

DANIELLE STEEL

Ruthless

A Novel



By Danielle Steel

RUTHLESS • THE TRUE MEANING OF LOVE • WEDDINGS • A WOMAN'S PLACE •
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DANIELLE
STEEL

Ruthless

A Novel



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To my greatly loved children,
Beatrix, Trevor, Todd, Nick, Samantha,
Victoria, Vanessa, Maxx, and Zara,

May you be blessed every minute of your lives,
Happy, protected, safe, loved,
with kind people who love you all around you.

May you be a blessing to others,
and may you have full, happy, productive lives.
And stay away from sociopaths!

With my greatest love for you,
and all my heart and soul,

Mom / d.s.

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ruthless: having no pity: merciless, cruel.

—MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY

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Chapter 1

John Randall Williams sat looking out the window of the conference room, on the forty-eighth floor of his office in New York. The men in the room were silent for a moment, waiting for him to speak. They were the senior employees of his company. John was a tall, handsome, powerfully built man, with broad shoulders, a mane of white hair, ice-blue eyes, and a stern expression. He had played football at Harvard, and was still in remarkable shape at sixty-six.

There were ten of his top men at the conference table with him. They had been wrestling with negotiations for a company he had wanted to buy for the past three months, and he had to make a decision about whether or not to go in for the kill now. He was known for his tough positions and relentless pursuit of what he wanted, without mercy. He owned container ships all over the world, and this was a line he had wanted to buy for years, for their fleet of vessels that suited his needs. The deal appealed to him because the owners were operating from weakness. It was a family-owned operation, and the three sons who had inherited it from their father were losing ground daily, and John knew it. He had made them a low offer and continued to drive the price down while they procrastinated. Behind his back, people said John was a man without mercy, without a heart. To his face no one contradicted him, they didn't dare. But in spite of his toughness

in business, he had incredible charisma, along with his good looks. He was charming when he wanted to be, if it served his purpose. Or as cold and immovable as a glacier, if he preferred.

He had inherited his shipping line. His great-grandfather, Arthur Williams, had owned passenger ships, elegant ones that had been the luxury liners of their day. John's father, James Williams, had converted them to cargo ships and made them infinitely more profitable. John's father had died young, and when he inherited the line, John had taken their fleet in hand, modernized it to state of the art, and had the most lucrative cargo ships anywhere in the world. He had turned distinguished old money into vast quantities of new money, and he shamelessly put his competitors out of business whenever it suited his purposes. He was about to do it again. The ships he wanted to buy would be put into dry dock and renovated. The men currently working on them would all lose their jobs, and his fleet would have grown again. The current owners knew how John Williams operated, and felt a responsibility to the men who had worked for them faithfully for years. But none of the three brothers who owned the line now wanted the headaches that went with the business, such as dock strikes and dangerous waters. They had lost two ships to pirates in the last year, and another had sunk in a hurricane, with loss of life among those onboard. Two of the brothers were past retirement age, and the youngest had never liked the business they were in. They wanted out but not at Williams's prices, and were concerned about what he would do with their faithful employees. But their losses had been too great and they knew they had to sell. It just pained them to agree to the slaughter they knew Williams would make of it. It was what he did. Some said he enjoyed it. He had a checkered reputation, and some fans, who also fell prey to his charms. Mostly women. But some men were impressed by how tough and what an astute businessman he was.

The men seated around the conference table were waiting for his final offer. It was a fine art figuring out just how low he could go, and naming a price he knew the sellers would accept this time. He was brilliant at it, and had been doing it for all thirty years he had run the company. No one denied that he was a hard man, but an incredibly smart one. He had an instinct for

business like few others. He was bold and never afraid to take a risk. When people thought he would lose, he came out of the shadows with unbeatable strength and always won. He seldom made mistakes and had had few losses in the course of his career. And very few of his allies or adversaries dared to stand up to him. In fact, none.

There was only one person who knew the softer side of John Williams, and was his source of comfort in a harsh world. His wife, Helen, had been the gentlest person he'd ever known. She knew what he was thinking and feeling without his ever saying a word. Only she understood how much it pained him at times to destroy another man's business or nearly steal his ships from him. If John had a conscience, he hid it well. Helen gave him strength in his rare weak moments. Their daughter, Gabrielle, would inherit his shipping empire one day, and had no interest in how it worked. She had gone into medicine instead.

Helen saw all John's strengths and loved him with his weaknesses, and even his flaws. She had loved him unconditionally, a rare thing in life. He shone like a bright star in her eyes. Gabby, their only child, saw only the sins he committed, and never forgave him for them, or forgot them. She hated what he did and how he did it. She had gone to college in the West at Stanford, went to medical school there, and did her residency and settled in Aspen, Colorado. She was an orthopedic surgeon, and was said to be one of the best knee surgeons in the West. Aspen was a ski community, and she had plenty of business in the winter, and people came from all over the country to be operated on by her all year long. Helen had been the bridge over troubled waters between them, and she had been good at it. Gabby and her father needed an interpreter to speak to each other. The chasm between them was almost unbridgeable now. Gabby had loved and admired him when she was a child, but not now as an adult. As an adult she loathed what he did. It was painful to watch when he moved in for the kill. And so predictable.

Her mother, John's beloved wife, had died nine months before of breast cancer. They had tried everything, even experimental treatments at Mass General and Stanford, and the Anderson Center in Texas, but they had

discovered it too late. John was inconsolable when she died, but he didn't let it show at the office. As far as everyone could see, nothing had changed. He was as tough and merciless as ever, maybe even slightly more so. He had cried himself to sleep every night for six months, and for the past three months, he had been slowly learning to live with the loss. His nights were a deep, dark abyss now, and he slept only briefly, in the early morning hours. The lines in his face were more sharply etched, his deep blue eyes pools of pain.

Gabby had never believed that her father loved her, and could see no evidence of it in his behavior toward her. He had never been around when she was growing up, always at the office. He had demanded excellence of her for her entire life, was easily critical of her, rarely praised her accomplishments, and always raised the bar higher. She kept her distance from him now for her own sanity. She firmly believed that her father was capable of loving only her mother, and no one else. No matter how much he loved his daughter, and Helen knew he did, he could never find the right ways to show her. Their relationship as father and daughter required a language that neither had ever learned how to speak, and Helen's absence for the past nine months was sorely felt by both of them. Gabby missed her mother as much as her father did, but they were unable to express their feelings to each other. Gabby's brash, outspoken criticism of John only made him colder with her. His famous harshness destroyed any sympathy and compassion she might have had for him.

Their mourning for the past nine months had been a lonely place for both of them. Gabby hadn't come home since the funeral, and only called infrequently, when she felt she had to. She took days to return his calls, and they had nothing to say to each other. She had told him she wasn't coming home for Thanksgiving or Christmas. Helen had always made the holidays warm for all of them, but there was no one to do that now. Gabby had decided to stay in Aspen and work through the holidays, which was her busiest season, due to skiing accidents. And John had decided to spend the holidays alone. He didn't want to spend them with anyone else. He knew that if Gabby came home, it would just end in an argument, so he didn't try

to convince her. His not doing so confirmed to her what she already believed and had all her life, that he didn't love her. He loved only his wife and himself, as Gabby always said. She saw him as a cold, selfish man.

He had accepted just one dinner invitation before the holidays, because the hostess flatly refused to let him off the hook. The invitation was from their dear friend Isabelle Phillips, Gabby's godmother. She had been widowed herself for the past ten years, and had one daughter, Angela, who lived in Los Angeles and was married to the head of a TV network. They had four children Isabelle adored. She had called Gabby, her godchild, to beg her to come home for Christmas, and she had flatly refused, although she loved her godmother.

"Dad and I will kill each other without Mom there," she had said. Isabelle knew it was true but thought Gabby should try anyway. Helen would have wanted her to. "There's no point, Aunt Iz. We have nothing to say to each other. He said he's going to the boat, which I hate anyway." John had a splendid sailboat, which he and Helen had loved spending time on. He kept it in the Caribbean in the winter, and the Mediterranean in summer. Gabby had suffered from seasickness all her life, which irritated him beyond words. He always believed she was faking it so she didn't have to go. "He'll be happy on the boat," Gabby said coldly.

"He's not happy anywhere right now, any more than you are, and this will be your first Christmas without your mother. Don't underestimate how hard that will be for both of you."

Isabelle was a kind, intelligent, warm, very attractive woman. She had run a successful ad agency with her husband, Steve, for years, and had retired and sold the agency five years before, when she turned sixty. She flew to Los Angeles regularly to see her daughter and grandchildren. She led a full life, entertained a great deal, was on the boards of Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Opera. She liked surrounding herself with young people and invited them to her dinner parties, since her only daughter lived far away.

Angela, her daughter, was the same age as Gabby. They were thirty-six years old, and had been best friends all their lives. They were both only

children, and were like sisters. Angela had married soon after college and was happily married. Gabby hadn't married yet. Her medical studies had taken up all her time, and now her practice as an orthopedic surgeon did. Helen worried that she would never marry. Gabby's worst nightmare was marrying a man like her father, since she saw none of his virtues and only his flaws. She thought he was a coldhearted, controlling monster, a destroyer of men, and only interested in money. She believed that he took pleasure in hurting people, crushing them to prove his strength. She told him to his face that he was a narcissist, which didn't sit well with him. It was partly true. It was the reputation he had, and he had a strong ego. But there were virtues that offset it, which Helen saw and his daughter didn't. He was a strong, deeply philanthropic man and a wonderful loving husband, and he loved his daughter too, although he admitted that he had expected a lot of Gabby. She had lived up to all his dreams for her. He had never expected her to come into his business, and didn't ask it of her. Shipping was a man's world, and she was an excellent, dedicated doctor.

When Isabelle called John to invite him to her annual pre-Christmas dinner party, she knew he would decline, and she refused to let him.

"You can't sit home by yourself all through Christmas," she told him kindly. "Helen wouldn't have wanted that. In fact, she told me so herself, and I promised I wouldn't let you. You're coming to dinner. You'll know almost everyone there, except for a few young new add-ons, and you don't have to talk to them if you don't want to. You can sit next to me. But you're coming, like it or not, and that's it. I'll come and drag you out myself if I have to," she said in her cheerful, upbeat voice that reminded him of Helen, who was always his antidote to sadness, and Isabelle was a good stand-in for the role. She cared about him as her dearest friend.

"I don't know where my dinner jacket is. Helen put it away somewhere and I can't find it," he said wistfully in a plaintive tone.

"I'm sure you haven't looked. I'll come over and look for it myself," Isabelle said firmly, and he smiled. Sometimes he felt as though Isabelle and Helen were twins. They even looked like each other. They were both tall, slim, elegant blondes with blue eyes. Isabelle was a bit more

extroverted and flamboyant than Helen, who had been quieter and more conservative, which suited John perfectly. And Isabelle's husband, Steve, had been a terrific guy. He owned the ad agency she worked for, and they fell in love and married. They were an amazing couple, as beautiful as they were happy. Isabelle had refused to give up living when Steve died. She had gone everywhere with John and Helen, and spent time on their boat with them. Unlike Gabby, she didn't get seasick, and she loved the boat and was their favorite, most enthusiastic guest. She knew when to keep to herself, and was festive and fun at meals, interested in a million things, and had a busy social life. She was fifty-five when she was widowed. She had dated a few times, but she never met anyone who even remotely compared to Steve, so she had decided to be a chic widow, continued to work for five years after his death, and then sold the agency so she could travel more and visit her daughter frequently. She traveled a lot after she retired, visiting friends all over the world. "So we agree then," she said about her dinner party, although he hadn't agreed at all. "I'll send you a reminder, and if you need help finding your dinner jacket, call me." She was sure it would hang on him since he had lost a great deal of weight after Helen died, but he was still a very handsome man, and until his wife's death, he hadn't looked his age. He had aged visibly since then. But he was still a powerhouse with boundless energy. He stayed in shape and played golf and tennis regularly.

Helen and Isabelle had played tennis every week too. The two couples had been a wonderful, handsome foursome, and Isabelle was sure that John would come back to life again. He had too much life in him not to. It would just take time. In the meantime, she knew he had a full schedule at the office to keep him occupied.

John had thrown himself body and soul into his business all of his life, and at times had sacrificed his personal and family life for it, which Helen understood and Gabby reproached him for vividly. In her memory, he had never been home, was always working or flying around the world to check on his fleet in person. He hadn't come to any of her school events when she was a child. Helen covered all the bases, operating as mother and father when she had to. She didn't work herself, so she was always around for

Gabby, more than John was, but he had been around more than Gabby admitted or remembered. It was true that he loved his business and was passionate about it, but Gabby considered him an absentee father for anything that had mattered in her life. In her eyes, he had shown up for her graduations from college and medical school and not much else. Helen had made excuses for him, but the fact was that he ran an empire and didn't have time to go to school plays or birthday parties. Men like John just didn't do that. He was a titan in a world of industrial giants, and he was the biggest of all.

After they hung up, John smiled, thinking of Isabelle, and he knew that Helen would have been pleased that he was going to her party. He had grumbled about it even when she was alive. Dinner parties always seemed like such a waste of time to him, with ambitious people trying to climb the social ladder, and talking about nothing. John was happiest in his office, negotiating, and acquiring new ships at the price he had forced the previous owners to accept in negotiation under duress. Every win proved to him that he was the most powerful man in the industry. He always had to be the biggest and the best. He couldn't tolerate losing and rarely did.

—

John looked at the faces around the conference table, waiting for an answer from him. With John, it was often hard to guess what that answer would be. He liked to surprise his adversaries and his colleagues. He was inscrutable as he looked at them, reached for a paper in front of him, and signed it. It was his final offer letter. He filled in the blank with an amount. It was a proposal that would break the owners' hearts, but they had no choice. They had taken too long to decide. They needed the money, and he knew it. They were desperate by then. From his standpoint, the negotiation had been a victory. He was buying seventeen ships in mediocre condition, and would be refitting them completely as container ships. He was getting what he wanted for much less than he had expected to pay.

“Let’s do it,” he said, set the pen down and stood up, and broke into a smile. “That’s my final offer. They’ll take it, they have no other choice now. They’ll be bankrupt if they don’t and their employees will blame them. If they take my offer, they can blame me. I don’t mind at all.” He walked out of the conference room then and back to his office, with his back straight and the stride of a winner. He left the others to break the news to the owners he was buying from. They were closing the deal for less money than they had hoped for, and all of their employees would be out of work, as the ships would head for dry dock. There would be hundreds of men out of jobs this Christmas, but it couldn’t be helped. John Williams always got the deals he wanted. He was a fearless negotiator, and it always paid off. He led a charmed life. He had always felt that way, except for the last nine months, since he had lost Helen. Even victory no longer tasted as sweet without her. And he took it as a personal failure, a mortal blow, that he hadn’t been able to save her. He would never forgive himself for it.

The night before Isabelle’s dinner party John found his dinner jacket, and everything that went with it. Isabelle’s guess had been correct, it was several sizes too large now, as he had lost a great deal of weight since his wife died. The night of the party, he sat down in a chair in his bedroom, laced his black patent leather shoes, and stood up to look in the mirror when he tied his black satin bow tie. Helen had always done it for him when they went to formal dinners and events, and he couldn’t get it as perfect as she did. It was slightly crooked as he draped a white silk scarf around his neck and put on a black overcoat. He looked far more handsome than he realized. Part of his charm was that he didn’t realize how strikingly handsome he was, and didn’t care about his looks. He had been much more struck by Helen’s beauty than his own.

It felt strange to be all dressed up in black tie and going out alone for the first time. It made him feel lonelier than ever.

His driver, Sam, was waiting for him downstairs as he left his penthouse apartment in the Trump Tower on East Fifty-Sixth Street and Fifth Avenue. It was filled with all the art and books and things Helen had loved and they had collected together. John slipped into the backseat of his car. He exchanged a few words with Sam, and they drove uptown to Isabelle's spacious duplex apartment on Park Avenue, the same one where she had lived with Steve, and where their daughter had grown up. There was a strange *déjà vu* for John about the whole evening.

The apartment was already full of people when he walked in and gave one of the waiters his scarf and coat, and Isabelle came over quickly to greet him, kissed him on the cheek, and tucked a hand into his arm and walked him into the living room, where he saw a sea of familiar faces and was sorry he had come. Being there without Helen hit him like a wrecking ball for a moment and left him speechless. He hated knowing that everyone felt sorry for him now. It made him feel like a loser. He was a winner in everything else, but he had lost his wife, and most of the guests were there in couples, except him and Isabelle and a few others. He was the odd man out. Isabelle went to greet her other guests, and he helped himself to a glass from a silver tray and took a long swallow of champagne to bolster him.

He greeted a number of people he knew, and noticed a cluster of young people standing near the fireplace drinking champagne and martinis. They were a sophisticated-looking group, and he noticed that some of the girls were very pretty, and they all looked lively and happy, and stayed among themselves rather than mingling with the older guests, who outnumbered them. They were younger than Gabby and Angela. They looked to be somewhere in their twenties, at most thirty. Gabby was thirty-six and seemed much older. Isabelle's younger group looked like kids to him.

Isabelle checked on John regularly during the cocktail hour. He had found a small cluster of men he knew and played tennis with, which made him more comfortable. They were deep in conversation about politics, and he seemed engaged and happier than when he walked in. When they moved into the dining room, John saw that Isabelle had seated him next to herself at dinner, so she could keep an eye on him and cheer him up if he looked

sad to be at a gathering without his late wife. It was the first party he had been to without Helen in forty years, which was shocking when he thought about it, and he was trying not to. One of the men congratulated him on his purchase of the shipping line he had just bought, and John thanked him.

“I hear you made quite a killing on it. You always do,” his acquaintance said admiringly.

“The right opportunities turn up at the right time sometimes,” John said modestly. “They’ve been ready to sell for a while. They couldn’t run it without their father and they didn’t want to. So I stepped in at the opportune moment.” He didn’t admit that he’d been watching their downward spiral for months, ready to catch them as they fell.

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The guests had been invited for eight o’clock, and sat down to dinner at nine promptly. Isabelle ran a tight ship and entertained beautifully. The house was elegantly decorated for Christmas and looked very festive, with Christmas music on the sound system. The guests looked for their name cards at the dining table and sat down. John had the place of honor at Isabelle’s right, and was surprised when one of the young women sat down next to him on his other side and smiled at him. She had long, straight, dark brown hair and green eyes, and was wearing a very chic short black strapless cocktail dress. Some of the older women were wearing long gowns, but the young ones were all wearing short cocktail dresses. The young woman glanced at his place card.

“Hi, John, I’m Lillith,” she said. She was beautiful and it stunned him into silence for a moment, and then he greeted her appropriately and she turned to the good-looking young man seated on her other side, as Isabelle leaned toward John and whispered.

“I thought I’d give you someone pretty to look at, since you’re stuck with me for dinner,” she said, smiling at him. Isabelle was wearing a silver gown and looked beautiful. She had a perfect figure.

“Hardly. The poor thing must feel like she got stuck with her grandfather,” he whispered back, relieved she had someone young to talk to on her other side. It took the pressure off him to find something to say that she’d be interested in. She seemed very warm and friendly, as well as beautiful.

When Isabelle turned to the man on her left after the first course, John dutifully turned to the girl next to him, who had said her name was Lillith, and asked if she was going home for the holidays. It was all he could think of to say.

“Actually, no, I’m not.” He guessed her to be somewhere in her early twenties. “My parents are divorced, and this year our plans are a little sketchy. My father is going helicopter skiing in Canada with his girlfriend, and my mother is having a baby in L.A. with her new husband, twins actually, and it’s going to be crazy, so I’m staying in New York. I work at an interior design firm that does work for Isabelle, and she very kindly invited me tonight.”

“Are you a designer?” he asked her, feeling odd talking to someone so young. It felt like interviewing her for a job.

“Yes, I am. I went to Parsons, and I’m an interior designer, but I’m not senior enough at the firm to do Isabelle’s bigger work on my own.”

“Did you just graduate?” he asked her, and she laughed, and looked into his eyes. She had noticed how handsome he was.

“Thank you for the compliment. No, I graduated five years ago. I’m twenty-seven,” she said, as though it was a great age, and he was surprised. She was nine years younger than Gabby, but she looked even younger. But Gabby was very serious, didn’t do anything to enhance her looks, and rarely wore makeup. It shocked him when he realized that the girl he was talking to was thirty-nine years younger than he was. “And where are you spending the holidays?” she asked him. She kept it generic, since he wasn’t wearing a wedding ring and she didn’t know if he was married. He had only taken it

off recently, because it made him sad to wear it. It was a constant reminder of Helen.

“I’m going to St. Barth,” he said simply. He didn’t say on his yacht.

“I went there last year and I loved it,” she said, seeming bubbly and fun and easier to talk to than he had feared. The young man on her other side reclaimed her a few minutes later and John turned back to Isabelle.

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” she asked him, with a mischievous look.

“I nearly asked her how school was. She looks about twenty,” he said, still startled, but she seemed grown-up when he talked to her. She was poised, polite, bright, and upbeat.

“She’s a very talented designer, and a very nice girl. The poor thing has a screwed-up family and she’s going to be alone for Christmas, so I invited her tonight.” She was another of Isabelle’s charity cases, as he was, he realized.

“She must have about ten boyfriends.”

“I don’t think so. She works very hard.”

The rest of the dinner passed uneventfully, and after dinner someone sat down at the piano and they all gathered in the living room and sang Christmas carols. It was a bittersweet evening for John, and made him wish that Helen were there, or at least Gabby, and he had to go home alone. He didn’t want to be rude to Isabelle, so he stayed to the bitter end, and found himself at the coatrack with Lillith and helped her into her coat.

“Are you here by yourself?” he asked her, and she looked embarrassed.

“Yes, I am.”

“Can I give you a lift home? I have a driver downstairs.” He was just being friendly and felt fatherly toward her.

“It’s all right, I was going to call an Uber,” she said, as they got into the elevator together. Others were lingering to say goodbye to Isabelle, and John and Lillith already had.

“It’s too late for you to go home alone,” he said, as he would have to Gabby. She hesitated when they got to his car with the driver parked out front. He opened the door for her. “I won’t bite, I promise. I have a daughter

older than you,” and she suspected he was older than her father. She got into the car with him and asked him about Gabby. “She’s an orthopedic surgeon in Aspen, and a ski fanatic. She loves it there.” They talked about St. Barth then. Lillith lived in the East Eighties, and when they got to her building, she gave him a warm smile.

“Thank you for taking me home, that was nice of you. It’s always a little scary late at night,” she admitted. She seemed wistful and he thought of the father helicopter skiing and the mother having twins in L.A., and he remembered what Isabelle had said about her screwed-up family. There was something that seemed lonely and vulnerable about her, although she was beautiful, and he couldn’t imagine why she was alone. She got out and waved as she walked into her building, and Sam took John back downtown. He had enjoyed talking to Lillith at dinner and in the car. It took the sting out of going home alone to an empty, dark apartment.

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All the lights were off when he got home. He lit two lamps in the living room, took his coat off, and sat down and thought about the evening. It had been easier than he expected in some ways, and harder in others. He and Helen always talked about the parties they went to when they got home. She always said it was half the fun of it, and the silence in the apartment seemed like a sad way to end the evening. He thought of how beautiful Isabelle looked, and how much like Helen. They had similar styles, and liked many of the same designers.

Isabelle had taken good care of him all evening, and been very attentive. She was almost like a sister to him now. He wondered what it would be like to have a daughter like Lillith, bubbly and friendly, and cheerful in spite of what was obviously not an easy family situation. Gabby had been angry at John since her teens, and was always accusing him of something. Lillith didn’t seem bitter about her relationship with her parents, which surprised him. She said she had fallen through the cracks in the divorce, and seemed to accept it as inevitable, with a father who chased young women and a

mother with a new younger husband and now a high-risk pregnancy. There was no place for Lillith. She said they didn't even have a room for her in their homes, and she had to make do on couches and in guest rooms. They made it clear that there was no space for her in their family anymore. She seemed to accept it. John had a moment of wanting to protect her, as Isabelle obviously did. But she was an adult with a job and a life, and was moving forward on her own. John was sure that some handsome young guy would scoop her up and have a romance with her. Girls as pretty as she was didn't stay alone for long. He was sorry that Gabby hadn't found a serious partner yet. She was more interested in her work than in romance, and she had always said she would never marry. She didn't want a man like her father. She'd rather be alone than marry a man like him. Helen told him that Gabby had dated a few doctors, but no one she was madly in love with. He supposed he wouldn't be privy to her love life now, without Helen to tell him about it. Gabby said nothing of her personal life when she spoke to him. He was an outsider.

John was surprised to notice on the clock on his bed table that it was one-thirty in the morning. The party had gone later than he expected, and he thought of Lillith again as he got into bed. He wondered what it would be like to date a girl her age. He couldn't imagine. He felt foolish at the thought of it. He told himself that he had been mostly faithful to Helen during their marriage, with some slips over the years, all one-night stands when he was out of town on business. He had never seen the women again. They were in their forties and fifties, closer to his own age, and most of them were married. It was purely physical, at business events, when everyone had had a lot to drink. Helen had never suspected it, and he had never confessed. Gabby had seen him once with a woman, when he was in San Francisco, closing a deal, and she was at Stanford and having dinner in town with friends. It was sheer coincidence when they ran into each other at a restaurant. She had accused him later of cheating on her mother, and he had told her truthfully that the woman he was dining with was one of his attorneys for the deal. He didn't tell her they had spent the night together afterward. Gabby didn't want to hurt her mother and never told her, but she

had treated her father with contempt after that, and it was no mystery to him why.

He lay in bed that night, thinking of the carol singing and standing near the piano with Lillith close to him. She had a sweet, pure voice that had blended well with his deeper one, and then he laughed at himself. There is no fool like an old fool, he thought. Lillith existed in another universe, thirty-nine years away from his, and she would have laughed at him if he had asked her out to dinner. He turned his thoughts to Isabelle then and how beautiful she looked in the silver dress, and so much like Helen, and he fell asleep.

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Chapter 2

John thought about Lillith again the next morning, after he read *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* online. There was a mention of his deal again in *The Wall Street Journal*. It had made headlines right after it happened, with the phrase “John Williams strikes again” in bold print. He liked the validation of his negotiation talents, but they were well known to everyone in the business sector. His success had been phenomenal for thirty years. Helen used to keep clipping albums of articles like this. Eventually, they had so many of them that he told her to stop. He no longer kept them. Now and then he printed an interview he particularly liked, but most of the time he didn’t. Helen had said that she was keeping them for Gabby to have one day, but John could easily envision his daughter making a bonfire of them, given her opinion of him. He had no illusions about that, after almost twenty years of her outspoken criticism. She had gone sour on him in her teens, and it had gotten worse as the years went by. By the time she graduated from college, their relationship seemed irreparable.

Thinking about meeting Lillith the night before was more agreeable than thinking about his daughter. He no longer had any idea how to get close to Gabby, now that her mother was gone. Helen had been the glue that had kept their family together. But all pretense of it had disappeared with her. John had a fatherly way with younger people, particularly young women

who crossed his path. They gave him a moment of the warmth he always hoped to feel from Gabby, and never did. She was relentless in her criticism of him, without pardon or mercy. She used to write him angry emails. She no longer even did that. He wasn't sure what was worse, her scathing accusations or her silence. Sometimes the latter was worse. It told him she didn't care about him at all.

It was hard knowing that there was no one on earth who loved him now, except maybe Isabelle as a close friend.

It made him think of Lillith, and how lonely she must be at this time of year, far from both her parents, with no semblance of family life to warm her. Before he left the apartment for the office, he decided to make a small gesture, hoping it would provide some small difference for her. He emailed his florist and had them send her two dozen roses in winter white. He sent another bouquet of fuchsia roses to Isabelle, to thank her for the splendid dinner. To Isabelle he said, "Always perfect, better than ever. Fabulous evening with a divine hostess. Great fun! Always, John." And to Lillith, "Great fun sitting next to you last night. Merry Christmas. Best, John Williams." Helen used to send flowers and do the cards for him, as the perfect wife she was. Now he did his own.

He had no intention of seeing Lillith again. It was just a kind gesture from an old man. And he knew Isabelle was leaving for L.A. the next day, and he would see her when she got back. She would have a happy Christmas with her daughter, Angela's husband, Aaron, and their kids. John was leaving for his boat in St. Barth in a few days. It was the ultimate in luxury. It was the only place where he truly relaxed, with a crew of forty to serve him. It seemed particularly self-indulgent now that he was alone. He and Helen had spent some of their best times on the boat. It was a three-hundred-fifty-foot sailboat built by Perini in Italy, the biggest sailboat on the water. The *Lady H* was his pride and joy, with an owner's cabin more comfortable and elegant than the Ritz in Paris, which had inspired the interior designers. Her exterior was sleek and graceful despite her size. He loved riding up to the top of the mast, and just sitting there, looking out to sea. It was peaceful.

After he sent the flowers, he rushed off to the office. Sam was waiting for him downstairs. It was a short ride to Park Avenue, and he hurried into the building in a bitter cold wind. He was happy to be leaving soon, and to get the warm weather in St. Barth.

He was stacking up files to take with him, most of them about his recent acquisition, when the intercom buzzed on his desk and he picked it up.

“Lillith Jones,” his secretary said, “on line one.” He was surprised to hear from her, and then remembered the flowers. He had sent them to her office, since he didn’t remember her home address. He hadn’t written it down when he dropped her off, not expecting to see her again. But he knew the name of the design firm she worked for since Isabelle used their services.

“Hello,” he said in an even tone, happy to hear from her. It was an unexpected treat.

“You sent me the most beautiful white roses I’ve ever seen. They look like a rose garden on my desk.”

“Red seemed too aggressive,” he said, and he had thought they sent the wrong message, even though red would have been appropriate for Christmas, and he had always thought poinsettias looked cheap. The white roses were as elegant as he was, and as beautiful as she was.

“Thank you, that was so nice of you, and such a happy surprise.”

“I’m glad you like them.”

“I’m taking them home. They’re going to give my apartment some pizzazz. I didn’t put a tree up this year. It seemed stupid and too much trouble if no one is going to see it.” He felt sorry for her again as she said it. And yet, she wasn’t pathetic. She was open and honest and real, a little bit the way Gabby had been when she was a lot younger, until her late teens. She got mean after that.

“Would you like to have a drink after work?” he asked her on the spur of the moment. The words flew out of his mouth before he could stop them. She hesitated for a beat, and sounded startled.

“Sure, I’d love to.”

“The Bemelmans Bar at the Carlyle, six o’clock. Will that work?”

“Perfectly. I’ll take my beautiful roses home tomorrow. I’d look weird staggering into the Carlyle with an enormous vase of flowers.”

“I can drive you home if you want to bring them.”

“Tomorrow will be fine. I’ll meet you there.” He could see her smiling while they talked, it was in her voice. She seemed like a happy, positive person, despite her family situation.

“See you at six,” he said, and they hung up. He was smiling when he did. He was excited to see her, and not sure why. She was just a young woman he had done something nice for. There was no deeper meaning to it than that.

He left the office in time to meet her, and she arrived five minutes later in a red coat, a short black skirt, and tall high-heeled black suede boots that disappeared under her skirt. She looked terrific, but he didn’t say it. He didn’t want her to think that he was hitting on her, because he wasn’t. It was just a friendly drink. There was soft music playing and they both ordered wine.

“I read online about the ships you just bought,” she said easily, looking interested. “That’s a lot of ships.”

“It is,” he said with a smile. “Seventeen. They’re all going into dry dock to be refitted as container ships. When they do, the press will have a lot of nasty things to say about me. All the men who worked on them will be let go. The previous owners knew that, but it makes me look like the villain, because I own the ships now.”

“That doesn’t sound very fair to you.” She was sympathetic, and he smiled again.

“That’s the way it works. I’m used to it. We’ll give them all proper severance, but the papers won’t say that. We notified the unions, so it won’t come as a surprise.” She nodded. He seemed to exist in a tough world, but he was equal to it. She talked about her family but didn’t seem bitter about them, which impressed him, unlike Gabby, who had kept careful track of every sin he’d ever committed in her eyes. Lillith was matter-of-fact about her father’s penchant for very young women, most of whom were younger than she was.

“He likes them young and not for long. He dazzles them, and then he moves on. He’s the head of an ad agency. My mother was a model in one of their ad campaigns. She’s still beautiful, when she’s not expecting twins,” Lillith said with a laugh. “She’s fifty-one, and her husband is thirty-nine. She looks amazing for her age. He looks older than she does. He’s an actor on daytime soaps, which is why they live in L.A. She’s due on Christmas. I figured they had enough going on, and I’d avoid the craziness. She’s been on bed rest for three months and she can’t wait for it to be over. They’re fraternal twins, a boy and a girl. I haven’t seen her since Thanksgiving. She was huge then. It makes you think twice about having babies. They’re happy. I’ve been an only child until now. It was lonely after the divorce, with both my parents leading their own lives, but otherwise I liked it. It doesn’t matter now.” Lillith looked so young and innocent, with a wistful smile that touched him. He could tell that she hadn’t had a happy childhood, but she was philosophical about it.

“I’m an only child too,” he said, “and so is my daughter.”

“I used to fantasize about having a twin,” she admitted, “and now I have twin siblings. I don’t know how my mother is going to manage. She goes on location with Zack a lot. I guess they’ll leave them home with a nanny.” John got the feeling that Lillith had lived comfortably. She’d gone to private school in New York. Her mother had only moved to L.A. when she remarried. Lillith said she had bounced back and forth between her parents as a child. Gabby had no idea how lucky she was for the stable family she had grown up with, and how fortunate she had been.

“And why is it that there was no man with you last night?” he asked, curious.

“I broke up with someone six months ago. I’ve been working like crazy, no time for a social life,” she said, and he nodded.

“I haven’t been out since my wife died,” he said quietly. “Last night was the first time. Isabelle threatened to come to my apartment and drag me out, so I decided I’d better go. I’m glad I did. She and my wife were best friends, and so are our daughters.”

“I’m sorry about your wife,” Lillith said gently, and sounded as though she meant it. She was a sweet person.

“Thank you. What about dinner? Are you hungry?” he asked her. “I’m starving.” She smiled when he asked, and nodded.

“I’m hungry too,” she admitted, looking shy for a minute. She hadn’t expected him to invite her for dinner, but it sounded nice. He was easy to talk to, and she had learned a lot about him over their wine, and he had learned even more about her. She seemed so fresh and young, vulnerable but levelheaded. She was used to taking care of herself, since no one else had. It didn’t seem right to him, but she had survived it in one piece, without blaming anyone. He could see why Isabelle liked her and had invited her to dinner, and referred to her family as screwed up. Both her parents sounded like selfish people to him, more interested in their love lives than in their daughter. She had turned out well in spite of them. He couldn’t say as much for his daughter. She had a great career, but she blamed her father for everything she didn’t like about her life.

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Lillith was surprised by how comfortable she felt with John over dinner. They had walked from the Carlyle to Elio’s on Second Avenue. It was a brisk walk in the cold, and it was warm in the loud, cozy restaurant when they got there, with delicious smells coming from the kitchen. The headwaiter gave them a quieter table in the front of the room so they could talk. They looked like a father and daughter having dinner. They clearly enjoyed each other’s company, and John made Lillith laugh. They had soup to start, to warm them up, and delicious pasta. By the end of dinner, they’d had a nice evening. John had texted Sam, who was waiting outside when they left the restaurant. They drove Lillith home, and John walked her to the

outer door. It didn't feel like a date. They felt like friends after the confidences they'd shared.

"Take care, Lillith. I'll call you when I get back, we'll have to do dinner again sometime," he said, and she thanked him for dinner and a lovely evening.

"I had a really nice time," she said, smiling at him.

"So did I. Try to do something fun over Christmas."

"I will. Our office will be closed till after New Year. I'm going to catch up on books and movies. And sleep!" She laughed. He gave her a warm hug, and when she unlocked the outer door, he walked back to his car and waved as he got in. She was inside as they drove away, and he sat thinking of her on the way home. He hadn't had an evening as easy and pleasant as that in a long time. It was nice having someone to talk to again, to tell old stories to, and laugh at insignificant things. He hadn't realized how much he had missed being with another human being, and making a new friend.

John slept fitfully that night and woke up several times, thinking about Lillith. He hardly knew her, but it pained him to leave her alone on Christmas, to sleep and read books. She deserved so much more than that at her age. He sat staring out the window as he ate his breakfast, which he made himself. The housekeeper came after he left for work.

He texted her from his car on the way to the office, and asked her if she wanted to take a walk with him after work.

She texted that she had to supervise an installation that day, but she thought she'd be finished by six or six-thirty.

"I'll meet you at the entrance to the Plaza at six-thirty." He knew there were heaters there and she wouldn't get cold waiting.

She was wearing a big down jacket when he got there, with a knit cap and earmuffs, and looked even younger in combat boots and mittens. She smiled and waved when she saw him get out of his car.

They walked along side by side. The wind had died down and it was a beautiful December night. It was the third day in a row she had seen him, but it seemed totally natural to be striding along beside him. They stopped

at a bench when they got to the zoo and sat down. They could hear the big cats roaring.

