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Witte

The party is a lively crush, yet I'm keenly aware of one singularly significant presence – my employer's wife, a woman who has been dead for many years. Manhattan glitters in the vast night enfolding the penthouse tower. Clouds froth against the floor-to-ceiling windows, at turns obscuring then revealing the stygian spread of Central Park and its reservoir far below. The tower creaks as it sways ever so slightly in gusts of evening wind, the plaintive sound hidden beneath the music and sea of conversation.

Within the glass walls, tension seethes. Dangerous electricity charges the air, the inevitable result of confining rivals in a neutral space. Restrained by decorum and the fear of losing face, adversaries bristle, claws and fangs only briefly and resentfully sheathed.

The event is a black-tie reception in honour of a new cosmeceutical line. The attendees are the best known of Manhattan's young elite, a collective pool of the too-beautiful and too-rich. Among them are celebrated friendships and infamous feuds. It's a testament to Mr Black that he could bring such a diverse – and divisive – group together in his home.

Like chess players, the guests have chosen their positions for the best advantage. Mr Black's longest-known friend, Ryan Landon, stands opposite the spacious living room from Mr Black's business partner, Gideon Cross, the two

men perpetuating an enmity passed down from their fathers. As regretful as their discord is, I can still admire the purity of their open dislike of one another.

In contrast, Mr Black's main adversaries – his half-brothers Ramin and Darius – undermine him whenever it benefits them. And then there is Amy, Darius's wife, the only woman in the room who won't look at Mr Black. Not even a surreptitious peek.

The spaces between these key players are filled with reality television personalities and influencers, models and musicians. Bursts of light bounce off the glittering dresses and wide windows as mobiles capture a seemingly endless number of selfies that will be shared with millions of followers. Most companies pay exorbitant fees for such photographic endorsements, but that is not the case tonight. An invitation to the penthouse is a social coup, as is proximity to Cross and his wife, Eva, seemingly the world's most popular couple, if measured by media coverage.

I glance around the living room, assuring myself that the waiting staff are present but unobtrusive, supplying canapés and beverages while clearing away the discarded Baccarat glasses and Limoges plates.

Extravagant bouquets of Blacklist lilies decorate the sterling-silver tops of African blackwood tables, adding texture and glamour without colour or fragrance. Music weaves through the room, effervescent and of the moment. The singer is present, slouched against a wall with his arm around a woman's waist and his lips to her jaw. His eyes are on Mr Black, but they shift to me just as the smartwatch on my wrist gives a haptic signal announcing the arrival of new guests.

I move to the foyer.

The moment the sleek brunette glides through the front door on limousine heels, I know my employer will seduce her.

She's arrived on the arm of an attractive gentleman, but that's irrelevant. She'll succumb; they all do.

The lady resembles the late Mrs Black: inky hair, sultry green eyes, crimson lips. A beauty, yes, but a pale imitation of the woman immortalized in the portrait Mr Black treasures. They all are.

I greet them both with a nod and offer to take her wrap, standing by as her attentive escort assists her instead.

'Thank you,' she says as her companion hands me her shimmering wrap. She's speaking to me, but Mr Black has already captured her attention and her gaze is on him. Despite his deliberate withdrawal to the fringes of the room, his towering height makes him impossible to ignore. His energy is a lashing inferno checked only by a tremendous force of will. He is a man who composes himself with a stark economy of movement yet somehow gives the impression of furore. I can see the effort it takes for our new guest to look away from him and take stock of the festivity.

Mr Black's sister, Rosana, holds the command position in front of the windows. She is a tall, dark beauty in a beaded turquoise dress. Gleaming hair the colour of mahogany drapes her shoulders, a striking contrast to the silvery blond of Eva Cross, who stands beside her, petite and curvaceous and dressed in elegant blush-hued silk. Eva is Rosana's co-ambassador in the new venture; the two women so very different, yet both are tabloid and social media darlings.

I look at Mr Black, searching for his reaction to the latest arrival. I see what I expected: a focused gaze. As he scrutinizes her, his jaw tightens. The signs are subtle, but I sense his terrible disappointment and the resulting surge of self-recrimination.

For a moment, he'd hoped it was her. *Lily*. A woman whose exquisite beauty is immortalized in a single image that hangs

in his private rooms but whose profound significance haunts this home and the man who is its master. That he continues to search for her in every woman is heartbreaking.

Lily was absent from Mr Black's life before he acquired my services, so I know her only posthumously, but I'm in the position of overhearing a great deal. That she was incredibly lovely is universally acknowledged; many say she remains the greatest beauty they've ever seen. Though her given name suggests delicacy and fragility, acquaintances describe her as independent, sharp-witted and bold. She's remembered as being kind and encouraging, entertaining and deeply interested in others, a quality which I would argue is far better than being interesting.

