

Chapter Ten

Despite the fact it was still only March the temperatures proved warm and balmy for the party. The patio was lit with lanterns and created a festive mood for the exclusive guests. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves except the one whose honor the party was being held.

Marcus stood off to the side sipping his champagne and fighting the urge to do something harder. He plastered a fake grin on his face and endured the well-wishes of the prominent business associates his mother had invited. There wasn't one person in attendance his own age.

Well, there was one.

"Marcus! There you are!" Elizabeth smiled sauntering up to him. "Why are you hiding here in the corner? You should be mingling! Everyone here has missed you. I missed you."

She clutched his arm and leaned close. Marcus fought the urge to toss her away. His skin crawled whenever she touched him and he couldn't stand the superior look in her eyes. Elizabeth had been put on a pedestal by her parents and his mother. She believed wholeheartedly everyone else was inferior to her. It was the same attitude his mother had and it grated on his nerves.

Like his mother Elizabeth kept her brown hair tamed in a bun which only highlighted her thin face. Strong cheek bones, a prominent nose and pointed chin gave her a narrow profile and highlighted a harsh expression she never seemed without. Marcus couldn't help but see her as a younger version of his mother and the world wasn't big enough for two of them.

"Oh look there's Dalton. Let's go say hi!" she tugged on his arm but Marcus remained in his spot as if rooted there.

"If he wants to talk he can come over here," Marcus said with a scowl.

Dalton worked for Elizabeth's parents and as far as Marcus would remember had the same attitude as his employers. Everything that came out of his mouth was backhanded insults and Marcus hated playing games with such people.

"Oh, come on. You should be out there with everyone else," Elizabeth insisted, pouting, which only made her sour expression worse.

"It's my party and I'll stand where I want to," Marcus said without a trace of sympathy.

"Fine, but don't stand here too long," Elizabeth finally caved. "I'll be waiting for you."

She sauntered off, sashaying her hips in what she thought was an enticing manner. Marcus rolled his eyes and took another large gulp from his glass, nearly draining it in one go. He hated that he was relying on it and looked to the hors d'oeuvre table. Perhaps he could use food as a crutch instead.

As he looked over the spread a server brought out another platter. Normally he ignored staff but this one's maroon jacket caught his eye. When the party first started and he saw the caterer's uniforms his heart had skipped a beat. They were the same jackets, well the same color. The one in his room was plain while these were embroidered with the company's name. However try as he might none of the serving staff looked anything like the woman who tantalized his fantasies and had resigned himself to the idea she was no longer employed by this company.

Until now.

The woman in front of him was average height with a pleasingly curvy form and tantalizingly round hips. She had a round, smooth face and a dark, wavy mane barely controlled by a simple ponytail. Her brown eyes were like two dark pools deep enough for him to get lost in as his hands itched to touch her smooth, brown skin.

It had to be her. There was no one else it could be.

"Long time, no see," Marcus said with a smirk.

She looked up with a perplexed expression, "Señor? Something I can help you with?"

"Same as last time, right?"

She frowned, "I'm not sure what you mean. Is there an hors d'oeuvre you were looking for?"

Now it was Marcus's turn to look perplexed. Was he wrong? Was she not the one? Granted his memory was five years old but he remembered her as clear as day. She had to be the one. And yet...She did seem genuinely confused. Or was it an act?

When he didn't answer she moved off continuing to straighten the table as she took away platters that were mostly empty. Marcus watched still trying to figure her out. They had been more than a little drunk at their last meeting but surely she hadn't forgotten. Then her confusion had to be an act, or he was wrong. If he held her body against his own he was certain he would know the truth but he didn't dare to do so in front of this crowd.

None of them would understand his feelings and it would certainly embarrass the lady in front of him. As far as everyone else was concerned she was just hired help. But she was so much more. There was so much passion inside of her it was practically bursting to come out. He had felt it then.

How could he convince her it was all right to be truthful with him? But what if he was wrong? What if it wasn't her? She showed no recollection when he spoke to her. Was it because there were too many people around them?