“I had a crazy idea today,” he said to her. “Fate seems to have put us on each other’s path. You’re going to be alone this Christmas, without your family, and this is going to be a hard one for me without my wife, and not even my daughter to spend it with. It’s my first Christmas alone. I have a boat in St. Barth. And my offer is completely respectable. Would you like to come to St. Barth with me? There are five guest cabins on the boat, and you can have any one you want. We don’t have to tell anyone. No one has to know. We’re two adults and we could spend Christmas together as friends. It’s a big sailboat and you can do whatever you want, but it would be nice to have company.” They were two lost souls alone for the holidays.

There was a pleading look in his eyes as he said it, and it sounded crazy to both of them, but incredibly appealing at the same time. She looked at him, not sure what to think. He seemed like a kind man, and she knew he was sad about his wife. He was old enough to be her father at least, but his loneliness was palpable, and she was lonely too and secretly dreaded the holidays alone. They were both being offered a miraculous opportunity. She wasn’t sure what to do. She hardly knew him, but they felt like old friends. He didn’t feel old when he was with her. She made him feel young again. This wasn’t how he had expected to spend Christmas, with a girl he barely knew, but maybe they would turn out to be friends. Maybe Isabelle was right and young people offered another dimension, another layer, a boundless sense of freedom and joy to share, to do whatever they wanted with nothing to stop them.

“Yes,” Lillith said in a gush of air, as the frost flew from her mouth, and they hugged each other, sitting on the bench. They walked back to the Plaza making plans. She couldn’t believe what she was doing. She was flying to the Caribbean with a man she had met two days before, who had been incredibly nice to her, hadn’t laid a hand on her, and had been a perfect gentleman. And if he was a friend of Isabelle’s, she knew he must be all right, and she trusted him. He seemed solid and reliable. She felt like Santa Claus was scooping her up in his magic sleigh and sweeping her away for

Christmas. John was leaving in two days, and she would fly to St. Martin and he would pick her up with his boat there. It all sounded like a dream. He said he would arrange everything. He put her in a cab and walked back to his apartment. He wondered if he was momentarily insane. But if so, it was a delightful way to go mad, with a beautiful young girl at his side. It was their secret and no one would ever know. His wife and daughter's absence made the holiday seem unbearable, and Lillith was lonely too. Their trip together was a valiant attempt to turn it around and have some fun. Unlike most of his decisions in the business world, he wasn't hurting anyone, and neither was she. Her family didn't care where she was or with whom, so what difference did it make? Lillith had every right to decide for herself. Her decision was to spend Christmas in St. Barth with John.

Lillith couldn't believe that John Williams had invited her on the boat. It had to be a mistake of some kind. She wondered if he was drunk, but he didn't seem to be as they walked in the park, and he sounded relatively sane. It was just that being invited to spend Christmas on a sailboat with a man she had just met seemed completely unlikely to her. But she felt safe going with him. There were few people she would have gone on a trip with, let alone someone she had seen three times in her life.

She called him on the cell number he'd given her the next morning, while he was eating breakfast, and he was startled to hear from her.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked cautiously.

"Not at all. I was having coffee and reading the paper," he said pleasantly.

"Did I imagine all that yesterday? Did I misunderstand? Did you invite me to spend Christmas on your boat? Or did I dream it?" She sounded so earnest that he smiled before he answered.

"No, you didn't dream it. It sounds a little or even a lot nuts to me too. But why should we both spend the holiday alone, when I have an enormous sailboat with five empty guest cabins? We're not hurting anyone. Your

family is spending it the way they want to, without you. My daughter doesn't want to see me. So why not spend it together and have some fun? I can't think of anything better than being with you," he said simply, feeling fatherly toward her, and protective.

"I feel like Cinderella," Lillith said, breathless. "I didn't do anything to deserve this. I sat next to you at a dinner party, and you fell out of the sky like the best Christmas present ever. Why me?"

"Because I didn't see anyone else at that dinner that I wanted to take with me," John said, teasing her a little. "I looked, but the only one I found was you. And there are no strings attached, just to make that clear. You don't even have to talk to me if you don't want to. It will just be nice having you there. Being on a boat is the best vacation there is. All one's cares and worries and troubles seem to melt away as soon as you leave the dock. It's the only place I relax. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I do. I just don't want anyone to know when we get back. This should stay between us. I don't want to read it on Page Six," he said clearly.

"Neither do I. And of course I won't say anything to Isabelle or anyone else. I just can't believe you're giving me this amazing trip. Can I pay for my air ticket?"

"No, you cannot," he said firmly. "It's my treat, or it wouldn't be a gift." He was the kindest man she had ever met, for doing something like this for her. She didn't know how she could thank him.

"Can I bring anything? Cookies? A cake? A potluck dinner?" She could just imagine the luxury on a boat like that.

"Just bring you, and whatever else you want to bring. You can use as many of the guest rooms as you want. All five if you like."

"Thank you for making me happy." No one had ever done anything like it for her before, and probably never would again.

"I've got a lot to do today," he said. "I'm leaving tomorrow." He was flying to St. Barth on his plane, but she didn't know that. He hadn't mentioned it. "So I'll see you in St. Martin when we pick you up. I thought I'd spare you the little puddle jumper that goes to St. Barth. It's a bit of a thrill, but it's more pleasant if we sail in, and not as scary. And don't forget

your passport.” He sounded like a doting father, something she had never had before. And she was the loving daughter he hadn’t had in twenty years either. As a little girl Gabby had adored him, but not for a long time now. And Lillith thought he walked on water. It was refreshing to be admired and adored instead of hated, now that he didn’t have Helen to love him and balance Gabby’s contempt for him. It was nice to feel appreciated again. Lillith didn’t love him, she didn’t know him well enough, but her gratitude knew no bounds. Everything about her was new and clean, an empty slate for them to write on. It was a fresh start after a year of tragedy for him, and a lifetime of neglect and emotional abuse for her, by the people closest to her. John Williams was the reward. “See you in St. Martin. My secretary will send you your itinerary today by email.”

She left for work still feeling dazed after she spoke to him. The email appeared on her computer that afternoon, just as he said it would. It looked like Santa Claus coming down her chimney all over again. She couldn’t help wondering why John’s daughter was so hard on him. Especially with his wife dying, it seemed unnecessarily cruel for her to be so harsh with him. And he seemed like a genuinely nice man with a fatherly, nurturing style. It was hard to imagine why he and his daughter didn’t get along.

Lillith decided not to tell either of her parents where she was going. Her father didn’t care, her mother was busy getting ready to have the babies, and there was no one else to tell. She couldn’t tell Isabelle because she knew him. And her family could reach her on her cellphone wherever she was. They’d probably only text her when the twins were born, if they even remembered to. She was never foremost in their thoughts.

This was her adventure, and she was going to keep it that way. It was exciting leaving on a secret trip to sail away on a yacht in the Caribbean. She knew she would be safe with John, and her parents didn’t worry about her anyway. They hadn’t since she left for college nine years before, and not for many years before that.

It wasn’t the Christmas she had expected, far from it. And she still felt like she was living a dream when she went home to pack that night after work. She was arriving two days after John did, so he had time to settle in

and get ready for her. She pulled a big suitcase of summer clothes out of her closet and began rifling through them. She didn't have anything very fancy, a few nice slip dresses, some sweaters, T-shirts, and white jeans. John had said they didn't dress up on the boat, so she hoped she'd be all right with what she had. And she could always buy something there if she needed to. He had told her there were a lot of great shops, both simple ones and some really fancy ones, like Hermès.

She printed out her itinerary and stuck it in her purse. She didn't know how she was going to make it through the next two days until she left. She was already counting the hours. By the next morning she was packed. John was already in the air by then, on his plane, smiling to himself, looking forward to the trip. He hadn't had this much fun in years. It felt like an adventure to him too.

The countdown had begun for both of them. It was only two days now before he saw her again. His crazy idea was turning out to be the best one he'd ever had.

Chapter 3

Charlotte Ramsay was sitting at her desk in her small disordered office. She was going through her papers to make sure she hadn't missed anything she had to do by the end of the year. Her office was a mess, but she was thorough and organized, and she knew where everything was. She was a senior editor at *Vanity Fair*, and her forte was celebrity profiles. There was an edge to what she wrote, and she was brutally but artfully honest, but never mean. She liked digging deep and satisfying the readers' lust for insider information, without exposing, humiliating, or enraging her subjects completely. And she never lied to her readers.

She had worked at the magazine for twenty years and was forty-nine years old. She had been divorced for as long as she had worked there. She had a casual, youthful look, with long hair wound in a loose knot usually with a pen or two stuck through it. Her son Hugh was twenty-eight years old. She had married and divorced young. She had met her ex-husband in college at Brown, got pregnant, married, and divorced in that order within three years. Her husband was from a fancy family that hadn't approved of her. She wasn't a socialite and hadn't been a debutante. She grew up in Chicago and had a Midwestern honesty about her. She had a candid, straightforward style as a person and in what she wrote. People found her articles informative and refreshing. She told all, but nicely, and she wrote

well. Her father, an old-time war correspondent, had been killed while covering a minor war when she was in college. Her mother had died before that. The only family Charlotte had was her son Hugh. She went to graduate school at the Columbia School of Journalism, and stayed in New York. Her son's father, her ex-husband, was a respected writer at the London *Financial Times* now with a second family, a wife and three kids. He had never had a real relationship with Hugh, who was two when they separated. Hugh's father was already living in London by then. He showed up for important events, but nothing else. Charlotte and her son Hugh were very close. She hadn't spoken to her ex since Hugh's graduation from MIT as an engineer.

Hugh had taken a string of jobs in the Middle East right after he graduated. He was living in Dubai, and thoroughly enjoying it. Charlotte had spent Christmas with him there the year before, but this year Hugh was working in the field and couldn't take time off to see her, since he was the youngest member of the team. She was planning to spend Christmas alone, and didn't mind. She was used to it. She was an independent woman, although she missed her son, but she was happy he had work he loved, and he seemed to enjoy living in Dubai.

She had a small apartment in the West Village and a life she had created for herself, which suited her. She'd had brief superficial affairs for years, but she didn't want to get tangled up with anyone's complicated life, and liked keeping her own simple. She'd had one serious affair with a married man for six years. It ended badly, and she had stayed away from deep, complicated relationships ever since, the ones you could never win. She was planning to catch up on her reading over the holidays, and do some early research on a piece that was due in February, on the governor of New York. It had been pretty dry so far, and she was trying to figure out how to put some life into it. There hadn't been anything juicy or exciting to say about him. He had a pretty wife and three handsome children, and there hadn't been a whiff of scandal, which would be disappointing to some readers. Charlotte made no judgments about her subjects. She just reported

what was true, with intelligence, respect, and accuracy. Her only cardinal rule to her subjects was “Don’t lie to me.” And she didn’t either.

Her managing editor, Henry Portman, called her as she was about to leave her office. They had a good relationship based on mutual admiration, and weren’t afraid to do battle with each other. They both had strong opinions and a profound love of good journalism. At Charlotte’s request, the lightweight pieces were always assigned to someone else. She loved the big meaty stories with difficult subjects. She got the final vote on whom she interviewed, and had the clout at the magazine to do that.

“Busy?” Henry asked her.

“Not so much. Just cleaning up my desk.” Charlotte had copper-colored red hair, and the personality to go with it. She stood up for what she believed in, and was fiery when she had to be.

“Come see me,” he said. When she did, Henry was sitting at his desk, reading something on his computer. He looked up and smiled when he saw her. They liked each other when they weren’t fighting, and she thought he was a fair man, when she wasn’t arguing with him about her next assignment. In the end, he always let her do what she wanted. He trusted her instincts. She was rarely wrong about her subjects, and surprised everyone, digging up the unsung good deeds of the worst subjects, and the long-buried scandals of the saintly ones. People loved to read her interviews. They were always surprising. “Are you going to Dubai again this Christmas?” he asked her as she sat down. She was small, and had a youthful style about her. She could talk to anyone and get them to reveal themselves. She was a determined but gentle person with strong principles.

“No. Hugh is out in the field somewhere and can’t get time off. I’ll be here. Why?” She could see that he had an idea percolating, and wondered what it was.

“Do you want to get some sun and relax in the Caribbean?” he asked.

“Are you propositioning me, or giving me a big bonus?” she asked him with a grin. He was famously faithful to his wife, which was unusual in their line of work. And they had five kids.

“Neither. I have an assignment for you in the Caribbean. We just got the okay and the only free time our subject has is over Christmas, the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth. He’s on his boat in St. Barth, some big motor yacht, supposedly the biggest in the water. And he’s free over Christmas.”

“Who is it?” She was curious. Henry paused before he answered, and could guess what she would say. He knew her well.

“Ben Sharpe.”

“The high-tech billionaire?” He nodded. “Oh God. I’ve never heard a single decent thing about him, and he sued the magazine that wrote the last piece about him that he didn’t like. Do you really want to take that risk? I don’t.”

“He’s written a book about his life, coming out in May. His PR people want press to raise advance interest in the book, and I’d like to get a jump on it before the book comes out. It will be a big seller. He’s a very interesting guy with an unusual background.”

“All I’ve heard is that he’s a womanizer. He loves young, pretty girls, and goes through them like Kleenex. He’s made a shitload of money, and if we say anything real about him, he could sue us.”

“Possibly. But he has an intriguing history. He grew up dirt-poor. His father was a factory worker who wound up in a wheelchair after a bar fight when Ben was a kid. Ben took care of him until he died, worked three jobs to support his mother and two sisters, and never finished school. He’s the epitome of the American Dream, and one of the richest men in the world today. And the boat would be fun to see.” He tried to sell it to her, unsuccessfully.

“Fun for you maybe. I hate boats, and I used to get seasick as a kid,” she confessed.

“Do you still?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t checked it out.”

“He’s not inviting you for a cruise, just an interview. He personally requested you, so he must know you don’t put up with bullshit. He’s willing to give us an exclusive interview. He’s been married three times, and is

worth fifty billion dollars. There's got to be something you can say about him."

"Nothing I want to write. I hate subjects like him. All puffed up about themselves, and they think they can control the interview and the entire world, and get me fired if they don't like what I say. He's an accident waiting to happen. You can give that one to someone else." She sounded definite.

"I can't," Henry said, looking aggrieved. "He won't do the interview if you won't do the piece. That was his one condition."

"When did you find that out, before dragging me in here to ruin my Christmas?"

"I thought you said your son won't be here."

"No, but I have a stack of books I want to read, and some research to do."

"Just go to St. Barth and meet with him for a day. Two days tops. How bad can that be? We've got the budget. I can put you up at a good hotel, and I'll give you two days off down there after the interview, if you want to take some time off. Not a bad place to spend Christmas. Come on, Charlie, give me a break on this one. I don't want to miss this interview, and some other magazine will grab it if we don't." She sat silently, thinking about it, staring into space, and weighing it, and then looked at him squarely.

"Okay, I'll take the two free days, and I'll do it, but he doesn't get to whine and sue us if he doesn't like the piece. Get legal to ask for a release from him. I don't care how rich he is, I won't tippy-toe around and bend the truth for him. If he wants me, he gets whatever he gets, depending on what I see and hear and whatever research material I get. There might be some ugly stuff out there, not to mention three ex-wives, and God knows what else. And I was supposed to be off on Christmas, anyway, by the way. So when do I go?"

"He won't sign a release like that. We'll take our chances. He'll see you on the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth for the interview. And Charlotte, thank you. You can handle him. It'll be fine, and a strong piece if you write it. Some people say he's a nice guy."

“Nice guys don’t make fifty billion dollars,” she said, firmly convinced. “Just so he knows the ground rules. No lies,” she said, and stood up. Henry wished her a merry Christmas, told her he would set everything up and get her ticket, and she thanked him and left his office. She was thinking about Ben Sharpe that night and did a superficial Google search on him, and a general search on the internet. There was lots of material on him, most of it about the girls he dated. They said he was a tough businessman, and two of his ex-wives had nothing good to say about him. The third one said that he was the love of her life and a sweet person. Charlotte thought he must have paid her handsomely when he left her for a showgirl in Las Vegas. In any case, it was going to be an interesting Christmas with Ben Sharpe. She had nothing else to do, and she was getting four days in St. Barth out of it. There were worse ways to spend Christmas, especially since she’d be alone anyway.

Charlotte took a night flight to St. Martin on the twenty-second of December, arriving on the morning of the twenty-third, then took a terrifying short flight in a tiny plane to St. Barth, flying low over the water and landing on the short airstrip. Henry had arranged for a car and driver to take her to the Cheval Blanc St-Barth. Henry was as good as his word. The hotel was beautiful, said to be the best in St. Barth. Charlotte had a villa with a private pool and her own butler. It was all first-class service. She looked around with a smile and took off her safari jacket. She was carrying a beaten-up old Hermès Haut à courroies travel bag that she had bought in a vintage store in Paris and she loved. It was dark chocolate brown, and she was wearing brown combat boots. The weather was warm but not torrid, and she opened her suitcase and hung her assortment of summer clothes in the closet. She had brought summer work clothes, nothing fancy. This was a job.

She had arrived a day before her appointment with Ben Sharpe, and liked having time to acclimate when she did interviews in distant

destinations, getting the feel of the place and the atmosphere. The locations the subjects chose said a lot about them. At home, or a fancy restaurant, someplace cozy, or somewhere they could show off to demonstrate how important they were. Ben Sharpe was meeting her on his boat, on his own turf, where he felt at home. She was curious about the boat. It was said to be fabulous. It was four hundred and fifty feet long, the size of a small cruise ship, and it was called *Karma*. It was a motor yacht, and testimony to his enormous fortune and the way he liked to live.

Ben Sharpe was a man who liked excess. He had come a long way and wasn't afraid to show it. She wondered if he had an enormous security staff, like most men in his circumstances. She'd seen the photographs and read little snippets of articles about him. He looked very modest in the photographs, simply dressed in jeans and cowboy boots, with a blue collared shirt. He had a clean-cut boyish look to him. She had studied his face in the still shots on the internet, thinking of questions she wanted to ask him. She hadn't composed her final list yet. She knew that once she met him, she'd have a better sense of who he was before he even spoke. There were cues she looked for that told her a lot about a person. Women were more guarded, while men were usually open with her. They trusted her and they weren't wrong. She never betrayed her subjects. Some had even become friends.

She had dinner from room service on her patio, and then decided to walk to the port and check out the boats. She wondered if the *Karma* would be in port. She wanted to get a glimpse of it before she met with him the next day.

There were many large yachts tied up at the dock, their uniformed crews adding to the atmosphere, and their owners drinking wine and champagne on the upper decks. She saw women in jewel-toned outfits with diamonds sparkling in their ears. It was a world she wrote about but had never been part of, and she wondered sometimes what it felt like to be them. Their hair was beautifully done, their hands and feet were manicured and pedicured. They wore high-heeled sandals with their outfits, and they wore diamonds with everything. This wasn't a sporting crowd, it was a moneyed crowd,

and the people on the yachts were best of breed. Some of them had led simple lives before they made their money, lives which they were eager to forget. The men were always more simply dressed, with polo shirts and T-shirts, shorts, and million-dollar gold watches on their wrists. Charlotte didn't envy them, although she was fascinated by them, knowing the sacrifices most of them had made to get where they were. Some of them had sold their souls to be there, and she had a feeling that Ben Sharpe was one of them. A man didn't buy a boat like his unless he wanted the entire world to know how rich he was. And the women such men had with them were part of the show too. Charlotte wondered if he'd have one of his flashy girlfriends with him.

She walked past the biggest boats to the end of the quay, where there was a yacht she thought was some kind of oceangoing cruise ship. It was flying a Cayman Islands flag, which gave the owner a tax break, and she knew the boat was his even before she read the name. It was the *Karma*. As she watched, a tall, thin man in jeans and loafers, a T-shirt, and a leather baseball jacket walked onboard carrying an overnight bag. A cluster of uniformed crew took it from him and followed him onboard as he spoke animatedly with them, and then he disappeared, presumably to the owner's cabin, which were usually spectacular bedrooms, suitable for royalty. The *Karma* was brilliantly lit, with spotlights under the water, and Charlotte could see fish swimming around the hull. The man came out on deck then, holding a glass of wine. The captain was with him and they walked upstairs into what she assumed was the wheelhouse. She felt like a voyeur watching them, like a child with her face pressed against the windowpane. She heard the motors turn on then, and the crew freed the boat from the ropes that held it fast, and it moved slowly away from the quay, to spend the night outside the port at anchor. Some of the owners liked getting away from the bustle of activity in the port, others liked to go to bars and restaurants and discos and party on afterward until the wee hours. She assumed that Sharpe was part of the action. He was the right age, at fifty-two, with unlimited money. And judging by the women he had married, who all looked like models and showgirls in the photographs she'd seen, she could easily guess that he was

a member of the party scene. She couldn't see his face clearly when he boarded the yacht, but he was strikingly handsome in the photographs on the internet, and could have been a movie star or a model himself.

Charlotte walked back to the hotel, as people drove past her on the way to dinner. She read for a while and went to bed. She wanted to get up early to prepare for the meeting and have her mind sharp for the interview. She knew he hadn't gone to college, but everything she read about him said he was brilliant. She believed from experience that he would be trying to outsmart her, so she had to get some sleep to be in top form.

She woke up with a start several times in the night, wondering where she was and then remembering, and drifting back to sleep. In the morning, she put on white jeans and a white T-shirt with her safari jacket, and white secondhand Hermès loafers she had found at a garage sale in Connecticut. She was great at finding bargains wherever she went, and they were always chic. She was always classically and discreetly dressed and didn't try to draw attention to herself. Instead, she liked to disappear into the background so the subjects of her interviews knew that they were the center of attention and they were the stars. She did it well.

Her car and driver arrived at the hotel at exactly ten-fifteen, and drove her to the boat, and when they stopped, the *Karma* had just motored into the port and returned to the spot at the far end of the quay. The crew were securing her with the ropes Charlotte had seen the night before when they left.

They had the gangway down and secure in a minute, and a steward escorted her onboard. They stopped at a basket where she could leave her shoes, and she followed the steward barefoot up the stairs. She had a notebook and her laptop in her Hermès bag, and as soon as they reached the deck above the one where she had boarded the boat, she saw a man with salt-and-pepper hair, lounging on one of the couches, with a glass of champagne in his hand. There were cleaning crews busy all over the boat, wiping off the salty spray and shining the chrome. The deck furniture was beautifully designed for the boat. Ben Sharpe stood and smiled at her, and held out a hand to shake hers.

“I’m Ben,” he said with a broad smile, and she was shocked for a minute to see that he was even more handsome at close range. He had perfect features, a cleft chin, and movie star good looks. She could feel him appraising her as they sat down, despite his casual style as he lounged on the couch. “Would you like breakfast?” he offered her.

“No, thanks very much,” she said, trying not to look impressed by him. She found his looks more distracting than appealing, since she had come to hear about his life, not on a date. But he was without a doubt a beautiful man. She found men who were that good-looking disconcerting. They were too perfect, and usually narcissists, which had been the case with her married lover, who had also been extremely good-looking. She’d had a prejudice against handsome men ever since, and always said she wouldn’t date one again. She was more interested in character and intelligence, morals and values and integrity, and a sense of humor, than looks.

“Champagne?” he offered her and she declined again. She finally accepted a cup of coffee and he filled his glass of champagne again.

“Your boat is spectacular,” she said. It was impossible not to comment on it. “It must be wonderful to own a boat like this,” she said sincerely.

“Are we on the record, have we started?” he asked her, looking faintly unsure of himself for a minute.

“Life is on the record, Mr. Sharpe, but I wasn’t saying that for the interview, it wasn’t a trap. It’s a very, very beautiful boat.”

“I’ll give you a tour later, if you like. When we finish. Thank you for coming down here, by the way. I hope I didn’t ruin your holiday plans,” he said politely, and he almost looked sincere, but not quite. He was just saying the right thing. He wanted to impress her so the article would be favorable and support his book. It had taken him three years to write it with a ghost, which was in the biographical material his publicist had sent. He had given the ghost credit on the book cover, making him seem like a nice guy, which was his intention.

Charlotte took out a notebook and pen. She didn’t record her subjects. She had a photographic memory and an amazing ability to recall

conversations. She just jotted down details or key phrases to remind her of what her subjects said, and as a rule, she made few mistakes.

“Where would you like to start?” she asked him.

“Wherever you like,” he said congenially.

“Tell me about the period of time when you were homeless on the streets. How did that feel? Was it freeing or fun, or sad, or scary?”

“It was hard, scary even. I tried to focus on the good things, the blessings, to keep my spirits up.” He went into a long monologue then about how it had taught him to love his fellow man, and be part of a community. He had a thorough, rapid answer for everything she asked him. She wondered if some of it was straight out of the book. It was his party line, to be sure. Everything that came out of his mouth sounded canned and rehearsed, or coached by his publicist.

Charlotte stopped taking notes within a half hour of starting the interview. “Can you really remember all that?” he asked, impressed. She was quiet and serious as she listened to him.

“I can remember what I need to. It’s a sifting process. I have pretty good recall.” She usually wrote her pieces with an attitude of “innocent until proven guilty.” She wanted to like Ben Sharpe, but everything he had said to her sounded fake. She felt discouraged, listening to him. The interview was worthless. It was too rehearsed and sanitized. He was just an obscenely rich guy who had been lucky, at the right place at the right time in history. There was nothing more to him than that. He made his billions sound like blind luck.

Two hours later, when Charlotte closed her notebook, there was almost nothing in it. Her special interviews of extraordinary people lasted four or five hours, and sometimes she stayed with the subject all day, or for a couple of days if she thought it was warranted. Going by his answers to her questions, Ben Sharpe was an empty shell with nothing to say to the world. His book was going to be a disaster. Normally, she would have read his book before she met with him, but it was too early and the publisher didn’t have the advance copies ready before Christmas.

She thanked Ben Sharpe very politely for his time, and he showed her around the boat before she left. It was absolutely amazing, and he was justifiably proud of it.

“You see, size does matter,” he said with a grin, allegedly referring to the boat, and she nearly choked.

“Not always,” she said under her breath. “But it’s a gorgeous boat. You’re very lucky to have it.” Then she corrected herself. “No, that’s wrong. You’re not lucky. You’re obviously very good at what you do, or you wouldn’t have achieved a success of this dimension.”

“I invented a lot of the technology everyone uses today. I’ve been working on it for years.”

“I wish you had told me more about it in the interview,” she said wistfully.

“Most people wouldn’t understand it, and it’s hard to explain. My publicist gave me some ideas of what to talk about.” In fact, he had quoted her verbatim throughout. That was the tinny fake sound Charlotte had picked up immediately. It didn’t sound like him, because it wasn’t his own thoughts.

“She shouldn’t have. I wanted to get to know Ben Sharpe, not your publicist,” she said gently. It had been a wasted two hours, and a fruitless trip. She had nothing to write, no sense of him.

Ben had an uncomfortable feeling when she left, and he wished her a merry Christmas. Her driver took her back to the hotel, and she called Henry, who was spending time with his children.

“How was it?” Henry asked her when he picked up.

“A total waste of time,” she said honestly. “His publicist prompted him and told him what to say. It was pure crap that no one will want to read and I won’t write, but you still owe me two days down here. I love it here, and his boat is the best thing about him.”

“Shit,” he said, out of earshot of his kids. “The guy has made fifty billion dollars, and some people say he’s a genius, and he can’t give you an interview?”

“I have no idea who he is. I hope his book is better than what I heard today.”

“Do you want to take another crack at him?” Henry hated to see the opportunity go up in smoke. Sharpe did very few interviews, and he was only doing it now because of his book.

“There’s nothing else to crack. The guy is an empty shell. He’s just a money machine. I’d rather interview my refrigerator. It would be more interesting. There’s more in it than in Ben Sharpe. He was a parrot for his publicist for the entire time.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie. Well, enjoy your two days off. Three, since I assume you don’t want to go back tomorrow.”

“I don’t. It was all lies and manufactured garbage. Superficial. No depth. You know how I hate that.”

Henry thought about it after they hung up. He was going to call Sharpe’s publicist and tell her, and then he had an idea. The guy was smart. He’d get it, if he was as brilliant as people said. He called Sharpe himself and told him as gently as possible that the interview had been a bust and that he couldn’t give rehearsed answers, especially to a writer like Charlotte Ramsay. “She goes deep. She wants real,” he said to Ben. “You have to shoot straight from the hip, and tell her the truth. She’s not the kind of writer who would do a puff piece.”

“I could tell. I knew it was going wrong but I didn’t know what to do about it. My publicist insisted I stick to the script we rehearsed.”

“She’s wrong about Charlotte. She knew it was rehearsed. If I can get her to come back, would you do it again? But you have to give her straight, real answers. Not what someone told you to say.”

“I’d love to give it a try. I knew it was crap when I said all that stuff to her. And I could tell it wasn’t working for her. She was very polite, but it sounded like it was all over when she left.” Ben was being honest with Henry.

“Let me talk to her. She’s staying in St. Barth for a few more days, and you’re already booked for tomorrow.”

“She may not want to work on Christmas,” Ben said, disappointed. He knew he blew it. Interviews weren’t his strong suit. He either came across as aggressive or disinterested, or too technical, which was why he’d asked his publicist’s advice.

“That’s what she’s there for. I want you to give it another shot. I’ll call you back,” Henry said, and promised to try. He told his children he’d be there in a minute. Henry called Charlotte as soon as he hung up with Ben. She was changing into a bathing suit to go to the beach. It didn’t feel like Christmas in a tropical climate.

“He says he’d like to try again,” Henry told Charlotte, and she groaned at the thought.

“He has nothing to say, he’s like a pitcher with no balls to throw. The guy is empty.”

“You don’t know that. He was feeding you someone else’s words.”

“His publicist should have known better than to prompt him.”

“Will you go back tomorrow?” Henry pressed her.

She groaned again. “I guess I have to. You paid me for two days’ work.”

“Just do tomorrow like it’s the first time. I’ll talk to him. Maybe you can get it in one day.”

Henry called Ben back after that, and told him Charlotte would give the interview another chance.

“Just give it to her straight from the heart. Be honest with her, be yourself.”

“Myself doesn’t do well in interviews,” Ben admitted. “I don’t like them, and being the focus of attention.”

“You’d better tomorrow, or she’ll be out the door in five minutes. She’s allergic to bullshit and lies. Go honest all the way. I know you can do it.”

“I wish I did. Thank you, Henry, for fixing this.”

“I haven’t yet,” Henry reminded him. But they had one last shot at Charlotte doing the article. Once she gave up, she didn’t go back. And he couldn’t force her. He had tried in the past and it never worked if her heart wasn’t in it or she didn’t like the subject.

Ben sat thinking about it for an hour, after he spoke to Henry, and then called Charlotte at the hotel. She was lying on her bed, thinking about her son and missing him on Christmas, thinking about how strange life was, and how she had ended up in a life that other people envied and thought was exciting and glamorous, interviewing important people and celebrities, when in fact she led a solitary life, her son lived thousands of miles away, and she was in a hotel room alone, far from home on Christmas. It wasn't the life she had hoped for when it all started. She had loved two men in her life, and both relationships had failed abysmally. She was having a soul-searching look at her life when the phone rang. She thought it was Henry calling her again about the failed Sharpe interview. But it was Ben. He sounded cautious and hesitant when she answered.

"Ms. Ramsay?...Charlotte?"

She didn't recognize his voice for an instant. Her mind was a million miles away, with Hugh in Dubai. She was sorry now that she wasn't with him there, instead of on a wild-goose chase for a bad interview in St. Barth. It seemed like such a pointless way to spend the holiday, instead of being with the only person on earth she loved, and who loved her. But Hugh had his own life now. He was a grown-up and had a job he loved far away. It wasn't his fault that she had made a mess of the relationships in her life with poor choices. Hugh's father had been too young and so had she, and they barely knew each other when she got pregnant in college. And her married lover had been a liar and a bad guy, a manipulator who had strung her along for six years and had kept her from ever trying again. It had been ten years since she had a serious man in her life, if she ever had.

"I'm sorry I blew the interview today," Ben said humbly. "And I know we're scheduled for a rematch tomorrow, if I can do it right this time. But it's Christmas Eve, and you were a good sport to come down here and give up whatever plans you had with your friends and family in New York." For a minute she was tempted to level with him and tell him she had none of either, and it was her own fault. She had encouraged her son to be independent, which had served him well, but left her without family nearby,

and she had blown it with the only two men she'd fallen in love with and had done nothing but work for the last ten years and isolate herself.

"Don't worry about it," she said gently, actually feeling sorry for him. "You'll get it right tomorrow. I'll help you. And I only have a son. He's working in Dubai and he couldn't get free for Christmas. There are worse places than here to be on Christmas."

"We're both alone. Why don't you come over and have dinner with me? Just homestyle, nothing fancy. Just down-home cooking. I have a pretty good chef on the boat. He trained in France, but he's from Kentucky," Ben said, and she smiled. "You don't need to spend Christmas Eve at a hotel. That's depressing."

"I was actually feeling sorry for myself," she admitted. "I don't think I'd be good company," she said.

"You look like good company to me. Better than just my own." She thought about it and realized that an off-the-record dinner with him might help get the interview on the right track the next day, and felt like she should go for work. She was here for an assignment after all. She wasn't officially off until the day after Christmas. And duty came first. It always did. She was the job.

"This isn't Ben Sharpe, famous billionaire, that you're going to interview tomorrow. It's just me, Ben, and you. Maybe we'll get through the holiday better together." She hoped he wasn't hitting on her, she wasn't in the mood to play games or fend him off. And then she smiled. One of the richest men in the world was inviting her to his four-hundred-and-fifty-foot yacht to spend Christmas Eve with him, and she wasn't in the mood. She knew that anyone on the planet would think she was crazy and difficult. "Tonight is totally off the record. This isn't a good night to spend alone, even on a fabulous yacht with a sixty-four-person crew. If I said I'm lonely no one would believe me. It sounds crazy even to me, but I am." It sounded like a come-on, or a trap, but she decided to believe him.

"Can I come in a sweatshirt and torn jeans?" she asked, and he laughed.

"Yeah, if I can wear sweatpants and my favorite moth-eaten sweater. And wait till you see what's for dinner. My favorite."

“Caviar and champagne?” she asked. She liked him. A lot better than she had in the interview. He seemed like a decent guy.

“No, way better than that. You’ll see. I’ll send a car for you. Is ten minutes too soon?”

“Not in my torn jeans. I’ll be out front.” She hesitated and added in a soft voice, “And Ben...thank you. You just saved me from a miserable night in my hotel room, feeling sorry for myself.”

“It’s mutual. See you soon,” he said, and hung up.

She brushed her long red hair, washed her face, and was in front of the hotel when he drove up in a van. She didn’t realize Ben was driving himself until he stopped right next to her, and looked at her with a grin.

“Need a ride?” he said, and she laughed as she got in and they took off to the port. She barely knew him and the interview was a disaster, and now he felt like a friend.

He stopped the van in front of his yacht, and one of the deckhands sprang forward to take the keys from him. Ben let Charlotte go up the gangway ahead of him. They took their shoes off at the basket. She was wearing sneakers, and he was wearing flip-flops. They went up the stairs to the deck with the outdoor seating area, where the table was set for them.

“Welcome to my humble home,” he said, with a dozen crew members standing by to serve them, and they both laughed. It was the most incongruous setting she’d ever been in. He poured himself a Scotch on the rocks at the bar and handed her the glass of white wine she’d requested, and they sat down under a starry sky, as he raised his glass to her.

“Merry Christmas, Charlotte. We’re having my favorite dinner,” he said, looking happier than he had that morning. He looked comfortable and relaxed.

“Hot dogs would be fine,” she said, and sipped her wine. For that one moment, it felt like the perfect Christmas Eve. Other than with Hugh, there was nowhere else she’d rather be. They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes until the steward told them dinner was ready, and Charlotte followed him to the table. He held her chair as though he was wearing a dinner jacket, and she sat down as though she was wearing an evening

gown, as two young stewards brought the tray with their dinner, and Ben looked at her.

“You’re in for a treat,” he promised, as the stewards took the silver domes off a tray holding meat loaf, a bowl of mashed potatoes, southern fried chicken, biscuits, gravy, corn on the cob—all the things Ben loved. “Comfort food. When I was a kid on the streets, I used to hang around the door of a diner and just smell the food. There was a nice old waitress who would bring me a plate of leftovers sometimes, and one Christmas she took me inside and gave me a whole meal. It’s still my favorite Christmas meal.” It smelled delicious, and he wasn’t lying to her now. Whoever he was and wherever he had been in his fifty-two years, she knew at that moment that Ben Sharpe was real, and being with him on Christmas Eve eating southern fried chicken and meat loaf felt real too. She couldn’t think of a better meal, or a better night.

Chapter 4

The Christmas Eve dinner on the boat was one of the nicest Charlotte had ever had, except for the magical Christmases when Hugh was little and still believed in Santa Claus. He had asked Santa Claus for a new daddy one year, which nearly broke her heart. His father hadn't seen him in nearly two years at the time. He got slightly better as Hugh got older and he could meet him for lunch when he came to New York for business. But he was never an attentive father, especially once he had three more children with his current wife.