For some time, I had only those scant impressions and opinions until a tormented night, when Mr Black was wild with drink and half-mad, no longer able to suppress the furious grief inside him. I understood then the extraordinary hold she continues to have on him; I can sense her power when I look at the massive portrait of her that dominates the wall opposite his bed.

In his room, her image is the only spot of colour, but that isn't what makes the photograph so striking. It is the look in her eyes, feverish and incisive.

Whoever Lily was, her love for Kane Black consumed them both. That obsession remains the most perilous element of his life to this day.

I watch as our newest guest wades through the others, separating from her escort as she moves towards Mr Black. She is fire-bright in a crimson dress, but she is the moth, and he is the flame.

A popular periodical recently declared him one of the sexiest men alive. Mr Black is nearing thirty-three and wealthy enough to afford me, a seventh-generation majordomo of

British lineage, impeccably trained to handle any situation from mundanity to extreme crises. He is remote and unreadable, yet women are drawn to him without any thought of self-preservation. Despite their best efforts, he remains staunchly unavailable. He is a widower who remains deeply, thoroughly married.

His most frequent escort, the slender blonde who hovers nearby, gleams in ivory and pearls. She's his mother, although no one would suspect the relationship if it weren't widely known. Age isn't the only thing Aliyah hides well. The lone clue to her nature is her manicure, the long nails filed into a modish almond shape resembling talons.

As I turn away from the coat cupboard, I hear the pop of a champagne cork. Crystal flutes clink merrily, and conversation hums. A small fortune in designer shoes clicks and taps across obsidian floor tiles so liquid-like in their pristine reflectiveness one is reminded of the calmest of nocturnal waters. Mr Black's residence is a study in maximalism: dark woods, natural stone, rich leathers and hides . . . all in the darkest of shades, creating a space as elegant and masculine as its owner.

My daughter assures me he is blessed with uncommonly good looks and cursed with something she claims is even more compelling: a brooding, edgy torridity. The fact that he once loved so deeply and remains so shrouded in private grief has potent allure. His air of unattainability is irresistible, she says.

It's not artifice. His many sexual liaisons aside, Mr Black is taken in the most profound sense of the word. Lily's memory hollows him. He is a husk of a man, yet I've come to love him as a father would his son.

A woman laughs too loudly. Too much to drink, clearly. And she's not alone in over-indulging. A flute falls from someone's careless grip and shatters, with the unmistakable discordant music of tinkling shards of glass.

Witte

‘Did you show her out, Witte?’

Mr Black enters the kitchen the next morning dressed for the day in a Savile Row business suit and perfectly knotted tie, neither being part of his attire prior to my employ. I schooled him in the fine points of bespoke clothing for gentlemen, and he was an avid learner.

On the exterior, I can scarcely see the unpolished young man who hired me six years ago, so recently widowed and paralysed with grief that my first task was managing anyone who approached with queries or condolences. In time, he harnessed his pain into fiery ambition. That – and his singular intelligence – revived the pharmaceutical company his father had made insolvent through embezzlement.

Against all odds, he succeeded – brilliantly.

I turn and set his breakfast on the black marble-topped island, positioning it perfectly between the silverware already set out. Eggs, bacon, fresh fruit – his staples. ‘Yes, Ms Ferrari left while you were in the shower.’

One dark brow lifts. ‘Ferrari? Really?’

I’m not surprised that he never asked for her name, only saddened. Who the women are means nothing; only that they bring Lily to his mind.

I have never seen him show genuine affection to any woman but his sister, Rosana. He is polite to paramours, always. Attentive when in pursuit. But liaisons are limited to a single

evening. He has never sent flowers to a lover, never indulged in a flirtatious phone call, nor invited or escorted a woman to dinner. I've no knowledge of how he treats a lady with whom he is intimately entangled. It is a gap in my understanding of him that may never be filled.

He reaches for the coffee I set in front of him, his mind clearly running through his agenda for the day, his latest lover dismissed from his thoughts for ever. He rarely sleeps and works far too much. Deep grooves on either side of his mouth shouldn't be there on one so young. I've seen him smile and have even heard him laugh, but the amusement never reaches his eyes. He suffers life; he does not live it.

I have urged him to take a moment to enjoy his accomplishments. He tells me he'll enjoy life better when he's dead. Reuniting with Lily is his only true aspiration. Everything else is simply killing time.

'You did an excellent job with the party last night, Witte,' he says, rather absent-mindedly. 'You always do, but still. Never hurts to say I appreciate you, does it?'

'No. Thank you.'

I leave him to eat and read the day's paper, heading down a long hallway with its mirrored walls to the private side of the residence he shares with no one. The lovely Ms Ferrari spent the night in a bedroom on the opposite end of the penthouse, in a starkly white and sterile suite methodically designed to be nothing like the rest of the home. It's a space Lily would not favour, as if that alone would be enough to prevent her spectre from watching and knowing.

