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ROYALS WILL
RUIN YOU.

NUMBER 1 NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ERIN WATT

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Paper Princess

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One

"ELLA, YOU'RE WANTED in the principal's office," Ms. Weir says before I can step inside her precalculus classroom.

I check my watch. "I'm not even late."

It's one minute before nine and this watch is never wrong. It's probably the most expensive item I own. My mom said that it was my dad's. Besides his sperm, it's the only thing he left behind.

"No, it's not about tardiness . . . this time." Her normally flinty gaze is soft around the edges, and my gut relays a warning to my sluggish morning brain. Ms. Weir is a hard-ass, which is why I like her. She treats her students like we're here to learn actual math instead of some life lesson on loving your neighbor and crap like that. So for her to be giving me sympathetic looks means something bad is cooking down at the principal's office.

"Fine." It's not like I can give any other response. I offer a nod and redirect myself to the school office.

"I'll email you the course assignment," Ms. Weir calls after me. I guess she thinks I won't be returning to class, but there

isn't anything Principal Thompson could throw at me that's worse than what I've faced before.

Before enrolling in George Washington High School for my junior year, I'd already lost everything of importance. Even if Mr. Thompson has somehow figured out I'm not technically living in the GW school district, I can lie to stall for time. And if I have to transfer, which is the worst thing that could happen to me today, then no big deal. I'll do it.

"How's it going, Darlene?"

The mom-haired school secretary barely looks up from her *People* magazine. "Take a seat, Ella. Mr. Thompson will be right with you."

Yep, we're on a first-name basis, me and Darlene. One month at GW High, and I've already spent way too much time in this office, thanks to my ever-growing stack of late slips. But that's what happens when you work nights and don't see the smooth side of the sheets until three a.m. every morning.

I crane my neck to peek through the open blinds of Mr. Thompson's office. Someone's sitting in the visitor's chair, but all I can make out is a hard jaw and dark brown hair. Total opposite of me. I'm as blond and blue-eyed as they come. Courtesy of my sperm donor, according to Mom.

Thompson's visitor reminds me of the out-of-town businessmen who would tip my mom mega bucks for her to pretend to be their girlfriend for the night. Some guys got off on that even more than actual sex. This is per my mom, of course. I haven't had to go down that path . . . yet. And I hope I never have to, which is why I need my high school diploma, so I can go to college, get a degree, and be normal.

Some kids dream of traveling the world, owning fast cars, big houses. Me? I want my own apartment, a fridge full of

food, and a steady paying job, preferably one that's as exciting as watching paste dry.

The two men talk and talk and talk. Fifteen minutes pass and they're still shooting the shit.

"Hey, Darlene? I'm missing precalc right now. Okay for me to come back when Mr. Thompson isn't busy?"

I try to state it as nicely as possible, but years of having no real adult presence in my life—my flighty, lovely mom doesn't count—makes it hard for me to summon up the necessary submissiveness adults prefer from anyone who isn't allowed to legally drink.

"No, Ella. Mr. Thompson will be right out."

This time she's right, because the door opens and the principal steps out. Mr. Thompson is about five ten and looks like he graduated from high school last year. Somehow he manages a certain air of capable responsibility.

He gestures me forward. "Miss Harper, please come inside."

Inside? While Don Juan is in there?

"You already have someone in your office." I point out the obvious. This looks suspicious as hell, and my gut is telling me to get out of here. But if I run, I'll be giving up on this careful life I've spent months planning.

Thompson turns around and looks toward Don Juan, who rises from his chair and waves at me with his large hand. "Yes, well, he's why you're here. Please come in."

Against my better judgment, I slip past Mr. Thompson and stand just inside the door. Thompson closes the door and flips the blinds to the office shut. Now I'm really nervous.

"Ms. Harper, if you'd sit down." Thompson points at the chair Don Juan just vacated.

I cross my arms and look at both of them mutinously. The seas could flood the earth before I take a seat.

Thompson sighs and settles in his own chair, knowing a lost cause when he sees one. That makes me even more uneasy, because if he's giving up this fight, it means there's a bigger one coming.

He picks up a set of papers on his desk. "Ella Harper, this is Callum Royal." He pauses as if that means something to me.

Meanwhile, Royal is staring at me like he's never seen a girl before. I realize that my crossed arms are pushing my boobs together, and so I drop my hands to my sides where they dangle awkwardly.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Royal." It's apparent to everyone in the room that I'm thinking the exact opposite.

The sound of my voice jolts him out of his hypnosis. He strides forward and, before I can move, has my right hand clasped between his two.

"My God, you look just like him." The words are whispered so only he and I can hear them. Then, as if remembering where he is, he shakes my hand. "Please, call me Callum."

There's an odd tone to his words. Like they're hard to get out. I tug my hand from his, which requires some effort because the creep does not want to let go. It takes Mr. Thompson clearing his throat to get Royal to drop my hand.

"What's this all about?" I demand. As a seventeen-year-old in a room full of adults, my tone is out of place, but no one even bats an eyelash.

