. It was from the mind of a passionate art lover.

A ding sounded from the lift behind her, and Sienna sagged, knowing her artgasm was at an end. She heard the doors slide quietly open and turned.

To her surprise, springing from the lift was an immaculately dressed Asian man with designer glasses, who didn't have a lick of *Security* aura about him. He took her left bicep in a surprisingly firm grip.

"You are SO late," he said with a harried huff as he propelled Sienna back into the lift.

"I'm...what?" she asked, turning to face the rapidly closing doors.

"Late. You *must* pay attention. That's rule number one of what's expected of you." He slid his gaze over her, cataloging every inch of her. He pursed his lips with all the withering disapproval of a drag queen.

She wondered why she felt defensive and looked down at herself. Her ripped jeans, white T-shirt, tan duster coat, and hand-painted graphic trainers were perfectly acceptable New York wear. Hell, she'd seen some diabolical fashion sights in the two months since she'd been here that made her look practically overdressed.

"Well. You're not what I expected," the man said while punching the button for the ninth floor without even looking at it.

Sienna idly wondered how many times blindly pushing the lift button had gone awry for him.

Wait, she *wasn't what he expected*? "Excuse me?" she said, glaring at him. "Judgy much?" He could talk. He was practically a kidnapper! "And you've made a mistake."

The doors closed before she could make her exit. *Shit!* Still, she was rather curious as to what the universe was up to.

"Oh, honey, *I'm* not responsible for this." He peered at her. "Mr. Latouf is." He said the name with a sniff, as though she ought to know who that was. "*And* your fancy parents."

My...what? Her mum, Susannah, at home in Cricklewood, London, was the least fancy person on the planet. She ate digestive biscuits with her Tetley tea, for heaven's sake. And her meat-and-potatoes father had been a moderately successful landscape painter until his death ten years ago. The absence of a spike in prices for his works after he'd died was proof he wasn't as special as he'd believed himself.

They lived in a modest red-brick house with so many odd angles that even the real estate agent could only describe it as *rare in its lack of conventionality*.

The lift lurched skywards at an expensively rapid pace. Now that she thought of it, everything about this building was expensive, from the unexpected foyer art to the amber resin wall glowing in the lift's rear. It warmed the car like a backlit shroud of Turin (minus the Jesus outline).

The man glared at the flashing numbers of floors whizzing by. "Hustle, hustle!" he informed the lift, which was already flying as fast as any Sienna had ever seen.

"Oh, and I'm not *judgy*," he said in *the* judgiest of tones, as if just realizing what she'd said. "I simply didn't think you'd be so..." He swished a hand up and down her, then shook his head. "Old."

Old? She was thirty-four, for heaven's sake. Hardly middle-aged. And Judgy Guy seemed to be around her age, so she didn't have a clue why he was giving her any grief.

Sienna ignored his dig and folded her arms. "Okay, and you are?"

"Oliver Ang, of course." At her visible incomprehension, his tone turned patronizing. "The head assistant you were in the foyer waiting for? You *did* read my last text?" His voice dropped to a low mutter. "*Lovely*. Nepo babies. Always needing to be spoon-fed."

Nepo baby? He thought she was a new employee who was a nepotism hire? A kid from some powerful family empire or something?

Before she could protest that he was wrong on so many levels, up to and including his ability to identify an actual employee, the man turned to face her, one hand dropping to his hip.

"Look," he began, "the meeting's probably already started. But maybe we can just slip in the back and *She* won't notice." A hint of fear darted into his eyes.

Oliver really did seem to uppercase the *S* in *she*.

"She?" Sienna prodded, fascinated by his verbal genuflecting.

"The Queen," he said and, yep, he'd verbally uppercased the *Q* in Queen as well. Oliver supplied another sniff.

"Do you have a cold?" Sienna asked helpfully.

He rolled his eyes. "Did you even *read* the Latouf Luxury Emporium organizational chart I sent you? She won't take kindly to you being unprepared. She has high expectations, even if you don't." He glowered at the lift lights again for not yet having reached the ninth floor.

Sienna probably should have corrected Oliver right then. Told him she'd just happened upon this gorgeous old building by chance on one of her wanderings. She *should* have told him this and gone on her way. But fate had brought her here for a reason, and now she was incredibly interested in meeting Oliver's "queen." How could she leave before that? Curiosity would burn in her forever if she did.

The doors opened, and Oliver reached for her arm again with those pincer fingers.

She dodged him.

He merely huffed at her and took off, announcing, "This way. Hurry!"

Oliver set a breakneck pace, and Sienna was glad she was wearing her trainers. Not just any trainers. These were her hand-painted Converse Chuck Taylors she'd labored over for hours, getting the exact shades of blues and blacks for her detailed abstract design. Up close, the abstract triangles gave way to a dog's face that she'd sneaked into the pattern to amuse herself.

She occasionally received offers for them when she was out and about, but they weren't for sale.

Her shoes were perfectly matched in hue to her long-sleeved white T-shirt that flattered her trim, five-foot-eight frame and distressed navy jeans. She'd encouraged the knee rips herself, not to be trendy but because she loved the stark white threads peeking from the tears, contrasting against the denim's deep dark blue. Contrast was powerful in art.

The jeans probably looked top-end designer...which might explain Oliver's nepotism comment, but they'd only cost her forty bucks and an hour with her scissors.

They rounded a corner and came up to a glass-walled conference room, filled with about two dozen people. All were immaculately dressed, with perfect hair, sharp suits, and shiny shoes. The assembled group oozed quality and wealth.

Then Sienna saw *Her*. And, yes, Sienna absolutely put the emphasis on the *H*. She stumbled to a halt just behind Oliver and peered over his shoulder.

Wow. Holy... It was Jasmine Gemayel. Art legend. Curator. Icon. And Sienna's whole, sole inspiration when she'd been a young artist back in London. Her reason for loving art now. For *being* an artist. And for traveling the world.

Jasmine wore a midnight-violet suit dark enough to be almost black. The lapel was ebony, and it shone in a way that said silk and luxury and *dry-clean only*.

Beneath the jacket was a popped-collar, crisp white shirt with three buttons undone to her light-brown, flawless neck. Long and graceful, it flowed up to a strong jaw. That hadn't changed either. Jasmine looked as stubborn as ever.

Sienna's eyes drifted higher to rosewood red lips, angular cheekbones, an aristocratic nose, and that luxurious, sweeping dark-brown hair. Ever so slightly ruffled, her shoulder-blade-length hair looked as if she'd been absently running it through her hands. Her earrings were fancy—dancing strings of glass in assorted colors, Egyptian style.

Her mystique and charisma were just as intoxicating as they had been when Jasmine had launched a cutting-edge London experimental art gallery two decades ago.

It had been a fifteen-minute Underground ride from Sienna's family home to Jasmine's West End gallery, and Sienna hadn't been able to stay away. She'd soaked it all up, the incredible art, the colors and textures of experimental artists from all over the world. The highlight was the monthly evening talks Jasmine would give to artists and patrons, while Sienna had lurked in the shadows at the back.

Jasmine had never seen her, and—until a teenaged Sienna had finally plucked up the courage to show Jasmine her art portfolio—she'd never spoken to her either.

She'd been so clueless back then. And...*God*. What an interaction. Her cheeks heated as they always did at the reminder of Jasmine's clipped, faintly accented critique of her work. "Derivative. Unoriginal. Lacking character. *Live* before you create. My God, have you even left home? Seen anything of the world?"

Sienna had been crushed. Shredded. Shattered. Of course, that rebuke had probably just been Tuesday to Jasmine.

Would she recognize Sienna now as the teenager she'd torn apart with professional detachment? After one meeting so long ago? Unlikely. She had been of no consequence to the icon. The thought was a relief. Sienna was not about to remind her of her younger self's humiliation. And she sure as hell wasn't about to waste another opportunity to be in Jasmine Gemayel's orbit. No wonder fate had brought her here: a second chance.

The art curator had to be just over forty-five now. Age had in no way made her less stunning. Her stillness in the way she held her head, and her graceful movements, were as captivating as they always had been.

She was also doing that thing with her hand she'd done years ago—a flick when she was done with something. It was dismissive and coolly applied to people too. No one wanted Jasmine's disapproval. Her biting tongue when displeased was scathing. Worse was when she said nothing at all and simply walked away. When someone was beneath her notice, they did not die wondering.

Exhaling in wonder, Sienna could not help but stare. The woman was magnificent.

Oliver shifted back a step and whispered with a tiny curl at the edges of his lips. "You see? She *is* the queen." His eyes glowed with adoration.

Jasmine's eyes, hickory brown, and edged with black kohl, now swung in their direction.

Sienna's breath hitched, fear and anticipation shooting through her. Her hands turned clammy and her mouth dried.

But there was not even the faintest recognition in the cold, even stare that intersected Sienna. "Ah, the *intern* has deigned to arrive," Jasmine said, her voice a trademark low, throaty rumble. "Please look into time management in future."

She might have said *please*, but the sentence was laced with admonishment.

Wait, what? She thought Sienna was an *intern*? No wonder Oliver thought she looked too old! She couldn't seriously pass as an intern at her age, could she?

Under Jasmine's brief, derisive glance, Sienna withered a little, even though this was in no way her fault. She wasn't their intern! Yet she'd somehow already disappointed the woman.

"Everyone"—Jasmine glanced at the room—"take note of who will be dealing with your photocopies, deliveries, and coffee orders for the next six months." She did the little hand flick in Sienna's direction, not even looking at her.

All eyes swung to Sienna, but she was too busy digesting Jasmine's words.

Six months?

Even if they really were offering this to her, she couldn't intern for six months! Although it *would* mean working with her art hero. Sienna's heart raced. She'd dug one hell of a hole for herself.

The room was waiting. Was she expected to introduce herself? Surely they'd realize she was not their intern the moment she said her name? Maybe they didn't know her name? What to do?