Shortly after hiring me, Mr Black purchased the penthouse while the tower was still under construction. He oversaw the design of the raw interior minutely, from the positioning of the walls and doors to the selection of materials. Yet, I can't say the space reflects his personal style. He chose every piece

of furniture and accessory with his beloved Lily's tastes in mind. He didn't want a fresh start, free of her memory; he simply wanted a residence in the city, and he made certain to include his late wife. There are reminders of her everywhere, on nearly everything. In that respect, I feel I know her.

Elegant. Dramatic. Sensual. Dark, always dark.

I pause on the threshold of Mr Black's bedroom, sensing the lingering humidity of his recent shower. The his-and-her suites occupy one entire side of the residence, with walk-through wardrobes, matching marble-slab bathrooms and a shared sitting room.

The lady's suite has a view of Billionaires' Row and the Hudson from the foot of the wide, deep bed and of Lower Manhattan to the right. Sunsets spread fire through the sumptuously appointed and lavishly furnished room, warming the subaqueous decor that I refresh with exuberant bouquets every few days at my employer's request. Her room is ever in readiness, waiting for a woman who was gone before it became hers. Her *LRB* monogram is embossed or embroidered on nearly everything as if to assure Lily that the space belongs only to her. Her garments fill the wardrobe and drawers. Her private bathroom is fully stocked.

By rights, the empty echo of abandonment should mar the beautiful suite, yet there is a strange energy here, a precursor to life itself.

Lily lingers, unseen but felt.

The master suite is spare in comparison. Mr Black sleeps atop a slender platform chosen to diminish any possible distractions from the immense image commanding the wall directly across from where he rests his head at night. Fleurs-de-lis decorate his drawer pulls and are embroidered on his sheets. New York is laid out like a gift at his feet beyond the windows, but he's positioned his bed with the view behind

him and Lily's picture in front of him. It's emblematic of how he lives his life: indifferent to the world and possessed by a woman long departed.

Mr Black ends his days with Lily. Her portrait is the last thing he sees, and he wakes to the sight of her. Unlike her room, his is tomblike, cool and eerily quiet, devoid of animation.

Turning away from the north-eastern views over Central Park, the woman whose immortal perfection dominates one's attention draws my gaze. It's an intimate, earthy picture. A life-size Lily reclines across a dishevelled bed; her torso draped in a white sheet and her slender limbs tangled in her long black hair. Her lips are swollen from kisses, her cheeks flushed, her eyes heavy-lidded with desire and possessiveness. Against the ashen wall colour, she beckons with a siren's song of beauty, obsession and destruction.

I've caught myself staring more than once, arrested by her flawless face and potent sensuality. Some women entrap men in webs by the simple act of existing.

She was so young, barely in her twenties, yet she left a profound impression on everyone who met her. And she left her husband in torment, destroyed by doubt, guilt and heart-breaking questions . . . the answers to which she took to her watery grave.

Witte

As I merge the Range Rover into the traffic, Mr Black relays clipped orders into his mobile. It's barely eight in the morning, and he's already deep into managing the various aspects of his growing dynasty.

Manhattan overflows around us, brimming with streams of cars and people rushing in every direction. In places, bags of rubbish are piled several feet high on the pavements, waiting to be hauled away. The sight put me off when I first came to New York, but now it's just part of the tableau.

I've come to enjoy this city, which is so different from the rolling green dales of my homeland. There's nothing one can't find. The energy, diversity and complexity of the people here are unrivalled.

My gaze darts back and forth from the traffic to the pedestrians. Ahead of us, a delivery lorry blocks the one-way street. On the left pavement, a bearded man takes a group of excited canines on their morning walk, deftly handling a half-dozen leashes. On the right, a mother dressed for a run pushes a jogging pram ahead of her towards the park. The sun is shining, but the towering buildings and thickly leafed trees choke out the light.

The traffic delay stretches.

Mr Black continues his business dealings with self-assured ease, his voice calm and assertive. The cars begin to creep forward, then pick up speed. We head downtown. For a short

time, we're blessed with green lights in succession. Then our luck runs out just before we reach our destination and a red light stops me.

A flood of people rushes by in front of us, most with heads down and a few with earbuds that I suppose offer some respite from the cacophony of the busy city. I glance at the time, making sure we're on schedule.

A sudden pained noise sends ice through my veins. It's a half-strangled moan that is vaguely inhuman. Turning my head swiftly, I glance at the back seat, alarmed.

Mr Black sits still and silent, his eyes dark as coal, his face drained of colour. His gaze is sliding along the pedestrian crossing, following. I look that way, seeking.

A statuesque brunette hurries away from us. Her hair is short and sleek, cut into a bob that skims her sculpted jaw. It's not Lily's luxuriant mane, not at all. But when she turns to walk down the pavement, I think it might be her incomparable face.

The back door swings open violently. The cab driver behind us yells obscenities out of his lowered window.