Mr. Thompson runs an agitated hand through his hair. "I don't know how to say this, so I'll just be straightforward. Mr. Royal tells me that your parents are both deceased and that he's now your guardian."

I falter. Just for a beat. Just long enough to let the shock filter into indignation.

“Bullshit!” The curse word bursts out before I can stop it. “My mother signed me up for classes. You have her signature on the registration forms.”

My heart is beating a million miles a minute because that signature is actually mine. I forged it to maintain control over my own life. Even though I’m a minor, I’ve had to be the adult in my family since the age of fifteen.

To Mr. Thompson’s credit, he doesn’t chastise me for the profanity. “The paperwork indicates that Mr. Royal’s claim is legitimate.” He rattles the papers in his hands.

“Yeah? Well, he’s lying. I’ve never seen this guy before, and if you let me go with him, the next report you’ll see is how some girl from GW disappeared into a sex-trafficking scheme.”

“You’re right, we haven’t met before,” Royal interjects. “But that doesn’t change the reality here.”

“Let me see.” I jump to Thompson’s desk and pluck the papers out of his hands. My eyes run over the pages, not really reading what’s there. Words pop out at me—*guardian* and *deceased* and *bequeath*—but they mean nothing. Callum Royal is still a stranger. Period.

“Perhaps if your mother could come in, we could clear everything up,” Mr. Thompson suggests.

“Yes, Ella, bring your mother and I’ll withdraw my claim.” Royal’s voice is soft, but I hear the steel. He knows something.

I turn back to my principal. He’s the weak link here. “I could create this in the school computer lab. I wouldn’t even need Photoshop.” I toss the sheaf of papers in front of him. Doubt is forming in his eyes, so I press my advantage. “I need

to get back to class. The semester is just starting and I don't want to fall behind."

He licks his lips uncertainly, and I stare him down with all the conviction in my heart. I don't have a dad. I certainly don't have a guardian. If I did, where was this jackass all my life while my mom was struggling to make ends meet, when she was in god-awful pain from her cancer, when she was weeping on her hospice bed about leaving me alone? Where was he *then*?

Thompson sighs. "All right, Ella, why don't you go to class? Clearly Mr. Royal and I have more matters to discuss."

Royal objects. "These papers are all in order. You know me and you know my family. I wouldn't be here presenting this to you if it were not the truth. What would be the reason?"

"There are a lot of perverts in this world," I say snidely. "They have lots of reasons to make up stories."

Thompson waves his hand. "Ella, that's enough. Mr. Royal, this is a surprise to all of us. Once we contact Ella's mother, we can clear this all up."

Royal doesn't like the delay and renews his argument about how important he is and how a Royal wouldn't tell a lie. I half expect him to invoke George Washington and the cherry tree. As the two bicker, I slip out of the room.

"I'm going to the bathroom, Darlene," I lie. "I'll head back to class right after."

She buys it easily. "Take your time. I'll let your teacher know."

I don't go to the bathroom. I don't go back to class. Instead, I hustle to the bus stop and catch the G bus to the last stop.

From there, it's a thirty-minute walk to the apartment I lease for a measly five hundred a month. It has one bedroom,

a dingy bathroom, and a living/kitchen area that smells like mold. But it's cheap, and the landlord is a woman who was willing to accept cash and not run a background check.

I don't know who Callum Royal is, but I do know that his presence in Kirkwood is bad, bad news. Those legal papers weren't Photoshopped. They were real. But there's no way I'm placing my life in the hands of some stranger who appeared out of the blue.

My life is *mine*. I live it. I control it.

I dump my hundred-dollar textbooks out of my backpack and fill the newly emptied bag with clothes, toiletries, and the last of my savings—one thousand dollars. Crap. I need some quick money to help me get out of town. I'm seriously depleted. It cost me over two grand to move here, what with bus tickets and then first and last month's rent, along with a rental deposit. It sucks that I'm going to be eating the unused rent money, but it's clear I can't stick around.

I'm running again. Story of my life. Mom and I were always running. From her boyfriends, her pervert bosses, social services, poverty. The hospice was the only place we stayed in for any substantial amount of time, and that was because she was dying. Sometimes I think the universe has decided I'm not allowed to be happy.

I sit on the side of the bed and try not to cry out of frustration and anger and, okay, yes, even fear. I allow myself five minutes of self-pity and then get on the phone. Screw the universe.

"Hey, George, I've been thinking about your offer to work at Daddy G's," I say when a male voice answers the call. "I'm ready to take you up on that."

I've been working the pole at Miss Candy's, a baby club

where I strip down to a G-string and pasties. It's good, but not great, money. George has been asking me to graduate to Daddy G's, a fully topless place, for the last few weeks. I've resisted because I didn't see the need. I do now.

I'm blessed with my mother's body. Long legs. Nipped-in waist. My boobs aren't double-D spectacular, but George said he liked my perky B-cups because they give the illusion of youth. It's not an illusion, but my identification says I'm thirty-four and that my name isn't Ella Harper but Margaret Harper. My dead mom. Super creepy if you stop to think about it, which I try not to.