"Hi," she said. "I'm Sienna Fisher. Artist and wanderer." She smiled. "I'm looking forward to working with you all." She shocked herself with that last line.

Beside her, Oliver stiffened and tossed her a dismayed look. He glanced down at his phone, fingers moving frantically, as if he was looking up the intern's details. Then he glared.

She gave him a shrug and a half grin.

Jasmine was now peering coolly at Oliver, asking a wordless question of her own.

His mouth opened, then shut again, and he flicked a confused look at Sienna, his cheeks darkening.

Jasmine's eyebrows lifted ever so slightly at that. But then, as if deciding intern matters were beneath her, she flicked her fingers again, this time to a man next to her. "Antonio?"

Antonio looked as Italian as his name, and was dressed elegantly in a tailored suit, with a red tie the color of undried blood. In his early fifties, he exuded an air of a well-bred man of taste, with an aura that was somehow both luxurious yet strongly masculine. How interesting.

His expression was as neutral as his tone. "Three of the department heads have submitted their concepts for this year's tiers," Antonio said. "Some need work. We'll be making feedback shortly."

Jasmine nodded. "To reiterate, we need to be *creative*, people. *Original*. Do *not* recycle rejected ideas from previous seasons in whole or in part." Her gaze swung to a bunch of six young men in their twenties and early thirties sitting in virtually cloned navy suits at one end of the table. "Do not think I won't notice, gentlemen."

They squirmed under her scrutiny.

"Antonio and I will be getting back to you all soon with our feedback."

Antonio, who made an Easter Island statue look animated, inclined his head in agreement, no flicker of emotion betraying him.

"Our Tier One product will be announced shortly," Jasmine went on. "As always, I trust that all departments will submit ideas for it, in addition to their own tier's work. The chosen team's design will be awarded a larger-than-usual bonus this year, because the task is more exacting. So it quite literally pays to put some passion into your proposals. Understood?"

The heads all bobbed.

"That's everything." Her elegant wrist flipped backward to punctuate her words, then she pivoted and stalked out of the room.

When Antonio began to speak, something about a deadline extension for the Tier One Thousand department, Oliver latched onto Sienna's wrist and hauled her outside the conference room.

"Hey!" she protested. "Do you always drag people around?"

"Who *are* you? You are not Amy the intern!"

"No," Sienna agreed. "Not me."

"Why didn't you *say* that in the lobby?" He all but stomped his foot.

"Why didn't you ask? Not even once did you ask my name! Why did you assume I was this Amy person?"

He blinked and then pointed at her shoes. "Those, my dear, are designer sneakers. Handmade, cost a pretty penny. Since Amy's from one of the richest families in New York and you were standing exactly where and when she was meant to be, why wouldn't I assume you were her? Oh, and I got a call from the receptionist to say a young woman had arrived and 'wasn't I expecting some intern'?" He shook his head. "A better question is why you let a complete stranger drag you off into a business meeting without so much a whimper of protest?"

"Fate does what it will. If here's where I'm meant to be, then who am I to argue?"

Oliver looked at her agape for half a minute and then said, "Well, why did you say you looked forward to working with these people when you don't intend to work here? Or even know *where* you are? Or what we do here?"

"Who says I don't intend to work here?" Sienna countered with a grin.

"Why do you assume we would take some random stranger off the street as an intern? You haven't been vetted by HR." He looked close to hyperventilating now. "You don't know anything about anything!"

His phone beeped, and he snatched it out of his pocket, still glaring at her. Then his dark-brown eyes narrowed. "Amy the intern *sends her apologies but won't be joining Latouf Luxury Emporium*. Apparently she's had a better offer." He scowled and dropped his phone back into his jacket pocket.

"Oh dear," Sienna said.

"Nepo babies," he complained again. "Don't appreciate what they have. The opportunity to work with one of the greatest women in human history and the ungrateful creature has thrown it all away for some other internship because it's *paid*." He sounded disgusted.

"Greatest woman" was a bit of a stretch, but Sienna understood the sentiment. She paused. "This is an *unpaid* internship?" Why would Jasmine do that? It seemed unnecessary and unscrupulous, given how luxurious the building was. They didn't look short of money. She didn't exactly blame this Amy for wanting to be paid for six months' work.

"Yes." He smirked now, as if certain she'd backtrack on her interest in working here.

What he didn't know was that Sienna didn't have to worry about money right now. Between her savings and her mother keeping her bank account turning over from Sienna's art sales—and waitressing jobs topping up any shortfalls—she was self-sustaining. It allowed her to keep wandering the world, creating art. She'd planned to be in New York for six months anyway, but did she really want to spend her time here as an intern?

An intern for *Jasmine Gemayel*?

No question. *Hell, yes.*

Oliver was still eyeballing her in agitation. She needed to convince him first.

"I don't care about the internship being unpaid," she said. "I mean, my tourist visa doesn't allow me to do paid work while I'm here anyway. And as for why you'd want me?" She offered him her most charming smile. "I know one thing that Amy doesn't: The woman running that meeting was Jasmine Gemayel."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"I know her as the legend who created GOMEA," Sienna said. "I totally agree she's a queen. I *know* how good she is. Would your Amy know that?"

Oliver stared at her in bewilderment. "GOMEA," he repeated.

"London's Gallery of Modern and Experimental Art."

"I know what it is. But how do *you*? Jasmine's not a household name. And she hasn't run that gallery in ten years! Not since she came to New York."

"I'm an artist. I also dabble in graphic design." Sienna waved at her hand-decorated trainers. "I'm originally from London. Jasmine's name is one anyone in art circles would know there."

"So those really are designer," he said, looking thoughtful. "Only *you're* the designer?"

She nodded.

"Interesting. You know, kitten, I *was* going to throw you out on your ear. I thought you were some charming grifter who doesn't know how lucky she is to even be here. So close to..." He exhaled.

"A legend," she finished for him. "I know. And *you* know. We see it. Not everyone does, but we do, right? It's about respecting someone who's earned it."

He studied her for a moment. "I am sorely tempted." He thought for a few seconds more. "Well, Miles is *so* boring, so that tips you over the edge."

"Um, who is Miles, and what does he have to do with me?"

"Miles Rutherford is ten thousand years old, wears cravats for God's sake, and runs Collections." He gave an airy wave. "And until you fell over our chic doormat, that queer dear was the only other gay in the village." His look was knowing. "It might be nice to have more 'family' around here who isn't from the last century."

Few people picked out Sienna as a lesbian. The long curly hair usually threw them. She stared in surprise.

"I have excellent gaydar." He tapped his nose. "Besides, only artsy, queer men and starstruck sapphics look at Jasmine the way you did just now." He snickered softly. "It's a bit of a giveaway when your jaw thuds to the floor."

"Smart aleck," Sienna shot back, not denying it. She lifted her chin. "Don't straight men look at her that way too?"

"Alas, no. They see a successful, powerful, elegant woman who drills a look right through them, and all their interest just *shrivels* up. Queer men recognize and respect her divine queenliness. Queer women in general adore her power and hotness and that fabulous hair. And some"—he eyed her pointedly—"just turn into a little lezzie puddle of awestruck goop."

"I was that obvious?" Sienna muttered in dismay.

"Only to me, kitten. I get it." He exhaled. "All right, we'll do this. I'll handle HR. If anyone asks, Amy bailed and you were second on the intern list. But they won't ask. All anyone wants is for interns to do their bidding and not bitch too much."

"Won't Jasmine ask, though? I could tell she was not expecting my name. She'll want to know, right?"

"God no. She has *zero* interest in the interns, disagrees with the very concept of them, and makes that abundantly clear every chance she gets. We all know not to even mention the intern scheme to her. On that note, don't be offended if she ignores you entirely for six months. It's not personal."

"What? Why would she do that?" *No!*

"The interns are the sole domain of her husband, Mark Latouf. He picks them out carefully based on their family connections. Jasmine leaves well alone. But don't fret, he won't know you're not Amy and throw you out. He has his own business that he runs elsewhere. He's barely ever here."

Jasmine had a husband? Curiosity rippled through her. How surprising. She'd never thought of her as the marrying kind. She was just so fiercely independent. Was he some famous, brilliant artist perhaps? Someone powerful, probably. Doubtlessly good-looking. Of course he would be, given how beautiful she was. She could have anyone.

Oliver stopped. "What was your name again? I have to look like I know you before we get to HR."

"Sienna Fisher."

"Right." His eyes brightened. "You're not an heiress by any chance, are you? That'd help your case. I'm being serious."

"Afraid not."

"Damn. Okay." He straightened his outlandish purple glasses. "Let's get you an internship."

They walked on in silence for a few moments.

"You know you're actually qualified," Oliver told her. "In case you're having doubts."

"Even though I don't know what you do around here?"

"Art, Sienna. We do art. Well, designer goods. We create concepts, give the designs to established high-end firms and pay them to create a special limited edition run for us. Sometimes manufacturers will approach us and beg us to partner with them because they want to be linked to our excellent name. But at the end of the day, we create luxurious goods with massively overpriced tags, and sold only to the richest of the rich who want bragging rights."

"I've never seen your label anywhere. Do you sell your products in stores, or..."

"No. We're far too exclusive for that. For Tier One, that's our one-off biggest item, there'll be an end-of-year auction. For the rest, it's a subscription-only service, and there's a wait-list to even be included in that. I'll explain more later. Right now, we're here." He waved at a door with *Human Resources* written on it. But Sienna was more transfixed by what was next to it.

On an adjacent wall was a portrait of a man who looked like he should be on the cover of a steamy romance novel with the title *Taming the Dark-Eyed Billionaire*.

Sienna took in the sharp suit, expensive watch, and manicured hand holding a glass of spirits. He could be a model, but why would they have his framed photo on the wall? She already guessed the answer but asked anyway. "Who is that?"

"Mark Latouf, company founder. You'll see his portrait all over the building."

"The husband?"

"The husband." Oliver raised his hand to knock.