Ben asked Charlotte about her son at dinner, and she smiled as they both ate fried chicken with their fingers. There were hot biscuits too, which melted in their mouths.

"He's a great boy," she said proudly. "He's an engineer. He went to MIT. He loves working in the Middle East, and the money is great. I don't think he'll stay there forever, but he's happy for now. You don't have any children?" she asked, as he helped her to more mashed potatoes, which were the best she'd ever tasted. The stewards had discreetly left them alone while they ate.

"I never wanted kids," Ben said seriously. "I don't think I'd be a good father, and the idea always scared me. What if my son ran away, or I lost all my money and he wound up on the streets like me?" Charlotte couldn't

conceive of how one could lose fifty billion dollars, but everyone had their demons, and that was apparently one of his. “I was born in Oklahoma. My father worked in the oil fields, and then we moved to Texas. My sisters were really little. And then my mother died and everything went to shit. My father became an alcoholic and got into a bar fight. It broke his spine and he was in a wheelchair from then on. He tried to work in a factory and got fired for being drunk. I was fifteen. I dropped out of school and held down three jobs to support us. We went on welfare, and my sisters went into foster care. I lost track of them after that. I know one of them died, and I never found the other one, she probably died too or she would have turned up by now. My father and I drove all over the south. I took migrant jobs and he did whatever he could get. He was a mean old sonofabitch, even after he got sick. He died of cancer when I was sixteen, and something happened after he died. I found a computer in a garbage can. I had a gift for fixing things. I was thinking of becoming an electrician, and I fell in love with computers. I’d always been good at math, and I had something of a gift. I understood computers, it was like they were part of me, and I started inventing things. I stole a computer once so I’d have a better one. I couldn’t afford an apartment then, so I lived on the streets. Philadelphia, New York, Boston. I got taken in by a homeless program in Boston, and they got me trained to work on computers, and I worked on my inventions at night. I met a man in Boston who understood my ideas. They said I was a genius, but I’m not. I just have a gift for understanding what will take technology to the next step. I imagine it in my head and then I do it, and it works. When I was twenty-one, I got a real job working in a computer lab. All the big things happened after that. I had made a million dollars by the time I was twenty-eight, and turned it into ten by the time I was thirty. Everything kept skyrocketing after that. But I never forgot what it was like not to have a home to go to, or a bed to sleep in, and how it felt to be hungry all the time. I had no family and no role models, and I learned to live by my wits on the streets. I learned some hard lessons. I got beaten up a lot at first, and then I learned to take care of myself and not trust anyone. It stayed with me. It was a big jump from that to this,” he said, waving vaguely at his incredible

boat. "I never thought it would last, but it has. I never think people will last in my life either, and they haven't. That's why I didn't want kids. I knew I was meant to make my way alone in this world. My marriages didn't last either. I didn't think they would. Technology becomes obsolete in the blink of an eye," he said matter-of-factly, "and so do people. They love you one minute, and then they're gone. I moved on pretty quickly from my relationships. I never let myself get too attached. I loved my last wife. She was a good woman, and when I moved on, she didn't hold it against me. She was ready to move on too when I left."

"Is that the one you left for the showgirl in Vegas?" Charlotte asked, fascinated by his story. He was like some being from another universe. He wasn't hardwired for ordinary life and he knew it.

"Yeah," he said with a grin. "The dancer in Vegas lasted for about five minutes but she was a lot of fun. I have a short attention span," he said, as he poured the rest of the gravy on his meat loaf. They had eaten like starving people, but the food was great. His chef knew just what he liked, and Charlotte's heart ached when she thought of him starving outside the diner as a kid, waiting for the old waitress to bring him scraps of food, or sleeping in doorways and railway stations at night. He had managed never to get picked up by the police, and a life of crime had never appealed to him. All he wanted was to get his hands on the next computer, and make miracles with it.

"I think I don't get attached to people the way others do. I don't expect them to be around for long. I miss them for a while, but I care more about technology than the humans who create it. I've had some amazing women in my life, but they didn't stick around and neither did I. Your son is lucky to have a mother like you. You're a constant in his life, and even far away, you're there for him, ready to pick him up if he falls, ready to embrace him if he comes home, yet willing to let him live his own life, even if it hurts you and you're alone.

"I never had anyone like you in my life. I had no role models, except in the high-tech world. I had mentors, and people that taught me what I needed to know, and I used what they taught me to learn more until eventually I

knew more than they did. Each of them was like a stepping-stone in my life to get where I needed to go. I never had a place I felt was home.

“This boat is probably more my home than anywhere else. But how could I explain all that to you in the interview today? My life experience is so different from anyone else’s.” She realized as she listened to him that he was a genius, or very close to it. Originally without an education or any kind of emotional support, he had achieved heights that few people could. The measure of it was the money he had earned, but it wasn’t the money that motivated him. She could tell from listening to him. He was driven by his own inner voices and the technology he invented. He was like a beautiful robot that looked like an ordinary man, but wasn’t.

“Did you ever have a long-term relationship with any of the women in your life?” she asked, fascinated by him. And he was being honest now, not like that morning.

“Not if I could help it.” He laughed. “But I didn’t seek out women like you. I knew I couldn’t give them what they wanted and I would hurt them. I was always attracted to the ones who were more like me and didn’t plan to stay around for long, even the ones I married. They never expected me to stay forever. Maybe a year or two, a few years at most.”

“Two of your wives aren’t very flattering about you. Why, if they always knew you would move on?”

“I know which two you mean. This lifestyle,” he said with a wave, “makes people greedy. I gave them a lot, more than my lawyer said I should, but they wanted more. They were short-term marriages to young women with big ambitions. That’s why I like younger women. Some of them are still naïve and aren’t spoiled yet, and they’re not ready to settle down with babies. They didn’t want babies with me, they wanted diamonds and jewelry, probably things they could sell later, and money. If any of them had wanted to have children with me, I would have run like hell, even faster than I did.” He was an interesting study in human psychology and the effects of early childhood, which never get erased. It was amazing that he had turned out as well as he had, and had adapted to what appeared to be real life, by his own individual standards. It sounded as though he had tried

not to hurt anyone, and had selected his partners from among women who were similar to him. Charlotte was sure that greed had entered into it more often than not in the past twenty years, and he didn't mind paying them handsomely when he left. He was generous with what he had, and said he had learned that on the streets too.

"The streets were the college I graduated from."

"I'd say you graduated with honors," Charlotte said, enjoying the time they spent together. They had apple pie with vanilla ice cream for dessert, which was the perfect end to a terrific meal. And Ben was right, it was comfort food.

"There's somewhere I want to take you," he said as they stood up from the table.

"I'm not sure I can walk. I've never eaten so much in my life, and it was delicious." She smiled at him. Ben said something to one of the stewards and he disappeared. It was eleven o'clock and Charlotte thought she should go back to the hotel and go to sleep. They had work to do in the morning.

"You'll never forget it once you've been there." It sounded intriguing. She could see that there was a van waiting for them on the dock with one of the deckhands to drive them.

Ben gave her a hand into the van after they left the boat, and they set off a minute later. The deckhand seemed to know where they were going, and Charlotte let herself be taken wherever Ben wanted to go. She had enormous respect for him after hearing about his childhood and his otherworldly meteoric ascent to success, almost beyond human standards. There were few men who had gone as far as he had, and none with his background and the heartbreak and hardships he had faced. It was a rare combination in one person. She could understand now why he never got attached to anyone, because no one had ever been attached to him or protected him as a child. Children were a mystery to him, a puzzle he had no urge to solve. Science and technology were of much greater interest, and safer than anything involving emotion and unreliable humans.

They drove for twenty minutes and stopped in front of a small white wooden church. People were filing in dressed in their Sunday best, others

were dressed in rags. The poor were mingling with the rich, and a pastor stood outside greeting them. He nodded at Ben with a warm smile of recognition. It was obvious Ben had been there before. Charlotte glanced at her watch and realized it was midnight mass. The organ was playing softly, and got louder once the church was full. A choir filed in once everyone was seated, and the pastor welcomed them all, and wished them a blessed Christmas. Charlotte glanced up at Ben and he smiled at her with a knowing look as the choir began to sing. Their voices soared toward the roof of the humble church and within minutes a joyful sound filled the church as people swayed and clapped, and the choir sang gospel songs as Charlotte had never heard them before. It was the most exquisite sound she had ever heard. The choir sang Christmas carols and hymns, and the congregation was invited to join in. She and Ben sang, and the voices in the church blended into what sounded like heavenly music. Charlotte felt herself lifted out of the sadness she had felt earlier into a kind of bliss that transported them. She left the church with Ben, and he reached for her hand and held it.

“Oh my God, Ben, that’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I told you that you’d love it,” he said, beaming. “Merry Christmas, Charlotte.”

“Thank you, Ben,” she said softly, as they got back into the van and drove to her hotel. He walked her into the lobby, and she felt like she was floating. “I can’t thank you enough for tonight.”

“You don’t have to. I loved it too. I would have been sad eating Christmas dinner all by myself.” It was an evening she hadn’t expected, and he was so different from what she had thought he would be, so much more of a human being. “I’ve never told anyone everything I told you tonight about my childhood. Somehow, I think I always felt the hand of God in my life, leading me in the right direction, bringing the right people to me. Looking back, it all seems very predestined.” It was so different from her traditional early life with ordinary loving parents, although they had died young and left her alone, so she could relate to some of what he’d been through, and the loneliness he’d experienced on the streets. Other things in his life she couldn’t fathom without having experienced them. He had come

through all of it a decent human being and relatively whole. There were scars he would never lose, but most of them had faded, and they had made him what he was now. He was so much more than the money he had made, his success, and even the magnificent yacht. *Karma* seemed the right name for the boat. His had been extraordinary.

“See you tomorrow,” he said gently, and hugged her, and then he left and she went to her villa, thinking about what an amazing night it had been with an incredible man. She couldn’t think of a single person in the world like him.

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When Lillith stepped off the plane in St. Martin, there were two crew members waiting for her with the van that was kept on the boat to use in port. She saw the two handsome young crewmen in their white uniforms as she went through customs. She had nothing to declare. They came toward her immediately, as she left the customs men checking people through.

“Miss Jones?” one of them asked her. John had described her perfectly. Long dark hair, green eyes, five feet four, slight build, in her twenties. The crew were intrigued that a young woman was coming on the trip but staying in a guest cabin. She smiled at the crew members, who were both about her age and looked like the men she usually went out with, tall, blond, and handsome, somewhere in their twenties. Men still seemed juvenile to her at that age. Sooner or later they did something really sophomoric that impacted the relationship, or they cheated on her. Once they did, it was over for her. She hated cheaters, and had been thinking that she needed to date someone older, but she never had. And she didn’t think of John in that way. He was so much older that she thought of him more like a father figure, a very generous one since he had invited her on the boat.

“Mr. Williams is waiting for you on *Lady H*,” one of the deckhands said respectfully. She was a very pretty girl and they would have liked to pick her up at a bar on their night out, but she had an entirely different status as their employer’s guest, whatever her age. They treated her like someone

much older, not their equal. She could tell from their accents that they were both Australian. They chatted quietly between themselves on the way to the boat, something about the crew schedule, as Lillith looked out the window at the scenery slipping by. It was exciting being here. She was wearing jeans and a soft white cashmere sweater when she arrived, and carrying a down jacket.

It was like being transported to Paradise, away from the cold weather. There had been a lit-up sign at the airport that said “Merry Christmas,” and a Christmas tree, but there was no other sign of the holiday on the way from the airport, which was something of a relief. She didn’t have to think of families celebrating together, wrapped gifts under the tree, everything she didn’t have in her life. Instead she had a miraculous benefactor who had invited her to his yacht. It was almost too good to be true, except that she was here now, and it was real. For the past two days she had worried that he would change his mind, call her with some plausible excuse, and cancel the trip, once he thought better of it. But he hadn’t.

Lillith was lost in her own thoughts when they reached the port. She’d been thinking about her father and his girlfriend, skiing in Canada. She saw the impressive yachts tied up along the quay, with the crews busy on deck, cleaning, hosing down the boats, getting the salt water off the surfaces. The yachts seemed to get bigger as the van drove along, and they stopped in front of an enormous sailboat with tall masts reaching up toward the sky. There was a man in a blazer and jeans standing at the rail, and as she got out of the van, she was startled to realize it was John. He was dwarfed by the enormous boat, with half a dozen uniformed crew members working near him as he watched the arriving cars intently. The boat was a dozen times bigger than she had expected. She had thought of a big sailboat in her mind’s eye. She had never seen one as big as this one, and John’s face eased into a broad smile and he waved when he saw her. She was shocked by the majestic graceful splendor of *Lady H*. She walked across the gangway onto the boat, took off her shoes, and left them in a basket, as the two crew members who had picked her up took charge of her luggage, and John appeared rapidly next to her. He hugged her and she got a whiff of his

cologne as he did. Everything around her seemed overwhelming, and he was still smiling as he greeted her.

“Welcome aboard!” He led the way up the stairs to an upper deck where a stewardess had champagne waiting for her.

“The boat is incredible!” Lillith said with a look of awe, and he handed her a glass.

“It’s my favorite place to be,” he said, as the crew got busy, getting underway. He was eager to get to St. Barth and show her around. The deck furniture was all upholstered in blue and white stripes. John watched with a keen eye as the crew threw off the ropes, carefully inching away from the berth between two large motor yachts. Lillith watched the delicate maneuver with fascination. The van had already been put onboard. It was an efficient operation with a huge crew.

“Did you have a good flight?” John asked as they sat down.

“Perfect, thank you.” Lillith had been shocked when she discovered that he had gotten her a first-class ticket, so it would be an easy trip for her and she would be well rested when she arrived. He had planned some activities with her, for when they got to St. Barth. There was lots to do and to see, and he was afraid she might be bored with him. He preferred staying on the boat, but he knew that she would need more to do at her age, and he wanted her to have a good time. Just being there, she added life and a feeling of vitality and excitement. His own daughter hadn’t been on the boat in years. There was a huge library of books and films, their own movie theater to view them, and even an outdoor screen for warm nights. The purser had assured him that they had all the most recent popular movie hits, although John never watched them. He preferred to read or work. It was something he and Helen had provided for their guests, and Helen had enjoyed them.

As they left the port behind, they picked up speed, motoring in order to get to St. Barth quickly. There was very little wind that day, and Lillith sat watching the powerful wake behind them, thinking how lucky she was to be there.

“She’s beautiful when she’s under sail,” John said proudly. “It took them three years to build her in Italy,” he added. “She’s a work of art, and a

technical wonder. She combines the elegance of sailing with the efficiency of powerful engines when we need them to get somewhere in a hurry. I love the silence when we're sailing, she moves through the water with such grace. She's the biggest and the best of her kind. My grandfather taught me to sail as a boy." There was a showcase of his father's and grandfather's trophies, which he didn't mention to Lillith, but was very proud of. The wind riffled through her hair as they sat on deck, and he handed her a blanket in case she was chilly, but she wasn't. The air was warm. She looked up at John gratefully as he handed it to her.

"Thank you," she said in reverent tones, "for bringing me here." She could already tell it was going to be the most remarkable week of her life, and it would be unforgettable. It made him happy just seeing the look on her face.

"Let's pick a cabin for you," he said in a fatherly tone when she finished her champagne. She felt a little giddy and she wasn't sure if it was the champagne, John, or the boat, which was so much more than she had expected, and so beautiful.

The art that lined the halls were mostly maritime scenes by famous artists. Two of the cabins John showed her were decorated in brighter colors and more contemporary with a Calder, a Damien Hirst, and some Ellsworth Kellys on the walls. Lillith's bags were waiting in the hall for her to choose a cabin, and two maids smiled at her as they passed them. She picked the larger of the two cabins. It was flooded with sunlight, and had a big bathtub in a white marble bathroom. Without knowing it, she had picked the cabin closest to his, and he showed her his study with an intricate model of the *Lady H* in silver. Helen had had it made in London for him as a birthday gift years before, and he treasured it. All of his computer equipment was there for when he wanted to work, and he showed her his own cabin, which was huge, all done in a rich blue fabric. The room was a designer's dream.

Lillith couldn't even guess what the interior design had cost him, not to mention the art, and the boat itself. It was obviously astronomical. The whole boat was a work of art, put together with love and passion. Helen had chosen the interiors with the designer, and John had focused on the

technical details and the physical design of the boat. Even the guest cabins were beautiful, and designed to make one feel at home with the utmost comfort. Each one of them was bigger than Lillith's entire apartment. She was dazzled by everything she'd seen. The living room on each floor was white, to showcase the art. Every living space was inviting and made her want to curl up with a good book, and the outdoor spaces were equally so. The sundeck had its own dining area, if one didn't want to go downstairs for meals. It made guests want to stay forever and never return to the real world.

"How do you ever leave here?" she asked him, feeling breathless from everything she'd seen.

"With great difficulty," he said, and laughed. "I could stay on her for months, and sometimes I do in the summer. Helen loved our house in Southampton. She had a lot of friends there, but it's a little too social for me. I'd rather be here on the boat. We used to go to Saint-Tropez, because she loved it too. She turned everywhere we went on sea or land into a party. She loved people and had friends all over the place. I'm a sailor at heart, and I'd rather be on the boat, even if I'm alone."

"I can see why," she said, as they motored toward St. Barth.

When she went to leave her jacket and bag in her cabin and freshen up before lunch, her suitcase was already unpacked and the meager wardrobe she'd brought was put away neatly in the closet, looking sadly inadequate for a boat of such splendor. She wondered if she should have brought fancier clothes, though she didn't have many. But she had youth and her own beauty, and could have worn anything and looked beautiful, which she didn't realize. John still couldn't decide if he wanted to date her or adopt her. He wasn't sure if it was too soon, but something he had thought was dead stirred inside him each time he looked at her. It was impossible to overlook her beauty. And her simplicity and naïvete made her even more attractive. Just being near her and talking to her made him feel young again. She breathed hope and life into every corner of the boat, and looked perfect in the surroundings. She responded to the boat in the way he had always hoped Gabby would and she never did.

They had a delicious salad for lunch, and sandwiches and cold pasta, with gelato and cookies for dessert. She declined the white wine he was drinking and had iced tea. She already felt drunk on all the things she was seeing and experiencing just being there. She went to her cabin to change while the captain and crew docked the boat, and John went to the wheelhouse to be with them. The technology on the boat was so advanced that one highly experienced person could dock it, and occasionally John took the wheel. He was a supremely skilled sailor and some of the trophies in the library were his. He loved talking with the captain.

Lillith found her way to them after she had changed into white jeans and a white shirt with a pale blue windbreaker and she carried ballerina flats with her in case they went ashore. She looked cool and breezy and pretty and young as John gazed at her admiringly. She brought the happy aura of youth to the boat, like a summer breeze. Helen had been more serious and sophisticated, and had exquisite taste in art. Lillith offered something very different, a promise of happy times to come, with childlike innocence. More than ever, it made John want to protect her from any harm that might come her way. She was like a lamb in a harsh world. Even Gabby no longer had that naïvete. She saw the dark forces around her and potential threats as real. Lillith didn't, but Gabby was nine years older than Lillith, and had seen more of life. And as the daughter of a powerful, very rich man, Gabby had strong instincts about when people wanted to use her, which had been an undeniable factor in her life since she'd grown up. She never admitted to strangers that she was his daughter until she knew them well and trusted them, and her friendships had withstood the test of time. She and Angela were still close, and Angela was Gabby's only real friend, whom she trusted.

"Are you ready to discover St. Barth?" he asked Lillith, as they docked and turned off the motor. The trip from St. Martin had taken less than an hour. Usually, John preferred to be at anchor outside the port, but he thought it would be more fun for Lillith to be at the dock, at least the first night. It was noisier in port, and people stopped constantly to admire the boat and inquire whose it was, which he didn't like. It felt intrusive.

“I can’t wait.” Lillith smiled broadly at him, and they left the boat a few minutes later to stroll through the port and explore the shops. Hermès and several other luxury brands were well represented, along with Chanel, Cartier, and some beautiful jewelry stores. She saw a bag she loved at Hermès, but didn’t buy anything. Nothing they saw was in her budget, and he noticed her self-restraint and respected it. She was levelheaded and sensible, and well aware that she was a short-term tourist in his world and not a resident. She wasn’t his wife or his daughter, she was a guest. He could have bought anything he wanted, but he didn’t.

They walked away from the port, stopped in a little church, and stood in silent prayer for a few minutes. There was a simple crèche set up for Christmas, with all the saints, the three kings, Mary and Joseph, and the infant Jesus in the manger. It reminded Lillith of church as a child on Christmas, when her maternal grandmother was still alive. She had been a practicing Catholic and Lillith had gone to church with her. Her mother had dropped churchgoing as soon as her own mother had died. Standing in the church brought back tender memories for Lillith.

They visited some of the local sights that afternoon. At the end of the day, they came back to the boat, and had a quick refreshing swim. Afterward, Lillith went to her cabin and John went to get a massage at the spa he kept fully staffed for his use. She had noticed again when they swam that he was powerfully built and in strong, athletic shape. In the warm tropical weather, it was hard to believe it was Christmas Eve. It didn’t feel like it to either of them.

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Lillith wore a ballerina-pink satin slip dress that night with flat silver sandals that laced up her legs. They were brand-new so John let her wear them, as they wouldn’t hurt the deck. He wore a navy blazer and white slacks, and they had a sumptuous lobster dinner with caviar. John had lived well all his life and was used to the finest things as a common occurrence. He had enhanced his fortune greatly, but he hadn’t established it. His

grandfather and great-grandfather had done that. But he had made good use of the foundations they had left him, even more than his father had. His father hadn't had John's daring, or his fearlessness of risk. He had been a conservative, cautious man, always afraid to make a mistake or lose a deal. John had always plunged ahead with bullish determination and the certainty that he would win, and most of the time he did. He told Lillith his theories about that over dinner. His courage and success were awe-inspiring.

"You have some of that," he pointed out to her, but she couldn't see it. She also didn't have his resources at her disposal, to demonstrate her courage, if she had any.

"You came here to meet me. That was a brave thing to do," he said generously. "You weren't afraid, or maybe you were, but you did it. A lot of women wouldn't. You don't know me, but you took the risk anyway. That's brave, Lillith. And as a result, we're both going to have a better Christmas, we're not alone. It's a win-win for both of us. That's what winners do. A loser would have stayed home and wondered forever what would have happened if they were braver. I have no regrets. I've done everything I've ever wanted to, and most of the time, it turned out well. I didn't miss opportunities, and I wasn't afraid. You'll do well in life because you're brave."

"I think my parents are too," she said thoughtfully. "My mother married her husband, whom she didn't know very well, and he's twelve years younger. That could have been a mistake. And she decided to get pregnant at fifty because he wanted kids, which seems very brave to me. And my father is always taking some crazy risk, like helicopter skiing, and dating very young girls he doesn't know. I always think they're foolish, but maybe they're brave."

"Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference," John admitted. "There's a fine line between the two. I play life pretty close to the edge in business, but I had a stable home life with Helen. I'd rather take risks in business than with my life partner. I don't like excitement at home," he said, and she nodded.

“Neither do I. I think my mom took a big chance with Zack. He’s a good-looking guy and she’s a lot older.”

“Do you want children?” John asked her, and she hesitated.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure. That’s a huge responsibility. And you have to be willing to take on everything that goes with it. My parents had me and then they kind of forgot about it, and figured I’d raise myself. I did, but that’s not great for a child. I don’t know if I’ll ever want to take that on. Definitely not now. I’ll see how I feel about it eight or ten years from now. For now, I just want a good job and to get ahead in my field, be with good people, and maybe have a partner I could build a good life with. I made a mistake with the last person I went out with. He wasn’t a good person. It took me a year to see it. I didn’t want to see it, but eventually I did.”

“That’s his loss, not yours,” John said solemnly. “My daughter doesn’t want children. She’s been definite about it since she was in her teens. She thinks the world is too dangerous a place to bring children into it. She’s not a trusting person. She blames it on me.”

“I don’t see how,” Lillith said. “You’re as solid as a rock, and an honest man.”

“Remind me never to introduce you to her,” he said with a wry smile. “That’s not what she thinks about me. I’ve been hard in business, even merciless sometimes. I had to be, for the good of my company. It’s an ugly process sometimes. I’ve made some harsh decisions against my adversaries. Some people call me ruthless. I think you have to be ruthless in business, and loving at home. My wife understood that. Gabby doesn’t. She thinks it’s one and the same. She sees everything in black and white. Life is gray, and occasionally business dealings are too.” He was honest about who he was and what he believed. Lillith admired that about him, and she was sorry for him that his daughter was so harsh in judging him. He readily admitted that he hadn’t been as present for her as he should have been, but her conclusions about him were without mercy. He didn’t think he deserved it, and neither did Lillith.

Gabby didn’t call him on Christmas Eve, and he didn’t call her. He said there was no point, she wouldn’t answer his call anyway. He had given up.

“It’s never too late to mend fences,” Lillith said gently.

“Sometimes it is,” John said quietly. “Sometimes you have to know when to walk away, to escape the pain.”

“Not with your children. I think you have to keep trying forever,” she said, convinced of it.

“You’re kinder than I am,” he said with a distant expression, thinking of his daughter.

They spent the evening on deck under the stars, talking quietly. Lillith had called her mother earlier, and they were timing contractions again, but nothing was happening. She was distracted, talking to Zack during most of the call, and forgot to wish Lillith a merry Christmas. She hadn’t sent a gift either, since she couldn’t get out to shop. And Lillith’s father didn’t answer her call. She left him a message and he didn’t return the call. True to form.

For once, it didn’t matter so much. She wasn’t alone. She was with John, and whatever it was, whether friendship, or if it turned into something else later, it met both their needs for now, as a daughter for him, and a father for her. She didn’t mind the nearly forty years between them. The age difference seemed irrelevant. He walked her to her cabin at the end of the evening, and left her to sleep in the beautiful room alone, on his magical boat. It was the happiest Christmas she’d had in years.

Chapter 5

On Christmas morning, Lillith found a large orange box on her seat when she came to breakfast, and looked at John in surprise. She recognized the box, tied with brown ribbon. It was from Hermès, one of the stores they had visited the day before.

“What’s that?” she asked, puzzled.

“The crew said they heard sleigh bells last night, and footsteps on deck. They came out to look, but all they heard was a distant ‘Ho, Ho, Ho!’ and they saw lights in the sky. One of them said it looked like a sleigh, but he had too much tequila at the bar last night, so I don’t know how reliable the report is,” he said with a mischievous look, and she smiled.

“John, this trip is the biggest gift I’ve ever had. I don’t deserve a present too.”

“You deserve a whole lot more than a Christmas gift, Lillith.” She had been deprived all her life by her parents, and part of him wanted to make it up to her while another part was afraid to get in too deeply with her, even as a friend. She was a nice girl, too trusting for her own good, and he didn’t want to take advantage of her, no matter how appealing she was. He was almost forty years older, and she brought out all his protective instincts and a noble side of him, but reason told him that she deserved a man her own age. If she were his daughter, he would have said as much. But selfishly,

since he wasn't her father, he didn't. He liked how young and alive she made him feel.

Lillith opened the box cautiously, as though its contents would leap out at her. She lifted the lid, and folded back the many layers of tissue paper, and there was a square shape in a beige cloth dust bag at the bottom of the box. She pulled it out and her mouth opened when she removed the dust bag and saw the handbag she had admired at Hermès the day before. It was a beautiful sleek black leather bag in their Kelly style, an Hermès classic, and she never thought she'd own one. It was in a small size, in perfect proportion with her. She gasped as she held it and looked at him. He was smiling with pleasure. She was thrilled, and it made him happy watching her. She was so appreciative she got up from her seat, took two steps toward him, threw her arms around his neck, and kissed his cheek like any loving daughter, a gesture he hadn't had from his own daughter in years. He'd never bought Gabby an Hermès Kelly bag, and she wouldn't want one. Gabby dressed plainly, in practical, moderately priced clothes for her work at the hospital in Aspen. She didn't like to show off, or let on that she had a rich father. Many of her patients had modest incomes. The tourists in Aspen were usually wealthy, but the locals weren't. Some had small jobs and could barely pay their rent. Out of respect for them, Gabby didn't wear expensive clothes, and she didn't care about fashion anyway. She lived in jeans and hiking boots when she wasn't working or at her office, or Crocs and surgical scrubs at the hospital.

Lillith was stunned by the generosity of John's gift, and the thoughtfulness of it.

"I think you were the guy in the sleigh last night," she said to him.

"Absolutely not, I was sound asleep in my bed when they heard it. I think it was the real deal. You must have been a very good girl this year," he teased her, and she stood up again and said she'd be back in a minute.

She came back a few minutes later with a flat square box and handed it to him.

"It's just a thought to thank you for bringing me on this trip and making my Christmas so wonderful." She lived on her salary, and it wasn't a big

one. The gift was from Bergdorf Goodman, a luxury department store in New York with high-priced items. He opened it and found four pocket scarves, in white, pink, navy, and red. She had noticed that he wore them with his suits and blazers, and he smiled broadly when he saw them, and leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“I love them!” he said, and looked delighted. Neither of them had gotten gifts from their families, although Isabelle had sent him two bottles of very fine Château Margaux wine from Bordeaux, for which he had thanked her. She sent him wine every Christmas. And Lillith’s gift to him was a small token compared to his lavish bag from Hermès, but he had seen how much she liked it. He had always been generous with Helen too, and had given her jewelry for her birthday and Christmas, all of which Gabby had inherited and would never wear in her simple mountain life. She had never liked jewelry, unlike her mother, who had loved John’s gifts. He and Helen had been well matched. He considered their daughter an anomaly. She was a stranger to him.

He and Lillith shared a relaxed breakfast in good spirits. They lay in the sun afterward, and John glanced over at her several times. She had her eyes closed, and was getting a nice tan in the Caribbean sunshine. It wasn’t too hot at this time of year. They went swimming in the sea afterward, and got back to the platform to come onto the boat. They sat side by side for a moment with their feet dangling to catch their breath. They were alone, as the deckhand had gone to get something, and John put his arms around Lillith and kissed her, tenderly at first and then passionately, and they were both transported to another level of engagement. It was a game changer. He was no longer the father figure in her life, he was a man who wanted her as the woman she was, and he was the man she wanted, regardless of their age difference or anything else. They were both breathless when the deckhand came back with a stack of fresh towels for them, and they looked at each other with sheepish smiles.

They dried off and lay in the sun, and had lunch on deck, speaking in low tones so no one could hear them. As always, the stewards left them alone for privacy while they ate.

John told her he was falling in love with her, which hadn't happened to him in more than forty years, with Helen. He hadn't expected this and neither had Lillith. His invitation to come on the boat with him had seemed innocent, but she wasn't entirely sure that it was, for either of them. He was a sexy, powerful man, and she was a beautiful young woman. And the combination had set off fireworks for both of them.

They agreed to take it slow and let things develop between them, a promise that lasted until after dinner that night. When he kissed her good night in front of her cabin door, they were hit by a tidal wave of desire. He stepped into the bedroom with her, gently pushing the door closed behind them, and their clothes were off in seconds, as they fell into bed and gave way to the emotions that swept over them. It was soon for them, but they couldn't resist any longer. The attraction between them had sparked suddenly and taken off like wildfire. They were both starving for affection and human contact. He made her feel safe and protected. And for John, it had been child's play to win her trust. She had been ripe for the plucking, and he couldn't hold back. He loved her vulnerability, her gentleness, and her courage. She was a brave soul who had survived for a long time in adverse conditions. The closeness they shared, and the heights of passion he led her to, were ample reward for them both.

—

Charlotte and Ben spent three hours on the interview on Christmas morning. He had shared so much about his childhood and family history the night before, on a personal level, that most of her remaining questions were about his career and astounding success. She asked him hard questions about his reputation for being tough, and he said he was both tough and fair. He worked hard and expected others to do the same. He drove himself to his limits. He had never shortchanged anyone or lied. His deals were straightforward and his achievements undeniable. He was at ease with her now, and spoke well. He had given her an enormous wealth of information

to draw from. At noon, he stopped her and said they were done. He said he had a treat for her, and she smiled.

Ben had already told his crew what he wanted, and he walked Charlotte to the rail to show her. She looked down several decks, and there was a tiny sailboat bobbing on the water, held fast by a single line. Sitting next to the mammoth motor yacht, it looked like a child's toy in the bathtub.

"What's that?" she asked, intrigued.

"My first love. When I was a kid, I dreamed of having a boat like that. I bought it a few years ago. I take it out when I want to have some fun and need a break. It's easy to sail, although not as easy as you think. I usually take it out alone, but it can hold two people. Want to go for a sail?"

It was much less reassuring than the *Karma*, or his tenders and motorboats, but his love for the little boat shone in his eyes and she didn't want to disappoint him. He had given her great material for her article, and she could see that the little sailboat meant a lot to him. She wanted to be a good sport and not seem like a coward.

"I'll give you a life jacket. It's the sweetest little boat." She smiled at him again. He looked like a kid when he said it.

She put on the bathing suit she had brought with her in her bag, and the life jacket he'd promised. He didn't wear one, and she gingerly stepped into the tiny sailboat with him. He handled the sails expertly and told her where to sit. He sailed it himself but had her help him, giving her a sailing lesson, and as she got the hang of it with him, she enjoyed it. The wind filled the sails and they zipped along. They didn't go far, but he was having a ball and she enjoyed it more than she thought she would and never felt seasick. She felt very accomplished when they sailed back to the *Karma*. Charlotte got back on the platform and Ben handed the lead line to one of the crew and got out. He smiled down at Charlotte then.

"You are a very good sport," he praised her, "and a very good sailor. I figured I'd have to fish you out of the water at least once. Or you'd capsize us." They had never been out of sight of *Karma*, and the crew would have sped to their aid if it was needed, but Ben was a very competent sailor, and Charlotte had been very careful and had done as he told her.

“I actually enjoyed it. I was scared at first, but you handled it masterfully.” He laughed when she said it, and they lay in the sun for the rest of the day. They had leftover fried chicken and meat loaf from the day before for lunch, and Ben loved it. He declared it a perfect Christmas, and she spoke to Hugh again on the phone, which made her happy.

“It’s going to be hard to go back to real life after this,” she said to Ben as they lay side by side on sunbeds. “I feel like Cinderella.” She had such happy memories now of the trip, the gospel service on Christmas Eve, their long conversations and mutual confessions. She liked talking to him. He was brilliant, but explained things plainly so she understood them.

“Then don’t go back,” he said. “I’m going to stay for a while. You’re welcome to stay on the boat if you want.”

His offer startled her, and touched her.

“That’s nice of you, but my managing editor only gave me two days’ vacation for two days’ work. I have to leave in three days, and I have an article to write,” Charlotte reminded him.

“You can write it here and send it in by email. If you can’t change your ticket, I can send you back on my plane.”

“Thank you for the offer, and I mean it, but that’s not how it works. In *Cinderella*, the coach turns back into a pumpkin, not a private jet. Although I like your version better.” Ben was so attractive, and so nice to be with, as it turned out, that she was doing everything she could not to fall for him. He was the subject of her article, and she had a hard-and-fast rule never to get involved with her subjects, which was industry standard, and she knew better than to do that. That was a novice’s mistake, to believe that the subjects were friends after sharing the intimacy of revealing themselves. He had done that as part of the article, not because he was falling in love with her and wanted to be friends. She was twice the age of the women he dated. If she stayed on the boat with him, she would be considered MIA by her bosses, and she didn’t know if she could remain objective and impersonal, and she hadn’t written the article yet. Everything about his offer was wrong, although very appealing.

“I mean it, Charlotte,” he said again. “You’re great company, I love talking to you. I’m going to miss you when you leave, so don’t.”

“Life is never that simple. It would be a breach of my professional ethics if I stayed here with you. I’d lose my objectivity and my credibility. The interview would be polluted and discredited. I’m sure it’s happened before to others, but I could even lose my job.”

“So don’t tell them. Tell them you’re sick.”

“I can’t do that. I can’t lie and play hooky. And it would sacrifice the interview,” she said, smiling at him. He made it sound so simple, but it wasn’t. In his position, he was used to doing whatever he wanted. He made the rules.

“What would you prefer? Writing a ‘non-polluted’ article, or being happy and seizing an opportunity that might never come again?” he asked her.

“The interview,” she said, and he laughed.

“I knew you’d say that. Are you always such a stickler about form and playing by the rules?” He looked at her.

“Yes. My reputation would be at stake, and my honor. I can’t screw around with that.”

“Even if no one knows?” he asked her.

“Even then. I would know.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” Ben said, sounding like a kid for a minute. “It will be boring when you go.”

“That’s nice to know.” Charlotte smiled at him, wondering if they could be friends. She wondered whether, if she saw him in New York, away from the magic of the Caribbean and his boat, she would find him less attractive. It was all she could do to stay on track now, and not give in to his charm. He had a natural simplicity that was incredibly appealing. She had been trying to stay objective since she met him. He was an extraordinarily charismatic man. It was why women fell for him. He was stunningly bright, unconsciously sexy, drop-dead handsome, and a nice person. It was a deadly combination. All she had to do was hold on for two more days, and escape without letting her feelings run wild and her attraction to him show.