There aren't many jobs a seventeen-year-old can actually do part-time and still pay the bills. And none of them are legal. Run drugs. Turn tricks. Strip. I chose the last one.

"Damn, girl, that's excellent news!" George crows. "I have an opening tonight. You can be the third dancer. Wear the Catholic schoolgirl uniform. The guys are gonna love that."

"How much for tonight?"

"How much what?"

"Cash, George. How much cash?"

"Five hundred and any tips you can make. If you want to do some private lap dances, I'll give you one hundred per dance."

Shit. I could make a grand easy tonight. I shove all my anxiety and discomfort to the back of my mind. Now isn't the time for an internal morality debate. I need money, and stripping is one of the safest ways for me to get it.

"I'll be there. Book as many as you can for me."

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Two

DADDY G'S IS a shithole, but it's a lot nicer than some of the other clubs in town. Then again, that's like saying, "Take a bite of this rotten chicken. It's not as green and moldy as these other pieces." Still, money is money.

Callum Royal's appearance at the school has been eating at me all day. If I had a laptop and an internet connection, I would've googled the guy, but my old computer is broken, and I haven't had the cash to lay out for a replacement. I didn't want to trek to the library to use theirs, either. It's stupid, but I was scared if I left the apartment, Royal might ambush me on the street.

Who *is* he? And why does he think he's my guardian? Mom never once mentioned his name to me. Earlier, for a moment, I wondered if he might be my father, but those papers claimed my dad was deceased, too. And unless Mom lied to me, I know my dad's name wasn't Callum. It was Steve.

Steve. That always felt made-up to me. Like, when your kid says, "Tell me about my daddy, Mama!" and you're on the spot, so you blurt out the first name that comes to mind. "Uh, his name was, um, Steve, honey."

But I hate to think that Mom was lying. We'd always been honest with each other.

I push Callum Royal out of my mind, because tonight is my debut at Daddy G's, and I can't let some middle-aged stranger in a thousand-dollar suit distract me. There are already enough middle-aged men in this joint to occupy my thoughts.

The club is packed. I guess Catholic schoolgirl night is a big draw at Daddy G's. The tables and booths on the main floor are all occupied, but the raised level that holds the VIP lounge is deserted. Not a surprise. There aren't many VIPs in Kirkwood, this small Tennessee town outside of Knoxville. It's a blue-collar town, mostly lower class. If you make more than \$40K a year, you're considered filthy rich. That's why I chose it. The rent's cheap and the public school system is decent.

The dressing room is in the back, and it's full of life when I walk inside. Half-naked women glance over at my entrance. Some nod, a couple smile, and then they refocus their attention on securing their garter belts or applying their makeup at the vanity tables.

Only one rushes over to me.

"Cinderella?" she says.

I nod. It's the stage name I've been using at Miss Candy's. Seemed fitting at the time.

"I'm Rose. George asked me to show you the ropes tonight."

There's always one mother hen in every club—an older woman who realizes she's losing the fight against gravity and decides to make herself useful in other ways. At Miss Candy's, it had been Tina, the aging bleached blonde who took me under her wing from moment one. Here, it's the aging redhead

Rose, who clucks over me as she guides me toward the metal rack of costumes.

When I reach for the schoolgirl uniform, she intercepts my hand. "No, that's for later. Put this on."

Next thing I know, she's helping me into a black corset with crisscrossed laces and a lacy black thong.

"I'm dancing in this?" I can barely breathe in the corset, let alone reach in front of me to unlace it.

"Forget what's up top." She laughs when she notices my halted breathing. "Just wiggle that bottom of yours and ride Richie Rich's pole, and you'll be fine."

I give her a blank look. "I thought I was going onstage."

"George didn't tell you? You're doing a private dance in the VIP lounge now."

What? But I just got here. From my experience at Miss Candy's, normally you dance onstage a few times before any of the customers request a private show.

"Must be one of your regulars from your former club," Rose guesses when she notices my confusion. "Richie Rich just waltzes in here like he owns the place, hands George five hundies, and tells 'im to send you over." She winks at me. "Play it right and you'll squeeze a few more Benjamins outta him."

Then she's gone. Flouncing off to one of the other dancers while I stand there debating if this was a mistake.

I like to play it off like I'm tough, and yeah, I am, to some extent. I've been poor and hungry. I was raised by a stripper. I know how to throw a punch if I have to. But I'm only seventeen. Sometimes that feels too young to have lived the life I have. Sometimes I look around at my surroundings and think, *I don't belong here.*

But I *am* here. I'm here, and I'm broke, and if I want to be that normal girl I'm desperately trying to be, then I need to walk out of this dressing room and ride Mr. VIP's pole, as Rose so nicely phrased it.

George appears as I step into the hallway. He's a stocky man with a full beard and kind eyes. "Did Rose tell you about the customer? He's been waiting for you."