"Jasmine must really enjoy looking at him if she's put his portrait up everywhere."

Oliver's teeth flashed. "He *is* good to look at," he purred as he knocked. "And she didn't put his portraits up; he did."

A voice on the other side of the HR door said, "Come in."

He led them inside. An older white woman with a generous build was enhanced by an elegant navy suit. Everyone here was so well-dressed.

"Mrs. Burgess," Oliver said, "I'd like you to help us get our newest intern settled and official."

"Ah," she said, glancing up briefly, then flipped through a manila folder. "You must be Amy Vanderbilt."

Sienna started at Amy's famous surname. Oliver wasn't kidding about their interns being sourced from well-connected families.

The HR woman looked up again, a typed piece of paper clutched in her fingers, and frowned. "You do *not* look twenty-two."

"No," she said. "I'm Sienna Fisher. Thirty-four."

"Amy bailed on us," Oliver cut in. "I'll explain later. Sienna's our number two pick. Please process her for us."

The HR woman held up a stalling hand. "Oliver Ang," she said, her tone light censure, "we both know Ms. Fisher is *not* number two. I keep a copy of the interns list."

His expression turned sheepish. "Well, Sienna's here now. Ready and willing. That puts her one up on..." He paused, as if thinking of a name. "Whoever our number two was. And Sienna here has a design and art background." He glanced at her. "Right?"

"Yes." Sort of. She wondered if learning at her artist father's knee counted as self-taught or expert taught.

"There, see?" Oliver tilted his head at Mrs. Burgess. "Think of how exciting it'll be to have an intern who's not telling us 'Don't you know who my parents are?' every three seconds?"

"I admit, that would make a change," Mrs. Burgess murmured with an amused twinkle in her eye. "All right, Oliver. As long as Ms. Latouf approves of Sienna, I'll go ahead and process her."

Ms. Latouf? Jasmine had taken her husband's surname? Really? The woman she'd listened to in the Art After Dark talks in London had proudly mentioned her parents' Iranian roots and their family tree that could be traced back centuries. This was not someone who'd give up the family name easily. How...puzzling. It seemed like there was a lot she didn't know about Jasmine.

"Good," Oliver was saying. "I'll leave Sienna with you and then pick her up for the grand tour after you're done. And that's when the real fun begins."



"You survived," Oliver said with a warm smile as Sienna tucked her HR-issued security badge into her coat pocket.

"I did. You might have warned me beforehand how much she likes talking about her pet ferret."

"Why do you think I didn't stick around? Let me give you a quick tour, but later, we're going to have lunch and you will spill on what *She* was like in the before times. In London."

"It'd be my pleasure," Sienna said honestly. "Although Jasmine and I never formally met." Aside from the art-critiquing incident, which she was in no hurry to share. "But I did see her running her gallery a lot."

"Good. You like sushi?" he asked. "We're having sushi."

"My agreement sounds nonoptional," Sienna said in amusement.

"Sushi is life." He waved to the large office area they'd just turned into. "This is called the main floor. It's really just Jasmine's floor plus a few support staff who buzz around her like earnest bees."

It was a lavishly appointed space with every modern convenience, from state-of-the art photocopiers and computers to exotic tinted glass light shades in a ripple of colors. The walls, though, were what caught Sienna's

eye: The wallpaper was a pale cornflower blue with incongruous yellow vertical lines.

Sienna stopped to study it, running her fingers up and down the faintly raised lines. "Unusual," she murmured. "You don't see many offices with wallpaper these days." She traced a slim sliver of gold. "And why this look? It doesn't seem Jasmine's taste. I mean, it's the sort of wallpaper you'd slap up in a room filled with Louis XIV antiques."

"You have quite the eye," Oliver said, pausing. "The wallpaper was chosen by Bradley, who is Mark Latouf's head designer. Back in the day, when Mr. Latouf was setting up the company for his then new wife to take over, this is what was chosen."

Sienna didn't care for either Bradley or Mark Latouf's taste, but she didn't say it.

She glanced higher to an array of framed artworks. "He did better here." She pointed. "I love this collection. Bialke, right? Maybe Bradley the designer has some taste after all."

"Hardly. That series was chosen by Jasmine her first day on the job," Oliver said.

"Ah." Of course it was. In matters of taste, Jasmine was second to none.

"Come on," Oliver said, drawing her away. "Let's get you set up. And then you can start the low-octane world of being a Latouf Luxury Emporium intern."

CHAPTER 2

WORMS AND STRAYS

Jasmine leaned back in her office's dark-purple, velvet chair and waited for the salesman/supplier from East Moroccan Fine Linens to stop monologuing about his importance. Occasionally, while droning on, he'd glance around at the pop-culture posters framed on her wall, or the curios in display cabinets, and his lip would curl down slightly. Or he'd glance over at Antonio, seated silently in one corner, as if expecting him to take over the meeting.

Antonio was having none of it, of course, saying nothing and refusing to indulge the irritating Samir Jabri.

Jasmine was too practiced, too experienced to react to his subtle insults or disdain. She'd worked out the moment he'd started speaking exactly how this would end.

Jabri was so far out of his depth, it was embarrassing. She caught the look of amusement in Antonio's eye, as if he was anticipating what was about to follow.

This supplier claimed he'd just flown in from Rabat, Morocco, as a "courtesy" to her company. In fact, she knew he'd instead been relocated from his company's Moroccan headquarters months ago to a tiny New York sub branch.

Her issue wasn't that he had lied to big-note himself. Her issue was he had assumed she would not have extensively researched his company and him before this meeting. And her main issue was he thought she was a nobody, a woman far beneath him.

"It is an insult," Jabri said with what seemed like faux outrage, "how small your order is. Perhaps if you quadrupled the order size, I can make our company available to do business."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Jasmine said. "We were very clear at the outset when talking to your head office about what our needs are. We sell an exclusive *limited edition* product...in this case, it will be a collection of quality throw cushions. We never mass-produce. We certainly don't intend to sell four times what we already outlined with your CEO just to meet the minimum that you state we should buy in order to do business with you."

"For such a small amount," he tried again, "I don't see that it is worth it for us."

"Your company is trying very hard to break into the US market, Mr. Jabri, yes? It's why they've set up a New York office and sent you here. Correct?"

He shifted in his chair now, clearly not liking how much she knew.

"Yes, but we will not go very far agreeing to such tiny orders."

"The order may be limited, but it means your product will be showcased by the most high-class luxury emporium in the world."

He slapped his armrest. "Except no one has ever heard of you! I could stop a thousand people on the street and say, 'You there! Do you know of Latouf Luxury Emporium?' and they would all say no!"

She arched an eyebrow. "Because we are not retailing to *them*. We sell only to the world's top point-five percent of wealthy individuals." How did he not know this? "Individuals who often appear in luxury lifestyle and architecture magazines, showing off their homes and, more often than not, products they have bought from us. What is a *tiny* thing to you, is a very large thing to your company's reputation, especially in the US, where no one knows *you*."

A wary look crossed his tanned face. "I already have told you what line of fabrics I may be willing to sell, but you refuse. You hold out for our best. And you want it exclusively! Not acceptable."

"But the line you're willing to sell is too commonplace to interest our clientele."

"I doubt your clientele would know the difference," he shot back. "Americans and culture? Please. These *people* would not know culture if it bit them on their fat backsides."

Jasmine's lips thinned. A great deal of America's elite, in fact, knew more about culture than this...imbecile. They were collectors of quality. Rightly, they wanted to get what they paid for. And they knew every inch of what they were buying.

"It is irrelevant what a client's knowledge is. Because I assure you, Latouf Luxury Emporium does not substitute cheaper materials for any reason."

"We are going in circles. Good luck finding any luxury fabric supplier prepared to sell in such insignificant amounts. Why would they bother?"

She rose. "Clearly this negotiation is over. It's a shame the requested line is not available to us despite initially being told it would be," she said. "I appreciate your time."

Like hell she did. Businessmen like him were just so predictable: Arrogant misogynists who were so sure they could bully a woman into compliance. He truly thought he could steamroll her into taking a lesser quality product for the same price? No doubt he wanted to dazzle his CEO with his business savvy. Except he would never have tried such an insulting or risky stunt with a male manager.

Jabri looked startled by the abrupt meeting end. He shot Antonio an astonished look that seemed to say, "You're letting *her* throw me out?"

Antonio gazed at him and also rose. "Thank you for coming in, Mr. Jabri," he said, lifting an arm to shepherd the man out.

"But..." Jabri blinked, "I thought..." He automatically stood. "We haven't come to an agreement."

"I'll let your headquarters know the reason we're not moving forward," Jasmine said, tone curt. "Good day."

He looked down his patrician nose at her as she led him to the lift, Antonio trailing them.

Jabri rallied. "My CEO will be the same as me," he announced. But the fear in his eyes betrayed him.

Jasmine already knew full well their answer. The Moroccan CEO had been so enthusiastic at her interest, he'd all but fallen over himself to arrange this meeting to finalize things.

"No doubt I will be hearing from you later," she said with utmost confidence as she stabbed the lift button for Jabri and the doors opened.

He straightened his shoulders, stepped inside, and turned. "No, no. Our business is concluded." He wagged a finger at her, trying to reclaim his bruised ego. "Your needs are not worth our while. Good day, Mr. Favero." After a pointed pause, he added, "And Mrs. Latouf."

She merely smiled evenly at his disrespect, which seemed to unsettle him even more.

The lift doors closed.

Antonio glanced at her. "Will we be seeing him again when his company realizes what he's torpedoed? A chance at the American market's most elite luxury sector? How often does a minnow like East Moroccan Fine Linens get promoted straight to the big leagues?"

"He doesn't see us as the big leagues. He hasn't done his research. If his CEO doesn't fire him on the spot for incompetence, he'll be back, begging us to take his fabric, no matter how limited the quantity."

"So we'll see him groveling shortly."

