



Chapter 16

My heart stopped.

My thumb froze over the keys.

I looked up.

Dominic was walking toward the podium.

He was in black. A suit that did not look like anyone else's suit in the room, cut for him, on him, the way water is cut for a fish. And at his throat, knotted clean and deliberate, a tie in a red that I knew. 1 2

It matched my dress.

To the shade.

My mouth came open and nothing came out of it. 1

He took the stage like he had built it. He let the applause wash up at him and he did not smile at it, did not need it, just waited for it to settle the way you wait for a noise to stop. 2

"Good evening," he said. "I am Dominic Ford. Chairman of Veil Holdings."
"

The room came apart with sound. 1

Dominic Ford. The Veil chairman. The richest man in the country and one of the richest in the world. The ghost nobody had ever photographed, standing thirty feet from me in a tie that matched my dress.

The Dominic I had let into my bed.

The Dominic I had cried in front of in a rainstorm.

The Dominic I had thought was a man with a desk and a salary and a quiet

life, who I had felt almost sorry for, who I had decided to keep around for the way he made me feel and the small revenge he could help me take. 2

That Dominic.

How?

How was this real? 1

He kept talking and I stopped hearing it. The words slid past me. I was looking at his hands. He gestured when he spoke, slow, certain, the same hands that had held my hips hard enough to leave marks I had found in the mirror and pressed my thumb into just to feel them. I stood in a crowd of the richest people in the country and thought about exactly what those hands had done to me and felt my face go hot. 1

Then one phrase reached through. 1

"...Helix Research Laboratory." 1

I came back into my body.

"Helix Research," Dominic said, "is the first recipient of the Veil Holdings Foundation grant. Five billion dollars. Veil will be partnering with Helix to bring their work to hundreds of thousands of women. In time, millions." 4

The room inhaled. 2

Five billion. Helix. My Helix. The little lab I had kept barely breathing through my marriage, the work Julian had asked me so sweetly to give up, the thing I had let shrink to almost nothing because a loving husband wanted his wife at home. 3

People were whispering now, hungry, asking each other who owned it, who the lucky ones were, who Helix belonged to.

No. I was dreaming. I had to be. This was a dream and I was about to wake



up in that too soft bed and reach for him.

Dominic's voice came again, clear over all of it.

"I would like to invite the representative of Helix Research to join me on this stage. Helix's lead research scientist. Celeste." 6

The spotlight moved.

It found me like it had been waiting for me the whole time, like someone backstage had a sheet of paper with my exact position on the floor, and it swung across the room and stopped on me and the whole party turned with it. 2

Hundreds of faces. Cameras lifting. Phones going up. A reporter near the front already firing off shots, the little white flashes stuttering across my skin.

I stood there in the red dress he had sent me, in the spotlight he had aimed at me, in front of the husband who had not yet realized the woman everyone was staring at was his wife. 4

My heart slammed against my ribs. 4

I looked up at the stage.

Dominic was already looking at me.

And when our eyes met, across the whole shocked silent room, the corner of his mouth went up. 1

He smirked. 12