Nodding, I swallow awkwardly. "I don't have to do anything fancy, right? Just a regular lap dance?"

He chuckles. "Get as fancy as you like, but if he touches you, Bruno'll haul him out on his ass."

I'm relieved to hear that Daddy G's enforces the no-touching-the-merchandise rule. Dancing for slimy men is a lot easier to swallow when their slimy hands don't get anywhere near you.

"You'll do fine, girl." He pats my arm. "And if he asks, you're twenty-four, okay? No one over thirty works here, remember?"

What about under twenty? I almost ask. But I keep my lips pressed tight. He has to know I'm lying about my age. Half the girls here are. And I may have lived a hard life, but no way do I look thirty-fricking-four. The makeup helps me pass for twenty-one. Barely.

George disappears into the dressing room, and I take a breath before heading down the hallway.

The sultry bass line greets me in the main room. The dancer onstage just unbuttoned her white uniform shirt, and the men go wild at the first sight of her see-through bra. Dollar bills rain on the stage. That's what I focus on. The money. Screw everything else.

Still, I'm so bummed at the thought of leaving GW High and all those teachers who actually seem to care about what they're teaching. But I'll find another school in another town. A town where Callum Royal won't be able to find—

I halt in my tracks. Then I spin around in a panic.

It's too late. Royal has already crossed the shadowy VIP lounge, and his strong hand encircles my upper arm.

"Ella," he says in a low voice.

"Let me go." My tone is as indifferent as I can make it, but my hand shakes as I try to pry his off me.

He doesn't let go, not until another figure steps out of the shadows, a man in a dark suit and with the shoulders of a linebacker. "No touching," the bouncer says ominously.

Royal releases my arm as if it's made of lava. He spares a grim look at Bruno the bouncer, then turns back to me. His eyes stay locked on my face, like he's making a pointed effort not to look at my skimpy outfit. "We need to talk."

The whiskey on his breath nearly knocks me over.

"I have nothing to say to you," I answer coolly. "I don't know you."

"I'm your guardian."

"You're a stranger." Now I'm haughty. "And you're interfering with my work."

His mouth opens. Then closes. Then he says, "All right. Get to work, then."

What?

There's a mocking gleam in his eyes as he drifts backward toward the plush couches. He sits, spreading his legs slightly, still mocking me. "Give me what I paid for."

My heart speeds up. No way. I'm not dancing for this man.

From the corner of my eye, I see George approaching the steps of the lounge. My new boss stares at me expectantly.

I gulp. I want to cry, but I don't. Instead, I sashay over to Royal with a confidence I don't feel.

"Fine. You want me to dance for you, Daddy? I'll dance for you."

Tears prick the insides of my eyelids, but I know they won't spill over. I've trained myself never to cry in public. The last time I cried, it was by my mother's deathbed, and that was after all the nurses and doctors left the room.

Callum Royal wears a pained look as I move in front of him. My hips roll to the music, as if on instinct. Actually, it *is* instinct. Dancing is in my blood. It's part of me. When I was younger, Mom was able to scrape money together to send me to ballet and jazz classes for three years. After the funds ran out, she took up the teaching part herself. She would watch videos or crash classes at the community center before they kicked her out, and then she'd come home and teach me.

I love to dance, and I'm good at it, but I'm not stupid enough to think it'll ever be a career, not unless I want to strip for a living. Nope, my career will be practical. Business or law, something that will earn me a good living. Dancing is a little girl's foolish dream.

As I run my hands seductively down the front of my corset, Royal lets out a groan. It's not the groan I'm used to hearing, though. He doesn't look turned on. He looks . . . sad.

"He's rolling over in his grave right now," Royal says hoarsely.

I ignore him. He doesn't exist to me.

"This isn't right." He sounds choked up.

I toss my hair back and jut my boobs out. I can feel Bruno's eyes on me from the shadows.

Five hundred bucks for a ten-minute dance, and I've already gyrated away two minutes. Eight more to go. I can do this.

But evidently, Royal can't. One more sway and both his hands clamp down on my hips. "No," he growls. "Steve wouldn't want this for you."

I don't have time to blink, to register his words. He's on his feet and I'm flying through the air, my torso slamming into his broad shoulder.

"Let me go!" I scream.

He's not listening. He carries me over his shoulder like I'm a rag doll, and not even Bruno's sudden appearance can stop him.

"Get the hell out of my way!" When Bruno takes another step, Royal booms at him. "This girl is seventeen years old! She's a minor, and I'm her guardian, and so help me God, if you take one more step, I will have every cop in Kirkwood swarming this place, and you and all these other perverts will be thrown in jail for endangering a minor."

Bruno might be beefy, but he's not dumb. With a stricken look, he moves out of the way.

Me, I'm not so cooperative. My fists pound against Royal's back, my nails clawing at his expensive suit jacket. "Put me down!" I shriek.

He doesn't. And nobody stops him as he marches toward the exit. The men in the club are too busy leering and hooting at the stage. I see a flash of movement—George coming up beside Bruno, who whispers furiously in his ear—but then they're gone and I'm hit by a gust of cool air.