"He can try." She headed back to her office, Antonio at her side. "I'm just deciding how much I'll take from his margin for inconveniencing me. Maybe I'll insist he sells us some gold skalli samm at cost." The thread did look so delightful woven into cushions. "You know Indira's been dying for us to acquire some."

Antonio's eyes were amused. "You love this, don't you? Putting the fools in their place."

"Not the fools," Jasmine said, settling back into her purple chair. She did not hide her scorn. "I can't be bothered with the ignorant. The *disrespectful*." She waved at him to sit, and he did so. "You saw the way he talked down to me. He doesn't see a CEO. To him I'm just a woman who has no value and cannot have any real authority. As such, he thinks I'm just for show and you were the power in the room. He kept waiting for you to make the decision."

"I noticed that," Antonio said. "I'm surprised you'd still be willing to do business with him when he crawls back."

Jasmine warmed at the thought of what lay ahead. "Oh it won't go the way he expects. I'll insist on all my concessions. He'll agree probably, while limp with relief that a deal's still possible. A contract will be drawn up. But then I'll refuse to sign until his name is off it and he's not involved in our account—now or ever again."

Antonio chuckled. "I'd love to be there to see that."

"That is why I like you. You understand." She closed her eyes. "Winning is nothing without crushing the ones who deserve it. He's an ill-bred worm."

"Very evocative image."

"What do you know of the new intern?" Jasmine suddenly asked, eyes springing back open. She flicked her hand in the direction of the outer office, and rotated her chair a little to properly face him.

"What?" Surprise was all over his face.

"That woman was *not* Amy Vanderbilt. Unless Amy Vanderbilt is really an eccentric artist who got lost from London."

Antonio smiled at that. "I don't know who she is, but I did notice that—unlike every other intern we've ever had—she didn't check her phone once during the meeting. Her outfit caught my eye, though. Did you see her shoes? Unique. I don't recognize the designer."

"I did not." She doubted somehow they'd be Balenciaga. The interloper wasn't *intern* young. Mid-thirties probably. She was...appealing to look at, Jasmine supposed, with the doe eyes and sweet oval face.

Her long wavy hair that gave her a windswept look, as if she were a backpacker just blown in from some regional airport. "Oliver panicked when she said her name," Jasmine continued. "He didn't know she wasn't Amy until then. Do you know any famous Fisher families that Mark would want to ingratiate himself with?"

"Only the tinning tycoon? From Texas?"

"Did that girl sound Texan to you?"

"No. But we both know plenty of heiresses get their educations abroad."

"True." She drummed her fingers on the table. "She doesn't fit the usual stereotype Mark sends us. The trust-fund types we get are all bored and have a careless air about them. Fisher seemed *excited* to be here. So, who is she?"

"Why not ask Mark?"

Jasmine suppressed a shudder. "No, thank you. My ex-husband is too annoying to tolerate before my first tea," she said. "Or my second. Or third."

His lips came perilously close to a smile. "When you talk about him like that, I have no idea why everyone hasn't worked out you're divorced."

"You know Mark won't tolerate everyone knowing that dirty little secret. It doesn't fit his image. He has important clients to impress with his aura of perfection." She waved her hand. "Back to the intern. Who on earth is she?"

"I have a bold idea," Antonio said. "Why not ask *her* who her rich and powerful parents are?"

"Don't be absurd. You know I have no direct interactions with the interns. I won't set a precedent now. I was more curious than interested. I don't like unresolved issues."

"For someone with no interest, you're asking a lot of questions."

She shot him a warning glare. "Don't."

He held his hands up in surrender.

"I repeat: I do not care. The parade of uninterested empty heads we get is exhausting. The interns don't know design. They don't know art. They don't know creativity or originality. They don't know hard work. All they care about is social media and their bank balances. And they quit the second they don't like doing a moment's hard work. Or until they spend a day in the Smart Machines department. Whichever comes first."

God, they were annoying. Once again, she regretted her decision not to fight Mark in creating an internship scheme.

"Jasmine?" Antonio broke into her thoughts.

She looked up.

"The new girl's right there." He pointed through the glass wall, angling his body to not be obvious.

And so she was. Sienna was standing beside Oliver, their backs to Jasmine's office, as Oliver pointed out various features around the main floor.

"So just ask her who she is," he suggested.

"No." Why was this so hard for him to grasp? She never bothered with the interns. To do so would mean she thought them worthy of stepping into her emporium, and they were far from it. However, that didn't mean she couldn't solve her minor mystery another way. She cleared her throat and called out, "Oliver? *A moment.*"

She was rather pleased at seeing his swallow of alarm as he pivoted toward her. Good. He *should* be nervous if he'd just allowed an unknown element to slither into her office. Although to be fair, Sienna Fisher was rather graceful for a slitherer.

Jasmine glanced at Antonio. "That will be all."

Her head of Fashion rose and exited in a swish of perfect Italian pinstriping.



The moment Oliver scurried in, Jasmine leaned back in her chair and gave him a steely look. "That woman you're showing around is *not* Amy Vanderbilt."

"No." He swallowed and tried a joke. "I noticed that too."

Her look was hard. "Care to explain?"

"Amy Vanderbilt decided to take another offer at the last minute. She texted me that she had a...better position come up," he added, looking uncomfortable.

"A paid one, you mean," Jasmine filled in for him.

"I suspect so, yes."

"And who is that little stray you picked up instead?" Jasmine arched an eyebrow.

They both glanced outside her glass office at Sienna Fisher, who was studying the Madeleine Bialke collection. She seemed engrossed, which was unexpected. Usually no one noticed the art Jasmine had so carefully selected for her building, except perhaps Miles. But he was head of Collections; he was paid to notice art.

"She was our second choice."

Jasmine eyed him, her skepticism rising. "I see. Which famous Fisher family is she from, then?" she asked, turning her voice soft and dangerous. That usually yielded results.

"Uhm..." Oliver shifted from one foot to the other. "Doesn't Texas have some multimillionaire tinning family?"

Answering a question with a question? What was he hiding? Another glance back at the woman revealed she was now peering so closely at a Bialke that her nose was almost touching it.

"Enough, Oliver," she said, tone warning. "That young woman's not some heiress, and she's certainly not from Texas. Tell me right now who she is."

"I don't know," he finally confessed, wringing his hands. "I *truly* thought she was Amy."

"Did she tell you that?" Jasmine demanded. "Misrepresent herself?"

"God, no!" he said in alarm. "No! Reception said there was a young woman in the foyer and asked if I was waiting for an intern. And it was right when Amy was supposed to be here, and so I...assumed."

"What was she doing in our foyer in the first place?"

He screwed up his face as if trying to remember. "I think she was admiring the Hom Nguyen."

Interesting choice, given all the other art she had on display downstairs. "Which one?" she couldn't resist asking, her professional curiosity piqued.

"Um...*Young Man*?"

"*Youman*," she corrected. Many a morning she'd take a break with a thyme tea and sit on the sofa and admire the foyer art. In some ways it was like having her old gallery again. However, perhaps it was not alike in enough ways or she wouldn't feel so cut off from her art now.

She shook herself and focused. "How did this Not-Amy wind up in a lift with you heading up for our start-of-year staff meeting?"

He looked down. "Well, as I said, I assumed it was Amy, so I grabbed her and..." his voice rose to a higher pitch, "dragged her in?"

Jasmine's eyes tightened. "You *abducted* her? Bodily hauled her in here? Will we need to call our lawyers now?"

"No...it wasn't a kidnapping. She kind of...went along with it?"

She stared at him, baffled. "Why?"

"She said she believes in fate. That fate brought her here and that everything happens for a reason."

Jasmine sighed. "For God's sake, that's absurd! Show her the door."

"But..." Oliver's tone turned pleading, "we need an intern."

"Our staff do know how to make copies and coffees. And those who don't, well, we have you and all the other assistants. The intern is an indulgence we only allow because my husband wants leverage with wealthy clients."

"But Sienna's *really* into art."

That much was obvious: The girl had now turned her head sideways to study the bottom of the artwork. "So?"

"Well, she seems qualified. And she already knows who you are."

"How exciting for her," Jasmine said dryly, then paused. "Wait, I thought you said she was here due to pure chance. How could she have researched me already if that was the case?"

"She's from London and an artist. Wasn't your old gallery popular among art lovers? I'm sure I read that somewhere."

That was true, thanks in no small part to her gallery's publicity manager. The ambitious young man, Dillon, had ensured for years she'd been interviewed by every magazine and TV show in Europe focused on art. By the time she'd left England, she was seen as a powerhouse influencer, the queen of contemporary art curation. An...art icon.

That was then. These days, she was someone else entirely. Apparently a *business* icon now, or so *Forbes* magazine claimed last year in its list of up-and-coming CEOs. You'd think US recognition would bring her joy. She was still waiting.

"Dismiss her," Jasmine ordered Oliver. "I have never liked having unpaid interns in the building. And if I'm not forced to have any given intern underfoot, then I won't."

Before Oliver could move, Sienna Fisher stuck her head in the office.

"Hi!" she said, her face open and bright. "I hope I'm not intruding."

Jasmine blinked at her in disbelief.



Sienna had never been very good at waiting. She had examined the Bialke artworks from top to bottom. Then she'd scanned the room, admiring all the various artistic flourishes, and had amused herself by guessing which had been sourced by the talentless designer Mark Latouf had hired and which had been chosen by Jasmine.

What had her on the fence was a raven holding a cable, from which dangled a light bulb. This black resin table "lamp" was striking and unusual, definitely bold, so in the end, she slid it into the Jasmine column.

She turned back to the nearest Bialke, admiring the bright colors and contrasting shadows. Of the four paintings on the wall, she liked *Charmed Life* the most. A naked woman was lying in bed on her stomach, asleep, partially covered by soft blankets, while a towering tree outside her window wrestled and merged with shadows inside her room.