She kept telling herself she could do it, but it got harder by the hour. She had only just met him, and her attraction to him didn't even make sense. It was visceral. She felt like she was shaking every time she saw him, and she loved talking to him. She thought that he would think she was an idiot if he knew. Women fell for him all the time. It wasn't new to him, although many of them were after his money, and she wasn't.

"Besides," he said, still trying to convince her to abandon her responsibilities and stay, "you're the only woman I know who likes meat loaf and will admit it. I think you should stay," he said, with a pleading look. "I *want* you to stay," he said, sounding imperious, and she laughed at him.

"I'd lose my job."

"No, you wouldn't, you're the most important writer they've got. I made your writing the article a condition of my doing the interview," he said proudly.

"I know. They told me. That was nice of you."

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"I read your articles. You're never mean. Tough sometimes, and truthful, but not mean. You don't have a chip on your shoulder or an axe to grind. You just call it the way you see it." What he said was true. "And you get me. Most people don't." He had been touched by the way she'd responded to his history when he told her truthfully what his life had been like. "All they see is money when they look at me. They don't care about the rest."

"What if you don't like the article when I write it?" She was worried about it.

"It won't change anything. I've had a lot of bad things written about me. People are jealous, and some hate success. I hope you won't write a bad

one, but it won't kill me if you do." He looked more curious than worried. "Do you think you will?"

"No," she said honestly. "But I write what I see and hear and feel. It's not entirely objective, although I try to be. And I can be wrong."

"I can live with it if you slam me. I'd be disappointed but I wouldn't hate you for it." She nodded, thinking about what he said. So far, most of her impressions were good ones, almost too much so. She didn't want the article to be too sweet, or dull.

After they lay in the sun, not talking for a while, it was comfortable just being with him, even without speaking. When they returned to port, he asked if she wanted to go for a walk. He was feeling restless.

"Sure. Do you want me to go and give you some space?" They had been together all day and he might have other things to do, or need time alone.

"No. I like being with you. I just want to get off the boat for a while." He put on shorts over his bathing trunks, and a T-shirt, and she put on jeans. Their suits had dried in the sun. They walked down the stairs and across the gangway onto the quay. Other people were strolling, from the yachts or to see the yachts and ogle the owners from shore. They were hoping to see something exceptional like furs and tiaras, or people doing things that very rich people did, whatever they thought that was. Charlotte and Ben looked like ordinary people in scruffy clothes as they walked down the quay. They had walked almost all the way to the other end, when Ben saw a familiar person, and turned his face away.

"Oh shit, I know that guy. John Williams. Do you?"

"I know the name. I've never met him," she said vaguely.

"They say he's a monster, the worst man in shipping. He's a natural-born killer. Ruthless. Men have taken their own lives after he destroyed their business. You should interview him."

"If what you say is true, I don't write about guys like him. It depresses me." Ben nodded. They were about to pass each other, and Ben noticed that Williams was with a young girl, maybe his daughter. She was very pretty, with her hand tucked into his arm, and Williams was smiling at her in a

possessive way. Maybe not his daughter, Ben decided. He was thinking it when Williams caught his eye and nodded, and then headed toward him.

"I saw the boat. I didn't know you were here," John Williams greeted him. Ben thought about saying he was sorry to hear about John's wife, but it didn't seem appropriate with a girl with him. They knew each other slightly from yachting circles, not through business.

"I came down for the holidays," Ben responded. "It's nice to get out of New York." Ben introduced Charlotte to him then, and John introduced Lillith. She was watching them with interest, and Ben thought she looked even younger up close, maybe twenty-two at most. The two women started to talk then in soft voices, while the men talked about their boats, and some of the other owners who weren't there.

"I've read all your interviews," Lillith said softly. "I love them."

"Thank you." Charlotte smiled at her. "Do you work for a magazine?"

"I'm an interior designer." She named the firm she worked for and Charlotte pretended to know it, but didn't. She wasn't up on decorators and interior design. It wasn't her field of interest. She interviewed mostly captains of industry, politicians, and heads of corporations. The occasional big fashion designer, or author, or First Lady. Major CEOs in the world, like Ben, were her forte. The women's conversation ended just as Charlotte heard Ben invite John and his "friend" for a drink on the boat at seven. John looked pleased and accepted, and a moment later they walked on, in opposite directions.

"I hope you don't mind," Ben said to her. "I don't usually socialize with him, but I thought you might like to check him out, to see if you want to interview him. He's a very big deal."

"Not as big a deal as you are," she said with a smile. "Lillith Jones seems like a sweet girl. And she's definitely not his daughter," Charlotte said. Lillith had had a good grip on John's arm and never let him go.

"He lost his wife recently. He didn't lose any time."

"She seems nice, though," Charlotte said again. "That's a hell of an age difference, it must be forty years or more. I always think that must make men feel even older, but it doesn't seem to work that way."

“They think youth is contagious and it makes them feel younger, though not with a forty-year difference. I don’t date twelve-year-olds,” Ben said, and Charlotte laughed as they got back to the *Karma*.

“Should I go back to the hotel and change?” she asked him.

Ben looked at her and shook his head. “You look fine, and who cares? In fact, you look better than fine. Very fine.” He grinned at her. He loved her looks and the simple way she dressed. He loved that she wasn’t pretentious and didn’t show off. And she was a beautiful woman.

John and Lillith arrived at the boat exactly on time, and Ben orchestrated it so Charlotte wound up talking to John Williams. She found him cold and arrogant, and he had a hard look in his eyes. She suspected that he was as mean as Ben said, and that he was proud of it. But she noticed that he was very nice to Lillith. She guessed that he liked being “the baddest guy in town,” and didn’t try to hide it. She got the impression that Lillith was crazy about him. She was wearing the same satin slip dress as when they met her that afternoon, with a denim jacket. “Maybe they’re just friends,” Charlotte said later, but it didn’t look like it. Lillith practically swooned when she looked at him. John didn’t look as enamored with her, but he was warm and friendly to her and it was clear that they were some kind of couple, despite the age difference. Charlotte was intrigued by them. “You’re the expert here, is she a gold digger?” she asked Ben after they left.

“No. She’s not sparkly enough, or sexy enough. She looks like Heidi with her grandfather,” Ben said, and Charlotte laughed.

“He looks like what you said. He has the coldest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“I hope she’s not in love with him,” Ben said. “He’ll eat her for lunch.”

“I hope not. She seems like a sweet person. And you’re probably right, by the way. I should interview him, but I wouldn’t enjoy it.”

“He just bought a shipping line and put them out of business. Everyone lost their jobs. The unions are striking because of it. It’s not a big news item yet, but it will be.”

“Not a nice guy,” Charlotte agreed, dismissing him. Nothing about him appealed to her, as a subject or a person.

Ben suggested that he take Charlotte back to her hotel and they have dinner there. His chef had the night off. The interview was over, but they were enjoying each other. “Do you want to go out on the boat tomorrow? We could check out some of the smaller islands. There are some beautiful deserted beaches. We could go swimming there.”

“I’d like that,” she said, smiling at him.

He took her back to her hotel a little while later, where they had dinner outside, and he left her regretfully in the lobby afterward. He kissed her on the cheek, dangerously close to her mouth. He had just found her, and he could already feel her slipping away from him. They only had two days left, her days off she had said, before she went back to New York. She was dreading it too, and trying not to show it.

Charlotte was exhausted when she got back to her room, from trying to appear nonchalant about Ben when she could feel the sheer magnetic force of him pulling her closer day by day. After two full days with him, talking intensely for hours, she felt drunk on his charisma, and he was feeling the same way, having a drink on the deck and thinking about her. She was so firm about her boundaries that it only made him want her more. He was trying to figure out how to break down her walls. And she was in her hotel room, trying to think about how to shore them up. He had no idea how little it would have taken to make them come tumbling down. She thought it was a good thing he didn’t know. She felt as though she was on the brink of making another huge mistake, and she couldn’t let it happen again. She had done that with her married lover, and bitterly regretted it. And Ben had already said that he had never really loved the women in his life. Even married, he only stayed for a year or two, paid his dues, and moved on. He was just another heartbreak waiting to happen, and she’d rather be alone than go through that again. He had given her all the clues she needed to steer clear of him and stand firm. She only had to resist him for two more days, and then she’d be back in New York, write the article, and try to forget him. But she knew she would never forget this Christmas with him,

and the connection between them in the little white church with the gospel choir's voices soaring to the skies. It was one of the moments engraved forever on her heart. But it could never be more than that. She wouldn't let it.

—

While Charlotte was tormenting herself about Ben in her hotel room, desperate to resist his charms, John and Lillith were in the throes of passion in John's cabin on *Lady H*. Lillith had never felt that way about any man. The floodgates of her heart had opened, and she welcomed him as totally into her heart as into her body. He was a skilled and powerful lover, seemingly untouched by age, and she was an innocent compared to him, in every way. Afterward, they lay in bed and talked, and he aroused her again, satisfied her orally, drove her to the edge of sanity, pulled her back repeatedly and did it once more, and then made love to her and roared like a lion when he came. She lay in bed next to him afterward, too breathless to speak. She had never experienced anything like it. It made her dream of the future with him. She was totally abandoned to him and his sexual prowess. She could imagine having babies with him, something she had never wanted before. She was dreaming of a future, a life with him. He told her he loved her while he made love to her and she believed him. She loved him too. She had no doubt that she had met the love of her life, and it was meant to be. Her savior had come. And her defenses were gone. She was his, to do with as he wished.

Chapter 6

Ben sent a crew member to pick Charlotte up the next morning to bring her to the boat. She felt hungover from her fears of the night before. They had magnified while she was sleeping and multiplied like ants, but the moment she saw Ben and he smiled at her, her anxieties scurried away like mice. There was something about him that made her trust him, and then she would remember the things he had said in the interview that were like flashing red stop signs, warning her to steer clear. That he never got attached to any woman, hadn't loved the women in his life. Years before, it would have challenged her, and she would have risen to the bait. Now it terrified her and was like a Greek chorus echoing in her head, warning her. She remembered everything he had said with her perfect recall. But then there were his eyes looking into hers and she got lost in them and she forgot what the warnings were.

"Are you okay? Did you sleep well?" he asked her over coffee on the rear deck. The deckhands were getting the boat ready to leave the dock. The plan was to find a location and drop anchor, and get dropped off to explore the deserted beaches. They were going to use the tender so they could get in and out of small bays and coves. It was another adventure with him.

She assured him that she had slept well, which was a lie, but she couldn't tell him that she had woken countless times in the night, thinking about

him. As it turned out, he wasn't the liar, she was, hiding her powerful attraction to him, but she had to, to protect herself.

One of the crew drove them in a motorboat Ben kept onboard with the toys. They reached a location he liked forty-five minutes later, and Ben had the crewman drop them off in a cove that he liked the look of, and told him to come back in three hours. Ben had a radio with him, so he could contact the boat if they had a problem and needed to be picked up earlier. Some of the small islands and beaches weren't as hospitable as they looked initially, with biting bugs in the sand, or swarms of bees. But this time, the beach was as peaceful as it had looked through his binoculars from the motorboat. They waded in the last few feet, and the boat took off to go back to the mother ship, as Charlotte felt the sand on her feet and smiled at him. The sand was almost pure white, and so fine it felt like satin to the touch. She lay down on it, and Ben smiled at her. She was wearing a red bikini with her hair piled up on top of her head. He sat down next to her, and had to steel himself not to put his hands on her. There was a little lip of rocks at the end of the beach, which shielded them from view from the boat. It was like being alone on their own planet with no one there with them.

He suddenly looked tender as he gazed at her. There was a pleading look in his eyes and he bent down to kiss her. It was the moment they had been avoiding since they met, she out of fear, and he out of terror of losing her if he made the wrong move. But there were no wrong moves now, only right ones. She kissed him just as passionately, and reached her arms up to him where she lay and pulled him to her. With a deft hand, he unhooked her bikini top and bottom, and pulled off his swimming trunks, and they lay naked together on the sand. It was so fine it felt like velvet beneath them as he kissed her, and gently explored her body with his hands, and she caressed him, and the inevitable happened.

He held her for a long time after they made love, looking down at her. She was smiling, and he kissed her tenderly, and bent to kiss her breasts, as she arched toward him again. And the second time was even better. They were making up for all the years they hadn't known each other, when

everything they'd had seemed like counterfeit compared to this. He lay down next to her after they pulled apart, looking into her green eyes.

"I feel like I'm going to break apart I love you so much, and I wanted you so badly," he said, and she nodded.

"Me too," she whispered. "Was this a plan or did it just happen?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "It's what I've wanted to do since I met you, but I was afraid to scare you off."

"I've been trying to resist, and it was impossible," she said, propping herself up on one elbow, her slim body stretched out as he admired her.

"We got lucky," he said, grinning. "These beaches are tricky, I've been bitten by stinging ants on some of them, and had to wait in the water till they picked me up. This is a good one," he said, looking at her. "A very good one." He knew he would always remember this moment.

They swam in the crystal clear turquoise water afterward, and went back to lie on the satin sand, and made love one more time before the crew came back to pick them up. They were back in their bathing suits waiting when they showed up, and had lunch back on the boat.

He made a suggestion over lunch. "Why don't you stay here on the boat for the rest of your stay? You're leaving in two days, and it would be nice to be together now," he said gently, and she looked at him seriously.

"Technically, I'm on vacation now, until I leave. These were the days off they gave me, if I did the interview over Christmas. So what I do is my business. But the truth is that I corrupted the interview as soon as I slept with you. I haven't written the article yet, and no matter how hard I try, my feelings for you will affect it. I'm not going to write a puff piece, but it won't be as crisp and sharp as it would have been if today hadn't happened. I can't do anything about it now. I'll try my damndest to be objective, and I'm not going to tell them. It's none of their business. But I'm guilty of a professional fault now. And wherever I stay won't change that."

"You're an honorable woman, Charlotte Ramsay."

"I try to be, but I blew it this time. I really tried not to let you know how I felt about you. When you told me about your childhood, it pushed me over

the line. I think I fell in love with you as soon as we started the second interview. I don't know when, but I did. But my professional ethics have been severely stretched. I'm going to write the article as soon as I go back, while I can still be somewhat objective." He could see that she was worried about it. She was an ethical woman, and her integrity was important to her. He admired her for it.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte. Maybe we should have waited."

"I couldn't have waited another minute when you kissed me on the beach this morning," she said softly.

"Neither could I. I didn't mean to make it so hard for you professionally."

"It was bigger than both of us," she said, and leaned over and kissed him. "These have been the happiest days of my life," she said, and meant it.

"With more to come," he promised. "Will you really not stay longer?" he asked with a pleading look. He looked like a boy sometimes.

"I can't. I have to write the piece before it gets corrupted any further by my feelings for you." He didn't argue with her. He respected her reason for going back, and everything about her. "I have to be back in the office on December twenty-ninth. They gave me two vacation days and a travel day. I have to go back."

"What are you doing on New Year's Eve?" he asked her.

"Writing about you," she smiled. "That's second best to spending it with you."

"I have some important Zoom meetings set up on the boat. I want to be here for that—I have fewer distractions here to prepare for them—and then I'll fly back. I'm not sure what date yet. And in the meantime, we have tomorrow together. Let's make the best of it. Will you stay with me?"

"What's the old saying about you might as well be hung for stealing a sheep as a lamb? Yes, I will." They stood up and he hugged her close to him, and she felt as though a river was running through her that calmed all her fears and swept her along with it.

They picked up her things at the hotel, and she put them in the cabin next to his. She was faintly embarrassed with the crew, but she loved the idea of

waking up next to Ben for the next two mornings, before she left. It had been an incredible trip, and the final gift was staying on the boat with him, although she doubted that they'd get much sleep, but for better reasons than her anxiety and torment for the last two nights.

They had dinner on the aft deck again, one of the chef's French specialties this time, bouillabaisse and oysters. It was a superb meal, and they sat on the deck for a long time, just talking softly about how strange life was at times, and how unexpected. She felt as though destiny had had a hand in it, and Ben agreed.

Charlotte didn't allow herself to ask any questions on the last day, of herself or him. A cynical side of her could have thought that he had wooed her to assure a good article about him, but she didn't believe that. He might bend the truth occasionally when asked a question he didn't want to answer, but he wasn't a scam artist or an opportunist. She was more worried that this was just a fling for him, his usual *modus operandi*, whether it lasted for a day or two years, which was the longest he said he had ever lasted with any woman. She was deeply afraid of his saying that he never attached to anyone because of his painful childhood. He wasn't someone who stuck around.

Because of the interview, she knew too much about him. He had told her most of his secrets. Some of them she wouldn't include in the article, they were too personal, but most of what he had said was on the record, and she would write the piece accordingly. She owed it to her magazine to be truthful, to the best of her abilities, such as they were now. She wondered if she could get back to an objective place when she sat down to write it. She wondered if she should tell Henry the truth. He could reassign it to someone else if he wanted. But Ben's only condition had been that she had to be the writer. They were in a tight place on all sides.

The last day on the boat together was magical. She had woken up in bed next to him that morning. They showered together and made love. She had waffles for breakfast, which she hadn't done in years, and he had fried eggs and bacon and sausages, and then they took off to their private beach and made love again, and it was even better than before.

They spent their last night talking and listening to music, and they danced on deck. They played all of his old favorites and hers, and many were the same, since they were only three years apart, and they had a lot of history and culture in common. He tried to explain in detail some of what he did with computers, and most of it was beyond her, but it was fascinating. He was way out of her league. She felt as though they were both storing memories, and he promised to get back to New York as soon as he could.

They hardly slept on the last night. The boat motored to St. Martin early that morning and he drove her to the airport in the red Ferrari he kept onboard. She was wearing jeans and boots and a T-shirt, and carrying her down jacket again, and he was wearing shorts and a T-shirt. He kissed her and she walked to security and turned one last time to see him. He was smiling and in spite of the tears in her eyes, she could see that there were tears in his eyes too. Neither of them fully trusted Fate to bring them together again. It had been cruel to them before. But they agreed that if they had met, there had to be a reason, and it was a reward of some kind. Out of superstition, they didn't make plans for when they got home. He lived in the Dakota on Central Park West and she had her apartment in the West Village. She was sure they would make some kind of plan. He told her he was flying to meet the boat in Monaco in May, for the Grand Prix race. The *Karma* would be back in Europe by then. He made her promise to go with him, and she said she would.

She had thanked the captain before she left the boat, and he said he hoped to see her again, and she said she hoped so too. Those were the only promises she made, not to anger the Fates.

—

It was freezing cold when Charlotte got to New York, and there was an inch of ice and snow on the ground. She texted Ben that she had arrived safely, then sat quietly in her living room for a while, thinking about him. She couldn't imagine how they would put their lives together. He was a

billionaire, and she couldn't afford his lifestyle, but she didn't want him paying her way. She didn't want to be a burden to him, or another gold digger. He had told her they'd work it out, but she didn't see how. Their lives were light-years apart in every way.

Part of her regretted sleeping with him, because of the impact it would have on the interview and her ethics, but the other part of her had no regrets. She knew that for that moment, for those days, whatever happened later, she loved him.

She pulled all her notes and her research notebook out of her suitcase, read all of it, and sat down to write the article that night. She texted Henry the next morning and told him she was writing the article at home, and he texted back that he approved. He assumed it had gone well since he hadn't heard from either of them after she went back for a second try.

Ben called her and she didn't answer the call. She didn't want to speak to him now until she finished the piece. She couldn't have his voice in her head, telling her he loved her. She had to write about him as the man he had been before they fell in love with each other. She was trying to avoid the interview being colored by what had come later, although it would be, inevitably. But she wanted it to be as pure as she could make it. She worked on it nonstop for three days, living on coffee and whatever she found in her kitchen cupboards. She didn't leave the apartment or unpack her suitcase. She wrote everything he had told her, the good and the bad, the things that showed what a good man he was, and his flaws, the ones he admitted and the ones she saw. He came alive in what she had written, and she thought the reader could see that she loved him. But it was an honorable, accurate piece, and she was proud of it when she finished.

She looked at her watch when she knew she had completed it.

It was five minutes to midnight on New Year's Eve. She had ended the year with him, and she was happy with what she'd written. She hoped he would be too. She read it again that night, and the next morning. And she didn't email it to Henry. She wanted to hand it to him after the New Year's Day holiday.

Ben had been sending her texts for three days, frantic to talk to her, and she finally texted back.

“I did it. It’s a good piece. I love you.”

And then she went to bed and slept for twelve hours. Her mind had cleared after she wrote it, and she knew what she had to do now.

—

Lillith’s final days with John on the boat were the sweetest time she’d ever lived. She felt like she was floating on air. John had talked about the future several times. He talked about making plans with her for next summer. He wanted to reopen his house in the Hamptons for them, and spend a month on *Lady H* in Saint-Tropez with her. It sounded like a dream to her. He was everything she had ever wanted, and she was about to have all of it with him.

John told Lillith the day before she left St. Barth to go back to work that if they were going to travel together and spend time in the Hamptons and the south of France, it didn’t make sense for her to have a job, and she needed to give it up soon. He said Helen had never worked. Lillith couldn’t afford not to and was embarrassed to say so. He didn’t mention marriage, but he implied it. But she needed her job, unless he supported her, which was humiliating to say, so she didn’t. She wasn’t a gold digger and didn’t want money from him, but she needed her job in order not to be. She couldn’t quit. She supposed he would address the issue eventually. She would have no income of her own at all if she didn’t work. She had no independent source of money, and at twenty-seven, her parents didn’t support her. They hadn’t since college.

They talked about her apartment too, and John said that she would be moving into the Trump Tower with him soon, and should start going through her things, deciding what she wanted to keep and bring with her. He said she could put the rest in storage, or give it away. He sounded sure and definite. Her whole life had changed in the space of a week, and she had so much to do when she went home, to prepare for her life with him.

He made it clear that he wanted her available to him, not working and installing someone's apartment when he needed her. John said that he expected Lillith to be the emotional support to him that Helen had been, and they were big shoes to fill. He said Helen had been a saint, which was a lot to live up to, but he seemed sure she would. He was moving ahead at breakneck speed. Her head was spinning.

It was almost as if she had eloped when she was with him, and now she was going home to start a life with him. She didn't know where to begin taking her old life apart. It sounded scary but exciting, and she was eager to do it, to prove to him that she could be a strong support, and she would learn how to meet all his needs in time.

He warned her that Gabby would probably be difficult in the beginning, but he was sure she'd come around. She was already difficult, and Lillith couldn't see how much more difficult she could be, but she was determined to help them make peace. Anything was possible.

John said goodbye to Lillith on the boat in St. Martin, and the crew took her to the airport. He didn't go with her. He had conference calls coming in.

"Thank you for the most beautiful Christmas of my life," she said to him, and he smiled at her.

"I had a wonderful time too," he said, and kissed her. She looked more childlike than ever with eyes full of dreams and her trust in him. He loved how trusting she was, and how much faith she had in him. She didn't doubt him, and was ready to be the woman he wanted and needed now, whatever that meant. She was willing to follow him blindly. "I'll be home in a few days. I'll call you when I'm back," he said, kissing her one last time on the deck, and she crossed the gangway to the quay, back into the real world. She had been living a dream with him for eight days, and her time with him was like diamonds in her pocket as she left. He waved as she stood on the quay looking up at him, and when the van drove away, he walked into his study and turned his computer on. His face set in hard lines. He had work to do, and decisions to make. He had countless reports to read, and forwarded them to the purser to print them. There was another ugly story in the *Times* about the shipping line he'd bought, and the men he had fired, with

interviews with some of them. He had seventy-six important emails to deal with, and a class action suit against him. None of it frightened him, but he had to deal with it. By the time Lillith's plane took off for New York, she was the last thing on his mind. She was a child compared to all else in his life. An enchanting child, but for John, business always came first.

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Chapter 7

Charlotte called Henry the day after New Year's, and he was excited to hear from her. She had only sent him a text to tell him that she had arrived back in New York and that the interview had gone well, after he had intervened to urge Ben to be truthful with her, and he had been. Ben had bared his soul to her, some of which she hadn't included in the article, because it was too personal and she wanted to protect him. And he had told her some of those things after the interview, speaking to her as a friend, not an interviewer, which she had respected scrupulously.

"How was it? How is it? Did you finish the piece?" Henry asked her eagerly.

"I did. I finished it five minutes before midnight on New Year's Eve."

"Are you happy with it?"

"Very."

"Email it to me. I can't wait to read it." Henry sounded excited and enthusiastic.

"I want to bring it to you personally, by hand."

"Is there a problem? Will he sue us?"

"He has no reason to. He won't sue us," she reassured him.

"Is he as crazy as they say?"

“Not a bit. He’s entirely sane. He’s brilliant, probably a genius. I just want to tell you about the interview, in person. I said more good things than bad about him. There aren’t many bad things to say. I was entirely honest. I’m sure he’s not easy to work for. He admits that he’s tough. He works hard and expects everyone to do the same. He’s probably not very patient. And he admits that he’s addicted to gold diggers. They’re greedy and they sue, but he seems like a generous man. He had a hideous childhood, and in spite of that, he’s a decent, kind human being.”

“It sounds like you like him.”

“I do. A lot.”

“Well, I didn’t expect that. Guys who’ve made a billion dollars, several billion, aren’t usually nice men.”

“This one is. When can I bring the article to you?”

“Anytime you want.”

“I stayed home to proof it again this morning. It’s too noisy in the office, with too many interruptions. It’s clean. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Henry was on the phone when Charlotte walked into his office. The door was open and he looked relaxed after the holiday. She closed the door behind her, and sat down to wait for him. He hung up two minutes later and smiled at her.

“You got a nice tan.”

She held on to the piece for a minute and looked serious. “There’s something I have to tell you about the interview. And I’ll respect whatever you decide. I slept with Ben Sharpe,” she said simply, and Henry stared at her, taken aback. She had never done that before, or at least had never confessed it to him. She looked deadly serious while he studied her face.

“Did he force you? Is this a me-too issue? Did he drug or rape you?” He looked shocked, and then relieved when she shook her head.

“Not at all. It was entirely consensual, but ethically, we could be accused of it coloring the piece and polluting it. It puts my ethics and my objectivity in question. If you want to pull the piece, take my name off, or start over and assign it to someone else, it’s entirely up to you.”

“His condition was that you do it.” Henry suddenly wondered if Ben had slept with her to soften her up so she’d write a favorable article. But he didn’t think so. Ben wasn’t the type for that.

“So I did. I shouldn’t have slept with him before I wrote it, but I did. It was poor judgment on my part. It happened on the two days I was off, not the days I interviewed him.” Henry’s face relaxed as he watched her.

“For God’s sake, Charlie, don’t be such a purist. How many times do you think that happens? We assign a piece, the subject and the writer get drunk together and wind up in bed, or they do it for the hell of it cold sober, or a writer gets dazzled by some movie star, male or female. Or they fall madly in love and out of love by the next morning. It happens all the time, and I’m sure most of them never tell me, unless they brag about it. I know your ethics are squeaky clean, but you’re the first writer who’s ever walked in here and confessed as though they’d committed murder. No one has the ethics you do. This wasn’t a crime, and I’m happy you relaxed, let your hair down, and had a good time for a change. You deserve it. And if he’s a nice guy, better yet. This isn’t the Vatican, or the CIA on a federal case. You interviewed a guy and slept with him. So what? It’s not a big deal. Were there paparazzi? Did someone see you?”

“No. He’s very discreet. We both were. I stayed with him for the last two nights on my days off. I checked out of the hotel, so they wouldn’t charge you for the room since I wasn’t there.”

“Terrific. So you even saved me some money. Thank you.” He smiled at her. She had more integrity than anyone else he knew.

“What if he doesn’t like the article? It’s fairly personal,” she said, looking worried.

“Did you say in the article that you slept with him, or that he forced you in some way?”

“Of course not.”

“If he hates the piece, we’ll send him a nice apology letter. And he’s not going to sue us for being too nice. Relax. Thank you for telling me. I’m not worried about it. Now give me the piece, have a drink, and relax. Are you

seeing him again or was it just a fling?” he asked. “That’s off the record, I’m not supposed to ask that.”

“It wasn’t a fling, but I don’t think I’ll see him. It could still be an issue about the article’s objectivity and credibility. I could be accused of withholding negative information, although I didn’t. I addressed some of his less appealing traits, although there aren’t many. But he said clearly in the interview that he doesn’t get attached to anyone, that his relationships and marriages never last more than two years, or considerably less. And he never loved any of the women he dated and married. He had a horrific childhood, and I think he’s a heartbreak waiting to happen. I’d rather it not be mine. I’ve been there before. If he hasn’t gotten attached to anyone by the time he’s fifty-two, he’s not going to be any different with me. I’d rather quit while I’m ahead. I spent four incredible days with him. It was like a dream. But I don’t want to get hurt again. A guy who knows he has attachment issues isn’t a good bet for a relationship. I’ve learned that the hard way before.”

“Maybe you’ll heal him. It happens.”

“And he likes twenty-five-year-olds.”

“So do I. So does everybody. My wife is fifty-seven and I think she’s beautiful. I wouldn’t trade her for a twenty-five-year-old on a bet. It sounds like this guy has been floundering for his whole life. He had a shit childhood, and you say he’s a genius. That’s not easy. But maybe it’s worth a shot, and seeing him a few times to check it out. Life is a heartbreak waiting to happen, Charlotte. It happens to us all, to some degree. And you will get hurt again. We all will. You can’t live without getting hurt. What do you have if you don’t give him a chance? Nothing. Your bad memories of the last bad relationship. You have to get out there again, and take a chance on him. There was obviously something between you or you wouldn’t have slept with him. I know you.”

“I’m scared,” Charlotte said as her eyes filled with tears, and Henry leaned forward and patted her hand.

“He’s used to women taking advantage of him, because of what he has. You’re not like them. You’re different. You’re a real person. He’s probably

never met one of those. You might be just what he needs or has been looking for, and he doesn't know it. And he may be what you need. For what it's worth, I'd say be brave and give it a chance, and if he's a jerk, you thank him for the fling and move on. It's better than hiding or letting life pass you by because you're afraid to get hurt. You only get one go-around here. Don't waste it. You'll regret it one day, if you don't give him a chance," he said wisely.

She handed him the article and wiped her eyes, and he looked at her over his glasses.

"I'll let you know what I think of him after I read the piece. I'm sure it's very good, and not corrupted. I have faith in your objectivity. You're a hell of a great writer. Don't sell yourself short. And you're probably the most honest woman I've ever known. Thank you for the confession. I absolve you." He waved a vague sign over her. "Now go have some fun, and give the poor bastard a chance." She wasn't convinced but she was relieved, which made her feel better. "I'm going to read the piece now. I'll let you know what I think, of him and your article." Charlotte stood up then and thanked him. Henry always made her feel better when she was worried. He waved her out, and she left his office as he started reading.

She went to her office and waited to hear from him. Henry called her twenty minutes later.

"The article is brilliant. And he sounds interesting. I think he'll like it. You really got under his skin and into his head. Your description of his childhood and youth made me feel sick. I nearly cried. It's a beautiful, compassionate, sensitive, intelligent, first-rate article, so stop beating yourself up."

"I hope he likes it."

"Trust me. He will." Her admiration and respect for Ben Sharpe shone like bright sunlight and lit up the piece.

Ben texted her again that afternoon, and Charlotte didn't answer him until she got home. She emailed him the article and told him she had turned it in. It still had to be fact-checked by the copy editors, proofed, and approved.

He answered her immediately. “Does that mean you’ll see me when I get home?” he asked her.

“Read the piece and see if you like it,” she responded.

He wrote to her an hour later. “It’s fantastic. I love it. It made me cry. I love you,” he said, and she thanked him. She didn’t know what to do next or what to say to him. She thought of Henry saying that life was a heartbreak waiting to happen, and real love was worth it. She knew he was right. But she was afraid to sign up. She’d had enough heartbreaks for one lifetime. She didn’t want more. And Ben couldn’t attach. He said so himself. So what good was that? Why would she be different than the women he hadn’t loved before?

She didn’t hear from him again that night. She guessed that he was thinking. They both were. What had happened in St. Barth had been beautiful. Why spoil the memory of it with a broken heart to follow? It sounded like a sure thing to her if she got involved with him, but she already was.

Ben sent three dozen red roses to her apartment the next day. The card read, THANK YOU FOR THE BEAUTIFUL ARTICLE. I LOVE YOU, BEN. She put them on her dining table and sent him a text to thank him. She was hiding, just as Henry had said, and Ben could sense it, but he wasn’t sure. She wasn’t making firm plans to see him, and she was evasive whenever he mentioned it. He was eager to get back to New York and hold her in his arms again.

—

Coming home was brutal for Lillith. It was freezing and there was ice on the ground. She looked around her apartment and wondered if she should start packing, or wait until John got home and ask him how much she could bring to his apartment. She didn’t want to crowd him, and wondered if she should sell her furniture. Storing it would be expensive and she couldn’t afford it. It was all secondhand anyway. She had to give notice at her apartment, but she didn’t know when John wanted her to move in. When she went to work, she learned that her boss’s mother had died suddenly over

the holidays from a stroke. Lillith didn't want to add to her misery by telling her she was leaving. Two days later, her boss fell on the ice and broke her hip. She had surgery and was in the hospital with a hip replacement, so Lillith couldn't leave her now. It felt like the fates were conspiring against her to slow things down.

She wanted to call John to tell him, but he had told her he would be busy with back-to-back Zoom meetings and she didn't want to disturb him. He had been on vacation when she was there, but the holidays were over. She knew he was coming back the week after New Year, but he hadn't said what day.

She checked her texts and emails constantly all day every day. Every half hour she would check again for a message, but there wasn't any, and he hadn't called her. She knew he would, and she wanted to be ready for his call when he got back, and to move quickly in response to him. She made no plans and sat in her apartment, waiting, every night. The silence was painful, but she knew he was a busy man.

She called him over the weekend, and he didn't answer. She left him a message on his cell, and he didn't return the call.

By Monday, Lillith was panicked. She'd been home for a week and John hadn't returned. She thought something must have gone wrong with his meetings, and he was trying to fix it and too busy to call. He was a controversial person, dealing with millions and fighting with unions. She had to be patient. Normal rules didn't apply to him, but she was scared anyway. Her cellphone never left her hand after that. She checked it for text and email dozens of times a day, every few minutes. She sent him a text asking him to reassure her that he was okay. She had no one to call to ask. Two weeks after she got home, she called his office and was put through to his secretary, who said Mr. Williams was in a meeting and couldn't be disturbed. Lillith was shocked to discover John was in New York and hadn't called her. She felt sick. Why hadn't he called, at least to tell her he was busy but alive and in New York? She alternated between rage and despair for another week. She left five messages that week and sent three texts, asking if he was okay. Her heart felt like it was breaking. When she left

John on the boat he said he loved her, wanted her to move in with him and quit her job, and now he wouldn't speak to her. Lillith couldn't understand why he didn't tell her what was going on. He was back in the city and hadn't called. She had no explanation for his silence. He couldn't have changed his mind after she left. She hadn't done anything wrong and hadn't bothered him. She had waited for him to contact her before she panicked. She wondered if he was depressed or if Gabby had upset him, if he had told her about them and she had exploded and scared him off.

No explanation Lillith came up with made sense. She was so nervous and upset that she had hardly eaten, had lost eight pounds, and couldn't sleep at night. He was simply gone. From I love you to nothing within weeks. Ghosted.

People at work noticed how pale and unhappy she looked and how nervous she was. It looked serious, and she was so visibly upset no one dared ask her what had happened.

Her mother had had the twins the night she came home. She and Zack were wildly excited. The babies were two weeks early but healthy. They had named them Audrey and Alexander. Ginny, her mother, was trying to nurse them both. They were home from the hospital a week later with two baby nurses, two relief nurses, and a lactation expert. Her mother said Lillith had to come to see how beautiful they were, and she promised to come soon, and never told her about John or how upset and confused she was. Her mother was totally absorbed by the twins, and didn't notice the despair in Lillith's voice. She sent Lillith photos of the babies every few hours, and each time Lillith nearly jumped out of her skin thinking the text was from John. But it was only her mother with more baby pictures.

Her father had sprained his ankle on the last day of skiing and he was staying at his current girlfriend's apartment, and she was nursing him. Whatever else was happening in Lillith's life, there were no messages from John and she wondered if she would hear from him again. It looked like she wouldn't, and she wondered what had gone wrong, why he had changed his mind so suddenly and cut her out of his life. She felt constantly sick over it, heartsick and guilty. She must have done something very wrong, and she

couldn't figure out what it was. She had never had a more painful three weeks. She felt as though her heart was bleeding somewhere deep inside her. She had never felt so abandoned, so terrified, so bereft, and so alone. It was as though their time on the boat had never happened.

John came back to New York three days after Lillith. The week with her had been wonderful but suffocating, and he needed a breather after she left. He was intending to call her, maybe at the end of the week. And he was in no rush. He knew she was there if he wanted her, and his silence would only make her want him more. He wasn't worried about losing her. She was his for the taking.