We're outside, but Callum Royal still doesn't put me down. I see his fancy shoes slapping the cracked pavement of the parking lot. There's a jingle of keys, a loud beep, and then I'm propelled through the air again before landing on a leather seat. I'm in the back of a car. A door slams. An engine roars to life.

Oh my God. This man is kidnapping me.



Three

MY BACKPACK!

It has my money and my watch in it! The back seat of the behemoth Callum Royal calls a car is more luxurious than anything my butt has ever touched in my entire life. Too bad I won't have time to appreciate it. I dive for the door handle and pull on it, but the stupid thing won't open.

My eyes shift to the driver. It's reckless as hell but I don't have any choice. I lunge forward and grab the shoulder of the driver, whose neck is as big as my thigh. "Turn around! I have to go back!"

He doesn't even flinch. It's like he's made out of brick. I tug a few more times, but I'm pretty sure that short of stabbing this guy in the neck—and maybe not even then—he's not doing anything unless Royal tells him to.

Callum hasn't moved an inch from his side of the rear passenger seat, and I resign myself to the fact that I won't be exiting the car until he okays it. I test the window just to be sure. It remains stubbornly closed.

"Child safety locks?" I mutter, even though I'm sure of the answer.

He nods slightly. "Among other things, but suffice it to say that you're in the car for the duration of our trip. Are you looking for this?"

My backpack lands in my lap. I resist the urge to rip it open and check if he's taken my cash and identification. Without either, I'm completely at his mercy, but I don't want to reveal a thing until I figure out his angle.

"Look, mister, I don't know what you want, but it's obvious you have money. There are plenty of hookers out there who will do whatever you want and won't cause you the legal trouble that I could. Just drop me off at the next intersection, and I promise you'll never hear from me again. I won't go to the cops. I'll tell George that you were an old client but that we hammered out our issues."

"I'm not looking for a hooker. I'm here for you." After that ominous statement, Royal shrugs out of his suit coat and offers it to me.

Part of me wishes I was just a little bolder, but sitting here in this super-fancy car in front of the man I just used as a pole is making me feel awkward and exposed. I'd give anything for a pair of granny panties right now. Reluctantly, I slip the jacket on, ignoring the uncomfortable pain the corset is causing me, and clutch the lapels tight against my chest.

"I have nothing you want." Surely the small amount of cash shoved into the bottom of my bag is peanuts to this dude. We could trade this car for all of Daddy G's.

Royal raises one eyebrow in a wordless rebuttal. Now that he's in his shirtsleeves, I can see his watch, and it looks . . . exactly like mine. His eyes follow my gaze.

"You've seen this before." It's not a question. He shoves his wrist toward me. The watch has a plain black leather band,

silver knobs, and an eighteen-karat-gold housing around the domed glass of the watch face. The numbers and hands are glow-in-the-dark.

Dry-mouthed, I lie, “Never seen it before in my life.”

“Really? It’s an Oris watch. Swiss, made by hand. It was a gift when I graduated BUD/S. My best friend, Steve O’Halloran, received the same exact watch when he graduated from BUD/S, too. On the back it’s engraved—”

Non sibi sed patriae.

I looked up the phrase when I was nine years old, after my mom told me the story of my birth. *Sorry, kid, but I slept with a sailor. He left me with nothing more than his first name and this watch.* And me, I’d reminded her. She’d playfully ruffled my hair and told me I was the best thing ever. My heart lurches again at her absence.

“It means ‘Not for self but for country.’ Steve’s watch went missing eighteen years ago. He said he lost it, but he never replaced it. Never wore another watch.” Royal releases a rueful snort. “He used that as an excuse for why he was late all the time.”

I catch myself leaning forward, wanting to know more about Steve O’Halloran, what the heck “BUD/S” is, and how the men knew each other. Then I give myself a mental face slap and slouch back against the door.

“Cool story, bro. But what does that have to do with me?” I glance at Goliath in the front seat and raise my voice. “Because both of you just kidnapped a minor, and I’m pretty sure that’s a felony in all fifty states.”

Only Royal responds. “It’s a felony to kidnap anyone

regardless of age, but since I'm your guardian and you were engaging in illegal acts, it's within my rights to remove you from the premises."

I force out a mocking laugh. "I'm not sure who you think I am, but I'm thirty-four." I reach into the backpack to find my ID, pushing aside the watch that's a perfect match to the one Royal has on his left wrist. "See? Margaret Harper. Age thirty-four."

He plucks the identification from my fingers. "Five foot seven inches. One hundred and thirty pounds." His eyes flick over me. "Felt more like a hundred, but I suspect you've lost weight since you've been on the run."

On the run? How the hell does he know that?

As if he can read my expression, he snorts. "I've got five sons. There's no trick in the book that one of them hasn't tried on me, and I know a teenager when I see one, even beneath a foot of makeup."

I stare back stonily. This man, whoever he is, is getting nothing from me.