Sienna suddenly noticed that the dawn's cold, purplish blues and the bright yellows of the rising sun complemented the office's wallpaper: blue with gold lines. Nothing was a coincidence in art, especially where Jasmine

Gemayel was concerned. She was one of the most intentional people Sienna had ever encountered.

She tilted her head sideways to try to figure out a hidden meaning. It was so odd. Every curator knew walls were supposed to emphasize the art on them. Galleries would repaint whole walls in a particular color if they thought it would enhance a new series. So this choice of seemingly just making the best of a bad wallpaper was mystifying. Why not just replace the eyesore instead? Unless Jasmine actually *liked* the wallpaper? That would be a plot twist. Jasmine had taste.

Sienna had run out of things to examine. Oliver and Jasmine were still talking. She remembered Oliver's comment that Jasmine might never talk to her in the whole six months she'd be interning.

Six months and no Jasmine conversation *at all*? That seemed like a crime against art lovers, frankly. Or a crime against awestruck lesbians. Oliver hadn't been wrong about calling her that.

Maybe she could just stick her head in the door and say hi? Break the ice? Surely Jasmine couldn't ignore that? Because new staff introduced themselves, right? After that, they weren't new and couldn't use it as an excuse. This was her only shot.

So she screwed up all her courage, pasted on her brightest smile, and entered the CEO's office.

"Hi! I hope I'm not intruding," Sienna said.

Jasmine's expression darkened.

Oliver's eyes went wide, and he started shaking his head out of Jasmine's eyeline.

Uh oh. But she was here now. In for a penny and all that..."What a wonderful Bialke series you have. Gosh, I've never seen one in the flesh before. And I also really wanted to say I'm so excited to be working here. Thank you for the opportunity."

After a long beat, Jasmine said, soft and deadly, "Do you often barge into meetings?"

"I..." Sienna's cheeks flooded with heat. "Oh. Sorry."

"Sorry? For what exactly?" Jasmine asked sharply. "Your poor manners?"

"No, I mean, I didn't realize it was an actual meeting. I thought you were just talking. See, the last job I had was serving coffees in a really busy market in Croatia. I can understand coffee orders in four languages, but I'm

obviously a bit rusty on office protocol." She gave a self-deprecating laugh and hoped she'd be forgiven.

Forgiveness was *not* the expression on Jasmine's face. The CEO swiveled to face Oliver. "Why is a Croatian waitress bothering me?"

A *Croatian waitress*? Nice. "You, uh, don't like Croatia?" Sienna blurted out, trying to hide her hurt at the dismissal.

Oliver now shot Sienna a panicked look and mouthed, *Oh my God, shut up!*

She ignored him. What if this was her only chance to ever talk to Jasmine?

"My thoughts are none of your concern," Jasmine replied silkily. But then she stopped and frowned. "Why...Croatia of all places?"

"Why *not* Croatia? It was on my itinerary." Sienna's smile was broad. "What better way to learn about life than to live it? So far, I've lived in eighteen countries, excluding England, where I was born. No, wait, nineteen. I forgot about Liechtenstein."

"An understandable omission," Jasmine noted, tone chilly.

"Hey, don't knock Liechtenstein. It's lovely. Gorgeous mountain ranges."

Jasmine blinked, as if unused to being contradicted.

"Sorry," Sienna rushed in. "I know everyone has their own opinions of places, good and bad. It's just I'd hate for the little guy to get overlooked."

"Perish the thought."

"Like, for example, I know some people didn't like GOMEA, but I thought your little gallery was wonderful. Groundbreaking." She said it earnestly and honestly, but Jasmine's expression went hard.

"If you're quite done?" she snapped.

"I..." *Ok-ay*. So they weren't going there. "Well, since I'm here, where would you like me to start?"

Oliver's face dropped, and he stepped forward. "Look, Sienna," he began, "unfortunately a decision has been made to—"

Jasmine held up her hand, silencing him, a laser-sharp gaze on Sienna. "Why should we hire you?"

"Fate," she said immediately. "What are the odds of me being here exactly when Oliver was looking for an intern who had decided not to show? Meant to be."

"Fate is not an answer. Fortune-cookie nonsense. *Why* should we hire you?" Jasmine repeated. "Give me a reason."

"I work hard."

"So do others. I could find some well-connected heiress who can promise to work hard."

"I didn't say I'd *promise* to work hard," Sienna said holding her gaze. "I said I *do*. I have worked with, and waited on, people of every possible background all over the world. I can connect with anyone, I can multitask, I can think on my feet, and I can *stand* on my feet, for hours, if needed. Tell me: how many of your fancy heiresses can do that?"

With only a tinge of mockery this time, Jasmine asked, "Do you even know what we do here?"

"Oliver has told me some. It doesn't matter. I'm a quick learner."

"You understand the position is unpaid?" She slid her eyes up and down Sienna's outfit, as if trying to assess her net worth. Her gaze landed on the Converse shoes, and she leaned forward for a better look. Her brow knitted.

"I know. I can't be paid while I'm in the US anyway."

"How can you afford to stay for six months in New York, one of the world's most expensive cities, without being paid?"

"That's for me to worry about." She didn't owe anyone a detailed explanation of her finances. She tangled her fingers in front of her stomach and added in a rush, "But Ms. Gemayel, please don't get rid of me based on my wanting to keep my private business private."

Jasmine's head lifted. "What did you call me?"

Sienna started. "I-I do apologize. Do you prefer Latouf? Oh, you probably do, because you're married." She almost slapped herself. "Of course you do! I'm really sorry, Ms. Latouf."

Jasmine's jaw went tight, and she glared.

Sienna winced and stared down at her shoes as she waited for the ax to fall. Yep, she'd definitely embarrassed herself, given Jasmine's disdainful expression.

"All right, Ms. Fisher. Let's see if you can back up your words."

Oliver's head shot up, surprise darting into his face.

"Interns do a one-week rotation in each of our four creative departments, and then the cycle repeats until six months is up, or they quit." As she said the word "quit," she met Sienna's eye. "You'll start with Smart Machines

this week." Was there a gleam in her eye at that last sentence? Sure looked like it.

"Um," Oliver said gingerly, "maybe...Collections for week one might be better?"

She spun to face him. "Did. I. Stutter?"

"No." He shrank back. "Of course. Rip the Band-Aid off." He glanced at Sienna and said in a light tone that did not reach his eyes, "Machines to meet, incels to greet."

Jasmine's expression hardened. "On the contrary, this will be a good test of Ms. Fisher's...resolve...to work here. What's the record?" she asked Oliver. "Briefest stint in Smart Machines?"

"One hour," Oliver said. "Miranda Astor said she was too rich and too smart to put up with this, er, *manure*."

"That long?" Jasmine's eyes definitely gleamed now, as if curious as to whether Sienna would rise to her challenge or flee the building. She glanced back at Oliver. "Show Ms. Fisher to Smart Machines," she instructed. "And go via HR. Inform them I've signed off on the new intern."

"Yes. Of course. Definitely!" He nodded extra hard.

Her eyes narrowed. She sighed. "You already took her to HR, didn't you?"

Oliver reddened. Then he asked hopefully, "Could you consider it as me being extra proactive?"

Sienna laughed at his tiny joke—well, *pleading* more like—and said, "You are too funny."

Jasmine pivoted and gave her A Look.

Oliver paled. "Gotta go!" he announced as he ushered Sienna out.

She felt Jasmine's eyes on her the entire way to the lift.

CHAPTER 3

THE KOBAYASHI MARU

Oliver gave Sienna a ferociously rushed rundown of Smart Machines as he led her there.

“They’re Tier One Thousand,” he said breathlessly. “That means they’re designing a product which could be a computer, smart device, phone, audio system, even a motorcycle, of which exactly a thousand will be made.”

“That seems like a lot of product if your business model is limited edition,” Sienna pointed out.

“It’s a cost thing. In electronics and automotive products, you can’t make your money back without a decent product run. A thousand is the absolute minimum.”

“How is one small team able to design for such a wide variety of products?” Sienna asked as they rounded a corner into a long hallway. “I mean motorcycles and computers? How can one team know how to do all that?”

“Don’t forget, all they do is create the cool *look*, and then consult with the best in that field on whether a feature they want to incorporate is doable. An expert will be the one to make it happen. While all of the team have design, mechanical, or engineering backgrounds, they’re really just savvy conceptual artists who know how things work electronically or mechanically. Or if they don’t know specifically if something’s doable, they know how they’d *like* it to work.”

“So they come up with showy concepts and make the products look pretty, then turn it over to someone smarter to make it happen?”

Oliver snorted. “Oh, girl, I’d love to be a fly on the wall if you ever tell them that!”

"Don't think I won't." She grinned. "They don't frighten me."

"They should. They make it a point of pride in ridding us of interns."

She shot a long look at him. "I thought the incels crack was just a joke."

"It was and wasn't. It's true they test the interns and see if they'll quit."

"Why? Do they really hate women?"

"It's not that. They respect Jasmine. They love Indira, who's in charge of Homewares. They do not respect the interns who blow in with their rich-bitch attitude and connections. They don't like how, if they're pushed even a little bit, the interns just walk out, hitching their Chanel bags high. They don't respect their lack of work ethic and, unfortunately, they can be dicks about it."

"But I'm not rich or well-connected."

"They won't know that, though. They'll give you some attitude to see what you'll do. If you let it roll off your back, you'll be fine."

"I'm surprised they're not some HR intervention waiting to happen."

"Nah. They're smart and know exactly where the line is, so no one intervenes. Consider it a low-level hazing."

Sienna frowned. *Hazing?* "Does Jasmine know what they get up to?"

"She knows they stress-test the interns to see if they'll flame out, but not the details. Mrs. Burgess hears all the complaints from quitting interns, and she would have told Jasmine if it was anything serious." He stopped at some doors. "We're here. Just don't let those meatheads win, okay?"

"Are they really that bad?" Sienna asked incredulously.

"Only in packs."

She eyed him, waiting to see if he meant that.