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Isabelle got back from California the day after his return. She called him and he was happy to hear from her. She always sounded poised and happy, and she had a light touch he enjoyed. She was his closest friend after Helen, and had been Helen's too. At times they were interchangeable in his mind.

"How was St. Barth?" Isabelle asked him in a sympathetic tone.

"It was very hard. It just isn't the same without Helen. Everywhere I look I see her and something she loved. Maybe I should sell the boat," he said, sounding depressed. She was shocked because she knew how much he loved *Lady H*.

"Don't make any rash decisions," she urged him. "You'll feel differently in a few months." It saddened her to hear him so unhappy. "Do you want to come for dinner?" She had a busy social life, had had a wonderful marriage,

and had adjusted to her widowhood smoothly, thanks to her friends and the boards she was on. She filled her time well, and was content.

“I’d love it.” John responded to Isabelle’s invitation warmly.

She glanced at her calendar and saw an opening.

“How’s Friday? That’s in two days, will you be okay until then?” She was seriously worried about him. He sounded so down.

“Perfect. Just knowing I’m going to see you will cheer me up.”

“Good. Just the two of us, nothing fancy, a simple kitchen dinner,” she said brightly. She was a positive person and an independent woman. She always had something cheerful to say, and a new project to report to him.

“Can I bring anything?”

“Just you.” He brought a bottle of good French wine anyway, an Haut-Brion he knew she loved, and she was pleased when she saw it and thanked him with a hug. “You look well,” she said to him. “You’ve got a great tan.” He looked better than she’d expected and very handsome and healthy, better than he sounded and said he was. He said the holidays had been brutal without Helen, which was understandable, and to be expected.

“The wind was good and we sailed a lot. It was the evenings that killed me. I miss her so much.” He looked devastated and she hugged him again and he held her tight. She felt sorry for him, and was upset that he wasn’t recovering better. She kissed him on the cheek, and served him the simple dinner her housekeeper had left them, and they each had a glass of the wine he brought. It was exceptional.

They sat in the living room after dinner, and he sat next to her on the couch and put an arm around her. “You don’t know what it means to me to see you, Isabelle. You’re my lifeline.” She smiled at him and gently touched his cheek. She wanted to help him but didn’t know how. And as she looked at him, he leaned toward her and kissed her, tenderly at first, and then passionately, and gently touched her breast. She was shocked at first, and didn’t know what to do. She hadn’t been involved with a man since Steve had died, and she was comfortable alone, surrounded by her friends. But John’s searing kiss suddenly struck a chord of memory, and she found herself kissing him back and responding to his touch. He gently picked her

up off the couch, walked to her bedroom and laid her gently on the bed, and before she knew what was happening, they were making love. He was an artful lover. He awakened feelings in her that she had long forgotten and no longer missed, but suddenly it was all back. He was a wonderful lover, and she lay at peace in his arms afterward, wondering how it had happened. She realized that his loneliness had overpowered him. She had been Helen's closest friend, so she was a link to Helen in John's mind.

He looked at Isabelle tenderly with an air of confession. "I've been in love with you for years. I could never do that to Helen, but I've wanted you for as long as I can remember. And she and Steve are no longer here. You were all I could think of during the holidays." It was flattering and she was touched, but it came as a surprise. She enjoyed John as a friend and didn't want to spoil it. He had advanced far into unexplored territory and Isabelle wasn't sure what to do now. She wasn't even sure what she wanted herself. He was opening doors she had closed a long time ago and she was comfortable with having closed.

"We need to think about this," she said gently. "It's a big step, and I don't want to upset Gabby."

"I think she'd be pleased. But you're right. I think we should keep this quiet for a while."

"I agree. John, are you serious about this? Or are you just lonely? I don't want to start something complicated we'll both regret when you're feeling better. I haven't wanted a man in my life since Steve died. But this is different, we know each other so well as friends." It was like an extension to their friendship, an added dimension.

"It is different," John agreed. "It's a dream I never thought would come true, and now it has." She smiled at him in the soft light of the lamp next to her bed. She was still beautiful at sixty-five, and he had wanted her for a long time. That much was true. Being with her was like being with Helen again, they were so similar.

"I won't ever regret this," he said, looking emotional. "And I hope you won't either. What are you doing this weekend?" he asked her, lying naked in her bed. He was a handsome bull of a man, and Helen had commented a

few times that he was very sexual. Isabelle knew now that was true. He was already aroused and wanted to make love again, and this time Isabelle wasn't startled and knew what to expect, and was a more willing and sensual partner than the first time. It had all come back to her very quickly, faster than she expected. But the situation with John had surprised her. She had never been attracted to him as a man. It had never occurred to her before. She loved Steve, and John was her best friend's husband, which she respected, even now.

"Do you feel guilty toward Helen?" she asked him afterward.

"No, because I've wanted you for so long. It's taken me this long to get up the courage to tell you. I couldn't hold back any longer. It was all I could think of in St. Barth. Will you come to the Hamptons with me this weekend? There's no one out there this time of year. No one will see us, if we're going to keep it quiet for a while."

"I think we should, out of respect for Helen," she said solemnly. "At least we should wait until the one-year anniversary before we share this with our friends. It's only another two months," she said respectfully.

"We can stay at my place in the Hamptons if you want," he offered.

"Or mine." She smiled at him and he kissed her, unraveled himself from her sheets, and stood up next to the bed, in all his naked glory. She went to put a robe on and tied it around herself as he smiled at her. It was a pale pink satin dressing gown that flowed down her body.

"God, you are so beautiful," he said, admiring her. No man had said that to her in ten years. It was an adjustment. She had never considered John lustfully, and it was a huge change thinking of him that way now, but not an unpleasant one. It was just new and different, and she needed to give it some careful thought. He had taken her by surprise. His passion was completely unexpected. "What time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?" he asked her, and she thought about it. He acted as though their being together was totally normal and a given now. Full speed ahead, like the force of nature he was.

"Eleven," she answered, still ambiguous about it.

“Perfect,” he said, and kissed her, and then he dressed and she walked him to the front door. There was an unreal feeling to the entire evening.

“I’m not sure if I should be saying hello or goodbye,” she said, teasing him, and he laughed. She wondered if Helen would have been upset about it. She wasn’t sure. Helen had adored him, but he was right that both Helen and Steve were gone and he and Isabelle were both very much alive. She showered, thinking about him after he left. She wasn’t sure how she felt about it yet, but suddenly the thought of a weekend with him in the Hamptons added new excitement to her life, so maybe it was a good thing.

She got a huge bouquet of red roses from him at nine o’clock the morning after they slept with each other, and a card that said, THANK YOU. I LOVE YOU, J. He arrived promptly at eleven to drive her to the Hamptons. She was wearing a sable parka and Chanel jeans, a beige sweater, and brown suede Hermès boots. She was always exquisitely chic and it excited him to be with her. They talked and laughed all the way to the country, and decided to stay at her house because his hadn’t been used in so long, nearly a year, and the water had been turned off. His property manager and a cleaning crew had been taking care of it ever since Helen became too sick to go at the end. John hadn’t been there since then. Using Isabelle’s house would be easier, and she had her property manager get the house clean and have the heater turned on for the weekend.

When they got to Isabelle’s house, the help was off for the weekend. John built a fire in the living room, and they spent most of the weekend in bed with sensual pleasures. They bought groceries and cooked, and Isabelle remembered all too well now how much fun it was to have a man in her life. She was glowing on the way home. She had thought of Helen but felt less guilty. They were alive and Helen wasn’t.

“Sex suits you, you’re an incredible lover,” he said, and she smiled at him.

“So are you, and tireless, I might add.”

“I have to go home and charge my batteries tonight. You wore me out,” he said playfully with a glance at her as he drove them back to the city on Sunday.

“I have some paperwork to do,” she said. She had forgotten what it was like to have a man around all the time, eating up her time, and keeping her from things she needed to do. She had been planning to get to paperwork for the accountant on the weekend, but she couldn’t with John around. He needed constant attention. He said he had been starving for sex and human contact.

He dropped her off at her building and kissed her, she waved, and he drove home. There was something he wanted to do too. He was in a hurry when he got to his apartment. He called Lillith as soon as he walked in. She sounded like a voice from the tomb and she was shocked when she heard him. It had been two weeks since she’d left him in St. Barth, and silence ever since. His voice sounded deep, sexy, and remorseful when he spoke to her.

“I know this sounds awful, but I’ve been buried in business problems since you left, serious ones. I’ve been trying to avoid a lawsuit. I wanted to get everything squared away before I saw you. I lost track of time and it took longer than I thought. I’ve missed you incredibly,” he said, sounding as upset as Lillith.

“I’ve left you a million messages. You could have called or sent a text,” she said to him. “I thought it was over. I’ve been heartbroken.” She sounded beaten instead of angry. Crushed instead of strident. It had been the worst three weeks of her life.

“I’m so sorry,” he said gently. “I’m back now. The business problem isn’t solved, but I’m working on it. I couldn’t stay away from you a minute longer. Can I come over?”

“Now?” She smiled when he asked. She didn’t know if she believed his story, but hearing his voice, and his wanting to come over, immediately relieved three weeks of her intense agony. She felt as though she could breathe again. Her anger and despair melted like mist. He was back. He still loved her. And it wasn’t over. The nightmare had ended. It was easier than he thought it would be. And he had Isabelle now too, which made life much more interesting and exciting for him. Two beautiful women who wanted him. One of them desperately.

“I love you,” he said convincingly to Lillith, with lust in his voice. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

He drove to her apartment and she was waiting for him, with bright eyes and a smile in her pale face. He could see how much weight she had lost in her agony. She seemed even smaller than before. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her to her bed and began making love to her immediately. She was more willing than ever, and starving for him and the reassurance he offered just by being there. She was grateful for relief after three weeks of torture.

It was a game John loved to play, going from one woman’s bed to another in rapid succession within hours. He hadn’t done it in a while and had missed it. He had forgotten how exciting it could be to have two women in his thrall, wanting him. It excited him and made him feel even more powerful. He loved making men cry, and making women plead and beg for him and desire him. He had never made love to Lillith as intensely as he did that night. Isabelle had set the stage for him perfectly that weekend, and Lillith was reaping the benefits of it. They were both easy victims, Isabelle because she was so kind and genuinely cared about him, and Lillith because she was so in love with him. It was a scenario he loved, and it excited him sexually even more.

When he’d had enough of her, Lillith curled up in John’s arms with a sigh and fell asleep, and he lay next to her and smiled. He had played the game with Helen for years with assorted partners, and only once she had suspected something and he convinced her otherwise. It was a chess game for him. And now Lillith was the pawn and Isabelle the dignified queen, and he was the king of them all. And a very dark king, which excited him even more. He had been so bored for the past year, but now his life was fun again. It was one of his favorite games.

Chapter 8

Ben had come back to New York as quickly as he'd said he would, as soon as he finished the meetings he had set up from the boat, and met with the local boat builder for some repairs before heading back to the Mediterranean in spring. He was diligent about maintaining the boat in perfect condition. The M.Y. (Motor Yacht) *Karma* was his pride and joy. She had been a showpiece famous in yachting circles the world over ever since he had her built in a famous Dutch shipyard.

When he got back to New York, Charlotte had finished the article. She said it wasn't considered complete until Henry had approved it and the fact-checking had been done. She refused to see Ben, and was adamant about it, in a voice that alternated between anxious and cold. Ben hadn't expected that and was surprised and upset. He had been dreaming of seeing her since she left. He felt like an abandoned, disappointed child when she wouldn't.

"I can't," she said simply.

"Why? I don't understand. Everything was fine when you left St. Barth. What happened when you got back?"

"It didn't happen when I got back. It happened when we were together. When I slept with you, I corrupted the piece. No one will ever believe I was objective when I wrote it, after I slept with you."

“They’ll never know. Who’s going to tell them that? No one knows, and you’re a master professional. I’m sure you wrote it objectively even then. It was very clean and honest when I read it.”

She hesitated for a moment and told him the truth. “I told my editor I’d slept with you when I handed it in. I couldn’t not do that. I offered to take my name off it, or to have him reassign it, and he didn’t want to do either one.”

“Neither do I. It’s a fantastic piece, Charlotte.”

“Thank you,” she said, sounding sad. “I just know it wasn’t right, so I told him, in case it ever comes out later.”

“Did he threaten to fire you?” he asked, concerned for her.

“No, he was great about it. He said it probably happens all the time and no one ever knows. I really tried hard not to let it color what I wrote about you.” But she knew it had anyway, because she loved him. She still felt guilty about it. She had lost her mind for a minute. And regained it when she got back to New York.

“I’m proud of that piece and you should be too,” he said warmly.

“I am,” she said with a sigh. “I’m just not proud of myself. I fell short of my own standards.”

“We did it and it’s done. We didn’t hurt anyone. Neither of us is married, or even attached to someone. We’re both free people. Something wonderful happened, for both of us. We can’t just ignore that, and what you wrote is magnificent. No one has ever said things like that about me. I cried when I read it. Now can’t we just go on with our lives? A miracle happened to us. You can’t deny it.”

“I know, but I remember what you said, that you never get attached, that your relationships have a shelf life of less than two years. And when it’s over, you pay up and walk away. I can’t do that. I got in a terrible mess once with a married man, six years of lies, pain, and disappointment. He wasn’t just cheating on his wife, he cheated on me too. It took me five years to get over it when I finally had the guts to end it. I can’t do that again,” she said honestly. He could hear the sorrow in her voice. She was grieving him.

“You won’t have to, I’m not a cheater, not when I’m in a committed relationship. I don’t lie. I didn’t cheat on the women I married. I got tired of them, so I left them before I cheated. I didn’t love them anymore, and probably never did. And they didn’t really love me either. They were using me and I let them. That has nothing to do with you. You are the opposite of a user. You’re a real person and I love you.” He was distraught at her refusal to see him. “You’re the first truly honest and honorable person in my life.”

“What if you get bored with me and get claustrophobic and want out? I can’t put my heart on the line again.” Once she got home, the bad memories of the past had come rushing back to her, in spite of Henry’s encouragement to try again. The pain of the past was still vivid.

“Our hearts are already on the line, or at least mine is, and I thought yours was too. It was when you left St. Barth,” he reminded her. “I couldn’t wait to get back to you.”

“My heart is still on the line,” she admitted. “That’s why I can’t see you. If I didn’t care, I would.”

“We both care,” he reminded her. “I love you.”

“You don’t even know me. We don’t know each other. You might get tired of me even faster than the others. I lead a small life, Ben. And look at yours. You’re a genius and one of the most successful men on the planet. I can’t keep up with that and your lifestyle, and I would never let you pay for everything, that wouldn’t be right.”

“Good. I just got a hundred-and-twelve-thousand-dollar repair bill for *Karma*, before she goes back to the Med. You owe me fifty-six thousand dollars,” he said and she laughed.

“You know what I mean.” She felt beaten before she started. Her fears had taken over when she got back to New York. He could hear it now, and he was sad for them both. He didn’t want them to lose what they had. It was a miracle that they had found each other. She was the best person he had ever known, and he wanted to live up to the standard she had set and be worthy of her.

“Not everything is divided equally in life. One person loves more than the other, one person can afford more than the other. They make up for it in

other ways,” he said reasonably, and what he said made sense.

“I don’t want to be one of your gold diggers, or have people think I am, or worse, have you think I am.”

“How much can it cost? We both love meat loaf and fried chicken. We can promise to eat only in diners for the rest of our lives and go dutch treat. I’d like it a lot better than the dinner parties I go to. Charlotte, be fair to both of us. Just see me and we’ll talk.” But she knew that if she saw him, they’d be in bed in five minutes and she’d feel guilty later. He blinded her with the force of their feelings. When they were together, there were irresistible forces holding them tight that neither of them could resist. They had already demonstrated that in St. Barth.

“At our ages, I’m not going to be any different than the girls who came before me. You’ll be tired of me in a year, best case two, maybe months. And you’ll be off to the latest model, a new and improved fully loaded gold digger, and I’ll have a broken heart. I’d rather put a stop to it now.” Her panic was speaking, not reason.

“Well, I wouldn’t rather put a stop to it. I can’t tell you what’s going to happen, that I’ll be different and better, with no scars of my own. Maybe you’ll get tired of me. I’m not such a hot ticket either. I have bad habits. I eat cookies in bed. I get bored at dinner parties and leave. I snore. I love my boat. My table manners are terrible, but I’m working on that. I read the end of a novel first to make sure I want to read it. I love happy endings and hate sad ones. I fall asleep in movies. I have a hot temper, I fire people if I think they’re disloyal to me. I’m vain. I love the fact that I’ve made a shitload of money. I’m loud and obnoxious when I get drunk, which I don’t do often, but when I do, I make up for it.”

“Now you tell me. You didn’t mention any of that in the interview,” she chided him with a wry smile. She loved how honest he was about his flaws.

“I wanted you to like me,” he said in his boyish tone. “I think you’re the first woman I ever loved, maybe even the first woman who ever really loved me, or could, and not for the money I’ve made or the lifestyle I can give you, and if you think I am going to just let you walk away, you’re even crazier than I think. I’m not willing to waste this or let you go until I really

believe that we don't have a chance of turning this into something wonderful for both of us. I won't let you do that to yourself or to me. Don't rob us of that, Charlotte. I need you. And maybe if I'm lucky, you'll need me."

"I already do," she said sadly. "That's the problem. I don't want to need anyone. It hurts too much when you lose them, and I always do."

"Well, you're not doing such a good job of losing me. I've been home for two weeks, begging to see you, and I'm not going anywhere. I saw a star in the sky when I met you. It's our star and my dream. I used to look up at the stars when I was a kid sleeping on the streets. And I always told myself that one of those stars up there was for me. I believed that and I still do. You're my star, Charlotte, and I can't let you go. I won't." He was as determined as she was, with opposite goals.

"Why?"

"Because you're honest and fair and strong and courageous, and you have integrity to an insane degree, and you're kind and you care. You're what people should be like, and nobody is, or very few. And you get me and still like me. You understand me. And I get you. That's worth everything. Meet me somewhere for coffee, water, root beer, anything, and if you still don't want to see me after that, I'll leave you alone. I don't know how I will, but I'll try." He was so earnest, she couldn't refuse him again. He asked her one question then. "Why are you so afraid to go to bed with me again?" She took a long time to answer while she thought about it.

"Because if I do, you'll own me, body and soul. I won't have the strength to leave you. That always happens to me. I lose all perspective, and the guts to leave." He didn't like what she said but it explained why she was so afraid to see him alone in one of their apartments. It made sense. "We started all wrong. We jumped right in with both feet, before finding out what we needed to know. And it was too late after that. It took me years to get myself back, after my one really bad affair. He was a terrible guy. I don't want to lose myself again, no matter how wonderful I think you are."

"I think you're as lonely as I am." He cut to the chase, and she didn't answer at first.

“That’s probably true,” she admitted. “I am lonely. But that’s better than heartbroken, disappointed, and abandoned.”

“I’m taking the same risk you are if you find a better guy, one who didn’t get all screwed up in his childhood.”

“There isn’t a better guy,” she said softly. “Less wounded maybe, but not better.”

“Coffee?” he asked her. “Or a walk?” He held his breath until she answered.

“I’ll think about it,” was all she said to him.

He called her back the next day, and she agreed to meet him at a deli he knew in the Village, for coffee, on Saturday.

Charlotte arrived on time, looking pale and serious, with her red hair pulled back, and wearing a parka. It was hard to be so close to him again, and when she saw his face and his eyes, it took her breath away. They had soup instead of coffee and made small talk. They talked about his interview again, and after they ate, Ben asked her to walk with him. The Village was crowded, and they strolled to the walkway leading to the Chelsea Piers, next to the Hudson River. It was cold but invigorating. It felt good just to be near him again, and she kept getting images in her head of their lovemaking on the deserted beach. It was hard not to think of that when she saw him.

They looked at the boats at the pier, with the occasional motor yacht or sailboat tucked in between other boats, historical and commercial, and a cruise ship.

“I brought the *Karma* here last year,” he said. “It was fun having her in New York. There’s a lot of traffic in this port, though. It was a little scary. A big sailboat ran aground last year right in the middle of the harbor. It was very exciting, but the captain was mortified. They got her off eventually.” He smiled at her, and she walked along next to him, trying not to feel the magnetic pull between them. It was still there, stronger than ever.

It started to snow, and they turned around and walked south in the falling snowflakes. It was beautiful watching it fall over the river, and she tucked a hand into his arm as they walked along without talking. It was strange thinking about what an important man Ben was, how huge his business life

was, and here he was walking along the river with her in the West Village, like ordinary people on a Saturday. He could have been anywhere in the world that he wanted to be, with far more important people than she was. Charlotte thought it was only a matter of time before he got bored with her.

They walked all the way back to her apartment and their jackets were wet when they got there, but they liked walking together, and there was a thin blanket of clean snow on the ground, and flakes of it on their eyelashes and hair. It felt like a movie, and added a layer of romance.

“Do you want to come up for a minute and dry off?” Charlotte asked. Her hair was dusted with flakes and wet, and so was his. Ben followed her up the stairs to the small, cozy apartment where she lived and wrote, and had spent days writing the article about him, until the final minutes of the year, when she finished it.

They took their jackets off and left them in the front hall, and she put on water for tea. He followed her into the kitchen.

“Do you want something stronger?” she asked him, and he smiled at her.

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“That might be nice. What do you have?”

“Rum, tequila, and red wine. I keep the rum and tequila for my son when he’s in town. This apartment is too small to entertain in,” but it was warm and inviting. Ben opened the bottle of red wine and poured a glass for each of them. Charlotte turned off the stove and put away the tea, and came to sit next to him on the couch. It was like a sigh of relief sinking into the couch next to him, and he looked as happy as she did. They could see the falling snow through her windows. She laughed thinking of the contrast between the vast elegant spaces on the boat and her apartment. Everything around them here was bright and colorful and cozy, and in the daytime it was

bathed in sunlight, with all her eclectic treasures close at hand. Ben loved it. It felt like a real home to him, as real as she was.

“I would have given anything to live in a place like this when I was a kid, freezing in winter, hiding in doorways and train stations, dodging the cops so I didn’t get sent back to foster care. I was good at outsmarting them.” It made her heart ache for him again when he reminded her. But the end of the story was a happy one for him, much happier than the beginning.

“My son Hugh grew up here. I kept threatening to move to a bigger apartment, but he wouldn’t let me. He loves it. But he’s happy in Dubai now. I just hope he doesn’t stay there. It’s a long way to go to visit him. I get there once or twice a year, and he came here once, for a few days.”

“I still want to meet him,” Ben said quietly.

“He’d be very impressed that I know you,” she said, and he poured them both a second glass of wine, and after he set the bottle down, he kissed her gently on the lips and she didn’t resist him. She knew what she was doing when she let him into the apartment to dry off. His hair was dry now, and his kisses were gentle and tender. They stretched out on the couch together, and a few minutes later, their clothes were on the floor and they were making love. It was a safe place where they could be warm and tender together. It was a refuge for both of them. They eventually made it to her bed, which was only a few steps away. She had a big, comfortable bed with warm blankets on it. He felt at home with her body, and her books and the objects around them from her travels. It was the only place on earth he wanted to be now, with someone he knew he could love and trust. He knew he was safe in her hands. They slept afterward for a while, woke up, and wandered out to the kitchen naked, as she looked at him with a wry smile.

“What is it about you that I can’t keep my clothes on when I see you, and we wind up making love right after hello?” Ben laughed and smiled tenderly at her.

“It’s some kind of spell someone put on me. I have the same problem with meetings at the office, or when I entertain. Everyone wants to take their clothes off and get naked with me,” he said, and she laughed.

“It’s a very nice spell,” she said, and kissed him. “The problem is, Mr. Sharpe, you’re addictive. I take one look at you, and I have to have you.”

“Is that a problem? You have the same effect on me.”

“It could be a problem,” she said. It was what she was worried about—loving him so much that one day she would think she couldn’t live without him. It was what had happened to her before and she didn’t want it to happen again. And this time was worse. She had known him for weeks and she already felt attached to him and couldn’t bear the thought of losing him one day, and the best predictor of the future was the past. He was a man who slipped his moorings and flew away after a year or two, to bluer skies. He said so himself. She wanted to be his blue sky forever, and no one could guarantee that, not even Ben.

She was afraid to take a leap of faith with him. He spent the night with her, and they made love again. In the morning, there were six inches of snow on the ground. They went out for breakfast and came back and made love. She had work to do and didn’t care. She was doing research again for her article about the governor.

He kissed her before he left. Her eyes looked like melted emeralds. “Will I see you again?” he asked her, but he could already see the answer in her eyes.

“It’s so perfect with us,” she said softly with her arms around him, and he had his around her. “It’ll never last, and then you’ll go, and it will kill me.” The more she loved him, the more afraid she was.

“You’d be a hard woman to leave,” he said.

“It’s been done before,” she answered quietly, and her heart had the scars to prove it.

“That doesn’t mean I would do it,” Ben said, but he had promised her he wouldn’t hound her if she didn’t want to continue with him, and he respected her and what she wanted, although it nearly killed him to let her go. “I’ll be here for a few months, and then I think I’ll make the crossing on the boat to the Med in April. There’s no point in having a boat like that if you don’t take her out for an ocean voyage now and then. I’d love you to do that with me one day. It’s an incredible experience. I feel like an explorer

every time I do it. I try to do it every year. Call me if you need anything, Charlotte.” She nodded and couldn’t speak. They kissed for one last time and then he was gone. She felt as though an elephant had hit her. He took her breath away every time, but she knew she was doing the right thing. Better the pain of loss now than a lifetime of agony later if he ran true to form and left her in a year. She couldn’t take the chance of losing a man she was so addicted to. Every inch of her was keening for him after he left, and he walked all the way uptown to the Dakota on the Upper West Side, crying. He was glad that they had one last night together. And so was she. But she had made her decision. Some things were better not started when you knew they have to break later. The damages would have been far greater, Charlotte was sure of it.

After John’s first night back with Lillith, after his explanation for his three-week absence, things were almost back to normal. He was incredibly convincing, a skill he had developed and honed in his youth. It had been particularly useful with women ever since.

He had utterly convinced her that he was under siege for the men he had fired from the shipping company he bought, which was partly true.

She made him breakfast before he left for work. He said he had a full day of difficult meetings, on the same ominous subject, with the unions ready to strike. She almost believed him this time, but she was glad she hadn’t given up her job or her apartment, and after his disappearing for three weeks, the morning after his return, she didn’t bring up the subject. She assumed that she wouldn’t be moving in with him for a while. She wanted to see evidence now that he was reliable. His passionate declarations when he made love to her and pushed her to the limits of her tolerance for pleasure weren’t enough to convince her that she could count on him. He had shaken her faith badly with three weeks of silence. But as if he had a pact with the devil, when she read the morning paper, there was a full article in the business section about how dire a situation John was in,

with the dockworkers poised to strike in solidarity, all of the terminated employees suing him, and the censure of the entire shipping community. She realized when she read it that he had been telling her the truth about the three weeks when he vanished, and claimed he was beleaguered and too ashamed to face her. She wasn't angry anymore, she felt sorry for him. He was in a terrible mess, and the paper estimated that he could lose half his fortune in damages. It was a high price to pay for seventeen old boats that he didn't really need, and gloating about the greatly reduced price and the final destruction of the previous owners, which had satisfied his blood lust. The *New York Times* reporter wrote that a number of sources had said that he had boasted about the misfortune he had inflicted on the sellers and the fired employees, and was proud of it. It wasn't a handsome image for an immensely rich man, taking advantage of poor men with families to support, who could barely make ends meet when they had jobs, let alone without them. The sympathy was all for the underdog, which should have been predictable.

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Although he had promised to, Lillith wasn't surprised when John didn't call her that night. She was sure that he was with lawyers or union heads, trying to work out a settlement that would satisfy the men and get him out of trouble. And he wasn't used to accounting for his whereabouts.

She was calmer at work that day than she had been for three weeks. She had looked as though she were at a funeral for weeks, and her boss wouldn't send her to clients because she was so distracted and looked so mournful, and several of her co-workers had warned her not to let her personal life impact her job. But how could she not? He was the sun and the moon to her, and she had made her apartment cozier for him, taking away some of the too-feminine touches and buying a stack of beautiful new towels with a matching monogrammed bathrobe for him she could ill afford. But she wanted him to feel at home now when they stayed there,

until she moved in with him eventually. She still believed she would one day, when his life calmed down.

She wasn't worried about his not calling her this time. It was understandable in the circumstances. Now that he was back, she was sure that he wouldn't do the same thing again for three weeks after she had told him how much it hurt her. He had told her that he loved her, which didn't mean the same thing to her that it did to him. To her it was a promise of the relationship to follow, while to him it was a statement of his feelings at that exact moment, subject to change without notice.

No one had ever been as kind to Lillith as John was to her over the holidays, with the love and attention he had lavished on her on the boat. She told herself that his three-week disappearance had been an unfortunate stumble in the early stages of their relationship. She was sure now it wasn't intentional or meant to be cruel, although she had felt it that way. Jane, the assistant who worked with her, said that he had all the earmarks of a sociopath. She had dated one for a year, and said he had nearly driven her insane, and used to disappear for weeks and then show up again as though nothing had happened. Lillith didn't believe her. She trusted John. He had been deeply apologetic the night before, and his eyes were damp when he explained how hard it had been for him too. He said he had become the victim of the men he had innocently fired. And Lillith was certain the press had blown it into more than it was to make it sensational and sell papers. John had said it to her and she believed him. He wouldn't lie about something as serious as that.

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Isabelle was sympathetic too, after she read the paper that day and saw the article. She was sure it was humiliating for him to be eviscerated by *The New York Times*. They talked about it in bed that night, after they made love. They were falling into a comfortably passionate routine, and he was staying with her one or two nights a week, and frequent weekends.

Occasionally, Isabelle felt like she was seeing too much of him, but she knew he was lonely for Helen, used to being married, and she didn't want to hurt his feelings. She still wasn't sure if their involvement was a healthy idea. Isabelle knew that she reminded him so much of Helen that it seemed like a way for him to avoid facing that she was gone. He had the next best thing in Isabelle. And he appeared to want to spend as many nights with her as he could and she'd allow. But she had an independent social life she enjoyed and a wide circle of friends, and since their affair was a secret and they intended to keep it that way for a while, she couldn't include him. She liked going out on her own now. She didn't need a man to escort her, nor want one all the time. Occasionally, she felt trapped with John on weekends. He sat for hours reading or brooding, bundled up on the deck, and she enjoyed city life more than the country in the winter. He insisted on going to the Hamptons nearly every weekend and having her to himself. Isabelle missed her friends. John had surprised her with revealing his feelings to her and his wanting to leap into a full-blown relationship with her, and she wasn't ready for it. And he loved being isolated with her.

She and Steve had been totally compatible. John and Helen had been different. John ran the show, and Helen had been much more compliant and meek than Isabelle. Occasionally John gave Isabelle directions that sounded like orders, and Isabelle discouraged him immediately and ignored them. She and Steve had made joint decisions as partners, especially when they ran their business together. Neither one was in charge. It rapidly became obvious that John expected to be in command, merely because he was a man. But he was in her home and apartment, and she was used to doing things her way. She hadn't been looking for a man to complete her life. It had felt quite complete before without him. He assumed that she was ready for a full relationship with him on his terms, which wasn't how she viewed it.

John was a proficient lover, and Isabelle enjoyed having sex with him. It made her feel as though she was back in the world as a woman, but she thought his sexual needs were excessive. She had the feeling now that when he came over, he didn't talk to her the way he had before he slept with her,

rushing through dinner so he could get her into bed. Several times, Isabelle felt obliged to have sex with him to meet his needs and what was turning out to be his voracious sexual appetite, whether she was in the mood or not. It had altered their friendship and she wasn't convinced she wanted to continue the affair. It was ruining a solid friendship and didn't seem worth it to her.

When he assumed they were going to the country for the weekend and she told him she was busy in town, and had two dinner parties to go to without him, he had a fit and stormed out, after calling her a bitch. She wondered if that was how he had treated Helen, which made her sad for her friend if it was true. Steve had never spoken to her like that, and she didn't intend to start accepting it now, even from an old friend. Once or twice, she thought John was just using her for sex, but told herself it was absurd. No one used a sixty-five-year-old woman for sex if they could go out with a younger one, unless they were ninety themselves. The idea seemed comical at best. But she remembered Helen's comment that John had a hearty sexual appetite, and it seemed as though she had been right, and had understated it.

Some nights he stayed to sleep with her, and at other times he was in a rush to leave. She looked at him one night as he was dressing hastily after they made love.

"Where do you go when you're in such a hurry to leave?" she asked him in a smooth tone. She didn't mind his leaving but she found it odd, with no explanation for his haste.

"Sometimes I have conference calls in other time zones at odd hours. I have two tonight," he said defensively.

"You work too hard," she said with a smile. He had apologized for calling her a bitch the week before, but he didn't seem as bothered by it as she was. She had been shocked. She and Steve had never called each other names in thirty years of marriage. John was turning out to be rougher around the edges than she had previously thought. She wondered now if Helen had been hiding the fact that she was unhappy with John.

Once or twice, Isabelle wondered if he was seeing another woman, which seemed unlikely since he had led such a reclusive life after Helen

died. He said that only his long-standing crush on Isabelle had brought him out of his shell. He was unlikely to have two of them. She decided eventually that he just needed time and space on his own sometimes and didn't know how to express it, so he rushed off right after sex, and he probably went home to stare mindlessly at the TV and not have to perform for anyone. He set a high standard for himself for sexual prowess, more than she would have wanted. In fact, she would have preferred more time to herself too, but didn't dare say it to him and didn't want to hurt his feelings. He prided himself on what a great lover he was.

Sometimes it was all just too much. Isabelle hadn't confided the affair to anyone, so she had no women friends to discuss it with and give her an additional perspective. She had to figure him out for herself, and she was puzzled by him at times. He seemed so unaware of other people's feelings and reactions, and interested only in his own. She sometimes wondered if he took Viagra in secret to achieve it, but she didn't ask him.

It surprised her that he was furious about all the negative coverage in the press about the shipping line he had bought. He was livid at the various news agencies, but he didn't seem remorseful toward the men he had harmed, the families he had starved, the many people and children that had been affected by his firing hundreds of them at once, right before the holidays. If nothing else, she found him extremely self-centered, and colder than she'd realized. He was sex-driven but not compassionate or loving. Isabelle wondered at times now if Gabby was right about John. It was a worrisome thought. He had always been such a warm, generous friend, but his behavior as a man left her feeling that there was a lot about him that she didn't know.

Chapter 9

When John promised to call Lillith that night, the day the *Times* article came out, he intended to do it this time, after the first night they had spent together in more than three weeks. He had enjoyed it. She adored him. Lillith was relieved to see him again and he was just as warm and loving as before, and apologetic. But once she saw the article, she knew his day would fall apart. He was consumed by the bad press he was getting for firing all of the employees of the shipping company he'd bought. He fired them to put all seventeen ships in dry dock for repairs and to refit them for their cargo. They could have done the remodels on a rolling basis, but it would have taken longer and cost more, and John was all about cutting costs and the bottom line. He was as merciless about the costs as he was about the people who had been cast into misery by dry-docking all seventeen ships at the same time. The shipyard had given him a fantastic rate, and it was all going in his favor, until the press got into it. John did what he had to, to negotiate down all of it, otherwise what was the point of driving the purchase price down and paying rock bottom prices for the ships? Economically, he knew he had done the right things, and was proud of it. But it was a media blow to his company, and made him look like a monster to the general public, who knew nothing about refitting ships and transporting cargo.

The media called him ruthless again. He was used to it by now, but it was a word he hated. Gabby had called him heartless and without morals. But she wasn't calling him anything now. He hadn't spoken to her in months and didn't want to. Her insults were brutal and familiar. The press was no better. They didn't understand what it took to run a company and make it profitable. Softhearted owners went bankrupt. The press just insulted him more eloquently than his daughter did, and it hurt more getting denigrated in public.

He meant to call Lillith that night, but he was having dinner at Isabelle's and didn't want to be late. And Isabelle had priority because of who she was, which impressed him. They had dinner at neighborhood restaurants or at home. And once in a while, he took her to a great restaurant for an elaborate dinner. They were friends after all, and had been for thirty years. There was nothing wrong with dining with a friend. They'd been doing that for ten months since Helen died, and no one would suspect that it had evolved into an affair.

He was proud to be seen with Isabelle. She was a beautiful woman, always elegantly dressed. She had incredible style and Steve had given her beautiful jewelry. He would have been a hard act to follow, but he had been gone for ten years. He was no longer a threat. Isabelle was used to leading her own life now. She had adjusted to John since their affair began, but she was still cautious about the path they were on. It was all very new, and people were gossips. He also didn't want anyone to think that their affair had begun before Helen died, which it hadn't. And he knew Isabelle would never have engaged in that.