"Your father is Steven O'Halloran." He checks himself. "Was. Your father *was* Steven O'Halloran."

I avert my face. Of course my dad is dead. Of course. I'd always assumed it, but hearing it from this stranger's mouth makes it real.

My throat feels tight, and the awful sensation of tears pricks at the back of my eyes. Crying is for babies. Crying is for weaklings. Crying for a dad I never knew? Totally weak.

Over the hum of the road, I hear a clink of glass against glass and then the familiar sound of liquor splashing into a tumbler. Royal starts talking a moment later.

"Your father and I were best friends. We grew up together.

Went to college together. Decided to enlist in the Navy on a whim. We eventually joined the SEALs, but our fathers wanted to retire early, so instead of re-upping for duty, we moved home to take up the reins of our family business. We build airplanes, if you were wondering.”

Of course you do, I think sourly.

He ignores my silence or takes it as approval to continue. “Five months ago, Steve died during a hang-gliding accident. But before he left . . . it’s eerie, almost like he had some kind of premonition”—Royal shakes his head—“he gave me a letter and said it might be the most important piece of correspondence he’d ever received. He told me we’d go over it together once he got back, but a week later, his wife returned from the trip and informed me Steve was dead. I set the letter aside to deal with . . . complications regarding his death and his widow.”

Complications? What did that mean? You die and then that’s it, no? Plus, the way he said *widow*, like it was a nasty word, makes me wonder about her.

“A couple of months later, I remembered the letter. Do you want to know what it said?”

What a horrible tease. Of course I want to know what the letter said, but I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of a response. I fix my cheek against the window.

Several blocks whiz by before Royal gives in.

“The letter was from your mother.”

“What?” I whip my head around in shock.

He doesn’t look smug that he’s finally gained my attention—only tired. The loss of his friend, of my dad, is etched all over his face, and for the first time, I see Callum Royal as the man he professes to be: a father who lost his best friend and received the surprise of a lifetime.

Before he can say another word, though, the car comes to a stop. I look out the window and see we're out in the country. There's a long flat strip of land, a large one-story building made of metal sheeting, and a tower. Near the building is a large white airplane with the words "Atlantic Aviation" emblazoned on it. When Royal said he built airplanes, I didn't expect *this* kind of airplane. I don't know what I expected, but a huge-ass jet large enough to carry hundreds of people across the world was not it.

"Is that yours?" I have a hard time not gaping.

"It is, but we're not stopping."

I pull my hand away from the heavy silver door latch. "What do you mean?"

For the time being, I shelve the shock of being kidnapped, of the existence—and death—of the sperm donor who helped make me, of this mysterious letter, to watch in open-mouthed amazement when we drive past the gates, past the building, and onto what I presume to be the airfield. At the rear of the plane, a hatch lowers, and once the ramp hits the ground, Goliath motors up the incline and right into the belly of the plane.

I twist around to look out the back windshield as the hatch closes loudly behind us. As soon as the door of the plane shuts, the locks to the car doors make a soft *snick*. And I'm free. Sort of.

"After you." Callum gestures toward the door Goliath is holding open for me.

With the jacket clutched tightly around me, I try to gather my composure. Even the plane is in better condition than me with my borrowed stripper corset and uncomfortable heels.

"I need to change." I'm grateful I manage to sound halfway

normal. I've had a lot of experience being shamed, and over the years, I've learned that the best defense is a good offense. But I'm at a low point right now. I don't want anyone, not Goliath or the flight people, looking at me in this getup.

This is my first time on a plane. Before, it was always buses and, in some really terrible spots, rides with truck drivers. But this is a giant thing, big enough to house a car. Surely there's a closet somewhere for me to change.

Callum's eyes soften and he gives a brisk nod to Goliath. "We'll wait upstairs." He points to the end of the garage-like room. "Through that door is a set of stairs. Come up when you're ready."

The minute I'm alone, I quickly exchange my stripper clothes for my most comfortable undies, a pair of baggy jeans, a tank top, and a flannel button-down top that I'd normally leave open but tonight fasten all the way up, leaving only the top button undone. I look like a hobo, but at least I'm covered. I kick off the heels and slip my feet into a pair of well-worn Converse sneakers.

I stuff the stripper gear in the bag and check to see if my money is there. It is, thankfully, along with Steve's watch. My wrist feels naked without it, and since Callum already knows, I might as well wear it. The second the latch is affixed around my wrist, I feel instantly better, stronger. I can face whatever Callum Royal has in store for me.

Slinging the backpack over my shoulder, I start plotting as I walk toward the door. I need money. Callum has that. I need a new place to live, and fast. If I get enough money from him, I'll fly to my next destination and start over again. I know how to do that.

I'm going to be okay.

Everything is going to be okay. If I tell myself that lie long enough, I'll believe it to be true . . . even if it isn't.

When I reach the top of the stairs, Callum is there waiting for me. He introduces me to the driver. "Ella Harper, this is Durand Sahadi. Durand, Steven's daughter, Ella."