"Sorry, hon," Oliver said. "I'm not trying to make you nervous. It's simple: don't take their BS, and they'll respect you. Just don't quit. We have a lunch date, after all."

"Sushi is life," Sienna quoted back to him.

"Yes! Good luck." He directed her into the room and introduced her to them. "Sienna Fisher, meet Tier One Thousand: Smart Machines. Everyone, this is Sienna." Then he left. Well, bolted, more accurately.

She glanced around. Dark-gray walls greeted her. The floor was polished concrete, which matched the matte chrome bench tops. Sleek, wide monitors were on all the desks, and high-end swivel chairs were filled with young men, all in nice suits, all in their twenties and thirties. Hanging from the ceiling was an artistic, shiny, red retro motorcycle that

looked like something from a fifties film. It was beautiful, even if it was the opposite of organic. Nothing in this room felt soft or warm or natural. Hard edges and sharp shapes. Sleek and cold.

At Oliver's introduction, half a dozen heads bobbed up to eye her, lost interest, and returned to their screens. Another day, another intern, it seemed.

One man did not. He had a thin, manicured beard, trimmed mustache, and neat, dark-brown hair that was far too perfect not to have been soaked in hair product.

His severe, funeral-black suit was too tight around his thick arms. He'd definitely be the sort of man who watched himself do bicep curls in a gym mirror. He reeked of an ambitious finance bro vibe. One of those men online who proclaimed they were an alpha male. He offered Sienna a lazy smile, even as his eyes hardened.

Oh, great. Sienna smiled back uneasily.

"How kind of Oliver to bring us someone fresh." He might as well have said *fresh meat*. "Adrian Mitnick." He did not offer her his hand.

"Hi, I'm Sienna."

He frowned. "You don't sound Texan. Did you study overseas or something?"

She eyed him in confusion. "Why do you think I'm from Texas?"

Now Mitnick looked puzzled. "I'd heard a rumor you were from a Texan tinning family."

"No. I'm from a London art family, actually. Well, not the whole family. Only Dad."

"Is he rich and famous, then?" Mitnick asked. His tone turned mocking. "Your father, the fancy London artist?"

"My father is dead," Sienna said coldly.

"Sorry," Mitnick said, sounding anything but. Still, it stopped the interrogation, and he turned. "This is Smart Machines." He waved to the room. "There's nothing electronic or mechanical we can't design a concept of, and we're the best." Mitnick paused. "Well, except for Bretty boy over there. But he's new." He smirked at a small man with round wire glasses who looked up, as if surprised he'd been mentioned.

He shot Mitnick a mildly aggrieved look but offered Sienna a friendly wave.

Mitnick laughed at him. "Just kidding."

Sure he was.

"So"—he leaned back, thrusting his chest out at Sienna—"your duties are to hop to it and fetch and carry whatever I say. Whenever I say it. Got it?"

She nodded, trying to hide how much his attitude was grating on her. "Yes."

"Good girl."

She bit the inside of her cheek at that condescension and noticed, behind Mitnick, Brett was frowning.

"Sorry, I mean, good *woman*," he said with exaggeration. "HR says you girls don't like being called girls."

God, what an asshole. No wonder the interns all quit. Why put up with this if you didn't have to?

Except there was no way she was quitting. Not when she was back in the orbit of a legend.

"What are you working on?" she asked, changing the subject.

"What do you think?" He smirked and swiveled his monitor around to face her. "Let's hear your expert insights."

The design seemed to be a detailed close-up of circuitry. It could be the inner workings of any electronics. Obviously, there was no way she'd have a clue as to what it was. Except, Sienna also had an incredibly good eye for detail. Her gaze fell to the file name at the bottom of the screen: "Mitnickdronev3.dwg"

"A drone," she said and straightened.

The whole room burst into laughter.

Mitnick's eyes went wide. "What the hell?"

She kept a straight face and shrugged. "Well, it's just the start of one," she said. "I'm guessing you're only at an early draft stage." She glanced at the screen again, looking thoughtful in order to sell it. "Third draft, I'm thinking."

Brett snorted with laughter. "Damn!" he called out. "Nailed it."

Mitnick stared at her in confusion before she grinned and leaned over, tapping the file name.

"I notice things," she said.

"So you do." He inclined his head as if to say, *one point to the annoying intern*. His eyes narrowed, though. Apparently a truce wasn't on the cards anytime soon.

"So," she said, trying to sound interested, "why a drone? What does it do?"

After a beat, he said proudly, "Our drone is unique. Nothing like it in the world. It is intended to be sold as a set of two."

"Okay...?" she said, waiting for more.

"I've worked out we can mount a water tank to the back of the drones, and using hosing, draw water down to the guns on the arms."

"The...guns?"

"Well, more the size of pistols, if you want to get accurate."

"As in..." *Oh God, really?* "Water...pistols?"

"You got it." He made finger-gun motions at her. "Rich kids' parents will pay a fortune for these things. An airborne battle bot, armed with water pistols, kitted out with some other bells and whistles, so they can be used to fight each other."

"For...a game?" She squinted at him. Surely this wasn't all there was to it?

"Not just a game," he scoffed. "The ultimate game! We'll make these the must-have rich-kid toy this year. We plan to build in a sensory target on each too, so when a gun's water shot hits it, it'll register as a point. You'll be able to see the scores in real-time from an app. And we're looking at adding a special bomb, one use per battle, where you drop a dye ball for a catastrophic hit. If you target it right, that ends the game immediately."

Drone battle bots. With water ammunition. And a special dye bomb. How...lovely.

"So..." He puffed out his chest. "Genius, huh?"

"Erm, I suppose." She tried to think of his concept as an art piece. Since every artwork had its own uniqueness and drew its own audience, she understood it had value. To...someone. She couldn't be judgmental just because it wasn't to her taste. That was...anti-art, right?

"How much will your water gun battle bots sell for?" Sienna asked.

"Finance department sets the price. But I reckon we'll sell the pair for around a quarter a million or so."

She choked. "For a pair of *toys*?" Okay, so now she was judging a little. But that was ridiculous.

"*High-tech* toys. With every bell and whistle." He glowered. "You don't get it, do you? We're supplying mega wealthy brats with *the* coolest toys on earth, that only their parents can afford. Owning them makes them

special. They'll feel like gods to their kids. It'll make their equally rich friends jealous as fuck, and they will drop any amount of money for that feeling."

They were commercializing...jealousy? This, seriously, was what Jasmine's people were doing? What a waste of talent.

"And everyone here is working on this?" Sienna asked.

"Well, everyone except Bretty boy. He's figuring out a dye mix for us that won't mess up their fancy pool patios."

"Pool patios?" she repeated in confusion.

"Rich people have backyards with pools, and that's where they'll be playing battle bot—above their backyards. We don't want to permanently stain their decking, do we?"

"No."

"Exactly," Mitnick finished, looking done with her and this conversation.

"Well, good luck with your...drones." She tried to offer an encouraging smile.

Except his eyes narrowed into slits. "We don't need luck, Intern. What we do need is more copy paper. Be a good girl and run down to the supply cupboard on seventh and get..." He paused. "Twenty-four reams should do it."

"Twenty-four?" Was he kidding? "Why so many?"

"Twenty-four. And none of your business." His smile was unsettling. "Don't use the trolley, though, that's weak."

"It's...weak to use a trolley for its intended purpose?" Her eyebrow shot up.

"Leave it for someone who really needs it. You look like you'll be fine without it."

Oh. Of course. Hazing nonsense.

"No trolley. Right." Well, at least she wouldn't have to look at his annoying face while she found his copy paper. She left the room and ignored the titters of laughter behind her.

Whatever. She could make multiple trips, she supposed. It didn't matter how Smart Machines chose to use her, even if it was just amusing them to give her mindless busywork. This was the job.

As she passed the conference room, she paused, noticing a compact whiteboard on wheels.

She went inside and checked if it was adjustable. On some, the board tilted all the way to horizontal. She found a locking mechanism at the back and flipped it. Sure enough...

Good. She pushed the whiteboard through the main floor, on her way to the lift. As she walked past Jasmine's office, she felt the woman's eyes on her. Sienna didn't look her way.

Ten minutes later, she pushed the now horizontal whiteboard through the main floor, laden with twenty-four reams of copy paper. People ducked and weaved out of her way because she was taking up the corridor's full width.

"Ms. Fisher," came a low, gravelly voice that could only be one woman. She turned to find the CEO with her arms folded. "Yes?"

"I'm quite sure there is a more efficient way to shift paper in this building. Did you not observe the trolley in the supply room?"

"I saw it. But I was instructed not to use it."

A small pause. But no surprise in Jasmine's face. Maybe Mitnick was well-known for this?

"And so you thought you should become a movable hazard. Did it never occur to you to use a *smaller* wheeled device?"

"I did consider that," Sienna said earnestly. "But twenty-four reams is too big for a wheeled chair. What would you have used instead?"

"My common sense."

My common sense. That goading line would have irked Sienna except she knew that meant Jasmine didn't have a better idea. She grinned. "You don't know *what* you'd have done." Her tone came out faintly accusing. Sienna held her breath.

Jasmine arched an eyebrow. "I would have told Mr. Mitnick he had clearly mistaken me for a pack mule and that perhaps he needed an eye test?"

"Except that does not sound very intern-y," Sienna said with a small smile. "More like something someone with *all* the power would say."

Jasmine paused. The edges of her lips twitched. "I suppose so."

Was that *agreement*? Sienna beamed.

Rolling her eyes, Jasmine said, "Tell Mr. Mitnick that I require you to use a trolley in future as I actually need my whiteboard *as* a whiteboard." She walked away without another word.

Still beaming, Sienna resumed pushing her paper pile.

When she entered Smart Machines, a bit of a challenge given the width of her load, the room fell silent.

Brett was the first one to laugh. A few of the others joined in.

Mitnick did not. He eyed her silently as she pushed the board into the middle of the room.

