



Chapter 17

CELESTE

My legs felt like lead.

I made myself walk. One foot, then the other, across a floor that had gone silent and a spotlight that would not let go of me. The whole room watched. I had never been looked at by this many people in my life and the weight of it pressed on my chest like a hand.

Do not fall, I told myself. Whatever you do, do not fall before you reach him.

I reached the foot of the stage.

Dominic put out his hand.

I looked at it. And then I put mine in it and let him draw me up the steps, like he had done it a hundred times in his head before he did it here.

The applause started ringing when I climbed the podium, a hollow sound coming from somewhere far away. My hands found the edges and gripped. The wood was cold under my palms. The red dress, bare at the shoulders, the neckline dipping just enough to be a dare, the slit running up my thigh almost to my hip, felt like a costume I just finally understood.

Dominic stood beside me.

Dominic. The chairman of the largest company in the country.

My lab. My small, underfunded, overlooked lab. He had chosen it. Five billion dollars. And I had found out the same way the room had, with the spotlights blinding me and hundreds of faces turned up at the two of us.



I was still trying to make my mind catch up to my body when a voice cut up out of the crowd.

"Celeste?"

I knew that voice the way you know a sound you have stopped wanting to hear. I found him in the crowd. He had finally seen me. His face had gone through three expressions in two seconds and landed on none of them.

"Celeste."

Julian. Confusion and something darker fighting in his eyes. He started pushing toward the stage, through the clusters of suits and glittering gowns. 1

He did not get far.

Bodies moved out of the dark at the edges of the platform. Men in black who had clearly been standing there the whole time, waiting to be needed. They stepped into Julian's path without hurry and without apology, and the message was plain. No one came up here who was not called. And Julian had not been called. 4

I watched my husband stopped by a wall of shoulders, his mouth still shaping my name.

Then a hand closed around mine. Warm. Sure. Familiar in a way it had no right to be after only a handful of hours of secrecy. 2

I turned. Dominic's eyes were locked on me. He did not say a word. He turned and he walked, and he took me with him, off the back of the stage, away from the lights, and my heart went so fast I could feel it in my throat. The adrenaline came up under everything else and made the room blur. 3



I kept my eyes on him. The back of his head. The line of his shoulders in that black suit. The red tie. The applause faded into a murmur and I did not hear it. I heard only the blood in my ears and the click of my heels as he led me past the curtains, down a hallway I had not noticed. 2

I did not look back at Julian.

People stared. Their faces blurred past. But his grip did not loosen. 3

He stopped at a plain black door at the end of the hall. He pressed his thumb to a panel. It clicked open. 1

He pulled me inside and locked it behind us. 1

The walls were glass.

All of them. Floor to ceiling. I could see the whole party out there, the lights, the moving bodies, a waiter with a tray, and somewhere in it the two people who had spent six months making a fool of me. 4



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