

## Chapter Eleven

"Marcus can we just sit and talk?" Elizabeth whined trailing him as he hurriedly marched down the hall. "Marcus!"

"Talk?" he suddenly whirled around to face her. "If you wanted to talk you should have done that before you made that ludicrous announcement last night. Where was the discussion about that?!"

"Really, I don't see the problem. You knew this day was coming. I mean, I think I've been very patient."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you've certainly made quite a spectacle of yourself over the years with all those—women—you've been with. Do you have any idea the damage you've done to the family's reputation? A marriage is just the thing to wipe the slate clean and start fresh."

"Is that so?" Marcus snorted. "And what family reputation are you concerned about exactly? You're not an Avery. Not now. Not ever."

Elizabeth opened her mouth to protest but he wasn't done.

"I never agreed to marry you. And I still don't. Good luck having a wedding without a groom," he turned away from her hurrying to the garage where all the family vehicles were stored including his personal ones.

"Our marriage was planned a long time ago," she said as she caught up to him just as he reached his Porsche. "We are not done talking about this."

"Yes, we are." Marcus scowled starting up his long neglected car and oored it as soon as the garage door was high enough to permit him to exit.

He left her fuming but he didn't care. With any luck the wrinkles would permanently etch themselves into her forehead but with all the botox she did it probably wouldn't stick. The Porsche quickly picked up speed and he let his mind go numb.

He and Ethan used to race their cars along these sleepy back roads all the time. Marcus knew every curve, every turn. It was the perfect place to simply let his mind go blank as the Porsche rapidly climbed into the triple digits.

Flashing lights and a siren brought him back to the present. With a sigh he let off the accelerator and brought the vehicle to a stop. Marcus frowned glancing around to realize he had actually gone further than he realized. How long had he zoned out?

A tap on the window reminded him of why he had pulled over in the first place. Reluctantly he rolled the window down to see a familiar visage. The other on the other side seemed equally surprised when they recognized him.

"Hi, Kris."

"Marcus Avery. It's been awhile. I didn't realize you were back. It's been quiet without you and the racing squad around."

"I can imagine. Not many vehicles come out this way."

In addition to his own family's estate there were three others down the same road including the Worthingtons. If one was not visiting them there was little reason for anyone to use this route.

"Well, drive safe and do me a favor...keep it under seventy," the other chuckled before walking back to his vehicle.

"Yeah," Marcus sighed. This wasn't Germany after all.

Starting the Porsche back up, he cautiously pulled away and drove on this time minding the speedometer. It wouldn't do to get a traffic ticket his first full day back. Still needing to blow off steam he headed into the city and one of his old haunts. At least there he could sit and drink in peace.

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"Well, speak of the devil and he will appear."

The familiar voice stirred Marcus from his thoughts. Looking up he saw Leonard Jensen taking a seat beside him. Only a year older than Marcus the pair had become fast friends bonding over alcohol and women as well as the pressures of a prominent family. With brown hair and eyes and practically the same build they could almost be twins if not for the hawk-like prole of Leonard's prominent features.

"How have you been, Leo?" Marcus asked as the other settled on the barstool beside him.

Leonard gave the bartender a nod and the server immediately prepared his usual. Turning back to Marcus he said, "Oh, about the same. Without you, Ethan and Liam though it's gotten rather boring around here."

"Where are those two anyway?" Marcus asked. When he first arrived at the hotel's lounge area he was surprised by all the new faces. Aside from the bartender he really didn't know anyone.

Leonard rolled his eyes, "Oh, they are family men now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, you know Nicolas nally found the woman he was looking for and got married."

"Right," Marcus nodded.

For ve years the youngest Worthington sibling had been a laughing stock because he stubbornly refused to give up the search for a woman he had a one-night-stand with. Marcus had been as surprised as everyone else when Nicolas actually succeeded in finding her. As if that wasn't enough of a shock her dark complexion and brazen attitude had socialites' heads spinning.

"Well, after you left they started popping out kids left and right. They have like three or four now."

"Okay."

"So apparently all the Worthington brothers decided to follow his example," Leonard said. "Cole has two. And both Ethan and Liam have two or three each. It's insane! As if the family wasn't big enough."