"Nice to meet you," Durand says in a ridiculously deep voice. Jeez, he sounds like Batman. "I'm sorry for your loss."

He bows his head slightly, and he's just so fricking nice that it'd be rude to ignore him. I push my backpack out of the way and shake his outstretched hand. "Thank you."

"Thank you as well, Durand." Callum dismisses his driver and turns to me. "Let's take our seats. I want to get home. It's an hour plane ride to Bayview."

"An hour? You brought a plane to go an hour?" I exclaim.

"It would have taken me six hours to drive and that was far too long. It's already taken me nine weeks and an army of detectives to find you."

Since I don't have any other options right now, I follow Callum toward a set of plush cream leather seats facing each other, with a fancy black wooden table inlaid with silver situated between them. He settles into one, then gestures for me to take my place opposite him. A glass and a bottle are already set out, as if his staff knows he can't function without a drink.

Across the aisle from Callum is another set of cushy chairs, and a sofa lies beyond that. I wonder if I could get a job as a flight attendant for him. This place is even nicer than his car. I could live here, no question.

I sit down and set my backpack between my feet.

"Nice watch," he comments dryly.

"Thanks. My mom gave it to me. Said it was the only thing my dad left her besides his name and me." There's no point in

lying anymore. If his army of private detectives led him to me in Kirkwood, he probably knows more about me and Mom than I do. He certainly seems to know a lot about my dad, and I find, against my better judgment, I'm starving for that information. "Where's the letter?"

"At home. I'll give it to you when we arrive." He reaches for a leather portfolio and pulls out a stack of cash—the kind you see in movies with a white wrapper around it. "I want to make a deal with you, Ella."

I know my eyes are as huge as saucers, but I can't help it. I've never seen so many hundred-dollar bills in my entire life.

He pushes the stack across the dark surface until the pile of bills sits in front of me. Maybe this is a game show or some kind of reality television competition? I snap my mouth shut and try to stiffen up. No one plays me for a fool.

"Let's hear it," I say, crossing my arms and looking at Calum with narrowed eyes.

"From what I can tell, you're stripping to support yourself and get a high school diploma. From there, I presume you'd like to go to college and give up stripping and perhaps do something else. Maybe you'd like to be an accountant or doctor or lawyer. This money is a good faith gesture." He taps the bills. "This stack contains ten thousand dollars. For every month you stay with me, I'll give you a new stack—in cash—for the same amount. If you stay with me until you graduate from high school, you'll receive a bonus of two hundred thousand. That will pay for your college education, housing, clothing, and food. If you graduate with a degree, you'll receive another substantial bonus."

"What's the catch?" My hands itch to grab the money, find

a parachute, and escape from Callum Royal's clutches before he can say, *Stock market*.

Instead, I stay seated, waiting to hear what kind of sick deed I'll have to do to get this money—and debating internally what my limits are.

"The catch is that you don't fight. You don't try to run away. You accept my guardianship. You live in my home. You treat my sons as your brothers. If you do that, you can have the life you've dreamed of." He pauses. "The life Steve would have wanted you to have."

"And what do I have to do for *you*?" I need the terms spelled out exactly.

Callum's eyes widen and his face takes on a green cast. "Nothing for *me*. You're a very pretty girl, Ella, but you *are* a girl, and I'm a forty-two-year-old man with five sons. Rest assured, I have an attractive girlfriend who meets my every need."

Ewww. I hold up a hand. "Okay, I don't need any more explanation."

Callum laughs with relief before his tone goes serious again. "I know I can't replace your parents, but I'm here for you in any way that you would need them. You may have lost your family, but you're not alone anymore, Ella. You're a Royal now."



Four

WE'RE LANDING, BUT even with my nose pressed right up to the window, it's too dark to see anything. Blinking lights from the runway below are all I can make out, and once we touch down, Callum doesn't give me time to examine my surroundings. We don't take the car that's in the belly of the plane. No, that must be the travel car, because Durand ushers us to another sleek black sedan parked on the tarmac. The windows are tinted so dark I have no idea what kind of scenery is flashing past us, but then Callum rolls the window down a bit, and I smell it—salt. The ocean.

We're on the coast, then. One of the Carolinas? Six hours from Kirkwood would place us somewhere along the Atlantic, which makes sense given the name of Callum's company. It doesn't matter, though. All that matters is the stack of crisp bills in my backpack. Ten grand. I still can't fathom it. Ten grand a *month*. And a helluva lot more after I graduate.

There has to be a catch. Callum might have assured me that he doesn't expect . . . *special favors* in return, but this isn't my first rodeo. There's always a catch, and eventually it will

make itself known. When it does, at least I'll have ten grand in my pocket if I need to run again.

Until then, I'm playing along. Making nice with Royal.

And his sons . . .

Crap, I forgot about the sons—five of them, he'd said.