As he watched she disappeared into the kitchen and Marcus was tempted to follow. Perhaps if he confronted her in private she would react differently. Before he could decide the clanking of glass brought him to attention. His gaze followed everyone else's to the center of the patio where his mother and Elizabeth stood.

Elizabeth smiled brightly, "Thank you everyone for coming tonight to welcome home Marcus."

The crowd sporadically clapped looking at him. He gave them a stiff smile wondering why she was suddenly making such a statement. Wasn't it his responsibility to thank the guests since the party was in his honor?

"We also want to make an important announcement," Elizabeth continued unfazed by his confused expression. "We are honored to share this night with you all because we are formally announcing our engagement!"

Elizabeth smiled holding out her hand to show off her ring with a rather large diamond. Around her the crowd clapped offering congratulations but Marcus couldn't move.

What? Since when?

His gaze scanned the crowd and their excited expressions. Beside Elizabeth was his own mother looking like a proud peacock. Were they in this together? And his grandfather...

Marcus found him on the edge of the crowd with a curious expression on his face, almost a scowl. So he didn't know about this. Yet he also wasn't protesting it either. Why? Was he waiting for something?

His grandfather's gaze found him. They stared at each other for a long, measured moment. Marcus felt as if his grandfather was trying to tell him something but the meaning eluded him. Something else caught his eye. Standing in the doorway to the kitchen was the woman who had haunted his dreams for so long. Had she heard the announcement too? How was he supposed to explain this to her?

His gaze drifted back across the crowd now turning their attention to him ready to extend congratulations to him. They were like leeches. Finally his eyes fell on Elizabeth again. She stood tall and proud among the others. She dared to smile at him but he only hardened his expression to a disgusted scowl. Without a word he turned and walked away. As far as he was concerned this party was over.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the once jovial crowd. Elizabeth's normal impeccable façade cracked but she struggled not to show it. They both knew this day was coming. What was his problem?

"Miles," Cybil hissed, "aren't you going to do anything?"

Miles Avery coolly stared at his daughter-in-law. His gaze was inscrutable and gave nothing away, "And what would you like me to do?"

"Go and drag Marcus back here," Cybil said. "Can you imagine how embarrassed Elizabeth must feel right now?"

"I think his reaction is quite reasonable," Miles said. "Did you even discuss this with him before you decided to make this announcement?"

"He's known this day was coming," Cybil said trying to keep her voice low as the confused guests milled about. "He is thirty-two years old. It's time he stopped acting like a child and took his place as the family heir."

"I quite agree. That is why I sent him away in the first place."

"Well bring him back here. He just abandoned Elizabeth! That's not a proper way to treat one's partner."

"They aren't partners," Miles countered. "In fact they couldn't be further apart. He isn't going to be anyone's puppet anymore. You'll have to find a new hobby."

"Y-you old bat. He's my son."

"Then I suggest you start treating him like one."

* * *

22 March

New York Times

They Are Engaged! Or not...

Tonight the Avery family threw a welcome home party for their prodigal heir, Marcus who has been away for the last five years. According to the Avery patriarch, Miles, Marcus has been studying to take over his position on the Board of Directors of the Avery Medical Foundation. Marcus Avery's fitness for such a role has been debated for years and many are nervous just how the drunk and womanizer will do when placed in charge of hospitals and advance medical research facilities.

Contrary to speculation Marcus Avery was calm throughout the party nursing a single glass of champagne and showing no signs of reverting to his often boisterous drunken persona. The night came to a sudden close when Elizabeth Quenn, long-time friend of the family, and Marcus's childhood sweetheart decided to end speculation about their relationship by declaring they were engaged.

The news seemed to come as a shock to Marcus who walked off without a word. When asked about the engagement spokesman for the family and the Avery patriarch, Miles, simply said, "I think my grandson's reaction says it all."

No social announcements have been made leaving all of New York society to wonder, are they engaged?