Marcus raised an eyebrow but didn't join Leonard's merriment. After spending extended time with Julius and his family Marcus was beginning to see the appeal of settling down and having a family. Like everyone else he had been surprised when Nicolas announced his engagement but there was no mistaking the look he had whenever he gazed upon Aubrey. It was the look of pure rapture and it was the same look Julius reserved for Macey.

In the past Marcus would never admit to being jealous of either but after ve years abroad he had no difficulties saying it now. He was jealous: jealous of the way their wives looked at their husbands, jealous of how their kids clung to them, jealous at how their lives seemed so complete and full while his was empty and wanting.

So Ethan and Liam each had kids.

It seemed he was falling behind even further. All the women he had been with not one of them stirred him with need. Their gazes weren't adoring. They were greedy and ambitious. None of them wanted Marcus for himself. All they cared about was what he could give them: luxury, jewels, prestige, money. That was all he was to them, a gloried ATM. Was it any wonder he treated them with an equal amount of callousness? They really shouldn't expect more from him.

An image of his dark beauty intruded. There was something different about her he couldn't put a finger on. She hadn't clung to him wanting empty promises. They had indulged in each other and then she vanished taking nothing but a memory. Why? Had it really been a mistake?

The questions haunted him even now. Last night he thought he nally had the opportunity to get answers but she acted as though she didn't remember him at all. Was she that good of an actress? Why deny their interaction unless it meant nothing to her? Was one night all she wanted?

"...Hey! Earth to Marcus. Snap out of it."

Marcus blinked and shook his head, "Sorry. My mind is preoccupied."

"Well, if your mind is preoccupied maybe we should occupy the rest of us too," Leonard joked.

"I don't really feel like it."

"Oh, come on. Let's play that game we always used to and pick out a woman for each other to charm. You first."

Marcus rolled his eyes. He recalled the game easily. At the first bar of the night they would each pick out a woman for the other to seduce. Since most women recognized them it wasn't much of a competition so they added challenges to keep it interesting: like who got to certain bases the fastest. The idea of it now left a sour taste in Marcus's mouth.

"Come on, let's do it," Leonard prodded. "For old time's sake."

"Fine," Marcus sighed. "That one. Brown hair."

Leonard followed his gaze and grimaced as he looked over the small group of college girls. Marcus knew he favored blondes but the idea of the game was to make it a challenge and the girl he pointed out was still young like Leonard preferred.

"Are you out of your mind?" Leonard exclaimed surprising him. "I'm not going anywhere near that."

"Why not?"

"Don't you know who that is?" Leonard scoffed. "That's Alexis Prescott."

Marcus's brow shot up and he turned his gaze to study the young lady more closely. She was average height with a mane of straight brown hair that nearly reached the middle of her back. Her clothing was modest: a simple black dress with wide shoulder straps. They were too far away to be certain whether her eyes were green but she certainly did bear a striking resemblance to Avalynn now that he was really looking at her.

But wow! When did she grow up?

"She is untouchable," Leonard declared. "No one in their right mind would get within twenty feet of her."

Marcus nodded. It was no secret that Silas Prescott adored his children especially his daughters. They were all considered American royalty. Approaching the Prescott Princess was certainly an invitation to incur Silas's wrath.

While he mulled over these thoughts a young man approached the group quietly only to dive a finger into Alexis's side causing her to squeal in surprise. Spinning around to face her harasser she suddenly broke into a wide grin and immediately embraced him. Marcus watched with a note of confusion studying the rather unimpressive man. The young man was tall, a little on the lanky side, with a mop of black hair.

His confusion was not unfounded as he knew Caden DaLair and Alexis Prescott had been the objects of speculation for years despite the fact neither of their families made a formal announcement. Though he had never asked Julius directly Marcus had a sense that Julius would never pressure his children into a marriage they did not want and he knew Silas must feel the same way. Whether or not their families ever merged depended on the kids themselves.

"Who is that?" Marcus suddenly asked.

"One of her brothers: Teddy or...whatever the other one's name is," Leonard shrugged. "I can never keep them straight."

Marcus nodded. That made sense and looking again the man did bear a close resemblance to Silas, enough to be a younger brother or son.

"Well, if you don't want to play let's head out to a club," Leonard said.

"Club? I don't really feel like it."

"Hey, this is a new one. You'll love it. Promise."

Marcus gave Leonard a wary glance.

"Would I lie?"

It was going to be a long night.