How bad could they really be, though? Five spoiled rich boys? Ha. I've dealt with a lot worse. Like my mom's gangster boyfriend, Leo, who tried to feel me up when I was twelve, then taught me the right way to form a fist after I punched him in the gut and nearly broke my hand. He'd laughed and we were fast friends after that. The self-defense tips definitely helped me with Mom's *next* boyfriend, who was just as handsy. Mom really knew how to pick winners.

But I try not to judge her. She did what she had to do to survive, and I never doubted her love for me.

After thirty minutes of driving, Durand slows the car in front of a gate. There's a divider between us and the driver's seat, but I hear an electronic beep, then a mechanical whir, and then we're driving again. Slower this time, until finally the car stops altogether and the locks release with a *click*.

"We're home," Callum says quietly.

I want to correct him—there's no such thing—but I keep my mouth shut.

Durand opens the door for me and extends a hand. My knees wobble slightly as I exit. Three other vehicles are parked outside a huge garage: two black SUVs and a cherry-red pickup truck that looks out of place.

Callum notices where my gaze has gone and smiles ruefully. "Used to be three Range Rovers, but Easton traded his for the pickup. I suspect he wanted more room to screw around with his dates."

He doesn't say it with reproach but resignation. I assume Easton is one of his sons. I also sense an undercurrent of . . . *something* in Callum's tone. Helplessness maybe? I've only known him a few hours, but somehow I can't imagine this man ever being helpless, and my guard shoots up again.

"You'll have to catch a ride to school with the boys for the first few days," he adds. "Until I get you a car." His eyes narrow. "That is, if you have a license under your own name and that doesn't say you're thirty-four?"

I nod grudgingly.

"Good."

Then I realize what he said before. "You're buying me a car?"

"It'll be easier that way. My sons"—he seems to be choosing his words carefully—"aren't quick to warm up to strangers. But you need to go to school, so"—he shrugs and repeats himself—"it will be easier."

I can't fight my suspicion. Something is off here. With this man. With his kids. Maybe I should have fought harder to get out of his car back in Kirkwood. Maybe I—

My thoughts die as I shift my gaze and get my first glimpse of the mansion.

No, the palace. The Royal palace. Literally.

This isn't real. The house is only two stories tall, but it stretches out so far, I can barely see the end of it. And there are windows *everywhere*. Maybe the architect who designed this place was allergic to walls or had a deep fear of vampires.

"You . . ." My voice hitches. "You live here?"

"We live here," he corrects. "This is your home now, too, Ella."

This will never be my home. I don't belong in splendor, I

belong in squalor. That's what I know. It's what I'm comfortable with, because squalor doesn't lie to you. It's not wrapped in a pretty package. It is what it is.

This house is an illusion. It's polished and pretty, but the dream Callum is trying to sell is as flimsy as paper. Nothing stays shiny forever in this world.



THE INTERIOR OF the Royal mansion is as extravagant as the exterior. White slabs of tile veined with gray and gold—the kind that banks and doctors' offices have—span the foyer, which seems to go on for miles. The ceiling never ends, either, and I'm tempted to shout something just to see how deep the echo sounds.

Stairs on either side of the entrance meet at an actual balcony that overlooks the foyer. The chandelier above must contain a hundred lights and so much crystal that if it fell on my head, all they'd be able to find is glass dust. It looks like it belongs in a hotel. I wouldn't be surprised if it was taken from one.

Everywhere I look I see *wealth*.

And through it all, Callum watches me with wary eyes, as if he's stepped inside my mind and realizes how close I am to freaking out. To running hard and fast, because I don't fucking belong here.

"I know it's different from what you're used to," he says gruffly, "but you'll get used to this, too. You're going to like it here. I promise you."

My shoulders stiffen. "Don't make promises, Mr. Royal. Not to me, not ever."

His face goes stricken. “Call me Callum. And I intend to keep any promise I make to you, Ella. Same way I kept every promise I made to your father.”

Something softens inside me. “You . . . uh . . .” The words come out awkwardly. “You really cared about my—about Steve, huh?”

“He was my best friend,” Callum says simply. “I trusted him with my life.”

Must be nice. The only person I’ve ever trusted is gone. Dead and buried. I think of Mom, and suddenly, I miss her so much my throat closes up.

“Um . . .” I struggle to sound casual, as if I’m not on the verge of tears or a breakdown. “So do you have a butler or something? Or a housekeeper? Who takes care of this place?”

“I have staff. You won’t be required to scrub floors to earn your keep.” His grin dies off at my unsmiling stare.

“Where’s my letter?”

Callum must sense how close I am to losing it, because his tone softens. “Look, it’s late, and you’ve had a lot of excitement for one day. Why don’t we save this conversation for tomorrow? Right now I just want you to get a good night’s sleep.” He eyes me knowingly. “I get the feeling it’s been a long time since you’ve had one of those.”

He’s right. I take a breath, then exhale slowly. “Where’s my room?”

“I’ll take you up—” He halts when footsteps sound from above us, and I glimpse a flicker of approval in his blue eyes. “Here they are. Gideon is at college, but I asked the others to come down and meet you. They don’t always listen—”

And still don’t, apparently, because whatever orders he