'Lily!'

That my employer should go so far as to shout out his wife's name staggers me like the crack of gunfire. My lungs seize with shock.

The woman's gaze darts towards us. She stumbles. Freezes in place.

The resemblance is uncanny. Eerie. Impossible to comprehend.

Mr Black leaps out just as the light turns green. His response is instinctual; mine is arrested by confusion. I know only that my employer is beside himself, and I am trapped behind the wheel of the Range Rover while the madness of New York City's morning commute rages on all sides.

Her face, already pale as porcelain, turns bloodless. I read the movement of her lushly red lips. *Kane*.

Her astonished recognition is intimate and unmistakable. So is the fear.

Mr Black glances towards traffic, then lunges between moving cars in an explosion of powerful physicality. The barrage of honking becomes deafening.

The harsh sounds visibly jolt her. She surges into a run, pushing her way through the throng on the pavement, her emerald-hued dress a beacon in the crowd.

My employer, a man who attains without pursuit, gives chase. A black town car reaches her first, driving too fast.

One moment Lily is a streak of green in the urban jungle's unrelenting grey. The next, she is a jewel-bright puddle on the dirty New York street.

4

Amy

I smile at the server, a slow, easy curving of my lips. ‘I’ll take another manhattan.’

‘Oh God,’ Suzanne moans dramatically, rubbing at her temples. Her tightly coiled glossy black curls dance with the movement. ‘I don’t know how you do it. If I drank alcohol at this time of day, I’d have to take a nap.’

I cast a longing glance at her cocktail fork and imagine stabbing her in the eye with it. I use words to the same effect. ‘How’s the book coming?’

She winces, and I hide my smile. She’s going to start blathering about organic creativeness and refilling the well, and I’m going to picture her pretty face with a gaping hole where her eyeball once was and the dark void behind it where a brain should be.

‘I’m such a huge fan,’ Erika Ferrari gushes.

Is she fucking *kidding*? I had to work quickly to connect with Erika and invite her to lunch before Kane dragged her away from last night’s party to shove his cock into her. To realize Erika accepted my invitation solely to gain access to Suzanne makes me livid. The stupid cunt *used* me!

Erika leans forward as she kisses Suzanne’s ass for greater emphasis.

And just like that, Suzanne’s anxiety is gone, replaced with a bright smile. She has the most beautiful lips – plush and

naturally darker around the edges and softly pink within, like natural lip liner. ‘Oh, thank you! I’m so happy you enjoy my work.’

My gaze skips across crowded tables to find the bar, hoping to spot the bartender making my drink. Another gulp, and I’ll be staring at the bottom of an empty glass. I cannot sit through a single minute of the Suzanne and Erika Mutual Appreciation Show without alcohol. Thank God I have a gift for deleting inanity from my memory banks. With any luck, I’ll consign this lunch to oblivion by dinnertime.

You know what you need, Amy? my mother-in-law once told me with her signature backhanded sweetness. *Culture. Try finding some friends who can elevate you. Writers, artists, musicians . . . People who can teach you something.*

As if I don’t know anything. Yeah, I went to public school and did a two-year stint at a junior college before finishing my marketing degree at a university. True, I hadn’t known my water glass was to my right or that you set forks on the left. None of that makes me worthless.

Aliyah thinks I’m not good enough for her precious Darius. If only she knew – I’ve fucked all three of her sons.

So, Suzanne – who was born just plain Susan – is my dash of literary sophistication. She writes trashy romance novels about billionaires who fuck like champs and the women who tame them. She’s the perfect middle-finger response to my bitch of a mother-in-law.

Because of Aliyah – and Kane – I’m wasting two hours of my life with two women I can’t stand. Erika and Suzanne are presently discussing the sexual exploits of fictional people with the kind of excitement I reserve for reality. It’s obvious Ms. Ferrari is secretly recalling being fucked senseless by Kane and imagining she’d lived a scene out of a book. She tries to be discreet about checking her phone, no doubt having left

her number behind before Witte showed her out the door with his oh-so-British aplomb.

How that scene would've played out is etched in my mind. The polite rap on the door. The perfectly polished silver tray resplendent with an elegant coffee service and a single white rose. A white silk robe waiting in a bathroom stocked with anything a woman might need to disguise the inevitable walk of shame. And when Erika returned to the bedroom after her shower, she would've found the clothes Kane had peeled off her body neatly laid out on the white velvet bench and her hastily kicked-off shoes next to the foot of the already stripped and remade bed.

Witte is nothing if not faultlessly efficient.

And Kane. So predictable. I'd known the minute Erika showed up that he'd nail her. She looks like his dead wife and me. She doesn't know it, but she's the latest subject in the exhaustive study I affectionately call *Women Kane Black Screwed and Screwed Over*.