John had had some close calls over the years, but rarely close to home, always in other cities when he was away on business. He didn't want to embarrass Helen. And there was also the chess game he loved to play, when he had two women in his thrall at the same time. He was a handsome, fascinating, powerful man, used to commanding those around him. The women never knew about each other. Helen had been an unknowing player in his little game. When John left Isabelle in a hurry after they made love, he was going to Lillith. He knew she would see him at any time, whenever

he wanted. The one whose life and schedule he had to accommodate was Isabelle. He knew that keeping Lillith on ice with no news of him and no response to her messages for weeks at a time would make her more desperate for him. It was a cruel but efficient way to control her. He loved the game and how anxious it made the women about when they would see him again. He was a master of manipulation and control in every area of his life. He loved leaving one and rushing to the other. They were always eager for him, and going from one warm bed and one sensual body to the other never failed to arouse him. He had been playing his own private chess game since Gabby was a baby. He had come up with it then, bored while they waited for Gabby to be born and Helen was too uncomfortable and no longer wanted to have sex with him. He didn't find her attractive then either.

But the one woman John couldn't control was Isabelle. She didn't need him. So he didn't play to her weaknesses, he appealed to her strengths and compassion. It was a different version of the game.

It had been a week since Lillith had seen John or heard from him this time, and she forgave him everything when she heard the sound of his voice and knew she'd see him. Sometimes he called her as late as midnight, and she let him come over. Sleeping with two women on a rolling basis made him feel young and virile again. He was in the best form he'd been in since Helen died. Once he had Isabelle, he no longer missed Helen. Isabelle was the better version. And it was true that he had always wanted her and couldn't have her. But he didn't love her. And now he had her. She was a major conquest for him. Lillith was just a dash of added spice to make the main meal more interesting.

Lillith sat quietly waiting for John to arrive, after he left Isabelle. She wondered how long he was going to leave her dangling afterward, for days or a week or two, and if that was going to be the nature of their relationship from now on. He was a mystery to her. She longed to go back to the boat where she could see him every day, wake up next to him in the morning, and make love whenever they wanted. It was a dream come true and he had been so kind to her then. Seeing each other in New York was harder. They

both had other distractions. She had a demanding job, going from one installation to the next. Her boss was still out with her broken hip, and John ran an empire and worked late almost every night, sometimes showing up as late as midnight. She was no longer talking about giving up her job and apartment. She couldn't leave the design firm where she worked with the boss injured, and she didn't want to give up her apartment now until she knew John was reliable, and so far, he hadn't been, not since he'd left the boat after the holidays. Something had changed after she flew back to New York. He became a different person, or himself, whoever he really was.

When John came through the door after leaving Isabelle, he was pleased to see Lillith waiting for him in her apartment.

"I'm sorry it's been such a shit show since I got back. It will get better when the press calms down." Lillith had stopped complaining that he never returned her calls or answered her messages. She had never known anyone to be so uncommunicative and nonresponsive. His excuse was that he was always in a meeting, and there was always someone around so he couldn't speak freely on the phone. He had told Isabelle the same thing, but he returned each of her calls at an opportune moment. Isabelle wouldn't have tolerated it if he didn't. She had run her own business and was reliable herself. John didn't have to return Lillith's calls. She had no power in the world, and she was sufficiently impressed by him and who he was that she put up with anything he did. She was blinded by love for him and he took full advantage of it. To John, there was a hierarchy in the world, and he was at the top. Lillith was young and at the bottom. She had no authority and no clout. Isabelle had both, and a respected position in the world, and she was a very wealthy woman. She had sold the ad agency for a fortune when Steve died. She was an important woman in New York and the world. Lillith wasn't. Her only power was who she worked for, and knowing him. As far as John was concerned, she was no one other than that. She didn't matter.

Charlotte was sitting in her office, thinking of Ben. She hadn't heard from him since she last saw him. She knew she wouldn't now. He had understood that she meant what she said. Their positions in the world were too far apart, and his relationship history too predictable. She knew how the movie ended with him, every time. A big check, a tender goodbye, and another diamond bracelet, after several before that. Only two of the women in his life had bad things to say about him, and they were two of the women he had married. They were angry because they estimated that they didn't get a big enough piece of the pie on the way out. They wanted half the pie, which was far too much to give them for a year of service. Each one of them had left with a truck full of trophies. Fancy clothes, alligator shoes and purses, jewelry, art. He had bought each of them a house, or an apartment if they preferred it. Charlotte wondered how some women did it. Most of the gold diggers had been trained in how to fleece a man. They were professionals. One of them had tried to get the boat he loved from him, or threatened to, because she said it had become part of her standard lifestyle. There weren't even children involved with any of them, which would have made it infinitely worse, and he would have had to support their mothers forever, previously well trained by their own mothers since birth to bleed him dry as they got older.

When Charlotte thought about it, it was no wonder that Ben hadn't stayed with them. They weren't the kind of women men stayed with, or who stayed themselves. The relationships they treated so cavalierly had nothing to do with it. What they were attached to was the money. But he was attracted to that kind of woman so he didn't have to love them. He would have given all of it for a life with Charlotte now, but even he knew it would never work. He had no idea if he was even capable of it when she said goodbye to him in her apartment, after a night of making love with him. He hadn't called or contacted Charlotte since. He knew she was right. It wouldn't work and she wasn't brave enough to try, and he didn't blame her. What astounded Ben was that she was the only woman he knew who

had walked away from a man with fifty billion dollars, on principle. She was stronger than she knew, and he loved and admired her for it.

Henry called Charlotte an hour later than she had expected him to. He had sent her a text that afternoon, and he looked at her carefully as she took a seat across his desk. She knew what was coming before he said the words. She knew it as soon as she read the morning paper.

“How are you?” he asked her pointedly.

“I’m okay.” She smiled at him.

“Do you still have a flock of billionaires running after you?” She smiled before she answered.

“It wasn’t a flock, it was just one.”

“Don’t tell me this is a job where you can’t meet men.” It was a complaint of some of the women who worked there. They worked long hours buried at their desks, and never met the people they wrote about, those with the grand lifestyles, gorgeous homes, and glamorous lives. Charlotte was used to circulating among such people and not being one of them. And she had no aspirations to be one. She wasn’t looking for a man to marry or support her. She missed Ben every day but she knew she could survive on her own. And she was never jealous of the people she wrote about. It was one of the reasons for her success. She didn’t want anything they had, or to be them. She was a keen observer of their lives, with no skin in the game. It made her impervious to their power. They couldn’t touch her. The only one who had was Ben, for different reasons. She loved his weaknesses as much as his strengths. She loved him with his wounds and scars, and didn’t want to take advantage of him, unlike everyone around him. She wanted to protect him. But their lives were just too different for it to work. She was convinced of that. So she had set him free, like a beautiful bird, but she still loved him. And she knew that he loved her. They didn’t have to be together to prove it.

“What happened with you and Ben Sharpe finally?” Henry asked her, curious because he genuinely liked her. “You don’t have to answer that, if you don’t want to. Did you see him again?” She nodded. He thought she looked thinner, and sad.

“I did. Once. It wasn’t going to work. It was a beautiful dream. He’ll marry another gold digger one of these days. It’s easier.”

“I’m sorry to hear it. I kind of fell in love with him myself, after reading your piece about him.”

“Yeah, me too.” She smiled. “So what punishment do you have for me now?”

“A tough one, if he’ll give us an interview. We haven’t asked. I wanted to talk to you first, and see if you’ll do it.”

“I think I can guess.”

“John Randall Williams,” he said cautiously.

“I thought so. I met him on Ben’s boat over Christmas. He was with a pretty woman, very young, like mid-twenties. I don’t know if they were a ‘thing’ or not. He’s a tough one. I think he’s very discreet. Or at least he was, until he pissed off the whole shipping community. He’ll be lucky if no one tries to kill him for putting all those guys out of work. He’s smart, but that wasn’t a smart move. The unions are out to get him now.”

“He deserves it,” Henry said dispassionately. “You can’t be that rich and screw over the little guys that badly to save a buck. He may be discreet, but he looks like shit to everyone now. Is there a personal story for us there, or just business?”

“He comes from old money, generations of it,” Charlotte answered. “He lost his wife about a year ago. Ben only knew him slightly from the yachting world, where old money meets new money, and they play a game of ‘Mine’s bigger.’ He has a gorgeous sailboat. But Ben’s boat is bigger.” She smiled. “I can do some research and see what I find. Maybe not much. What’s our angle? He’s nice-looking, but he’s not exciting. He seems very dry. There might not be much there, and no fun to interview. I think he’s all about business.”

“Not if he had a girl with him in her mid-twenties. Unless she’s his granddaughter.”

“She isn’t. She was mad about him. I have to think about it. I only talked to her for a few minutes. I vaguely remember she works for a decorating firm. Maybe she’ll talk to me.”

“Find out what people say about him, who his friends are, what makes him tick. I’m intrigued by what makes a man that ruthless. He owns one of the biggest cargo lines in the world. Why would he put hundreds of men out of work and on welfare, men who are already struggling, right before Christmas, and not give a damn what happens to them? Who is he? *The New York Times* called him ruthless twice, and they don’t like repetitions. What makes a man think he’s that untouchable? Maybe he’s just a very rich asshole who doesn’t care about his fellow humans. Most guys in that position are trying to prove to everyone what great men they are. Clearly that’s not on his agenda. Maybe he’s trying to get even for something, or hated his father. Let’s ask him for an interview, and you start doing the research. Maybe there’s nothing there and he’s just a jerk. But I get the feeling that he might be an interesting jerk. And I don’t think you’ll fall in love with this one. I’m kind of sorry you didn’t take a swing at it with Sharpe. You might have hit a home run with him. I was hoping you would.” She shook her head.

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“I decided to be smart instead. For once. Funnily enough, Ben thought I should interview John Williams. He didn’t appeal to me as a subject at all. I had kind of a visceral reaction to him. I didn’t like him. He’s very arrogant.”

“Well, see what you can dig up on him, and we’ll see if he’ll even give us the interview,” Henry said, shuffling papers on his desk, which meant that her audience with him was over.

“Keep me posted, and I’ll let you know what I can find out,” she said as she stood up and smiled at him. “Thanks, Henry.” She went back to her office and thought about what he’d said. John Williams hadn’t looked that interesting to her when she met him. He was a nice-looking, older, very rich man, with a beautiful boat. But there was obviously more to him than that if he wasn’t afraid to antagonize the whole shipping community and piss off the unions, and clearly didn’t give a damn. She concentrated for a minute trying to remember the name of the girl who was with him. Elizabeth... Lillibet...Lizzie something. She turned on her computer and looked for a list of the decorating firms in New York, and one of them rang a bell. She decided to call them, and got a fancy New York voice on the line. Charlotte apologized and said she couldn’t remember the name of a young designer she’d spoken to a while ago. “It was either Lizzie or Lily.” The girl on the phone corrected her immediately.

“Lillith Jones,” she said crisply. “She’s at an installation today. May I take a message and have her call you?” she asked politely.

“Thank you for the name. I’ll call her back.” Charlotte hung up and looked at the name she’d jotted down. Lillith Jones. It was a start. She hoped the rest of the research would be as easy. It made her think of Ben and her time on the boat with him. She hoped he was okay. She really missed him. But it was a pain she knew she had to get used to, until it finally went away. She knew it would one day, and then he’d just be a memory she could live with, not a dull ache whenever she thought of him, as it still was, and would be for a long time. The wound where he had been was still raw, like a severed limb. Researching John Williams would be a good distraction.

On the assumption that the interview would go through, Charlotte didn't want to waste time, and started her research that afternoon. If John Williams refused the interview, she could archive the information for future use. Nothing was ever wasted. With a man like him, of enormous wealth and stature in the community and business world, she was likely to need it again someday.

She started at the *New York Post* and the *Times's* photo archives to see what she could come up with and was surprised by how little she found. John Williams and his wife were old guard New York society. Charlotte found them in the Social Register, which gave her the names of John's wife and daughter. At the *Post*, she found photographs of John and Helen at opera and ballet openings, and at some gala charity events. Charlotte studied the photographs carefully. A few of the photographs were from the past two years, and she noticed how thin Helen had gotten, obviously ravaged by cancer by then. John looked much the same from year to year, with a full head of white hair, and Charlotte could see how pretty Helen had been before she got ill. She had a sweet face and a beautiful smile. She wore simple, elegant evening gowns, and had a nice figure. She wore her hair in a bun most of the time. Charlotte found photographs of Helen and John at equestrian events with their daughter in her riding habit, when Gabrielle was younger. She looked like her mother. The captions under the photographs took due note that Gabrielle had won first prize. She was a serious horsewoman, and had won first and second prizes at some well-known, highly regarded equestrian events. In one of the photographs, Helen was in a riding habit too. The photographs went all the way back to when their daughter was in her teens, some twenty years earlier. And Helen got more beautiful as the photos got earlier. She was really a lovely-looking woman, and she and John had made a handsome couple at all the major New York social events.

Charlotte found a photograph from Gabrielle's debut eighteen years earlier, which placed her at around thirty-six now. And she got as far back as John and Helen's wedding announcement, and a photograph of the wedding party, with fourteen bridesmaids and a maid of honor, and an equal

number of ushers all in formal morning coats. It was actually fun looking at the pictures. The wedding, their engagement prior to that, and Gabrielle's debut were all immortalized by the same well-known society photographer. Helen was from an important New York society family of equally blue-blooded ancestry as John's. It had been a distinguished match. Charlotte saw nothing salacious or surprising in the archives, just the evidence of distinguished lives conducted in a respectable manner. She found Helen's recent obituary, which made her sad to read. If one read between the lines, she had led a small and proper life at her husband's side. She had graduated from Vassar and done nothing of note after that, other than her place on some predictable charity boards, and her chairmanship of some Red Cross events. The obit said she was survived by her husband and only daughter, who still bore the family name at the time of her mother's death. She wondered if Gabrielle was still single at thirty-five when her mother died. No husband of Gabrielle's was mentioned. There was nothing of note or shocking in the archives, and there were several photographs of an enormous sailboat built in Italy ten years ago at the Perini Navi shipyard, and a photo of the three of them standing in front of the yacht at the launch. John and Helen were beaming and Gabrielle looked bored and annoyed and wasn't smiling.

Charlotte made copies of some of the images, and had written down a list of dates, but nothing of interest had emerged. No divorces, no scandals. She ran a national computer search then, and a criminal check just for the hell of it, which sometimes turned up youthful transgressions or the trail of an alcohol or substance abuse problem, which she thought was unlikely, and came up blank. What was slightly more interesting was that Gabrielle had gone to Stanford undergraduate and medical school, and was a Colorado resident, living in Aspen, so she wouldn't be hard to find, if she was willing to be interviewed about her father, if the interview went in a more personal direction.

Charlotte combed various magazines for interviews with John Williams, and there was a certain chill to all of them. He was a brilliant businessman but gave up very little about his personal life. Maybe there was nothing

much to say. He was an avid sailor and a member of the New York Yacht Club and had a remarkable boat, as Charlotte had seen for herself, and there must have been more to him than he admitted, if he had a woman in her twenties with him as a companion. But whatever he did in his personal life, he did it well below the radar and was discreet. There was no gossip about him on Page Six, in the tabloids, or anywhere.

He led an extremely private life. There was no depth or texture to anything she read about him. You couldn't get a sense of the man. His giant sailboat was the only visible sign of luxury of an extravagant nature in his life. He owned a house in Southampton, but there was nothing in the social pages about parties there or important guests. There was one photograph of John and Helen with a very social couple, Isabelle and Steve Phillips, who had owned an important ad agency, and Charlotte saw that Steve Phillips was deceased and that Isabelle had retired and sold the agency several years ago. She was a visible social presence in New York, but there were no photographs of her with John after her husband's death, so there was nothing noteworthy there.

Charlotte was going through her notes when Henry called her two days after their meeting. "He's in," he said when she answered her phone.

"John Williams?"

"I spoke to him myself. There is only one condition, and I told him I had to clear it with you. I know you don't like conditions and you won't like this one. He won't answer questions about his personal life. Strictly business. I told him we're not *Forbes* or *Fortune*, we're a social magazine about people and their lifestyles, and we're not *People* either, we're not a tabloid, but it can't be only about business. Knowing you, you'll be able to get some personal stuff from him, but those are the parameters he set. Would you still want to do it?"

"I can probably get what I need from other people," she said pensively, thinking of what she had so far. "He's a big persona, and people have opinions about a man like him. That may give us enough juice to make it interesting. Did you have to give him approval of the piece before we run it?" She hated those and they didn't give text approval often, because

people quibbled with every sentence and they got deadlocked into arguments that sometimes led to pulling the piece completely, which meant all of the work was wasted.

“No. Maybe he forgot to ask for it or didn’t know he could. He remembered meeting you on Ben Sharpe’s boat and he’s read some of your profiles and liked them, but he was very clear about the ‘No Personal,’ so you’ll have to be delicate about it. I know you will be. Has anything interesting turned up so far?” Henry asked, pleased that the article could go forward.

“On the surface, just a very proper, old guard social history. His daughter is a doctor in Aspen, which is a little different. But other than that, it’s all very correct and conservative, married for thirty-seven years to the same woman. Nothing dicey.” The magazine didn’t look for seamy details or sordid lives, but a little hint of spice brought interviews to life, and their readership didn’t want anything too outrageous. There was no sign of it with John Williams anyway.

“Nothing dicey except that he was traveling with a woman forty years younger than he is. That’s a sign of something,” Henry said cynically.

“That he’s human maybe? He has to float around with someone on his incredible sailboat,” and Lillith had been the lucky winner. Under what circumstances Charlotte didn’t know yet, but she intended to try to find out what role Lillith Jones had in John Williams’s life. “I have the girl’s name, by the way. She probably won’t say much, if she’s involved with him. He won’t let her. She’ll be too scared to tell us anything of value.”

“You never know.” Henry was impressed that Charlotte had found her.

“When can I get started?” she asked.

“It sounds like you already have,” he said with a laugh.

“I was just laying groundwork, in case he agreed to the interview.”

“You have a green light now, so go for it.” Charlotte wished the subject hadn’t imposed the ban on personal questions, but she planned to work around it as best she could, and sneak a few in and see what he did. Sometimes people answered them anyway, in spite of their agreements. And she wanted to interview his daughter. Adult children often had an

interesting perspective. They had seen everything happen over the years, from the sidelines. Many were loyal to their parents but some weren't, off the record. Charlotte was excited about the interview when she hung up, and she was trying to decide where to start and with whom.

She still had some business interviews she wanted to read. It seemed as though each of them was about some controversial position he had taken, or a reaction to one. Charlotte wanted to read them carefully to get a sense of him.

She sat thinking for a minute, deciding who she wanted to speak to first. She needed an appointment with the subject, but first she wanted to do more research, which would help her formulate the questions for him. She decided to start with his daughter. Charlotte got her office number in Aspen from the internet, and only got voicemail. She didn't leave a message, she didn't want to give Gabrielle advance warning. And then she left a message for Lillith, just her name with no details. She was off and running.

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John was with Lillith that night, after having dinner with Isabelle. She said she had a headache, so they cut the evening short and she went to bed, and John left. He didn't call Lillith to warn her. He just showed up and surprised her. She thought it was a good surprise when he buzzed the intercom and she saw him on the camera. She was smiling when he came through the door and kissed her. She was getting used to his surprise visits. He liked to keep her off-balance, not knowing what to expect or when he might show up. It meant never letting her guard down, and looking more than halfway decent at all times. But she didn't mind, for him. She was still as blindly in love with him as ever. And his frequent disappearances only whetted her appetite for more of him, as he intended. It fed her addiction to him and kept her hooked.

She had a snack for him. She kept all John's favorite treats on hand at all times. He helped himself to a glass of red wine from a bottle he opened. She turned it down. She had work to do that night if he didn't stay, but she

hoped he would. She never discouraged him. He was visiting her more regularly, and disappearing less. She had learned not to ask him when she'd see him again. He never said.

He told Lillith about the interview while he drank his wine. "*Vanity Fair* is doing a profile on me," he said proudly. "It's about business. I told them nothing personal, that was my condition."

"Is it smart for you to do a business interview right now?" she asked, concerned about him.

"I think so. It'll clean up my image, and temper all the criticism, and shut the bleeding hearts up. It's not a controversial magazine, they don't take hostile positions," he reassured her.

"If they agree with you," Lillith said carefully. He ignored what she said. He often did. She was young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, in his opinion.

"I don't want you talking to them," he said clearly. "On any subject. They can twist what you say, and you won't be helping me if that happens, although they'll make you feel that you are. That's their game. And you have nothing to add to the business side. I really don't want you talking to them. Is that clear?" John looked at her intensely, and she nodded. She'd had a message from Charlotte that afternoon, but only her name, which Lillith thought was related to meeting her in St. Barth. She assumed Charlotte was calling for decorating advice. She made no other connection, so it didn't occur to her to tell John about it. The two women had had a pleasant conversation, and nothing more. John slipped his hand under her sweater then, and a minute later unzipped her jeans. They left their glasses on the table and walked into her bedroom, and he drove her to the edge of passion and beyond, then rolled over and fell asleep. She watched him for a while and stroked his hair. He was like a visiting lion. She never knew when he would show up, or for how long he'd stay, and then he would disappear back into the jungle again, while she waited for his return. He never belonged to her, but she hoped he would one day. He was no longer gentle and kind the way he had been on the boat. He was a fierce warrior, and he never said he loved her, but he kept coming back for more, which

she thought was a good sign, and felt promising for the future. She was still dreaming of a future with him, and hoped he'd invite her to move in with him soon, so she could see more of him.

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Chapter 10

The first thing Charlotte normally did when she started an interview was talk to the subject himself, and then she contacted other people later, to either reinforce or subtly change the portrait the subject had painted of himself. She considered the subjects of her interviews innocent until proven guilty.

In John Williams's case, the reverse was true. The evidence was against him, and what he had done to the employees he had inherited, and their families, was so dastardly that she considered him guilty until proven innocent. You couldn't paint a prettier picture of what he had done to them. She wanted to talk to other people outside the interview to get their reading of him, and then she would meet John himself and hear his side of the story.

She was going to start with Lillith, but she was sure that John had already warned her not to speak to them, and from what Charlotte had seen of her in St. Barth, Lillith was so dazzled by John and so in love with him that her testimony wouldn't be worth much. The one who interested Charlotte now was Gabrielle, his daughter. She thought of making an appointment with her, but decided that she didn't want to give her that much warning, or time to prepare and sift out how much she wanted or had to say in support of her father. Charlotte wanted more spontaneous

impressions and reactions, to make the article more organic and natural. She wanted to drop in on her in Aspen instead.

Charlotte checked with Henry and he told her to go ahead, that he liked her angle. She checked with Gabrielle's office to make sure she wasn't away on vacation. They said she was in town but heavily booked. They'd had a run of accidents in the last week as weather conditions were icy. Charlotte made the reservation for a flight that night, directly into Aspen, without going to Denver, and booked a room at The Little Nell. She packed her warmest clothes, and a ski suit in case she wanted to take a run while she was there. She'd been to Aspen before. It was a charming ski village, with excellent restaurants and high-end luxury shops for expensive ski clothes and jewelry. Visitors to Aspen were from the Midwest and Texas typically. It was a high-ticket, beautiful ski resort, and everything there was expensive. The last time she'd gone, the airport was full of private planes, mostly larger jets, and takeoffs and landings were famously difficult. It always felt a little dangerous to Charlotte.

She thought the interview with John's daughter would be an important one, and might set the tone for some of the others. Charlotte was willing to meet her wherever she wanted, at the hospital if necessary. Gabrielle was a busy physician. Women like her always made Charlotte feel inadequate. Gabrielle was doing good for the injured real people she dealt with. What Charlotte did, working for a magazine that catered to and focused on wealthy people, seemed irrelevant in comparison.

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It was snowing lightly when the plane landed in Aspen, and Charlotte hired a taxi to take her to The Little Nell, the hotel where she had stayed the previous time, for a vacation. This time, she was traveling for business on an expense account. Charlotte knew it would be expensive and Henry had approved it.

She checked in to the hotel, and they had given her a charming room with a fireplace and a mountain view. It was a well-run hotel, and she

enjoyed a cheeseburger in her room and watched a movie. She had already completed her list of questions and had gone over it again on the plane. She didn't want to miss a single question if the interview was going well.

She slept fitfully that night because of the altitude and was up early the next day.

She had breakfast at seven, and called Gabrielle's office at eight-thirty. Charlotte could already see people heading toward the lifts, carrying their skis, and others arriving in vans and buses from nearby hotels. The whole town looked like a Christmas card. The voice that answered the phone at Gabrielle's office was a pleasant female one. Charlotte told her that she wanted a consultation with Dr. Williams, and didn't need an exam, she had everything with her as backup. It was a plausible request, and the receptionist said they had cases like that all the time, people arriving from other cities for assessments. Charlotte didn't want to say that she had flown out from New York, or it might arouse Gabrielle's suspicions. She had no idea if she would be a willing subject or a recalcitrant one, or throw Charlotte out of her office. She hated to make the appointment under false pretenses but she didn't want to waste time if Gabrielle didn't want to be interviewed about her father, whether out of loyalty or contempt. Once Charlotte was across the desk from her, Gabrielle would be more likely to answer Charlotte's questions, and Charlotte usually handled face-to-face contact well, even with the most reluctant subjects. She had a gift for it. People trusted her, and Gabrielle might even be happy to talk about her father, in his defense. She knew nothing about Gabrielle and the relationship between father and daughter.

Much to Charlotte's amazement, the receptionist said they'd had a cancellation and the doctor could see her at four o'clock that afternoon. It gave her the whole day to explore Aspen, and even do a little shopping. Some of her favorite stores were there, even a few in her price range at a mall nearby.

Charlotte thanked the receptionist and hung up.

She went out at eleven to check out the shops.

She had lunch at Ajax Tavern at the base of the mountain and studied her notes again. It was fun watching people come in from the slopes, and others joining them who weren't skiing.

She had taken Hugh skiing when he was a young boy, and it brought back memories seeing the red-faced children arriving from ski school with their mothers. Those had been wonderful years for her and Hugh.

After lunch, she took a walk through the town, and found the medical building where Gabrielle's office was. She checked in at the desk and waited twenty minutes until she was called. There was a constant flow of people in casts, with crutches or slings of some kind, and a few like her who had no visible injuries, who were presumably there to consult. It was a very full waiting room, and there was an overflowing toy chest for kids. Watching the injured made Charlotte hesitate to take a run while she was there. She hadn't skied in several years and couldn't afford an injury that would hamper her or keep her from working.

When her name was called, Charlotte followed a nurse to the doctor's office, a small, crowded room with a desk, a bookcase crammed full of medical books, a leather couch, and two chairs facing the desk. The doctor's degrees from Stanford hung on the wall, and as Charlotte looked around, a tall young blond woman with a perfect figure walked into the room, with a braid down her back and a warm smile for Charlotte, and sat down at her desk. She was carrying a stack of files and set them down, and glanced at a note on her desk and then back at Charlotte.

"So, Miss Ramsay, welcome to Aspen. What can I do for you?" Charlotte returned the smile and prayed Gabrielle wouldn't be angry that what Charlotte wanted from her was not medical.

"I'm sorry to waylay you, I can see how busy you are," Charlotte said, wanting to get to the point quickly. "I'm not a patient, but I need your help. And I'm happy to pay the consultation fee, I don't want to waste your time. I'm a writer and senior editor at *Vanity Fair*. I'm writing an article about your father, and I'd like to ask you a few questions about him. He's taken some fairly controversial positions recently, which aroused the magazine's interest, and I'd be interested in hearing anything you have to say."

Gabrielle's face froze for a minute as she stared at Charlotte and digested what she'd said.

"You're a reporter?"

"Not really. I'm a writer, that's a little softer. I want to write a profile of who he is, and anything you can offer would help."

"Is this in support of him to endorse his positions, or a critical piece?"

"It depends on what I hear," Charlotte said honestly.

"Does he know you're doing this?" Gabrielle looked suspicious, but she hadn't told her visitor to leave yet, which was a good sign.

"Yes, he does. It's an authorized interview. I'll be meeting with him in person sometime in the next week. He doesn't know I'm seeing you. I can keep it confidential, if you prefer. Or not. It's up to you."

The young doctor looked at Charlotte directly. "This is very unusual, I've never been interviewed before, and I'm not sure I'm the person you should speak to." She glanced at her watch and then back at Charlotte. "I can give you half an hour. You saw my waiting room, and other people need my help. My father doesn't, but if you came all the way from New York to see me, it must be important to you, so I'll do what I can. To be fair, my opinion of him is biased. My father and I are not on good terms. I haven't seen him in nearly a year, not since my mother's funeral, and we communicate seldom and by email, so my comments are hardly objective." What she had said intrigued Charlotte.

"Thank you for sharing that with me," Charlotte said gently, with her list of questions in hand. "I really appreciate your talking to me, in spite of that." She decided to jump into the deep end of the pool to save time. "*The New York Times* has called him ruthless and a man without a conscience. Do you think that's overstated? Is there a softer side of him people don't see in their business dealings with him, or is that an accurate description?" Gabrielle thought for a few seconds, and looked Charlotte in the eyes.

"From my perspective, I'd say that's accurate. He's a brilliant man, capable, reliable, disciplined, bold in his convictions, but there's something important lacking in his human dealings, a lack of empathy, which could

make him appear ruthless.” She described him well, clinically if not emotionally.

“Is he antiquated or modern in his thinking?” Charlotte watched as Gabrielle answered with a small smile.

“A little of both. My father likes to control things. *Everything*. Things don’t go well when he can’t.”

“Is he flexible?”

“Never.”

“Honorable?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Honest?”

“With money, yes, although he drives a hard bargain, but he’s not generous.”

“Do you admire him?” Charlotte knew it wasn’t a fair question to ask a daughter, but she had to ask, especially in light of what Gabrielle had said. And Gabrielle hesitated on that one again.

“I respect his success. He’s in a hard business with other men as tough as he is. He’s made a great success of our family business. I respect him for that. But I don’t admire his personal views in life. We’re very different, and I’m sure he doesn’t admire me either, if you ask him the same question. We have opposite views of the world. I’m a healer. He’s someone who will take a calculated risk knowing there will be collateral damages from the decisions he makes, but he thinks the damage is worthwhile if the benefit is great. He would have made a great general. He knows that men in the infantry will die, but if he wins the war, he thinks it’s worth it. My mission in life is to save as many of the infantry as I can. I fight for lost causes. My father cannot lose. He *has* to win, whatever the cost.”

“Is that how he’s treated you? As collateral damage?”

“My father has no room in his life for people who don’t see things his way. There is his way, or no way, and nothing in between.”

“It must have been hard to grow up with a father with that kind of point of view,” Charlotte said, and meant it. Her sympathy was all with this

beautiful young woman who was trying desperately to be reasonable and just in her assessment of her father.

“I had a wonderful mother who was an angel in my life,” Gabrielle said, her eyes full for an instant. “Unfortunately, we lost her about a year ago. It’s been hard for my father too. She was the bridge between us, the peacemaker. It’s been a big loss for me, and I’m sure for him too.”

“I’m so sorry,” Charlotte said kindly. “Do you think he has compassion for others?” Gabrielle shook her head and didn’t answer, and wiped a tear off her cheek.

“What do you think he could do to improve his reputation with the people he deals with? What could he change?”

“His rigidity. His inability to see another person’s point of view, to put himself in their shoes. He’s short on empathy, but maybe that’s not possible from where he sits. He sets industry standards faced with a lot of opposing factions—the seamen, the owners, the government, the unions. It’s a mammoth job, and people don’t like you for it in the end. He’s bold and courageous, but someone has to get hurt,” Gabrielle said wisely. “And it’s never him.”

The two women exchanged a look, and Gabrielle looked at her watch again. “I have an eight-year-old patient waiting to have his broken arm set, and he’s in a lot of pain. I don’t think I have more to add, unless I get personal, and I don’t think that would benefit my father or me. I hope this helped you,” she said with a smile, and stood up. “I’m sure he would hate my talking to you so frankly, but he needs to hear some of these things, and maybe this is the only way he will. There’s another person you might find interesting to speak to. She’s in L.A. She’s been my closest friend all my life. Our parents were best friends, and still are. Angela Phillips Klein. Her father died ten years ago, and her mother is very loyal to my parents. I doubt she’ll speak to you. But Angela might.” Gabrielle jotted down Angela’s name and phone number and handed it to Charlotte, who was deeply grateful for all that she had shared. She had given her a rich stew of information about her father that was invaluable, and she had been remarkably objective and fair, especially given the strain in their

relationship. There had been nothing vengeful about it. She was clearly a good person.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Charlotte said, very moved by her.

“Call me Gabby,” she said with a warm smile. “I know there have been a lot of negative things said about him recently. Some of them are true. I do know there is a good side to him, and he tries to do the right things. There is a part of him that many people admire, he just hasn’t shared that side of himself with me. He’s very hard to please. He’s a hard man.”

“I hope he’s very proud of you. He should be,” Charlotte said warmly, and they walked out of the office together, and a moment later, Gabby walked into an exam room with a last smile at Charlotte, who continued through the crowded waiting room and back outside. She took a deep breath of the cold mountain air. What Gabby had contributed would be the underpinnings of the interview, the meat and potatoes in the stew. Charlotte felt sorry for her. She was a remarkable young woman and it was obvious her father hadn’t been kind to her. Charlotte made a hard-and-fast decision that she was not going to reveal her source for the things Gabby Williams had said. She owed it to her to protect her for the honesty about what she had shared.

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Charlotte called Angela Klein in Los Angeles from the hotel that night. She didn’t know who she was, other than Gabby’s lifelong friend, and the daughter of John’s closest friends.

She waited until six o’clock on the West Coast, seven Mountain Time, in case Angela was coming home from work. Charlotte didn’t know anything about her except her name and phone number, and she could hear children in the background when a woman’s voice answered. Charlotte explained rapidly who she was and why she was calling, and that Gabby had given her Angela’s name and phone number. She hoped it would encourage her to talk.

It was very telling to Angela, and explained the text she had had from Gabby a few hours before, which said cryptically: “A woman named Charlotte Ramsay from *Vanity Fair* will call you. I gave her your number. It’s about my dad. Talk to her. This is your chance. I love you, G.” Angela was curious what it was about, and Charlotte explained the gist of the article and that she was looking for information, with no bias until then. It was a fact-finding mission about John Williams, nothing more.

“Gabby was very helpful today,” Charlotte said calmly. “She thought you and I should speak. I got the impression that you have information she didn’t want to share but she thought you might.”

“Would my name appear in the article?” Angela asked in a thoughtful voice. She was thinking of what Gabby had said in her text.

“Not if you don’t want it to. You have my word. Gabby’s won’t either. I think it would be damaging to her if I quoted her, so I won’t. Even if for some reason her father sues us, if he doesn’t like what we say about him, I don’t have to reveal my source, if I can show that it would be damaging or dangerous for her. I can offer you the same protection,” Charlotte said very seriously, and there was a brief silence at Angela’s end of the line. “I am guaranteeing you anonymity. I’m still trying to form an opinion myself. It isn’t clear yet. He’s a powerful man, and not a very compassionate one, from what I can tell, which is the only thought I have so far. But that’s why we’re doing an article about him. Public opinion is riding high against him.”

“I’ve known him all my life,” Angela said quietly. There were no more children’s voices in the distance. She had closed the door to the room where she was sitting. “Our parents were best friends, my mother and John still are. They thought that John is a hero and Helen was a saint. And she was. I have never known a more wonderful woman. She was like my aunt. But he isn’t what they think he is. When I was eighteen, the summer Gabby and I graduated from high school, I was staying at their house in Southampton. Helen and my mom went somewhere, shopping I think. I was in the kitchen baking cookies with Gabby, and she ran to my house to get something. Her father came into the kitchen and asked what I was doing, and I said I was

making cookies, you could smell them. He leaned over to taste the cookie dough, and he pressed me hard against the counter with his full weight, and he kissed me. A hard, deep kiss. I was wearing a denim skirt and a T-shirt. He squeezed my breast, and he reached under my skirt and into my underpants with his hand and touched me. I was trying to push him off me when Gabby came back and she screamed at him when she saw him. We were alone in the house with him, and he looked at me and said that if I ever told my parents he would tell them I tried to seduce him, and they'd believe him and not me. And he was probably right. He asked if I understood. I was crying and Gabby was screaming at him and calling him names, and he whispered to me that I was a little whore and he would get me one day. I never told my parents, and I was never alone with him again. Gabby was always with me, and I think she hated him from that day on. I was traumatized by it. Until then, he had been like a father to me, someone I really trusted and loved. He was like our family. I gave him a wide berth from then on. I went to USC and Gabby went to Stanford. We were together every weekend. And we graduated at the same time, two days apart.

“Our parents came out from New York together. My graduation was first, and we were all going up to San Francisco afterward for Gabby's. My parents were giving a lunch for me at the Beverly Hills Hotel. The graduation ceremony was crazy, and some idiot sprayed champagne all over me when I took off my cap and gown, and I was soaked. We were already late for lunch, so everyone went to the hotel with my parents and Gabby's mom. Her dad offered to drive me to my house off campus so I could change my dress and wouldn't make them any later. Gabby asked if I'd be okay with her dad driving me, but he'd never tried anything again and I was always careful around him, and I figured I was a grown woman, I wasn't a dopey kid anymore, and I could take care of myself. I didn't even think about it. I'd had four years of college, lived far from home, had a house with roommates off campus. In my mind, I was a grown-up, and I didn't think he'd try anything. We were in a hurry, I was late. I ran in and grabbed another dress out of my closet, took off my wet dress and underwear, and

put dry underwear on, and all of a sudden I turned around and he was there right behind me.