"Twenty-four reams of paper," she said and gave the top one a slap. "Where would you like them?"

Instead of answering, he said, "Jasmine won't be too happy you stole her whiteboard."

"What choice did I have?"

"A fuck-ton of trips?" Mitnick said, tone acidic.

"Sounds inefficient. And Jasmine wasn't happy, you're right."

A sadistic smile curled his lips. "No? And you still have a job?"

"Actually, she asked me to tell you in the future I have to use the trolley."

Incomprehension flitted across his face. "She...spoke to you?"

"Yes."

He fell silent. After a moment, voice tight, he said, "Dump the paper somewhere, return the whiteboard ASAP. Then go help Bretty boy. You two have to go through every dye color option to pick one that works best for an aerial drop that won't disappear into the background."

Now that was something in her wheelhouse. She nodded in approval.

He peered at her, his eyebrows joining his hairline. "You get that it's a shit job? Thousands and thousands of colors?"

"I'm an artist," she explained. "Colors are my thing."

She returned the whiteboard to the conference room and then pulled up a chair next to Brett.

"Dye, huh?" she asked him.

"Yep." He shook his head. "Sorry you're stuck with this. He's right you know; it is a shit job. It'll drive you nuts."

"Don't worry about me. Show me your short list."

"I don't have one. I'm still working on a nonstaining composite."

"I can probably help with that. I have the inside running on which materials stain worst, and vice versa."

And with that, she set to work.

Several hours later, after discarding everything from paprika to saffron, they'd settled on yellow ocher.

Sienna leaned back in satisfaction. "It's bright and functional. A winner!"

"Well, that's the color picked, at least," Brett said. "We still need a binding agent. I'm thinking of mixing the ocher with paraffin wax. We need it to hold a ball shape while in the air and then collapse on impact for a 'splat' effect. But it can't hit so hard that it'd harm the other drone." He bounced a little in his chair. "I'll make up a batch of ocher ammo and test it at home."

"But if it works, dye bomb complete?"

"Yep." Brett smiled at her for a moment, then his expression became serious. "Hey? Soon Mitnick's gonna order you to make him a coffee, and it's not going to be right no matter what you do."

"Okay?" Sienna said. "Weird." More hazing crap, then? Pretty low-key, though. It would probably annoy rich heiresses far more than her, though. As an ex-waitress, she could make coffees in her sleep.

"I'm sorry he's a jerk."

"Not your fault." She smiled, appreciating her unexpected ally.

He grinned back conspiratorially.

"So how *does* he like his coffee, anyway?"

"Honestly?" Brett lowered his voice. "I don't know. It changes depending on whatever the intern brings him. And suddenly *that's* the worst coffee ever. It's a game designed so the intern never wins."

Half an hour later, Mitnick ordered her to make him a coffee. Just that. No details.

"How do you like it?" she asked.

"You don't even know how to make a coffee?" he asked mockingly. He drew out his cadence as though speaking to a slow learner. "Go. Make. Me. A. Coffee."

Fine. Sienna disappeared to the kitchen and returned with a tray. On it, she'd placed an empty mug. A carton of two types of milk, full cream and low-fat. A jug of boiling water. Several sachets of sugar. Then she slid it in front of him.

"Since I wasn't sure how you like it, here you go."

Snickers filled the room.

Mitnick stared at the tray then glanced at her. Then he turned to Brett and said, "Someone's a damned stool pigeon."

"Or someone's pretty smart," said another guy, who slow clapped Sienna. "She worked out your game." His name was Jason...probably? She wasn't entirely sure.

"I don't have time to make a coffee. You do it," Mitnick snapped at her.

"Certainly." As she made his coffee, at each step she stopped: "This much milk? Or more? This much sugar? Or more?"

He ground his jaw and finally accepted the finished coffee before saying, "Get this shit out of here," and pointed at the tray.

She did so, hiding her triumph that she'd had a win. Behind her, she heard Brett announce that she'd just "beaten the Kobayashi Maru," whatever that meant. A few others laughed, so she assumed it was a positive.

When she returned, Oliver was lurking at the door to Smart Machines.

"Oh, thank God," he said overdramatically. "When I saw you missing, I thought you'd fled!"

"Still here." She smiled.

"I'm not sure how." He lowered his voice. "There were sightings of you pushing Jasmine's precious whiteboard through the office with a stack of paper on it."

"Wait, what do you mean 'precious'?"

"She had it imported from Japan. It's electronic and saves what's written on it onto a memory card so it can be uploaded later. And you just pushed it around like a farmer's cart with a mound of potatoes? Thank God Jasmine didn't see it."

"Um, she did?"

"And you still have a job?" Oliver gasped. "What did she do to you?"

"Er...told me to not do it again?" Sienna frowned as she recalled the encounter. "She was pretty cool, actually."

"Wait, she spoke to you?" He stopped then added, "Again?"

"Yes?"

He crossed himself as if to ward off Satan. Or the apocalypse. "All right, let's not tempt fate."

"I love tempting fate," Sienna said, brightening. "I could tell you all about it, if you'd like."

"No, thanks. I'm far too superstitious for that. Now, come on, woman, it's lunchtime."

"I should ask my team leader if I can go." She waved toward the Smart Machines door and Mitnick.

"No, asking could lead to refusal. One sec." He opened the door, leaned in the office, and called out, "Adrian, I need your intern on official business, bye!" then closed the door. "Ready?"

"Hey, do you outrank Mitnick?"

"No, but I am in charge of all the assistants, and that includes interns. Come on, it's sushi and gossip time. Let's go!"



"Congratulations," Oliver said as they sat down in a cute little sushi restaurant two blocks from the office.

"Why?"

"You've outlasted Mandy Astor's record of an hour in Smart Machines. I hope things weren't too terrible?"

"They were about what I expected," Sienna said with a shrug. "They pushed, I laughed at them. They looked confused. Actually, not Brett. He laughed too. He's nice."

"Is he?" Oliver gave her an unfathomable look.

"Yeah. And he gave me the heads-up about some hazing crap."

"Brett stood up to Mitnick? For real?"

"Is that unusual?"

"Yes. He can be a bit too quiet around those boys. I always tell him he's gotta take a stand. He's a great designer, but Mitnick's not letting him do much designing yet."

"Mitnick's a garden-variety bully," Sienna said. "But, like all bullies, he can be defeated." She smiled at the reminder.

"Sienna Fisher," he said, tone shocked, "don't tell me an intern won a battle against the head of Smart Machines?"

"Apparently I pulled off a Kobayashi Maru victory," she said.

"No! Seriously?"

She nodded, then asked in confusion, "Could you tell me what that means?"

"A *Star Trek* reference. It's about beating an impossible test. Trust those geeks to reference it."

"Okay. But doesn't that make you a geek too, if you know it?"

"No comment." He gave her an angelic look. "All I'll say is that seeing a gay, shirtless, Asian man swashbuckling around the bridge of the Enterprise was highly revelatory to a younger me." His grin fell away. "But Sienna, sweetie, this could be bad."

"What could be?"

"You embarrassing Mitnick."

"I didn't. I just didn't let him bully me."

"You beat him. He will go in harder on you now. He hates losing." He scrunched up his face in worry. "Please don't quit."

She laughed. "I won't."

"Good." He smiled. "I'm short on friends, and I've decided I'm keeping you."

"Why are you short on friends?" Sienna asked in surprise. "You're fabulous."

"That's the problem. I'm a little *too* fabulous for my family," he said ruefully. "My mother, back in Singapore, told me I could stay in America and not visit until I stopped offending God."

"Oh no." Sienna's heart tightened. "She's homophobic?"

"Yeah. I'm not part of the family until I embrace a 'healthy lifestyle.' I told her I do have a healthy lifestyle: I eat well, go to the gym once a month..." He patted his stomach. "And one of these days, I might even do some of the exercises there instead of checking out the hunks."

"Don't you have friends here in New York?" Sienna asked, not fooled by his nonchalance. Losing family would hurt. "Surely you must?"

"I'm really too busy to socialize much beyond the aforementioned gym visits. Sometimes I hang out with Miles, despite him being ten thousand years old." He rolled his eyes. "He's a nice listener but doesn't share much. I think it's because he was gay in the sixties, and that'll really mess a person up. They're all so uptight about privacy and secrecy."

"Ah." Sienna nodded. "I'm working with Miles next week, aren't I? He's head of Collections, right?"

"Yep. He'll be a soft, comfy blanket after Smart Machines. Have you met him yet?"

"In passing. He seemed nice." *Cravat Guy*. He reminded her of a rumpled Bill Nighy; a polite, almost hapless gentleman.

"He keeps to himself," Oliver continued. "No one bothers him, and he bothers no one. He's been working here since the dawn of time."

"He's not that old," Sienna laughed. He looked barely seventy.

"Whatever. He's Tier Fifty. He comes up with a design or product for a limited edition, fifty-item run, like reprints of some classic poster signed by someone famous, or a themed collector's loot box, or whatever."

He took a sip of green tea. "His product this year is a special issue of *Grapes of Wrath* in hardback. He's negotiating with the original artist's estate to re-create the first-edition cover. And he'll have the edges of the

pages painted in that style too. It also comes with an embossed leather case."

"That sounds amazing."

"Mm." Oliver put down his tea. "I never cared for Steinbeck. Too depressing. But Miles's book will be really popular. A lot of collectors snap up anything exclusive involving Steinbeck."

"Sounds like Miles really knows his stuff. I'm sure we'll be talking art nonstop." She exhaled. "So, what about the other departments?"

"Well, you're in Fashion after Collections, under Antonio Favero. You saw him in the meeting today. He runs Tier Twelve. I don't know what he's doing this year, but it'll be fashion, accessories, shoes, or jewelry. He usually does women's products. There's always some socialite somewhere who wants to have something that's one of only twelve in the world."