So far, superficial resemblance seems to be all Kane requires to nail a woman six ways to Sunday. He's a total headcase. Suzanne needs to write a book about him. In fact, I'd give her the title of my study for her next novel. I can be generous when I'm not sitting next to a lookalike who's glowing, puffy-lipped and sleepy-eyed.

God, I'm in a foul mood.

Erika Ferrari. That stupid name must be fake.

She sneaks a peek down into her Chanel tote, where her phone lies face up. Suzanne gives me a sidelong, knowing glance.

I look desperately around the packed restaurant, searching for my drink. Most of the men are dapper. The women have great hair and designer ensembles – but those wearing makeup are a rarity. Why they think that's acceptable is beyond me.

Why go to the trouble of doing your hair if you can't be bothered to put cosmetics on your face? Nothing is worse than half-assing it.

'How did you meet Darius?' Erika asks me, reaching for another roll from the breadbasket.

'Kane introduced us.'

She perks right up at the mention of his name. 'And how did you meet Kane?'

I give it a second for effect, then, 'I was leaving a restaurant, and he stopped me on the street. I look like his wife. That's his kink. Dark hair and green eyes. Red lipstick really works for him, too.'

Erika's smile wavers a bit. 'Well, some men have a distinct type.'

Her hand lifts self-consciously to her hair, which falls in dark waves that would touch her bra band if she wore a bra. She isn't and doesn't need to; she's small-breasted, like me. And like Kane's wife, who had him by the balls and never let go.

Kane doesn't care about anyone. If you're not standing directly in front of him, he's already forgotten you. If there is anyone who could be said to live in the moment, it's Kane. He's already discarded yesterday, doesn't give a flying fuck about tomorrow, and has just enough interest to stroll through today. But he's psychotically hanging on to Lily's memory.

Which makes zero sense to me.

He's not the type of guy who suffers willingly, so I have to believe that reminding himself she's dead gives him pleasure somehow. Or it's a gimmick to attract women, like a hot guy with an adorable puppy. How sick is that?

'We hit it off,' I go on, keeping my tone light. *More like we hit it, period. All night long.* 'Then, we ran into each other a couple of times.' *I stalked him.* 'On one occasion, Darius happened to be with him.'

And my now-husband had stepped right up as a replacement body in my bed. It should've ended there, but Aliyah ensured her middle son got what he wanted – his ring on my finger. And that she got what she wanted – my social media management company, Social Creamery. She regrets me now. That's my sole comfort.

'What was she like?' Erika asks. 'His wife.'

'In the writing world, we'd call her a Mary Sue,' Suzanne says with a giggle. 'Amy prefers calling her Mary Poppins.'

Confusion crosses Erika's face.

A humorless laugh escapes me. 'Practically perfect in every way.'

'Oh.'

'At least that's what the people who knew her would have you believe. None of the family ever met her because they'd had an estrangement from Kane for years. Her friends will tell you she was gorgeous, smart, glamorous, the perfect hostess, great at everything, so on and so forth, yada yada . . .' I tell her caustically. 'Everyone loved her.'

'No one likes to speak ill of the dead,' she says primly, her gaze full of judgment.

'Waxing poetic doesn't make them any less dead. And, weirdly, Kane won't talk about her at all. As in don't even mention her name within earshot because he turns glacial.'

'Yes, well . . . Maybe he's ready to move on,' she says, with a smug smile that makes me want to yank her out of the chair by her hair and punch her in the mouth. I fight the urge to show her the selfies I've taken with all the women who could be our lookalikes, only because I don't want her to think I'm insane.

I mirror her stuck-up smile. 'I'm sure that's why he still wears his wedding ring. Didn't you notice the pattern on the china? The flower arrangements? Her name was Lily, and everything he owns has lilies on it.'

She gives a microscopic shrug. Right. Those critical details had escaped her. I don't know why no one else sees what I do. Just mindlessly ignorant people fucking up the world. When I mentioned the explosion of lilies all over Kane's shit, Darius told me I was reaching. *He's got girly taste, so what?*

Erika's smugness evaporates. By the time we finish lunch, she won't be glowing anymore. She'll feel used and a lot less special. Her self-confidence will carry a dent in it for a long time, maybe forever. I hate that she slept with Kane, but it's nice to know I'm not the only one self-destructive enough to fall for his charm.

The server, handsome but overwhelmed, gets a genuine smile from me when he brings my drink. I swallow deeply, closing my eyes a minute to savor the cool bite of bourbon stirred with sweet vermouth. The resultant warm buzz from the alcohol takes the edge off my bitchiness, and suddenly, my eyes are stinging from the salt of tears.

Jesus. I shove the sadness back with anger.

It's pathetic how I've let one night with Kane Black define my life. My shrink says I've got daddy abandonment issues that skew my decision-making. That pisses me off even more. What kind of woman lets men twist her up this way?