“He was waiting in the car when I left him and he’d told me to hurry. I was in my bra and underpants in my room when he grabbed me. I was shocked when I saw him, too shocked to move for a minute. He hit me hard across the face, grabbed me with both hands, and pushed me down on the bed. He tore my underpants off and held me down with both hands and raped me, as simple as that. I was screaming and crying but there was no one to hear me. He just kept on raping me, and he hit me a few more times and told me to stop screaming. I bled all over the bed and didn’t have my period, but he was incredibly rough, and he’s very strong. He’s a big man. My nose was bleeding and my lip was swollen from where he hit me. I couldn’t even stand up when he stopped and I couldn’t stop crying. He pushed me into a cold shower to clean me up, and he said he’d kill me if I told anyone.

“I looked a mess when we got to the hotel for lunch. My hair was wet, my lip was swollen, I could hardly walk, and I threw up in the lobby of the Beverly Hills Hotel. He was kind of holding me up when we got to lunch. He told my parents that he’d realized I was drunk when I fell down the stairs and bumped my lip, and he’d done his best to clean me up. I had a bruise on my breast, but no one could see it. My parents believed him, and they were furious with me.

“Helen was really sweet to me at lunch. And Gabby knew right away. She took me to the hospital that night, but there was nothing to do. He didn’t break anything. They called the police at the hospital, but I refused to tell them who did it. I think it pretty much ended Gabby’s relationship with her dad. She hates him, because of that and a lot of other reasons.

“He wasn’t nice to Helen, but my parents don’t believe that either. He used to scream at her and call her names and tell her she was stupid. I didn’t have sex with anyone for a year after that. I told Aaron, the man I’m married to. We got married, and I’m okay. Except for him, you’re the first person I’ve ever told this to, and if you write about it, I don’t want my name on it. Gabby always said he’d pay for it one day, and maybe now he will. I

don't want to punish him or make a big fuss about it. I never saw him again until Helen's funeral. I never spoke to him. I just don't want to ever see him again. He's a terrible person, and who knows who else he's done it to. He's a predator." After what Angela had told her, Gabby's responses seemed even more understandable. Angela and Charlotte were both crying when her story ended.

"I don't know what to say. I can't tell you how sorry I am. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me."

"Gabby texted me today that I should tell you about it. It affected me for a long time, but I'm fine now."

"There are so many women this happens to," Charlotte said to her, with the deepest compassion. "Men like him should go to prison, but their victims pay a high price when they accuse them. Too high. Angela, I am truly deeply sorry. And I will use this in the most judicious way, so that no part of it is recognizable, but people should know what kind of man he is."

"He covers it well. I'm on the board of a free therapy program for women who've been raped," Angela said.

"Thank you for telling me," Charlotte said in a respectful, subdued voice.

"Gabby was right. I'm glad I did. It's time."

Charlotte was feeling shaken when they ended the call. She sent a text message to Gabby that said only, "Thank you. I spoke to Angela. My heart is with you both." She didn't order dinner. She knew she couldn't eat, thinking of the violence Angela had endured, and the damage done to her for a lifetime.

Charlotte flew back to New York in the morning, still weighed down by Angela's story. She called Lillith the next day and reached her this time. Lillith sounded bright and cheerful, until she realized why Charlotte was calling and remembered what John had said.

"I'm sorry, I can't talk to you," she said, "but I can tell you that John Williams is a wonderful person, an incredible man, and he doesn't deserve the abuse that's being heaped on him." Charlotte tried to ask a few

questions, but Lillith was too frightened to answer. John had made himself clear, and she got off the phone as quickly as she could.

Her call to Isabelle was equally futile, as she knew it would be. The moment Charlotte identified herself, Isabelle said firmly that she refused to be interviewed, she had no comment except that John Williams was an extraordinary man who was being publicly maligned unjustly by people who were jealous of him and wished him harm. And with that, she hung up, and the line went dead. Charlotte could tell that Isabelle firmly believed that. Ever since Angela's story, Charlotte had had an entirely different opinion of John Williams. She was dreading her meeting with him. It was no surprise that he wanted no personal details in the article. He was afraid of his own daughter and her best friend, and who knew how many others he had raped. She felt rage rise up in her every time she thought about him.

By the day that her appointment with John was to take place, she was ready. She already had her notes for the article she was going to write. She couldn't wait. He was everything people thought of him and worse. Ruthless was far too kind a word.

Chapter 11

Charlotte looked serious as she waited in the conference room of his firm for John to join her for his interview. Since her return from Aspen, she had spoken to two of his employees who had confirmed the kind of behavior his daughter and others had alluded to. Uncontrollable rages, lack of empathy, abusive language when he felt an employee had done something wrong, inflexibility, lack of concern for the safety of his employees. No one else had mentioned rape or sexual misconduct.

Henry had spoken to a few connections of his own who confirmed that John had done everything in his power to get the shipyard to accept the seventeen recently purchased ships at once and give him a much lower price on the refits if they all came in together, which had inevitably caused the entire crews of all seventeen ships to be laid off immediately, as well as dockworkers. John had been the single person responsible for it, and he looked Charlotte squarely in the eye and said that it was neither his decision, nor his orders, and he boldly blamed the shipyard for the layoffs that he had engineered.

For every point she brought up, he had someone to blame other than himself—the unions, the docks, the port authority, government regulations, and even the men themselves, saying that they should have seen it coming and had their unions negotiate a better deal for them.

“I believe they did,” Charlotte said politely.

“They got to it way too late,” John said. But the men had been laid off within the hour the ships were docked, and no one had known about it until the day before. The deal had been in secret negotiations until the last minute.

She read off the list of traits and behaviors that he had been accused of, and he blamed them all on and attributed them to someone else in each case. It was staggering listening to him. He was lying about everything, took no responsibility, and showed no remorse.

She didn’t bring up Angela’s rape, because she didn’t want him to guess her source, and she was saving it for the final draft and didn’t want to lose the element of surprise.

John mentioned having met Charlotte on Ben Sharpe’s boat in St. Barth and reminded her that since it was a personal trip during the holidays, their meeting and whoever else was there were off-limits according to their agreement not to include personal issues, which was his way of reminding her that she couldn’t write about Lillith, which was actually of no interest. He was a widower, his wife had been gone for nearly a year, Lillith was of age, and who he dated was irrelevant, and not the issue. How he conducted his business, how he treated his employees, his business practices, dishonesty, and lack of compassion for the people who worked for him were the issues. And what kind of man he was.

From experience, she could tell that he had lied his way through the entire interview, and she thought him a despicable person and suspected that the readers would too, once they read the article. It was a far cry from her interview with Ben Sharpe, which was inspiring, had touched her deeply, and showed what kind of man he was. Everything she knew about John now underscored the differences between the two men.

John looked victorious when he walked her to the elevator after the interview, convinced that he had fooled her and she had believed every word he said. He flirted with her and said he’d like to have dinner with her sometime soon. Charlotte pretended not to hear him.

She met with Henry the next morning and looked serious as she sat down across from him.

“Have you started writing it yet?” he asked her, and she shook her head.

“I wanted to talk to you first. We’ve got an awful lot on this guy,” she said with a grim expression, “much more than I suspected at first. Business and personal, operational, and even criminal.” Two of the men who got laid off had taken their own lives. She told Henry about the rape and he looked solemn.

“You have to protect your source on that, if you’re going to include it.”

“Can I?” she asked him.

“Yes, and I’d like you to check with the hospital and see if they kept any documentation from the night she came in after the rape.” He thought about it carefully. “I think you have to include the rape. People deserve to know what kind of man he is. That’s the core issue here. A man who would do what he did to his employees, treats them as badly as possible, lies to them, cheats them, and rapes young women is not who I want to do business with, with all his holier-than-thou ways.”

“He may sue us,” she warned him.

“Let him. I know you’ll handle it all gracefully, and he won’t want to face a rape trial in order to prove what a good guy he is. The laws in California have changed, and for criminal proceedings, there is no longer a statute of limitations on rape. He could be arrested and go to trial. We have to stay as circumspect as we can, and report what people say about him. The truth is the line of defense against libel, and everything you’ve told me and I’ve heard has the ring of truth to it. I know you’ll do a terrific job with it. You have my blessing,” Henry said, and she stood up a few minutes later, eager to go to work.

“I think I’m going to do the rough draft at home so I’m not interrupted. I want to get it all in and get it right.”

“Just stay away from that young woman he’s dating. He has the right to date whoever he wants, and it’s really none of our business. The rest is all

fair game. You've done a great job researching this," he said, praising her.

"And you helped," she returned. Henry had spoken to many people he knew and who had done business with him, and none of them had a kind word to say about John. The commodore of the yacht club said he broke the rules and had a wanton disregard for other members, including safety measures for the disabled and the elderly. And two men who had been in sailing races against him said he was a dangerous sailor, and several times had nearly caused accidents at the start and finish lines.

"He's damn lucky that girl he raped didn't bring charges. He could have wound up in prison," Henry said to Charlotte. "With those new laws now in California, and no statute of limitations on rape, he could still be arrested and face criminal charges. Good luck. I know you'll do a great job with this." He smiled at her. They had a gold mine of factual information about John Williams that all checked out.

Charlotte gathered up her things and went home after that. She changed into the old track pants she wore when she was writing, and an ancient sweater with holes in it. She sat on the couch with her notes and spread them out on the coffee table, putting them in the order she wanted to use them. The words were already swirling in her head, and she needed to get them all out now and onto her computer screen.

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She wrote almost without stopping for the next three days. And whenever she did stop to get some rest, she would wake up and think of something she wanted to add, or a section to move around. At the end of the third day, she felt as though she was almost there, and mostly had polishing and correcting to do. She was reading it through for the second time when her assistant called her.

"John Williams wants to talk to you. He says he has something to add. He wanted your cell number or house line, and I wouldn't give them to him. Do you want me to call him back and patch you through, so he doesn't get your number?" Charlotte hadn't thought of that, but her assistant had a good

point. She didn't want Williams having her number if he didn't like the article when it came out. And it was a sure thing he wasn't going to love it. She had put everything into the draft she'd written, including the rape of Angela Klein.

"That would be nice," Charlotte agreed, although she didn't want to talk to him. She felt as though she had been living with him for the past few days. She couldn't get him out of her head.

Her assistant had him on the line in two minutes, and just hearing his voice now upset Charlotte.

"Hello, John. What can I do for you?" she asked briskly.

"I'd like to meet with you before you write the article. Can you meet me somewhere for a drink?" It was the last thing she wanted to do.

"I'm working from home. I'm writing it now."

"Where do you live?" he asked her, and his voice made her skin crawl, especially after speaking to Angela.

"Would you like to speak to my managing editor? He's been very involved in the research too."

"How much research are you doing?" He sounded short for a minute. "We're just talking about an incident involving a few seamen and dockworkers. There's no need to fan the flames any more than they have been. The whole point is to put the fire out. It's not a big deal."

"It is to the men who got laid off," she said calmly. "I live downtown, in the West Village."

"Is there somewhere we can meet near you?" he asked. He sounded nervous, and had good reason to.

"There's kind of a deli two blocks from my apartment. I could meet you there," she said, not happy at the prospect of seeing him. She'd have to shower and dress and do her hair and look respectable. She looked like a derelict while she was writing. But she was curious about what he wanted to add, and it might be important.

"Fine." He didn't sound happy about it, and neither was she. "Would you want to come to my apartment?" he offered. "It's got a fabulous view." It

was the last thing she wanted to do, to get trapped in his apartment alone with him.

“I’ll meet you at the deli,” she said coolly. He was getting nervous about what she was writing. But he needed something to counter what was in the press, calling him ruthless and uncaring. She told him where the deli was, and she went to take a shower. She was there punctually an hour later, in jeans and a white sweater, spotlessly clean new sneakers and a heavy army surplus camouflage jacket she had bought at a garage sale. He was already seated at a table when she got there, and she ordered tea and paid for it herself. She was always careful about details that could compromise her.

He smiled when he saw her and stood up. He looked distinguished in a dark gray suit and well-tailored overcoat, shirt and tie, and perfectly shined shoes. She had noticed a chauffeur-driven Mercedes outside, and could guess that it was his.

“The sandwiches are delicious here if you’re hungry,” she said, trying to be pleasant. She didn’t want her disgust for him to show, and hoped it didn’t.

“I’ve eaten. Thank you for meeting me. I just wanted to share some thoughts with you.”

“My assistant said you had something to add,” she said in a businesslike tone, wondering what it was that he thought was so important. She had more than enough for the article, and it was almost finished.

“I enjoyed meeting you in St. Barth,” he began in a roundabout way, and she didn’t comment. “It’s beautiful at this time of year, nicer than when we were there in January. It gets warm early, and you work hard. I thought you might like to spend some time there, on my boat this time, if you can get the time off.” She looked shocked by what he was saying. She wasn’t sure if he was propositioning her, or just inviting her, but either way she wouldn’t accept. “Sailboats aren’t as spacious as motor yachts, so Sharpe’s boat is a little larger, with all the modern thrills, a spa and movie theater, and all of that, but there’s nothing more beautiful or more peaceful than a sailboat under full sail. I’d be honored to have you on the boat whenever you like, or I can lend it to you, if you want to bring friends with you.” He smiled at her

and she still couldn't tell if he was bribing her or trying to seduce her. She didn't seem like his type. She thought bribery was the most likely in the circumstances, given who he was. And he was too smart to bribe her with money. But a trip on a legendary yacht would be ample reward for her sanitizing the article, if she was willing. She understood his motive perfectly. It was clear.

"That's very kind of you," she said politely. "That would be an enormous gift, and the magazine wouldn't allow me to accept that, but it's very generous."

"Weren't you on Ben Sharpe's boat?" he asked her, which made her even more uncomfortable.

"The magazine put me up at the Cheval Blanc, and gave me some days off for working over Christmas."

"I didn't realize you were working then."

"I did a profile of him. Christmas was the only time he had free, so I flew down for a few days."

"Well, I'd be happy to host you on the *Lady H* or lend it to you any time. I have a great crew."

"That's very nice, but I can't accept gifts of great value, and that would certainly be over the line in my managing editor's opinion," she said calmly, masking her shock at what he was proposing. He was openly bribing her.

"Is there something else I can do for you?" John asked, looking anxious. "I want this piece to come out well," he said.

"So do I. I try to be objective and truthful."

"I understand you called Lillith Jones as part of your research."

"She wouldn't speak to me," Charlotte said matter-of-factly, "nor would Isabelle Phillips. They're both loyal to you," she said to reassure him.

"I hardly know the Jones girl well. I met her at a dinner party. She happened to be in St. Barth, so I invited her for a drink on the boat. Isabelle has been a family friend for thirty years, she's like my sister." He seemed to want Charlotte to think there were no women in his life, so maybe he was

hitting on her. She still wasn't sure. "Who did you speak to?" he asked her suddenly.

"I can't reveal my sources," she said simply, and he looked increasingly uncomfortable. She wasn't taking the bait of what he was trying to offer her, to indebt herself to him. And offering her money could backfire badly if she refused it and then revealed that he had tried. He had done that years before and it was a mess.

"Is there nothing you want or need? An air conditioner for your apartment, a vacation somewhere? You're welcome to use my plane. I understand you have a son in Dubai. Maybe you'd like to visit him," he suggested, and he looked pathetic to Charlotte.

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"I appreciate the thought, but I can't do any of that. My professional ethics would be in question. I can't be bought. I try to keep things very clean. Those things come out eventually, and it would be a disaster for both of us." He nodded and looked glum.

"I suppose you're right. You're a very beautiful woman," he said, and the way he looked at her gave her the creeps. He was willing to do almost anything to guarantee himself safe passage, but she couldn't give that to him, especially given what she thought of him, though she wouldn't have anyway. She had never taken a bribe in her life and didn't intend to start now. He dropped a dollar on the table as a tip and stood up, and she followed him outside. He looked uneasy as he nodded and got in his car, and a moment later she watched him drive away. It had been a very strange exchange, and she called Henry when she got home and told him about it.

"He's a damn fool if he thinks he can save his skin at this point and goes around bribing journalists."

“I couldn’t tell if he was bribing me and hitting on me, or just bribing me. I think he’s scared I’m going to mention the woman he was with in St. Barth. He tried to pretend she just happened to be there and he had her over for a drink. I don’t believe a word he says.”

“Well, I’m sorry you didn’t get another boat holiday. Big yachts seem to be part of your karma these days,” he said, and she laughed.

“He really is creepy. He made my skin crawl.”

“I’m sure that’s not the effect he was hoping for. Maybe he thought you’d fall into his arms and hop on the boat with him, and write him a nice puff piece about what a great guy he is.”

“I just wanted to let you know,” Charlotte said, and went back to polishing the article. She continued to work on it for most of the night, honing and sharpening it, and in the morning, she sent a clean copy to Henry. He called her an hour later.

“Wow, that’s another fantastic article. You’re really cooking these days. You got everything in there, even the two guys who died by suicide over Christmas.” One had hanged himself, and the other had thrown himself in the freezing river on Christmas Day and drowned. “And I thought you handled the rape very tastefully, and disguised it well.” She had changed the girl’s age at the time, the location, and the event. John would know who it was unless he had raped many young women, but no one else could guess who the victim was, which was Charlotte’s intention, to protect Angela. But she efficiently conveyed to the reader that John Williams had raped a young woman, and was a cruel man, to a criminal degree.

She was satisfied with her piece, and after Henry had approved it, it went to the fact-checkers. The next issue of the magazine was coming out in two weeks and they were rushing it through to appear in that edition. The headline for it was “Honorable or Ruthless?” above the tagline “You Decide.” The magazine hadn’t taken a declared position. They furnished all the information and were letting the readers decide for themselves. There was only one possible conclusion, and it wasn’t Honorable.

She went to the office then, and there was an enormous vase of three dozen white roses mixed with orchids, and no card. She called the florist

and after she insisted, they confirmed that John Williams had sent them. She asked them to pick them up and said that she couldn't accept them. She wanted to be scrupulously ethical with him. Henry came in and told her again how much he liked her article.

"Who died?" he said when he saw the flowers.

"John Williams's hopes of bribing me," she said, and he laughed. "They're picking them up in twenty minutes."

"What are you doing this weekend?" he asked her.

"Tonight, sleeping. I've hardly slept in three days, while I was writing. And tomorrow Hugh is flying through on his way back from Paris to Dubai. He's been there for two months, working. He'll be here for two days, till Monday." Henry knew how much that meant to her, and she looked all smiley at the prospect.

"Give him my best," he said. He really liked her boy. He had turned into a fine man, with his mother's good values. Henry knew how much Charlotte worried about him and missed him. She was deeply attached to her only child, and she lived for his visits.

She went to bed early on Friday night and slept, and on Saturday morning, she was dressed and ready for Hugh when he arrived. He had a good haircut, and was wearing jeans, a black turtleneck sweater, motorcycle boots, and a black leather jacket. He looked chic and trendy.

They went out for breakfast and had a hearty meal, and then back to the apartment, and he told her all about what he'd done in Paris. A lot of good meetings and great meals. She showed him the two articles she'd written and he read them, and said he liked both of them.

"Great journalism, Mom." It was high praise from him.

"John Williams hasn't seen the one about him, it'll be out in two weeks. He's not going to like it. I hope he doesn't sue us."

"He sounds like a real bastard. Did anyone say anything nice about him?"

"No."

"How is the poor girl he raped? Did she survive mentally? It sounded pretty rough."

“It must have been, and she was very young. She seems okay now. She’s married with children. It was fourteen years ago, though I’m not sure rape victims ever get over the trauma.”

“I know he’s very rich, but I don’t know much about him. What’s Ben Sharpe like? I’ve always been fascinated by him. From homeless to billions. He’s the epitome of the American dream, and I’ve read some things he’s written. He’s brilliant.” Hugh saw something odd cross his mother’s face then.

“Are you friends with him?” he asked.

“Sort of, or I was. Lightning hit us, so to speak. I did the interview, we spent a few days together on his incredible boat, and that was it.”

“And he never called you afterward? What a shit!” Hugh said.

“No, he called me. A lot. I was the shit. I didn’t want to continue.”

“Why not?” Hugh looked disappointed for her.

“He’s fantastic, but it just didn’t make sense.”

“You’re fantastic too, Mom, you’d have fun with him.” Charlotte shook her head.

“Our lives are too different. I can’t keep up with that lifestyle. Look at this apartment, it’s the size of a shoe box. He floats around on his gorgeous yacht, going to fancy places, expensive restaurants, great hotels, dining with presidents, dating twenty-year-old models. I don’t fit in with any of that.”

“Is he a snob?”

“No, he’s very down-to-earth, and I have to admit we were crazy about each other, but I thought we should stop before we started, so no one got hurt. It would be hard to bounce back and get used to real life after a man like him.”

“You can’t just assume it’s not going to work. People don’t always have the same amount of money. Rich people marry poor people all the time.”

“I’m not in his league,” Charlotte insisted, as she had to Ben.

“I really want to meet him, and I think you should give him a chance. Where is he now?”

“I have no idea. I haven’t seen him in nearly three months. He’s probably married to another model by now, or an actress,” she said in a light tone, to

be flip about it so Hugh didn't guess how much she missed Ben.

"I'll bet he'd rather be with you. I think you should reach out to him and give him a chance. You can't just give up because previous relationships didn't work. Let's face it, my father is a little weird, and you met him in college when you were a kid. But what if it works with Ben? You could be really happy."

"I don't care if he's rich. Everyone wants him for that, I don't."

"I want you to be happy, and I think he's an amazing guy. You have to be open to what comes, Mom. We have to reach out and grab the gifts we're given. I have a new girlfriend, by the way. She works for the same company I do, in Dubai. I just signed a new contract with them for a year. Pauline is French, from Bordeaux. Her parents own a winery there. She's a year younger than I am. We have a lot of fun together." He looked happy when he said it.

"So you're staying in Dubai for another year." Her heart ached a little when he said it. The past two years had been hard. She didn't get to see him as much, but he seemed to love it.

"We thought we'd both come back to Europe or the States for a year when we leave Dubai."

"Are you thinking about marriage?" Charlotte had a lump in her throat when she asked, trying to sound casual.

"No, and neither is she. Maybe one day, but not yet, and at our age, a lot can change in a year. But it's great for now." It sounded exactly as it should be, and she could see his happiness in his eyes. "I want you to reach out to Ben after I leave. Invite him to do something fun. He must do some pretty cool stuff. He has the world at his feet. All you do is work now. You need more in your life than that." In theory, she knew he was right, but she was comfortable as she was. Nothing was hurting, and she didn't have a broken heart. She felt ahead of the game that way. But she could see that Hugh was very earnest about it, and he almost made her want to call Ben, but not quite. She'd feel foolish calling him now. She'd been so adamant about not seeing him again. And she was sure he was back with the actresses and models by this time. That was his world. And for her, nothing had changed.

She and Hugh went out to dinner that night and roamed around the Village on Sunday, checking out the galleries and the shops. They cooked dinner on Sunday night, and at six-thirty on Monday morning he left for a nine A.M. flight back to Dubai. Now she knew about Pauline, his new girlfriend. She hoped they'd decide to move to New York for their next chapter.

Charlotte was still basking in the glow of Hugh's visit when Henry called. He had another big assignment for her. A cover story. A famous actress, Amanda Fine, had requested Charlotte.

"You're getting quite a reputation for your profiles. She can come in this morning at eleven to meet you."

"I'll be there," Charlotte said, smiling. She felt a bounce in her step because of Hugh's visit. She always felt that way when she saw him. He called her from the airport to say goodbye again.

"And call Ben!" he said to her. "Trust me! I have a good feeling about it."

"I have a good feeling about you. And I want to meet Pauline on FaceTime. Call me!" Charlotte said. "I love you."

"I love you too, Mom. I'll call you from Dubai."

She left for work then, excited to meet Amanda Fine, the famous actress who had requested her. She didn't need Ben, she reminded herself. She had a job she loved and a son she adored. That was enough for now. And Ben was a billionaire with a storybook life. She didn't belong with him. Hugh was young and he still believed in fairy tales. She didn't, and she liked her life as it was. She wasn't going to go chasing rainbows and get her heart broken. Not again. No matter how terrific Ben was, or how much her heart ached without him.

Chapter 12

Lillith hadn't heard from John in a week. She was used to it by now. He came in and out of her life whenever he felt like it, on any day, at any hour. The hope of moving in together had waned. He never mentioned it anymore, and he wasn't asking her to give up her job. Sometimes he was wildly passionate, or tender and affectionate. At other times, he was dark and brooding. He never explained why. He never asked to meet her friends, or about what she did when he wasn't with her. He lived in his own world, and entered hers whenever he felt like it, just as he did her body. And she allowed it because she believed that she was in love with him. He rarely called to warn her he was coming over. He just showed up, had the key and let himself in, and usually wanted to have sex with her as soon as he laid eyes on her. There was something about her that drove him wild with desire. He had to have her when he wanted her. At times he was exquisitely sensual with her, and at other times he took her with such force it left her breathless and in pain.

She could tell if he was angry when he got to her apartment. Sometimes he told her why, and at other times he barely spoke to her and his mind was somewhere else. He stayed with her for days occasionally and she loved it, even when he barely talked to her. And sometimes he was only there long enough to make love to her, then dressed and left, as though he had an

appointment somewhere else. It wasn't a relationship based on mutual respect, she realized now. It was based on his carnal and sexual needs, which he expected her to satisfy whenever he wanted, in whatever way that pleased him in the moment.

At times Lillith was ashamed of the relationship they had, and she was acutely aware that he was using her. But however quixotic and unpredictable he was, he was so big and powerful and exciting to be with that she was sure she loved him. It was like an addiction. And the thought of losing him and not having him in her life terrified her. She didn't know how she would live without him. He hadn't been back to the boat since January, but he had promised to take her the next time he went. She had begun to realize that it was a mutual addiction. He needed her as badly as she needed him, which reassured her. She realized that it wasn't a healthy relationship but it was the only one she had, the only affection, the only human touch in her life, and she didn't want to leave him. He occasionally asked her if she needed money, and gave her some cash, but she was mainly self-supporting.

She was no longer surprised when she didn't see him for a week. He had mentioned an article coming out in *Vanity Fair*, and he was worried about it. He had warned her not to talk to them if they called. When Charlotte called, Lillith had told her she couldn't talk to her or answer any questions. She didn't know what the final slant of the article was going to be. But she read the newspapers closely, and had followed the whole saga of the shipping line John had bought, and the men he had put out of work. He was getting a lot of bad press, and she felt sorry for him. She knew it upset him. On the day of a particularly bad story in the press he almost always showed up, and was rough when he had sex with her, as though making love with her was the only thing that gave him relief and brought him comfort.

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When Lillith went to work on Monday morning, her boss told her that Isabelle had a new project and had requested that Lillith work on it with her. The head designer whispered to her that she thought Isabelle had a new man

in her life. She hadn't said so, but she wanted to reconfigure her closets and build a dressing room for him, and Lillith was to be discreet about it. It sounded like a fun project. Isabelle wanted Lillith to come and see her that morning and they would figure it out together. Lillith always loved working with Isabelle. She was such a nice person, she had great taste and fun ideas, and the head designer was willing to let her work on it alone. There was no glory to it, it was just a useful project.

When Lillith arrived at the apartment, Isabelle was delighted to see her. They had coffee in the kitchen, and then they went to study her closets, decide which ones she could do without, and move the clothes to another room. Isabelle was going to take some of them to the Hamptons, and she was thinking of giving up a guest room to create an additional closet. Lillith had brought a sketch pad with her, and she followed Isabelle to the space she wanted to commit to the new dressing room. They talked about some ideas, Lillith took the measurements, and by lunchtime she was back at the office, making some computer drawings to show Isabelle the options. There had been some men's jeans and jackets and suits in one of the closets, so their guess had been correct. Isabelle had a man in her life, for the first time since her husband died. Lillith was happy for her. Isabelle had been girlish with her, and seemed a little embarrassed, which Lillith thought was sweet.

The computer renderings came out well. They had come up with four options, and Lillith emailed them to her after lunch. Isabelle had a busy life and was often slow to respond. Lillith didn't hear from her that day, or for the next week, which didn't worry her. She had plenty of other things to do in the office. They kept her busy, and they had several new clients after a big spread in *Architectural Digest*. It was a busy design firm, and Lillith enjoyed her work.

There was a buzz in the office that afternoon, about an article in *Vanity Fair*. She didn't pay attention to it at first. It was supposedly a knockout. It wasn't about one of their clients, but someone everybody knew. There was a copy of the magazine on someone's desk, and Lillith picked it up and thumbed through it to see who it was, and halfway through, she found herself staring at John's face. It was a very handsome photo, but the things

they said about him were shocking. It talked about two men committing suicide after he fired hundreds of people. She knew about the layoffs, and John had told her that they weren't his fault, they were someone else's—the previous owners, the union bosses, and the men themselves.

The article wasn't emotional, it was almost clinical, listing all the things he had supposedly done, the two suicides, all the men who had been laid off, other people who had been unfairly fired, businesses he had destroyed and taken apart piece by piece. There was a long list of his heartless misdeeds, and at the very end, the worst one, the rape of a young woman. It sounded premeditated since he had sexually abused her four years before, and when the opportunity presented itself and he was alone with her years later, he brutally raped her. Lillith felt breathless as she read it. Some of the behaviors the article described, cited by an anonymous source, were things he did to her at times. He came across as heartless, with total disregard for other humans, and the rape was the worst of all. It was a terrible article. She thought it couldn't be true. She wanted to call him to comfort him, but she didn't dare. She didn't believe most of it. Someone was clearly out to get him and hurt him, and the rape victim was probably lying too, Lillith thought. The man she knew was harsh at times and mercurial, but she didn't believe him capable of what the article claimed. She was sure he would sue them. She was shocked by what she read.

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At the magazine, Henry had John on speakerphone, so Charlotte could hear him, and she was silent in the room, so he didn't know she was there.

"I want that bitch fired *today*!" John was roaring like a lion, and it was obvious he meant Charlotte. "I was in a mess before this. This piece was supposed to calm it down, to say nice things about me, not this shit. She must be out to destroy me, and you can be damn sure I'm going to sue you. I'll own the goddamn magazine when this is over. And I want her head on a platter now. I want her out the door by the end of the day. And what's this horseshit about a rape? I never raped anyone. That's insane. I was a happily

married man then. How dare she throw that at me! Was someone paying her to damage me?" He meant Charlotte again. She sat very still as she listened to him rage.

"Of course not. She was only reporting what she was told. The piece was carefully researched. We always check our sources. And in the case of the rape, we saw the police report and the hospital report from Cedars-Sinai before we ran it. A person with reliable credentials informed us and we had to check it out."

"And I remember that little prick-tease you claim I raped. She came on to me, she was standing in her underwear, soaking wet, and damn near tore my clothes off. She tried to get me to screw her when she was a teenager. I refused, and she got even with me years later. I can sue all of you for defamation. The girl never named me to the police." Charlotte had carefully disguised Angela in the article but John knew exactly who it was, which was damning evidence against him.

"But others who were involved knew about it, and you don't want to sue us and face a trial, John, to prove your innocence to a jury, because that's what it would take to clear you if you bring a suit," Henry reminded him. "And Charlotte never promised you she would clear your name with the shipyard fiasco or anything else. All we could promise was an honest, fair, unbiased investigative piece, but we can't predict what the results are going to be, or who's going to come forward. If you knew you had all this in your history, you took a hell of a chance letting us do the article. You didn't warn us about what we'd run into. We *hoped* we'd give you back a lily-white reputation, but that's never a sure thing when you start digging. And the suicide of the two seamen was very fresh. They were both well-liked guys, and you can't expect us to clean that up. We all knew that was going to be a problem. I'm sorry if the article is painful. I'm very sorry you're upset and I understand. There's nothing we can do about it now, the information is out there. People forget. It only lasts on the page for a minute. Right now it's in everyone's faces, but it won't last. It will dissipate and people will move on."

“You’re not going to forget what I’m going to do to you for this. And I want to know the hour that that bitch is fired and out the door. You owe me at least that. And I want an immediate retraction. Pull the issue off the stands.” Henry wanted to tell him that they didn’t owe him anything, and he had no intention of firing Charlotte, but he didn’t want to enrage John further, or he might come to the magazine and shoot them all. He sounded capable of it at that moment. He was clearly a sociopath exposed. He was not only ruthless, he was a dangerous man.

“You need to put it in perspective. We have corroboration on all the facts, or we wouldn’t have run it, but in the end, it’s all hearsay. It’s one person’s word against another. It’s a magazine, it’s not a life sentence or a jury trial. The two suicides were really what sent this into the stratosphere to begin with. People don’t take that lightly, and both of the men had families with young kids who lost their father and their only source of income on Christmas. You knew that. You took the risk when you agreed to the piece. You knew what we might find. We didn’t. Our only intention was to write the truth.”

“My next call is to my lawyer. The bitch who wrote it must be a drug addict or a drunk,” John said viciously. It was his lack of sympathy or remorse to begin with that had set everyone off against him, and he still hadn’t understood that. John had evidenced no regret for anything the article accused him of. And to Charlotte and Henry, listening to him, he sounded insane, and as ruthless as the original *Times* article said. “Let me know when you fire her,” John said in a calmer voice. “Or I’m filing suit tomorrow.”

“We’ve got proof and corroboration for everything the article says. And truth is a rock-solid defense against libel. If anything in that article is true, and we can prove it, you’re dead,” Henry said bluntly, and John hung up. Henry took the phone off speaker, and looked at Charlotte.

“Well, we got a reaction out of him,” Henry said calmly, sat down and looked at her.

“Are you going to fire me?” she asked, concerned.

“Of course not. And he’s not going to sue us. He can’t. You did your homework and so did I. Everything you said is true. He’s a very bad guy, and maybe a little insane. His lawyers will tell him to cool off. It will all calm down. But I suggest you get out of Dodge for a couple of weeks. You don’t want that sonofabitch kicking your door down in the middle of the night and raping you. I think he’s capable of anything. Do you have somewhere to go?” She shook her head.

“I don’t want to go to Dubai to see Hugh, although I’d love it. But he’s busy and I’d upset him if he thought I was in real danger.”

Henry thought about it for a minute. Then he looked at her. “How about a two-week paid vacation to Paris or London? L.A.? Miami? Name your destination. It’s on us. Don’t stay at your apartment while this is hot. Go home, pack, stay at a hotel tonight and fly out tomorrow. We’ve dealt with situations like this before. I’ll send you home with one of our security guys. I don’t want you alone for a minute. And you can come back in two weeks, if he’s calmed down. I’ll talk to Amanda Fine, her interview can wait a couple of weeks, there’s no rush.” Henry had it all figured out, he had expected John’s reaction. Charlotte walked out of Henry’s office in a daze. She called him five minutes later.

“Would Paris be okay?”

“Sounds good to me. We’ll put you up at the Bristol or the Crillon, or the Plaza, whatever we can get. I think there’s a midnight flight on Air France. You could leave tonight.”

“Thank you, Henry.” She had never expected John to go so insane. She thought he’d be livid and hide somewhere. He was acting like a madman, and like the sociopath he was. But hopefully he’d calm down in a few weeks and retreat. And Paris would be fun in the meantime.

John’s next call was to Isabelle. She could hear that he was upset when she answered. She was at the hairdresser, getting her hair done for a dinner party that night. She was going alone.

“I want to go to the boat,” he said brusquely. “Will you go with me?”

“What happened? Did you rob a bank?” She tried to lighten the moment, but he was beyond that. He was in a rage and she could hear it.

“That fucking article came out today. It’s a disaster. I’m suing the magazine. They’ve accused me of a litany of things I haven’t done. They made everything worse. I told them to fire that bitch who wrote it. Someone’s out to get me. Do you suppose Gabby had something to do with it?”

“Of course not. She wouldn’t do that to you.” Isabelle was shocked at the suggestion.

“Well, someone did. I want to get out of here until it cools down. I want to fly to the boat tonight. I want you to come with me. Will you, Isabelle?” He sounded sad and vulnerable for a moment and she felt sorry for him. Everything was going badly for him.

“Let me see what I can do. I have appointments this week. I’ll see what I can change. Could we go tomorrow? It might be easier for me.”

“I’d rather leave right away, and don’t read the article, it’s all lies.” She wasn’t going to read it now, but she was going to tuck a copy into her suitcase and read it later, so she’d know what he was upset about. It couldn’t be as bad as he said.

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John’s next call was to Lillith. She was startled to hear his voice, and she could understand how upset he was, having read the article.

“Go to your apartment now. I’ll meet you there in twenty minutes.”

“John...I can’t do that. I’m at work. I can’t just leave.”

“I am telling you to leave now. Do as I say.” He sounded tense. She hesitated, and then agreed. She didn’t want to upset him more than he was.