"I suppose fashion is kind of art adjacent, so I'm sure I'll enjoy it." She was curious about Antonio. He was always so neutral. He barely expressed any emotions. She'd have to check if he was really Italian.

"After that is Homewares, Tier Five Hundred. Indira Burnam is lovely. She's a Mother Earth old soul who'll come up with designs for all sorts of furniture, decor, curtains, rugs, wallpaper, you name it. She's doing a throw cushion this year. Just waiting on a deal with some Moroccan fabric supplier to go ahead with the design she wants. I've seen her mock-up of it. It's absolutely gorgeous."

"I do love my colors and textures. It sounds like she'll be incredible to work for." Sienna beamed at the thought. "So that just leaves the mysterious Tier One. Which Jasmine told the meeting today she wants everyone's ideas for."

"Yep. The concept this year is still to be announced. Very soon, or so I hear."

"How does it work? Who decides on which type of product is chosen?"

"Jasmine decides. Usually it'll be that she's been in negotiations for months with a manufacturer or company that wants to be tied to us. And when it's all agreed, she'll tell the staff what the Tier One will be."

"And then everyone fights to have their concept be the one?"

"Oh yes, it's highly competitive. The bonuses that come with being chosen are *phenomenal*."

"But what if it's a product your department isn't good at designing?"

"Oh, that happens a lot. A few years back, the Tier One was a motorcycle. A deal was done with Triumph to develop a luxury product with us. Homewares and Fashion immediately bailed. Collections put up a submission, though, arguing for a re-release of the 1960s' Triumph Steve McQueen used in *The Great Escape*. But we all knew Smart Machines had it won. And sure enough..."

"I quite like Miles's idea though."

"Yeah, so did Triumph. But that year, they wanted to promote themselves as a forward-thinking, futuristic company connected with high-end luxury. His idea was looking backward."

"So sometimes departments just sit out a Tier One challenge."

"Occasionally. But it's always fun when everyone's in it. Makes for an exciting few months when we see their concepts all shaping up."

"What's an example of a Tier One that had everyone contributing to it?"

"Good question." He reached for his phone. "The rocking horse."

"A *rocking horse*?" She couldn't picture that being worth much money, even with a little bling added.

"No, don't think of it like a children's toy. Think of it as *art*. And you'll never guess which division won. Actually maybe you will when I show it to you."

He lay his phone before her with a picture of a sleek, ebony, rocking horse that had an angled face made up of different planes. It reminded her of a highly stylized chess knight. The eyes were...wait, were they polished emeralds?

"I... That's—" She winced. "It's more design than function," she said slowly. "I mean, I can't imagine a child liking it. It's more something an adult would like the look of."

"Exactly," Oliver said. "*Ex-actly*." He swiped a few photos along on his phone and then showed her a different rocking horse entirely. "Here's the runner-up."

This one was beautiful, with gentle curves that seemed soft and alluring. The horse was made of different types of varnished wood. It virtually begged the watcher to reach out and stroke it. A handmade leather saddle sat on its back; convincing enough that it could be put on a real pony's back. A child would absolutely adore it. Hell, Sienna loved it.

"Oh, it's beautiful." She looked up. "I don't understand. The second one is better. But you say the first one was chosen?"

"Smart Machines came up with the first one. Homewares came up with the second."

"I can see that. The first one looks kind of like a high-powered car in horse form."

"It really does. And Jasmine chose the second one. She said it was a better fit to function. More artistic. More desirable."

"But..." Sienna shook her head. "The Smart Machines design won?"

"It did." He sighed. "Mark Latouf has power of veto over Jasmine's Tier One choices. Very rarely, he exercises it. He intervened on this. He liked the more masculine design."

"Even though it's a product for children and most children's products are chosen by mothers? Typically, masculine designs wouldn't appeal to them so much?"

"I know. He vetoed, and there was nothing Jasmine could do. She promised Indira she'd let her use her design for a Tier Five Hundred at some point down the track."

"Oh, well, that's good. It might see the light of day yet." But Sienna's mind whirled. Jasmine's husband vetoed her creative decisions? Why would he do that when his wife was such an accomplished art curator? This was her area of expertise. Why veto her? "Does Mark Latouf have a design background?"

"He's the architect to the rich and famous. Runs his own firm. He set up Latouf Luxury Emporium for his wife to run when she moved to New York a decade ago, with a few caveats, like this one."

"A few caveats? So not just a right to veto Tier One?"

"No, there're a couple more. He wanted his son, Ethan, to be given a job here. He's a bit of a playboy. You won't see much of him, though, as he runs the annual catalog launch and Tier One auction, and those events are both held at the end of the year. And Mark also gets to choose the interns and be in charge of that program. All interns are from families of his clients or powerful people he wants to be clients."

"And that's why you thought I was a nepo hire when we met."

Oliver nodded. "Sorry I assumed, kitten. You're not like them."

"Are the interns really all so bad? Surely some of them actually work hard and stay on despite being from entitled families?"

"Two." He chuckled. "Only two."

"Really?"

"Yep. Lola Weiss is an assistant manager in Homewares. She's on maternity leave right now. She started out as an intern. And then there's Zahra Caulfield. That's Zahra with an *H*, darling. She's allegedly Jasmine's PA."

"Allegedly?"

"Well, she was an intern who Mark asked Jasmine to install as PA at the end of her six months."

"Why did he want that?"

"She has The Look."

"The *look*?"

Oliver laughed. "She's hard to miss. If you ever see a woman strutting around as if she owns the place, talks down to you, and flicks her hair about like a supermodel, that's Zahra. She doesn't like anyone, not even Jasmine, but she's absolutely who the clients are. They see themselves in her."

"Ah."

"You've seen Mark Latouf's photos all around the place? They're what the male clients are—or, more accurately, what they wish they were: success and power. Zahra's who the female clients are: elite, entitled, wealthy, and dressed only in designer. She speaks their language without even opening her mouth."

"How does Jasmine handle having someone like that as a PA?"

"Simple. She ignores her and uses me to handle most of her stuff."

Sienna frowned. "But why wouldn't Zahra like Jasmine? I mean she's elite too. Classy and elegant and refined? Wouldn't Zahra respect that?"

"She doesn't like Jasmine because Jasmine only appreciates people who work hard and know their stuff. And while Zahra is good at greeting clients and taking calls, that's it. The rest of the time, she's buying personal stuff online and trawling social media. Jasmine doesn't fire her because her husband wants her to stay given she's from a powerful family. And while I'm actually Zahra's boss too, she doesn't see it that way. So my advice: Avoid. Retreat. Do not engage."

"I'll bear that in mind." Sienna laughed. "But I generally don't engage with anyone who's mean."

He gasped and clutched his chest. "But however will we be friends?"

She slapped his arm lightly. "You're not mean. You're...biting. Witty. Funny. There's a difference. I like you."

"I'm so glad because I like you too. And you clearly are smart because you know to worship the queen. And then there's your utter fearlessness at handling Smart Machines."

"Please. Mitnick's just a little boy with insecurity issues. Real men don't play intimidation games with someone in a weaker position than them. I don't think even his team likes him."

He snorted. "Who can tell? They never break ranks."

"A shame." Sienna folded her arms and leaned on the table. "New topic: is Antonio Jasmine's second-in-command?"

"Very astute, kitten, he is. He appreciates the same designs she does, so she likes to run creative ideas past him. He's really buttoned-up, though. Protocol and correctness. The Smart Machines team call him Tuvok."

"What's that?"

"You really never saw any *Star Trek*?" he asked. "Tuvok's a Vulcan. Anyway, bottom line, don't be telling him he's too funny like you did to me in front of Jasmine today." He pursed his lips. "Actually, I still can't believe you said that."

"Why? You were hilarious!"

"I don't think Jasmine appreciates your honest blurtings the way I do. She likes everyone to be deferential and respectful."

Sienna blinked. "Since when?" That wasn't the Jasmine she knew.

"How interesting," he said. "And this was supposed to be the whole point of lunch: you telling me what the queen was like back in London."

"She was amazing. Creative. Inspiring. Incredible."

"Yes, I, too, can open a thesaurus under *fabulous*. Tell me something *specific*."

"She was not hung up on people being deferential back then. I mean, respectful, sure. She's earned it. But she dealt with all sorts of eccentric artists, and some of them were really unusual thinkers. Anarchic, chaotic—you name it. They were never going to tug their forelock at anyone. And she worked around their foibles like they weren't even obvious. She was great at dealing with all types of people."

"Interesting. Go on."

"She'd give these Art After Dark intimate talks to patrons and artists of GOMEA. She'd just stand at the front of the main room of her gallery and talk. I'd always sneak in to watch her." She exhaled at the memory of the charismatic woman's face alight with enthusiasm as she spoke about her favorite topics. "And you could feel her love for what she was doing. It just shone from her. I was so in awe."

"Ahh." His eyes became unfocused. "I wish I could have seen that."

"I wish I could see it again." She thought about that for a moment. "Your Jasmine—at least the one you describe—she's not the woman I knew back home. Well, *knew* is too strong a word. *Watched from afar* is more accurate. She was such a force. I spent a lot of time watching her between admiring her gallery and playing with her dog."

"Her dog?" He eyed her in astonishment. "She's a dog lover? I can't picture that."

"Oh, big time. Suki." She grinned at the memory. "An adorable girl who had her own enormous beanbag in one corner and greeted all the guests to the New Experimental Art room. I spent a lot of time in that room, occasionally discussing life and the universe with Suki, watching the passing parade. I'd often see Jasmine whipping past giving tours to buyers and benefactors."

"She didn't notice you?"

"Not really. She was always so busy. And I was good at seeing without being seen."

Oliver thought about that. "Amazing. It's a small world, isn't it? Look at you now—working for The Queen."

"Fate, my friend. I keep telling you: This is meant to be."

"Working for Jasmine is your fate?"

"I'm not sure that's exactly why I'm here. Maybe it's to meet Jasmine again, maybe it's something else. But I'm right where I'm meant to be."

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