Kane will never understand or acknowledge what it felt like to be plucked off the street and whisked up to the penthouse by a man who looks and carries himself the way he does. In that one night, I began to feel like I might be worth something to someone extraordinary, that every wish I'd ever had might come true. I would be Mrs. Kane Black. I would live within the penthouse's dramatic beauty, welcoming into my home as guests the very people who once made me grovel to win their business. Surely, he felt the same spark I did. That's why he chose me, then charmed me so completely I was under his thrusting body within hours.

It was over a year later when Aliyah showed Darius the picture she'd secretly taken of Lily's portrait tucked away in Kane's bedroom, which none of us had seen because Witte somehow always materializes if anyone strays into that end of the penthouse. I'd peeked over Darius's shoulder as he looked at Lily, and in a distant part of my mind, the screaming started and hasn't ever stopped.

Erika touches my arm, trying to lure my attention back to her. 'Do you work with Kane in the Crossfire Building?'

It rubs me the wrong way that she doesn't call him Mr. Black. Who cares if she fucked him? He's forgotten her already. They're not friends and never will be.

'Social Creamery is headquartered in the Crossfire,' I answer, sliding my tongue along my bottom lip to catch every drop of my last sip, feeling the familiar surge of rage as I name my business. 'But I don't have to go in every day. I built it to run like a machine.'

Yet another cog in the growing Baharan Pharmaceuticals empire.

I can't talk about the company I built from the ground up without resentment clogging my throat. Social Creamery had been my independence, my proof I could make something of myself. I studied social media trends comprehensively, finessed ways to exploit platforms' strengths and weaknesses, built a stable of influencers who could market and sell damn near anything, hired copywriters who were witty and knew how to fucking spell – the world really is full of uneducated idiots – and I took my natural charm door-to-door to convince accounts to trust me with their brands.

Then Aliyah slithered in and suggested we pull Social Creamery under Baharan's umbrella so that it would be a combined family business, and I would have access to more resources. Darius thought it would be wonderful to work side

by side, and I didn't know Aliyah well enough at the time to be wary.

Once we signed the paperwork, it wasn't long before she began undermining me and my ideas and questioning my business ethics. She stole the loyalty of my staff with gifts and bonuses, most of which were my idea, but she took credit for them. Would-be allies distanced themselves to avoid repercussions from her until the whole company was against me.

Suzanne and Erika lean into each other, speaking in raptures about a woman's dress as she passes our table on the way to the restroom. A bodycon style with an abstract print, it's an interesting garment that would look a hell of a lot better with shapewear taming the bulges underneath.

I take another slow, deep drink and hum with pleasure. And anticipation.

One day soon, my entire life will change. I'll claw Social Creamery back and everything else my 'family' took from me, plus interest. In the meantime, more so than the vows I share and the ring I wear, my company binds me to Darius, his brothers and Aliyah. Damned if I'll walk away without it.

The ring of a cellphone has Erika darting for her bag with idiotic eagerness. Her disappointment when we all realize it's my phone that's ringing has me laughing inwardly.

The humor flees when I see Aliyah's name on the screen.

'Hello, Mom,' I greet her, knowing how much she hates me calling her that.

'Amy,' she replies in the surprisingly deep and husky voice that takes me off guard more often than not. 'I was trying to track down your husband, but I just remembered what day it is.'

The not-so-subtle reminder that Darius is keeping his Friday afternoon fuck-date with his assistant kills my buzz. Bitterness coats my tongue.

It hurts. For better or worse, Darius is *mine*. I even think he loves me and would be a better man to me if I could ever stop thinking about how Kane fucked me like he'd die if he stopped. But I can't, and my husband is screwing his highly efficient assistant right now. The pretty blonde always brings me coffee precisely how I like it and is so nice I want to beat her bloody with my purse.

'Maybe I can help you?' I ask sweetly.

'Don't worry about it. I'll send him a text.' Her voice is honey-smooth when she rocks my world. 'Kane's wife has returned from the dead.'

Aliyah

I study my reflection as I carefully wipe the bright pink ‘Rosana’ shade off my lips and switch to a nude gloss. Stepping back, I eye the result and nod – much more fitting for the circumstances. I smile, imagining the look on Amy’s face when I hung up on her. If there is anything reliable about my daughter-in-law, it’s that she’s always wasted drunk by five o’clock. If I handled the call right, she’ll be blacked out by three instead.

The girl is beautiful but useless. She had one skill, and we’ve exhausted it. And her fixation on one of my sons is hurting another. For that alone, I want her out of our lives. It won’t be long now. What started as a glass of wine with dinner became two. Then the entire bottle. Why not add a splash of whiskey in the morning to kick off the day? Followed by a cocktail with lunch. All too easy, really. She wanted to tumble face-first into the bottom of a glass. I just gave her a little push to help her along.