“I’ll tell them I’m sick.” He had already hung up. She went to tell her boss that she must have eaten something bad at lunch. She was feeling awful and had just thrown up.

“Oh poor thing. Go home, hopefully you’ll be fine tomorrow.” Lillith literally ran out the door to get a cab to go back to her apartment.

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Charlotte was packing two suitcases in her apartment by then, with a huge, burly security guard standing by. Henry's secretary had booked her on the midnight flight to Paris on Air France. Her passport was in order, and she was trying to decide what to take. It seemed crazy to be running away, but better safe than sorry, and two weeks in Paris, all expenses paid, was too good to turn down. She sent Hugh an email, and told him she'd be at the Bristol if he needed her, and she was fine. She told him it was an assignment so he wouldn't worry about her.

Three minutes after she got home, John stormed into Lillith's apartment like a hurricane. His eyes looked like blue lightning as he gazed at her. She didn't dare tell him she'd read the article. And then, without a word, he grabbed her and pulled her into the bedroom and nearly tore her clothes off, and he pushed her onto the bed for the most violent sex he'd ever engaged in with her. At one point, he growled, "I need you." She had an animal in her arms, a beast who plunged into her and almost through her and he was shaking after he came. She held him until he quieted, and he seemed to melt into her arms as though all his bones had dissolved.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. She felt as though her lower regions had been beaten with a two-by-four. And she realized as he lay next to her that the article was true. He was capable of rape, and of everything it claimed. It hit her like a bolt of lightning. John was a stranger to her.

"I'm not okay. But I will be. I'm going to the boat to calm down," he said, sounding more like himself again. And she also knew that he had just used her to calm his nerves. The world was closing in on him. "Don't read the *Vanity Fair* piece. Someone must have paid them to lie about me. Maybe my daughter, or the unions. None of it is true. I'll come back when it calms down. There's no point sitting here while every tabloid in the city picks it up. They even accused me of rape." She couldn't look at him when he said it. She lay silent on the bed, afraid of him now. "It's not true. She was a little prick-tease who changed her mind. She accused me falsely. She

dropped the charges because it was a lie. I'm going to sue them for it. My lawyers can file the suit while I'm on the boat. I'll see you when I get back." He got out of bed. Lillith didn't want to see him again, but she was afraid to say it. She realized now just how dangerous he was. She had been in love with her illusions, not with the man he was.

"I need to be alone on the boat and I assume you can't leave work," John said as he dressed.

"No, I can't," she said in a small voice. All she wanted was for him to leave now before he hurt her again. She was glad he was leaving town.

"I'll call you from the boat," he said, and she knew he wouldn't. She was going to have her locks changed as soon as he left, and maybe stay with a friend for a while. The man she had fallen in love with on the boat had never existed. And she never wanted to see him again. She realized now that she was lucky nothing worse had happened. She was shaking when he walked out of her room. She heard the front door close a minute later, and she burst into tears in terror and relief. Her illusions were shattered, but she was alive. She had learned a terrifying lesson, and now she knew why his daughter hated him. He was an evil, dangerous man.

After he left her, John went to his own apartment and packed a small bag. He had everything he needed on the boat. And then he went to Isabelle's. She was in triple-time mode, packing several bags at once, calling people on her cellphone and canceling appointments. She called Lillith's boss and said she was going out of town. She told her she had complete confidence in Lillith and she should start the new dressing room project before she got back. She said she had to leave for an emergency and didn't say where she was going.

"We got a flight plan for nine P.M. takeoff," John told her. "We can fly into St. Barth. The crew will pick us up when we get there. We should leave for Teterboro at seven," John said calmly. It was only three by then, and Isabelle had almost finished all her calls. It took her until nearly seven to finish packing, make her last calls, and dress. John sat brooding for the rest of the afternoon and she was ready to leave on time.

At nine that night, Charlotte left for the airport for the ten o'clock check-in for her midnight flight to Paris. John's plane had just taken off from Teterboro promptly at nine. And Lillith was sitting alone in her apartment, thinking about what had happened, shaken to the core. The locksmith was coming to change her locks in the morning. John had come through her apartment like a hurricane that afternoon before he left, and she was still in shock. She was going to move in with a friend for the next few weeks. She didn't want to see him again.

Her boss had called her to see how she was and tell her that Isabelle had called to say she had an emergency and was leaving town, and Lillith was to handle the new dressing room without her. Lillith remembered what her friend at work had said. She was right, John was a sociopath. She had thought that he would bring love, companionship, and stability into her life, and instead he had brought instability, confusion, disappointment, sadness, and fear. None of the things he had promised her had materialized. He had lied to her. He hadn't asked her to move in with him after all, and she was grateful she hadn't given up her job or her apartment. She thought she loved him and she had never even known him. And all she wanted now was to forget him, and she hoped she'd never see him again.

Chapter 13

John had been restless on the plane, and being with Isabelle soothed him. They made love in the plane's bedroom and he calmed down after that. Little by little, he relaxed and seemed like himself again on the flight.

The plane landed in St. Barth at midnight. The crew met John and Isabelle and took them to the boat. And at one in the morning, they were drinking gin and tonics in the warm night air, sitting on the deck of *Lady H*, and life seemed sane again. Isabelle wondered if she should have waited a few days before joining him, to see if things calmed down. But he had been so upset over the article that she couldn't have reasoned with him. He just wanted to get away. He felt safe on his boat and he thanked her several times for coming with him. He seemed like a normal human being again. And he didn't want to talk about the article. She still hadn't read it, since he was always around, but she had it in her suitcase, and intended to read it sometime when he went ashore. She was sure it wasn't as bad as he feared. She suspected he was overreacting. He had a dramatic side that was new to her.

"As long as they fire that bitch, I'll be satisfied and I won't sue them. Someone must have paid her off," he said to Isabelle. "The whole article is full of lies. I'm glad we're here."

“So am I.” She smiled at him, but it had been a turbulent exit from New York. She had a dozen appointments to reschedule now when they went back. But he had been so frantic, she thought it best to go with him.

“I may have to go back a little earlier than you do,” she said as she set down her empty glass after the light meal they had eaten when they arrived. “I canceled some important appointments and I’m missing a board meeting,” she said gently.

“It means a lot to me that you came to St. Barth with me.” John smiled as he looked at Isabelle. He seemed normal again once on the boat.

They went to bed in the opulence of his cabin. It all felt familiar to her again. She hadn’t been on the boat since Helen died, but she knew the boat so well, it felt like home. It only felt a little strange now to be in the owner’s cabin with him and not in a guest cabin.

John told her to take over any of the closets she wanted. He said that all Helen’s clothes had been put away. It made Isabelle sad to hear it, but she was happy with him, most of the time anyway. He was more erratic and needed more attention than she had realized before their affair. He was impulsive and anxious, his temper needed taming, he had trouble controlling himself when he was angry. He had reacted violently to the article. They were all traits that Helen had never complained about and Isabelle hadn’t seen before. They were still adjusting to each other. She hadn’t invited him to move in with her yet, because of his behavior. She wanted more time of adjustment. She and Steve had been much more in harmony, and they were both easygoing people, which John was not. He was surprisingly high-strung, and Isabelle thought he acted like a child at times. She wondered if the sudden flight to St. Barth hadn’t been part of that behavior, and unnecessary, but now they were there, and there were worse places to wait out the storm. And once he calmed down after their arrival, he was an excellent host and attentive to her as always.

When Charlotte landed in Paris, she had a text from Gabby Williams, thanking her for being so kind to her friend, and one from Angela, thanking her for lifting a terrible burden off her heart. She said she felt avenged and washed clean. Charlotte was very touched by both texts, and felt that the ruckus with John Williams over the article was worth it if it had healed Angela's broken heart. She had another text from Hugh asking her if she was already in Paris and what she was doing there. It was hard to put it all in a text and she was going to call him when she got to the hotel.

Her plane had arrived at noon local time. She had slept for the whole flight, and arrived at the hotel at one-thirty in the afternoon. After she dropped her bags in her room, she walked along the Faubourg Saint-Honoré and the rue de la Paix and looked in all the shops. Then she walked around the Place Vendôme. Paris had never looked better to her and suddenly she didn't care about the magazine or the article or John Williams and how crazy he was. She was just happy to be there on a beautiful spring day. She had two weeks in Paris to do all the things she never had time to do when she was there for work. Being there was an incredible gift. She wanted to take full advantage of it.

She called Hugh when she went back to the hotel and explained the situation to him in a modified, less explosive version. She simply said that a disgruntled interview subject was acting out, and her two weeks in Paris were just a generous precaution on the part of her employer.

"Do you think you'll be safe when you go back?" Hugh asked, worried.

"I do. I think he's just a spoiled, self-indulgent, somewhat crazy guy who thinks he can control the world and do a lot of rotten things to people and not be accountable. I think he's a bad guy, but I don't think he's going to shoot me. He can't even sue the magazine. We have all the corroborations for everything we said. We had more, but we didn't use all the material. We had enough. He's a terrible person. His own daughter doesn't see him, and she was very restrained about him with me. He raped her best friend when she was fresh out of college. He's a monster, a really evil guy."

"Well, steer clear of him when you go back, and have fun in Paris," her son said to her. "Have you called Ben yet?"

“No, I haven’t but maybe I will when I go back. I’m thinking about it.”

She didn’t have to make the decision. Ben called her on her cell the next day. He had read the article, and decided to call her. “I can’t believe the list of all the awful things he’s done. I never liked him, but he’s worse than I thought.”

“It was upsetting writing it. How are you?” she asked him. She was happy to hear him.

“I’m okay. Where are you?”

“I’m in exile in Paris. The Witness Protection Program.” She laughed.

“What do you mean?”

“John Williams wants me fired and was going to sue the magazine. He got pretty heated the day it came out. So the magazine has sent me to Paris for two weeks while it cools off. I’m on the way to the Louvre. This is a pretty terrific place to be in exile.”

“You make me wish I was there,” he said wistfully. “I’ve missed you.”

“I miss you too, every day. Do you have a new Miss Universe?”

“No, I’m on sabbatical. I thought I’d join a monastery.” She laughed at the idea.

“It wouldn’t suit you. What else have you been doing?” She missed talking to him, and loved hearing him now.

“I’ve been developing new products. It’s what I do best. What about you?”

“Writing profiles. I was supposed to interview a movie star, but they sent me to Siberia, so it’s been postponed for a few weeks.”

“Can I see you when you get back?” he asked cautiously, fearing her answer.

“I’ve been thinking about it. My son thinks we should see each other. I got a whole lecture about it from him.”

“I knew I’d like him,” Ben said with a smile.

“He just signed up for another year in Dubai, and he has a girlfriend there now. I hate having him so far away,” she shared with Ben. He could hear the sadness in her voice.

“I hate having you so far away. When are you coming back?”

"I just got here yesterday. They think it'll calm down in two weeks, or probably less, but I have the two weeks off." It was a rare and extreme occurrence.

"That sounds like a long time. I could come over if you want, it's only a six-hour flight." He sounded hopeful.

"Maybe we should think about it," she said softly.

"I think about you all the time," he said tenderly.

"Yeah, me too," she admitted. "Maybe we could have dinner when I get back, when all this craziness is over."

"I'd like that a lot," he said, sounding dreamy. "I'll call you again if that's okay."

"It's okay," she said, and after the call, she walked to the Louvre and spent three hours there, and enjoyed it more than she ever had before. Her exile to Paris was turning out to be a blessing, and she had loved talking to Ben again. Hugh was right.

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Once they were on the boat, John calmed down and seemed normal again, except when he mentioned the article. It had done him good to get away, and the boat had restored him to sanity. Isabelle had always loved the time she spent on the *Lady H* with him and Helen. It was a treat to be pampered, although it was a little less fun without Helen. John spent a lot of time on the phone and sending emails to his office.

He talked to his lawyer, Martin Schultz, the morning after they got to the boat. Martin advised John not to sue the magazine. Even if inaccurate, as he claimed, it was best not to react or reply. And the magazine claimed they had backup for everything they'd written and Martin told John he believed them. They were absolutely firm in their claim of accuracy from research and interviews.

"I'll take a look at what they've got. But they wouldn't take a chance like that. It sounds like they dredged up everything they could from the past in their research. What about the rape?" Martin asked. "That's the only

thing that concerns me. Is it true? Anything you tell me is privileged, so you can tell me what happened.” It sounded credible to him, and could be a real problem if the rape victim pressed charges, even all these years later, and she could.

“It was a misunderstanding. She’s a hot little number, she’s a prick-tease, or she was then. And a liar. She’d been goading me since she was in high school. I thought she meant it this time, and she was twenty-two then, not a minor. I fell for it. She propositioned me. I thought we both had a good time. She looked like she was enjoying it. She was an adult, and she knew what she was doing. She led me on. No one ever said anything about rape until the article came out. They disguised her very thinly in the article, but I knew right away who it was. That only happened to me once. I’ve been more careful ever since.” He sounded like injured virtue when he said it. It had happened to others and his attorney believed him. He believed John was an honest man. He was tough in business, but not a rapist.

“The magazine claims they have a police report, and the records from the hospital trauma unit, with photographs. Both the hospital and the police listed it as a rape.” Martin had spoken to Henry about it to see what they had. And he needed to know John’s reaction to it.

“It’s listed as a rape because she said so. I told her I couldn’t see her again because I was married, so she was pissed.” There was a vast discrepancy between John’s story and what the magazine said about the hospital records, but his attorney didn’t press the point and hoped it didn’t come back to haunt them. “She’s a married woman with four kids now. She’d embarrass her husband if she tried to press charges, he has a big job. It wouldn’t hold up in court. Her parents are my best friends. Her mother is on the boat with me now. It’s not a problem,” John assured him.

“I hope your perception of it is the same as theirs.” Martin Schultz knew of cases like it that had gone badly in court for the defendants, but John was very convincing. He was furious at the accusation he said was false, and clearly wasn’t worried. “And they’re not going to fire the writer. They have complete faith in her, and all the backup they say they’d need in court. They sound very confident. She’s their most important writer, and a senior editor.

She's not going anywhere. Can you live with that?" Martin asked him. "I know you want her fired, but they maintain her innocence and accuracy as a journalist. They're standing behind her. She's a prize-winning journalist."

"What about the damage to me?" John asked him, sounding wounded. "They victimized me. They lied. They destroyed my reputation."

"It's up to you," Martin said. "Think about it while you're on the boat. It's an unfortunate situation. I think you should ignore it and move forward. You don't want all of that dragged through the press."

"I'd be okay with a public apology from them. I don't need money out of this." Martin was exasperated but didn't show it. Wherever the truth lay about the rape, John had a total lack of empathy for what the others had suffered. Martin wanted to ask him if the two men who had taken their own lives owed him an apology too. Nothing was ever John's fault, according to him, and his total lack of humility didn't help him publicly. No one was sympathetic to his cause. John Williams wasn't a man people felt sorry for. He was a man people feared and even hated. He was only charming to a select few, when he chose to be and if he had something to gain from it.

John and Isabelle spent lazy, easy days on the boat. It was a wonderful place to relax. He had a terrific chef onboard, and St. Barth was a beautiful place. Isabelle's only complaint, if she had one, was John's sexual appetite. He wanted to have sex with her three or four times during the day and again at night. She was beginning to think he needed a much younger woman. At times he made her feel like a hooker hired for the trip, expected to service him whenever he wanted, to relieve his anxieties and satisfy his desires. He was almost insatiable.

"Every time I see your body, I go crazy. You've bewitched me," he explained it to her, as though his constant need for sex with her was her doing.

"Did you and Helen make love this often?" she asked him.

“Helen didn’t like having sex. She tolerated it. She didn’t mind if I had an occasional fling with another woman, sometimes she encouraged me to.” Isabelle had the distinct recollection of two occasions when Helen thought he was having an affair and she was frantic about it. She had never said anything to Isabelle about not liking sex, or wanting him to pursue other women for relief.

John would tease Isabelle into having sex with him and sometimes arouse her against her wishes, when she was reading a good book, sunbathing, dozing in the sun, or swimming in the pool for some exercise, and eventually, he got her to do what he wanted. He was gentle most of the time, and only once in a while too rough, if he was in a hurry. She tried to get him to play cards with her, or dice, or dominoes, as distraction, but the only thing he really wanted to do, as many times as he could lure her into it, was make love with her. And she saw him take a pill one day and realized that he was taking Viagra so he could go on for hours. It was the greatest discrepancy between them. He was a raging bull in bed, always at the ready. At times Isabelle longed for the days when there was no man in her life. But she enjoyed John’s company otherwise, and he was fun to talk to. But between his occasional quick flashes of temper and his never-ending sexual prowess, she was beginning to suspect that Helen hadn’t had an easy life, although she almost never complained about him. He didn’t seem like the right partner for Isabelle, and she was beginning to have strong doubts. But he was impressive in other ways. He had an extraordinary mind, and was knowledgeable on so many subjects. He was intelligent, and kind when he wanted to be. He was a mass of complexities and contradictions, and at times extreme pleasures. But he was not an easy man to live with and she wasn’t in love with him. He was right, Helen had been a saint. And Isabelle wanted to dampen down their affair when they went home. His intensity on every subject was overwhelming and his lack of empathy for others disappointing, and even alarming at times.

As Isabelle had asked, Lillith took on the project of the new dressing room in Isabelle's absence, to get it done. It wasn't complicated, it was just a question of logistics, as to which of her closets Isabelle wanted to give up, and how to configure them. Isabelle still hadn't told her designer who the new man in her life was, or even that there was one. She was discreet in all things, but Lillith had seen that there was one closet already half full of men's clothes. It was helpful to have some of his jackets to measure, so the carpenter would know how high to put the racks for his hangers. One day, Lillith took out a jacket and a pair of gray slacks to measure them. He was a tall man. There was a pile of mail on one of the shelves, and a few of the envelopes fell when she put the jacket back and she picked them up to return them to their place. Without paying close attention, she saw the name on the envelope. It jumped out at her and she felt stunned for an instant. The name was John R. Williams. She took out the stack of mail and looked at all of it then. All of the mail was addressed to John, at Isabelle's address. Why was his mail at Isabelle's? She flipped through the jackets then and recognized two of them, and the scent of his cologne. He had worn one of the jackets the last time she saw him, on the day he left. Lillith sat down on a little stool in front of Isabelle's makeup table, and she realized that John was living with Isabelle at least part of the time. He was sleeping with both of them. And it dawned on her as well that Isabelle and John were both out of town, and had left at the same time. It hadn't occurred to her at first. And she was still deeply disturbed by the way John had treated her the last time she saw him, and she believed now that the claim of rape against him from the past was probably true. And clearly, with his clothes in Isabelle's closet, he was sleeping with Isabelle too. She felt sick thinking about it. He had played her for a fool. She wondered if Isabelle knew about her too.

Lillith put everything away, grabbed her bag and coat, and left the apartment as fast as she could with her heart pounding. All the times John had disappeared, was he with Isabelle? She took a cab back to the office and went to look for Jane, the assistant who had dated the sociopath. She was sitting at her desk organizing files of brochures of bathroom fixtures when she looked up and saw the expression on Lillith's face. She had been

there herself and knew how painful it was to realize that someone you loved was a liar and a sociopath, and wasn't the person you thought you knew.

And Lillith didn't want to tell her that John was also having an affair with their client. She didn't want to go back to Isabelle's apartment. All she said to Jane was, "I think you were right."

Jane looked pained for her and said "I'm sorry" in a soft voice.

Lillith wanted to know the truth, at least about John's relationship with Isabelle. She couldn't know the truth about the rape, although she strongly suspected that it was true. He had taken her so violently before he left, it felt like rape to her. She turned to Jane, feeling sick, wrote down the phone number on the boat, and handed it to her.

"I'm sorry to ask you to do this, but will you call this number and ask for Isabelle Phillips? If she's there, hang up, and if she isn't, it doesn't matter. Can you call from your cell?" Jane nodded, picked her cellphone up off her desk, and placed the call, as Lillith stood by looking intense. The call would tell her just how shamefully John had lied to her. She wanted to believe he hadn't, even if he had a dark past, but she wanted to know the rest now, as best she could.

Jane put the call on speaker so Lillith could hear what was said. It rang several times and a male voice with an Australian accent answered. Lillith knew exactly which deckhand it was.

"*Lady H,*" the voice said pleasantly. Jane asked for Isabelle. "I'm sorry. They've just gone ashore," he answered. "They'll be back in about two hours. May I take a message for her?" Jane turned to Lillith, who shook her head and gestured to hang up. Jane thanked him and said it wasn't important and she'd call later, and she hung up. Lillith looked at her and nodded. It explained his disappearances. Whether or not he was a rapist, he was a liar at best. He was sleeping with both women, with Isabelle, and with her.

And now Isabelle was on the boat with John. That had never even dawned on her as a remote possibility before. But now she knew. John and Isabelle were lovers and she was on the boat with him. And Lillith was the fool in the story. She wondered for how long he had been lying to her.

Maybe they had been lovers for years, or ever since Helen died, or before. But Lillith was the odd man out, the idiot, the woman he used for sex, not the woman he loved. It nearly broke her heart as she stood there and her eyes filled with tears. She felt like an idiot, and utterly betrayed. Jane hugged her as she cried.

She sat at her desk feeling dazed, thinking of all his disappearances and excuses.

She bolted out the door at five o'clock and went home. She couldn't stay in the office for another minute. She just wanted to run away and hide. She was certain he had never loved her. And all of his late-night surprise visits at midnight were only booty calls, not that he couldn't be without her for another minute as he said, or that he had late-night meetings. He had Isabelle, and Lillith on the side. It was a great arrangement for him. There was nothing left to say. She had to forget him as fast as she could. He was a heartless liar and a sociopath and as bad as people said. He and Isabelle were obviously living together at least part of the time. He wasn't leaving clothes at Lillith's apartment, and Isabelle was building a dressing room for him. On the way home from work, she went to a magazine store near her apartment and bought a copy of the latest *Vanity Fair*. She went home and read every word of the article again, and cried while she did. And whatever he had said to her that they had screwed him and it was all lies, she knew it was all true, even the rape. She was sure of it now. It had the ring of truth.

—

When Isabelle and John got back to the boat, the steward told her she'd had a call, but the caller hadn't left a message, and hung up. She found it very strange.

"That's so odd," she commented to John on their way to his cabin to drop off their purchases. "I didn't leave the boat number with anyone, just my cellphone. And I didn't tell anyone where I was going, not a soul."

"Maybe it was Angela. Did you leave it with her?" She shook her head.

“No one knows I’m here. I didn’t think you’d want me to tell anyone you were on the boat.”

“Well, it must not have been important if they didn’t leave a message,” he said, not interested in the mystery, and she hurried back up on deck, before John could get amorous again. They had already made love twice before they went out. She was still trying to guess who had called, and finally gave up. John was right. It couldn’t have been important or they’d have called her cell. But she didn’t remember leaving the boat number with anyone. Maybe she’d made a mistake and left the boat number for one of her canceled appointments instead of her cell.

—

A second odd occurrence happened on the boat the next day. Isabelle was cleaning out some bathroom cupboards in her bathroom, after she found some of Helen’s prescriptions still in a drawer. She threw them away, and checked all the other drawers for anything else left over. It made her sad to find Helen’s things. In one of the drawers Isabelle wanted to use, she found a red thong. It looked almost new and was sexy and cute. It was red lace with a tiny red bow. She took it out and looked at it, and knew that Helen would never have worn anything like it. It was something a sexy young woman would wear. And there was no way it could have gotten there, unless its owner had stayed in the owner’s cabin with John. It was a mystery she didn’t want to solve, but she needed an answer, or she knew it would gnaw at her forever. She didn’t know what else to do but dangle it on one finger in front of John. She was half teasing and half serious, but she wondered if he had had a woman on the boat with him over Christmas. It was before they were together so he had had a right to other women then, but she didn’t like the fact that he had told her how hard the holidays had been and how lonely he had been without her. It was beginning to appear that it wasn’t true, as evidenced by the red thong.

“Do you know who this belongs to?” she asked him innocently, and he looked blank.

“I have no idea. Maybe Helen, or Gabby.” Isabelle didn’t believe that either of them wore thongs. And Gabby wouldn’t sleep in her father’s cabin, or even come to the boat. She hadn’t been there in years. And then his face brightened.

“I totally forgot. I lent the boat to a friend in February for a few days. It must be his wife’s, lucky guy. Would you ever wear something like that?” he asked, and kissed her.

“No I wouldn’t. Those things always look uncomfortable to me, and slightly obscene.”

“Very appealing though.” He grinned at her and went to his study to check his emails, no longer interested in the thong. Isabelle dropped it in the garbage, and when the maids were turning down the bed later, she smiled at one of them and asked a question.

“What were the people like who stayed on the boat in February?” she asked conversationally, and they both looked confused.

“No one’s been here since Mr. Williams over Christmas, ma’am. He never lends the boat to friends. He only likes guests when he’s here.”

“Oh, right. My mistake,” Isabelle said cheerfully and left the room for dinner. She knew the answer then. He had had a woman with him over Christmas. He had a perfect right to, he was single now. But it meant he had lied to her. Lies were not acceptable. She and Steve had never lied to each other. She detested liars. He’d had every right to be with another woman, but what didn’t sit well with her was the lie. And who was the woman in the red thong who had been there?

—

It took Lillith a week of pain and grief to make the decision. It was the hardest one she’d ever made. She hadn’t wanted to see John again, but now that she knew he was living with Isabelle, part-time at least, she wanted to confront him. He had taken her for a fool. And if Isabelle was building an expensive dressing room for him, clearly he was planning to stay. So Lillith had meant nothing to him except as a sex toy. And she didn’t trust herself

not to give in to him at some low point. He had a powerful hold on her, and he was a dangerous man. She was sure of that now. Or she could give up her life in New York, quit her job, leave now, and never see him again. It meant giving up her dreams in New York and a job she loved. It was a high price to pay for her mistake in loving him. But she was afraid that if she stayed, she would always be waiting for him, hoping that he would show up, change, spend time with her, no longer disappear for weeks at a time, and love her. She wasn't sure she was strong enough not to see him, or sleep with him. His lies were incredibly convincing, and his power of attraction. The minute he walked in, no matter the lie, she melted and was his. She hated the thought, but if she left New York and moved to Los Angeles, she could stay with her mom for a while until she found a place of her own, and a job, and start her life again. It seemed the wisest course. She called her mother to discuss it.

"That would be a lot of fun, you could help me with the twins. They're so much work," her mother said when Lillith asked about staying with her. "We have a night nurse, but I take care of them all day. Our day nannies quit, both of them, and it was too expensive. I'm stuck here anyway since I'm nursing both of them. I feel like a cow." Lillith dodged her mother's questions about why she was leaving New York, saying she was lonely, it was too expensive, and she missed California. Lillith didn't want to be a babysitter, and it wouldn't be ideal, but if she could find a job she'd be out in the daytime, and eventually get her own place. She was beginning to believe that New York would be dangerous for her when John returned.

"I'll get my own apartment as soon as I find a job." She didn't like the idea of living with her mother again, it was a backward step and seemed juvenile, but L.A. would be safer for her. And she knew that if she didn't leave, she might be trapped in John's web again. She felt sorry for Isabelle, since he had cheated on her too, and presumably she didn't know it yet, and maybe never would. But secrets like that had a way of getting discovered, just as she had, with an envelope with John's name on it falling at her feet from Isabelle's closet. He was getting his mail at Isabelle's apartment, so she assumed he was living there part- or full-time. And Isabelle was

building him a new dressing room. Lillith felt like the joke in the story, the fool. And she had genuinely loved him. The truth about him was a bitter pill to swallow.

It wasn't a happy decision, and she cried every day. She gave notice at the design office, and they promised her a good reference and were sad to see her go, especially Jane, and her boss liked her too.

She sold her furniture, which she had bought secondhand when she moved to New York. All of her clothes fit into four suitcases. She shipped linens and kitchen equipment to her mother's address. It took her a week to pack everything up, and she bought a ticket to L.A. She told everyone that her mother needed help so she had to go. All she wanted to do was leave town now, take back control of her life, and forget the insanity of the last four months with John. The truth about him and Isabelle would have come out anyway sooner or later, and it would have hurt even more in a year, if he could keep up the charade for that long. She didn't tell John she was leaving. He didn't call her, and she didn't contact him. She wanted to leave before he got back and showed up at her apartment. She was afraid of him now, and the power he had over her.

She left the office amid tears and hugs, and flew to Los Angeles on Saturday. She knew it was cowardly to leave without seeing John one last time, but she knew that if she had, she might have stayed, and waited for his calls again, his visits and his lies. He was everything that Charlotte had said about him in the article. He was ruthless. He was a man without a heart or a conscience. She had truly believed he loved her at first, and she didn't believe now that he ever had. He was incapable of it. She'd had a magical week on his boat at Christmas, and had felt like a fairy princess. But it was all an illusion. She had been in love with a lie. And all she wanted now was a fresh start and to forget him. He had never loved her, she was just a toy to him. The only thing she believed now was that he was a dangerously sick man, and she needed to get away from him as fast as she could.

Chapter 14

Ben had been calling Charlotte every day while she was in Paris. She told him about the museums she went to, the parks she discovered, little churches and funny shops. She walked all over Paris, and felt the magic of the city embrace her. She didn't even mind being there alone, but it was nice hearing from him and having long conversations, and he texted her before she went to bed at night. He was thoughtful and kind, as well as brilliant and funny.

There was something very sweet about the anticipation of seeing him again, and savoring it. Now that she had decided to see him and take a chance, they could hardly wait. She was ready to go home. John seemed to have backed off his threats of a lawsuit, and the initial shock of the *Vanity Fair* article had worn off. People were still talking about it, but it wasn't as hot a topic as it had been at first. And no one who knew him was surprised by the contents of the article. It had the authentic ring of truth.

Ben had asked Charlotte several times if he could come over for her last weekend, and fly her home. She loved the idea and the fact that he wanted to, but it seemed incredibly self-indulgent, and it embarrassed her. There were a million things she wanted to show him, but it could wait for another time. She hadn't seen him in four months by then, which seemed like an

eternity to both of them. They were trying to be careful and wise. And Ben didn't want to scare her by moving too quickly.

On their second week in St. Barth, John went out with several of the crew to fish, and Isabelle remembered the copy of the magazine she had stuck in her suitcase when they left New York. She still hadn't read the article, and she wanted to now, while he was out. She wanted to know what it said. He hadn't talked about suing the magazine for several days, but he was still determined to get Charlotte fired. His attorney had told him that wasn't going to happen, but John was determined to try. She had caused him pain and embarrassment and he wanted to get even with her. He was out for revenge.

Isabelle sat in John's cabin and read the article from beginning to end.

The accusations were ugly, and reading them, she suspected that all or most of them were true. She had seen sides of him in the past four months that she had never seen before. She had new respect for Helen, and less for him. He wasn't the great guy she had always thought him, and he had no empathy for others. He was vengeful and cruel in business, self-centered and spoiled with a hot temper in his private life, and his sexual obsession had begun to seem strange.

The part of the article that rattled her particularly was the thinly disguised story of the rape. The location had been changed, the time of year, the occasion, the school, but the details leapt into her mind as though it had happened yesterday, and as she read it, she knew it was all true and who the victim was. It was Angela, her daughter. It broke her heart to realize how badly she and Steve had failed her and what she had gone through. They had believed everything John had told them after he drove her to her house to change, claiming that she was drunk and had fallen down the stairs. Isabelle still remembered the dazed look on Angela's face all day. Isabelle had tears running down her cheeks as she put the magazine back in her suitcase, and she couldn't stop crying.

She called Charlotte at the magazine and they said she was away. They said they would ask her permission to give out her cellphone and they texted it to Isabelle immediately, and told her Charlotte was in Paris. Isabelle didn't know Charlotte, but she spoke to her as one mother to another. She thanked her for telling the story and honoring her daughter, validating Angela's claim, and opening her eyes to what her daughter had been through.

"Could you do me one favor, could you email me the police report, and the one from the hospital? I'd like to read them myself." Charlotte had her office send them to her. When Isabelle read them, she cried again. She didn't know how she could have been so blind. She called Angela and told her how sorry she was that her parents had failed her so totally. John had been so convincing that they had believed him, and not Angela. Isabelle said she would never forgive herself for their blindness and stupidity. She and Steve had believed John beyond reproach then, mistakenly.

"It's okay, Mom," Angela said in a gentle voice. She was a mother too. "I'm fine now. Things like that happen. Aaron helped me get through it."

"Can I come out to see you?" Isabelle asked her humbly. "I just want to put my arms around you and hold you, and tell you how sorry I am and how much I love you."

"Are you still friends with John?" Angela asked her, sounding tense. "And of course you can come out whenever you want." She had no regrets about the interview she had given to Charlotte.

"I have been friends with him, but we won't be friends anymore," Isabelle said coldly.

"I don't want to see him again," Angela said in an emotional tone. The wounds had healed but the scars would be there forever.

—

When John came back to the boat that afternoon, he was very proud of the fish he had caught and went to find Isabelle. She was packing her suitcase,

and didn't turn to look at him. He spoke to her back and couldn't see her face.

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"You're leaving?" He sounded like a disappointed child. "Is there a problem in New York?" She shook her head and turned to look at him.

"I have to get back. I'm going to L.A." There was ice in her eyes.

"Did something happen?" He looked shocked. After reading the article, she hated the sight of him, and would forever now. She and Steve had been blind.

"We both know exactly what happened. And I'm going to California to apologize to my daughter for believing you and not her. You're a liar, John, and a monster. You're as ruthless as they say you are. How could you do that to her and look me and Steve in the eye? How could you do that, to anyone?"

"You shouldn't have read the article. It's all lies. Someone paid them to do that to make me look bad, probably the unions." He was sticking to his story. She didn't care.

"You do that all by yourself. I asked the purser to book me a seat on the first flight tomorrow morning. And when I go, I don't ever want to see you again. Stay away from me and my daughter, as far away as you can get. Tell your lies to someone else. I tried to give our relationship a chance. Gabby is right about you. You have no heart."

"Isabelle, I love you," he said, and she held up a hand to stop him.

"No, you don't. You don't know how to love anyone but yourself." She put her suitcases in the hall then, and ate dinner and slept in one of the guest cabins, the farthest one from his. She kept the door locked. He stood on the deck, watching her as she left. He looked bereft. She couldn't look at him.

All she could think of was what he had done to Angela, her child. He stood watching her as the car drove down the quay, and she never looked back. He was dead to her now.

That night, after she flew home, five of John's ships in dry dock were set on fire and destroyed. Members of the unions were thought to be responsible. Revenge for his crimes had been delivered. Justice had been served. It was only the beginning. He had the lives of two men and the well-being of the crews of seventeen ships to atone for, and Angela's pain, and all his past crimes, too many to number, to make up for.

By midweek, Ben couldn't stand the wait any longer and asked Charlotte's permission to meet her in Paris. It took very little convincing, since she was just as excited to see him.

He flew into Le Bourget airport with the other private planes, and met Charlotte at the Bristol. They walked all over Paris, and she showed him her favorite places. They went to a glorious meal at Alain Ducasse, and on the second night they ate at a bistro, which she liked better. And they still couldn't keep their hands off each other. The time apart had brought them closer and deepened their feelings for each other.

The sky was a brilliant cameo blue the whole time Ben was there, for the final days of Charlotte's stay. On Sunday, they flew home in his plane after a perfect four days in Paris, which was only the beginning of their adventures together. There were so many things they wanted to do together, so much to share. She was ready to take the risk now. However long they had together, she was going to cherish each moment, and he could no longer imagine another woman he would want to be with for the rest of his days.

As the plane made a wide loop and headed west, he kissed her and looked at her with joy in his eyes, mirrored in hers. He had found the woman he had been looking for all his life. She was a woman with integrity, a brilliant mind, and a huge heart.

"You were wrong, Cinderella," he said softly.

“About what?” she said, happier than she’d ever been.

“The coach doesn’t turn into a pumpkin, it turns into a private plane,” he said, and they both laughed, as they held hands and looked out the window at Paris far below them. They could see the Arc de Triomphe and the Champs-Élysées. “And don’t forget that you promised to go to the Grand Prix with me in Monaco in May,” he reminded her. It was only the first stop on their journey with so many great times ahead of them. They were braver and wiser and stronger, and ready for whatever came next. She had slain dragons and the force of evil with her article, and all that was left to do now was to embrace all the good waiting for them. They knew better than anyone how priceless it was and how lucky they were. He kissed her as the plane gained altitude and they headed home.

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About the Author

DANIELLE STEEL has been hailed as one of the world's bestselling authors, with a billion copies of her novels sold. Her many international bestsellers include *The True Meaning of Love*, *Weddings*, *A Woman's Place*, *The Devil's Daughter*, *The Color of Hope*, *The Portrait*, *For Richer For Poorer*, and other highly acclaimed novels. She is also the author of *His Bright Light*, the story of her son Nick Traina's life and death; *A Gift of Hope*, a memoir of her work with the homeless; *Expect a Miracle*, a book of her favorite quotations for inspiration and comfort; *Pure Joy*, about the dogs she and her family have loved; and the children's books *Pretty Minnie in Paris* and *Pretty Minnie in Hollywood*.

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