

Chapter Seven

Lugging his due bag to the kitchen he set it on the counter and retrieved the cat's breakfast, dumping the canned meat into its bowl. Sancho rubbed against his legs before settling in front of its meal. Chuckling, Nicolas knelt to pet the cat saying, "See you later, little man. Marion will give you your dinner."

Normally his housekeeper only came in once a week but whenever he had to go to the family estate he arranged for her to come twice-daily to feed Sancho. Luckily she loved cats so she didn't seem to mind. Unfortunately the affection wasn't mutual and Sancho avoided her coming out to eat only after she left. So far he was the only one the feline liked which was good enough.

With a sigh of resignation Nicolas grabbed his bag and headed out. He was not looking forward to a weekend with his siblings. Maybe he could sneak away after his father made his announcement.

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Nicolas sat in one of the chairs. Around the coffee table his three sisters and three brothers had dispersed themselves in the other furniture. In order starting with his eldest brother they were Cole, Bernice, Ethan, Liam, Charlotte and Ronni. While he got along well enough with his sisters enduring the bullying of his brothers left a rift between them none tried to cross.

Even now he generally gave all of them a wide berth. They said he was being overly sensitive but he was the one who endured noogies, games of hide and never seek, and cry babies to the back of the line for years before he nally learned never to trust any of them. Cole at least never bullied him but he also didn't try to stop the harassment.

What made it worse was his father's lack of concern. Donovan lived by a simple rule: survival of the fittest. Everything was a competition and if you didn't want to end up in last place playing dirty was totally acceptable. That same philosophy informed how he raised his boys which also meant the youngest suffered simply by being smaller and lacking allies. If he cried to his father about the unfairness of it, his father's answer was simple: life wasn't fair. Toughen up. Real men don't cry.

Was it any wonder he hated coming home?

He avoided it whenever he could even skipping holidays when he could nd a reasonable excuse but this was an ocial summons not unlike the one a year ago.

Last year his father announced it was time to turn over the company to one of them. In order to ensure the company ended up in the best hands he proposed a competition. Each one who wanted to enter would be given start-up funds, a small staff and control of a branch location. After ve years they would compare their clientele list and prots to prove who had been the most successful.

Bernice, Charlotte and Ronni abdicated citing their lack of interest in the family business and wanting to chase other interests. Bernice was nishing up her internship as a doctor. Charlotte was pursuing fashion and Ronni was attending culinary school in hopes of following in her hero's, Avalynn Prescott, footsteps. They were the lucky ones.

Unlike the DaLairs, Prescotts and Stantons, the Worthington's fortune revolved around a single industry: gems and jewelry. Worthington Gems was synonymous with ne quality gems and jewelry and their competition centered on who could sell the most. Part of their staff included two of Worthington's exclusive craftsmen to create pieces of jewelry to market and sell.

If he could have bowed out like his sisters he would have without hesitation. Unfortunately he didn't have an excuse his father would accept. So he was stuck until the winner was decided.

Even though Nicolas didn't care about the competition he did take his duty seriously. His father gave him a branch store so he ran it with the best of his ability and knowledge. While his brothers focused on elaborate statement pieces to appeal to high society he focused on smaller pieces that were affordable to a wider range of clients. Though the pieces he sold were cheaper, they sold at a much higher rate and were backed by Worthington craftsmanship.

But that wasn't to say he didn't catch the eye of high-end clients. Right when he rst opened none other than Silas Prescott entered looking for a gift for his ancée. Nicolas wasn't sure what was more surprising that the notorious bachelor was engaged or that he was shopping for a woman.

Apparently he had already visited his brothers' shops and hadn't found anything to suit his tastes. Nicolas didn't have much hope given the kinds of jewelry available at his but surprisingly Silas's gaze settled on a new design his craftsman had come up with. It had a small diamond in an innity shape using hearts. Silas requested a slightly larger gem but otherwise loved the design adding a considerable bonus for the trouble of his request.

Since Avalynn practically wore it to every event it rapidly became a bestseller so much so that his father started offering it at the main branch just to keep up with demand. As far as he knew none of his brothers had achieved a similar success which placed him well ahead as far as the competition was concerned and the rift between him and them widened as the need to win stirred in the others.

"Good, you are all here."

Nicolas looked up as his father and mother entered. Donovan and Liane Worthington had long enjoyed upstanding reputations among society's elite as an elegant and dignied couple. Society would probably nd it rather amusing that when it came to their home life they were just as prim and proper.

As far as he could remember his mother never let her hair down and his father never wore less than a three-piece suit every day of his life. This mentality was passed down to their children especially the eldest ones although it had become more lax by the seventh. As a result Cole and Bernice often appeared at these gatherings in formal wear while Nicolas relaxed in a pullover and trousers.

Behind them Royce Worthington entered seated in his wheelchair pushed by his long-standing butler, Ezra. The old man was rail thin. His eyes though still sharp were sunken in with age and his once thick hair was thin and wispy though still mostly there. He sat leaning forward, almost folded in on himself. Not looking at any of them he seemed oblivious though Nicolas knew he saw everything.

"Well it's been a little over a year since we started this competition," Donovan said. "Nicolas has taken an unexpected early lead so it is a good time to up the ante."

Nicolas sighed. It was as he expected. Their father was doing his best to stir their competitive spirit and putting a target square on Nicolas's back. Glancing at his brothers he saw them on the edges of their seats eager for the new challenge.

"It is not only important for the head of a company to make good nancial decisions but also good personal decisions. That is why you must all get married and prove yourselves capable of carrying on the family legacy," their father announced. "And you must do so before the ve-year deadline is up."

Nicolas stared at his father stealing a glance at his mother. He couldn't be serious. They only had a little less than four years left of this competition. How was that enough time to nd a person you cared about enough to want to marry them let alone start a family?

Nicolas looked at his brothers to see they had similar incredulous expressions. Of the four of them Cole was the only one currently in a relationship. Ethan and Liam never seemed to go out with the same women twice so it was hard to say if any woman would be willing to say yes. He could tell his brothers were doing the math as well.

"Are there any special rules?" Cole asked always the most pragmatic.

"As for whom you marry?" Donovan asked. "No. Though I suggest you choose carefully as your wife is your partner. She can support you as well as aid you with her connections. The only rule is that your grandfather must give his approval. He will interview them and prepare prenuptial agreements based on his impressions."

Nicolas looked at his grandfather. Earlier the old man seemed unfocused and half-asleep. Now he stared at them with keen eyes. He never knew what was going on in his grandfather's mind and not for the rst time Nicolas wondered exactly what the old man thought of this whole competition.

"I'm glad we bowed out of this from the beginning," Charlotte said sharing looks with their sisters.

"So...what you are saying is they have to be real," Ethan said his gaze sliding to Nicolas.

"Right," Liam snickered, "imaginary ones don't count."

Nicolas met their gazes with a steady, neutral expression. He learned long ago never to show emotion because it only egged them on. Maintaining silence he looked away not bothering to seek support from his other siblings. All of them thought he was either crazy to be searching for a mystery woman or that he had made up the whole story. But he knew she was real.

She was real and somehow he would nd her competition or no competition.