‘Are you ready?’ Darius asks, stepping into view behind me. He’s put on his jacket, and a frown mars his brow. His cologne is subtle and soothing, a woodsy scent I custom-designed for him. It suits him. He is as firmly anchored as a sequoia, strong and steadfast. He really is a credit to me. Too many mothers raise sons with no respect for women.

I face him. ‘Did you lock up those blueprints?’

‘Yes, of course. Where do you think I’ve been?’

His dark hair falls artfully across his brow. His lean face resembles mine, but the pale blue of his eyes comes from his father: such a strong trait, those eyes. Ramin and Rosana have them, too.

He scowls. 'We're almost done. We could get our comments back to the architect today.'

'And he won't get to them until Monday.' I smooth his lapels.

If only Amy knew that her husband spends his Friday afternoons working with me on the design of our proposed Seattle research facility. Instead, she thinks the worst of her husband. A little suggestion is all it takes to trigger her paranoia.

Darius isn't faithless like Paul, my first husband. I'd suspected Kane's father was having an affair but couldn't prove it. I chose to believe I was too essential for him ever to end our marriage, not just as the mother of his child but to the company I'd helped him build. Baharan Pharmaceuticals was everything to him, our shared life's work, and he adored Kane – or so I'd thought, right up to the moment I learned he'd pulled every cent he could out of the company and run off to South America.

I straighten Darius's tie. 'I'm disappointed in you.'

'Why?'

'Because you're being so irritable about supporting your brother in a time of personal crisis.'

His brow arches. 'I can't, and I won't because he'd never show me the same courtesy.'

'Darius.' My tone clears the barest hint of sulkiness from his face. 'You don't know that. And if you won't do it for him, do it for me. This is distressing for me, too.'

The look he shoots me is caustic, but I don't care if he thinks I'm a hypocrite. I did what I had to do to survive. Because of how I changed after Paul's betrayal, I did better

with my second marriage and outlasted the terms of the prenup, so I got what I was due. And it's not like I didn't support Kane to adulthood.

In any case, it's futile pointing out that Darius has never had a crisis of any kind because Kane has insulated him since re-entering our lives. Darius owes so much to his older brother – his freedom from student debt, his livelihood and even his wife.

When Kane approached me about resuscitating Baharan Pharmaceuticals six years ago, I thought we might finally become a family. My second husband – who hadn't been remotely interested in raising another man's son – was finally out of the picture. Kane took my advice about seeing his brothers educated for key positions within the company. I'd thought perhaps my children would all be together at last, but only Rosana was happy about reuniting with her eldest brother. Darius and Ramin bristled against Kane from the first, resenting being viewed as obligations.

I doubt even dethroning Kane as head of the company would soothe the resentment gnawing at Darius. He can't stop feeling that his responsibility for his younger siblings has been usurped. And really, it's probably best that the brothers aren't close. It could be problematic if they ever formed a united front.

'I just don't understand why we have to rush over there,' he argues. 'He'll need time to get his new story straight, and his wife is being treated for whatever is wrong with her. We're putting off something important for nothing.'

'Oh? Do you truly think it's nothing that Kane's been telling everyone he's widowed when he's evidently not?'

Though Lily apparently seemed near death on the street and might yet die. The driver who hit her didn't brake and fled the scene, according to Witte, when he called while she was

being loaded into the ambulance. I don't tell Darius that something about Witte's voice gave me chills like someone was walking over my grave.

'Are you surprised Kane lies?' my son scoffs. 'Come on. And I'm not saying his wife isn't a concern. I'm just saying she isn't a concern at *this very moment*. Kane's been getting along just fine without us in his life for years. He can deal with his own bullshit. It's not my problem.'

He says that because he doesn't know much about the past. He was a high school senior and at school when the Greenwich police came by our home in Saddle River asking about my eldest son, whom I hadn't seen or conversed with in years.

The detectives said their questions regarding Kane's character and temperament were just 'routine.' Maybe they were. When it quickly became apparent that I had very little knowledge of my son's adult life – I hadn't even known he had legally changed his surname – they asked me why we were out of touch, and I told them the truth: he didn't get along with my husband, his stepfather. They'd glanced at each other, thanked me for my time and left.

I still don't know if their visit had anything to do with his wife. I didn't even know he was married at the time of the interview. And I've never discussed it with anyone, not even Kane, who appeared on my doorstep just days later to discuss rebuilding Baharan.

Our relationship is tenuous at best, and I won't risk a rift that might jeopardize my position at Baharan until I can take over the company.

'Of course it's your problem,' I press. 'It's a problem for all of us. What brought her back *now*? What has she been doing all these years?'

'I can tell you why she's back. That stupid Sexiest Man Alive issue is everywhere. Kane's damn near getting more out of it

than Dwayne Johnson! So she sees the coverage, thinks he's a better bet now that he's rich, and she comes home. I'm not an idiot, Mother. I'm just not seeing her being a threat until and unless she survives *and* causes trouble.'

I made sure Social Creamery viralized Kane's inclusion in the magazine's feature of sexy men because celebrity equals wealth. It irritated me that I hadn't anticipated former friends and lovers – not to mention supposedly dead spouses – scuttling out of the shadows to revel in his glow. But how could I have foreseen something like this?

I don't even know her maiden name. There was never any memorial service after she died – *supposedly* died, that is. Or at least nothing I was invited to or could find an announcement for. And Kane refuses to discuss her. It infuriated him anytime I even remotely broached the subject of his marriage, so I stopped. And when all was said and done, a college sweetheart I had never met had nothing at all to do with me.

'I figure she left him,' he continues, 'and he's been lying to everyone this whole time to save face.'

'That would be a little extreme, don't you think?'

'So is the penthouse! And hiring Witte, for fuck's sake. Kane's ridiculous about a lot of things. You're getting yourself worked up over nothing.'

Fury ices my blood. I will not be talked down to or allow my thoughts and feelings to be marginalized. I ignored my instincts with Paul and learned a hard lesson, and it's one I will never forget. 'Watch your tone, Darius. I'm being cautious, not hysterical. Protecting Baharan and this family is important to me, and I won't apologize for it.'

'In that order,' he mutters.

'Don't forget the morals clause in our ECRA+ agreement with Cross Industries. If we're embroiled in a scandal – and a faked death in the family is obviously scandalous – it'll be

ruinous. We can't afford to lose what we've invested, let alone whatever restitution Gideon Cross might demand.'

Paul's embezzlement resonates with Cross, even though he avoids mentioning it directly. His father, Geoffrey Cross, is infamous for heading a Ponzi scheme with investor losses in the billions. When someone thinks of the Cross name now, it's Gideon they think of first and foremost, and he won't allow anything – or anyone – to tarnish the successful image he's worked so diligently to craft.

Darius frowns, and I can see in his eyes that he's processing the possible ramifications. 'Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Everything is going according to plan. Rosana is the face of the new cosmetics line, and Eva Cross is out to prove to her husband that she can spearhead a successful collaboration the size of ECRA+ Cosmeceuticals. If Rosie stays golden, Eva will make sure everything moves ahead. We just need a semi-plausible story to cover Kane's marital situation, so we'll figure one out.'

'Well, aren't you confident, considering you don't know anything about Lily or what happened between her and Kane in the past.'

'You act like she's the problem, but for all we know, it's Kane we need to worry about.'

I shoot him a look.

'In any case, we're going to the hospital, aren't we?' He grins. 'We'll know soon enough.'

He doesn't apologize for initially arguing against going, and I don't press the point. I also won't forget.

None of my children will ever know what I went through to reclaim Paul's chemical patents from the partner he bankrupted, and because of that ignorance, they'll never comprehend what Baharan means to me. One day, I may tell Rosana. She'll need to prepare for what it means to be a woman in this

world, how vulnerable we are and how easily we fall prey to predatory men.

I don't know what my eldest child may or may not have done. Kane is a man, after all: nothing is beneath him. But I won't make the same mistake I made with Paul. I'm not going to be left destitute. Baharan will go on, and I've more than earned the right to run it myself.

'There is a possible bright side,' he says. 'The accident sounds serious, right? Kane's already taking the week off, something he's never done before. Maybe he'll step back longer and give us the opportunity to convince the board that a new facility in Seattle is a great idea.'

Then we'll ensure the contractor who wins the bid is the one we've heavily invested in. We've padded enough unnecessary flourishes into the design that can be removed, that we can safely bid lower than anyone. With the profit from the build, I can acquire more shares, and when everyone sees what the facility brings to the table, they'll remember that Kane was too cautious.

I skirt Darius and head to where my clutch rests on a mid-century console – my favorite piece of furniture in my office, which pairs so well with the Jasper Johns hung above it. I fluff my hair and check the backs of my earrings, trying for an appearance of nonchalance. The walk is long since I have the largest office at Baharan. I have an impressive view of Midtown from both glass walls caging my corner office.

'If it's *really* serious, maybe she'll die,' Darius suggests. 'And you'll have worried over nothing.'

I tuck my bag under my arm, catching the reflection of my white cigarette pants and gold silk top in the glass. An essential oil diffuser perfumes the air with the scent of azaleas.

'Seriously, Mom. Don't stress about this. No one keeps Kane's interest long,' Darius stands by the closed door – a tall,

dark figure against the lustrous walnut panel. ‘He enjoys the hunt. If she sticks around long enough this time, he’ll get bored and pay her off.’

Love and beauty fade. Vows are worthless. Blood is life. My children are young yet, but they’ll learn those lessons eventually.

Darius opens the door as I approach.

I pause on the threshold and touch his forearm. ‘Text Ramin again. Make sure he’s meeting us there.’

‘I’ll call him.’ Darius pulls out his phone.

My hand falls back to my side, and I stride through the door with my head high.