

THE
PERFECT
LIAR

MURDER IN PARADISE SERIES



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Prologue



“Don’t you wanna have some more fun, baby?” Henri asked.

My panic mutating into anger, I used the heel of my right foot to kick him in the shin. Yelping, Henri stumbled back. Encouraged by his pain, I turned, intent on kicking him in the balls, but he must have guessed what I had planned for him, because he slapped me—hard.

Crying out in pain and shock, I lurched away from him toward the galley kitchen. Frantic, I looked over my shoulder. Henri was walking toward me. Whipping my head back toward the kitchen, I scanned the area, looking for some sort of weapon.

There, in a plastic dish rack, I saw what I needed.

A large butcher’s knife.

Without thinking, I rushed toward the sink, grabbed the knife, and turned.

An open hand cracked across my face so hard I saw lights popping and feared my jaw had been dislocated. Crying out, I stumbled back, the knife dropping from my grasp and clattering across the stained, sticky linoleum tile. Feeling nauseated from the sloshing in my head, I dropped to one knee, struggling to get my bearings.

“Get up, bitch!” Henri grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet.

“Let go of me!” I screamed, trying to yank away from him.

“Shut up!” he said, and his hand came toward my face again, quick as a cobra’s strike. I felt the stinging blow of his fist near my left temple. Desperate not to lose consciousness, I struggled to keep my eyes open as darkness converged, but it was no use.

The blackness pulled me into its boundless depths.

DAY ONE

Chapter One



Someone was trying to kill me.

They had already tried before—two times.

The first attempt had occurred following a break during a tense settlement negotiation. My clients, Kastor-Jones Pharmaceuticals were being sued for wrongful death, accused of paying kickbacks to doctors for aggressively promoting a top-selling prescription drug which they allegedly knew had fatal side effects. I had been going head to head with the plaintiff's attorney and was finally wearing him down from the multi-million-dollar settlement they were requesting. The pharmaceutical executives were pleased with my efforts, and as I washed my hands in the ladies' room, I thought I was sure I could get the plaintiffs to accept a settlement the company was more willing to pay.

A stall opened and through the mirror, I saw a woman step out. Dressed in black from head to toe, she wore an ironic smile and held a gun.

Shocked, I faced her, raising my dripping hands, ready to tell her she could have my purse, my cell phone, and whatever she wanted, and ready to beg for my life. Before I could open my mouth, a gunshot, as loud as a bomb in the small, tiled restroom, exploded. Seconds later, I

felt something hit my chest and didn't need to look down to know I'd been shot.

I hadn't been killed, though. A janitor had come to my rescue, an ambulance had been called, and I was whisked away to the hospital where I underwent surgery to remove the bullet.

A month later, they'd made a second attempt, ambushing me in the parking garage connected to the office building where I worked. I'd been wrestling with a summary judgment motion all day. Close to midnight, I finally decided to leave work. My heels echoing on the concrete, I headed toward my car. Not paying attention, a purse on my shoulder, carrying a laptop bag, and staring at my cell phone, I scrolled through my contacts, looking for the phone number of an expert I wanted to testify on my client's behalf.

In the car, I turned the ignition and—

An eruption of glass exploded behind me, sending chunks and shards flying as white-hot pain seared into the back of my left shoulder. Screaming in shock, I caught an image of something in the rearview mirror and looked behind me. Pressing my hand against my throbbing shoulder, I saw someone standing a few feet from the trunk of my car.

A woman dressed in black, pointing a gun at me. The same woman who'd tried to kill me before.

Two more bullets had me scrambling to hide beneath the steering wheel. Another bullet slammed into the gear stick. One hit the sun visor on the passenger's side. The fifth bullet smashed into the center console. Terrified, I struggled to breathe.

Faintly, I heard sirens and then footsteps running away from the car. The cops had been alerted by the building security, and as the police officers questioned me, the paramedics tended to my injury. A flesh wound, the EMS worker told me. I'd been lucky. The bullet had only grazed my shoulder.

Hours later, lying in bed, still shell-shocked and unable to sleep, I tried to think of who might want me dead, and I wondered why they hadn't been able to kill me yet. Their first and second attempts to end my life had failed.

Hopefully, the third time would be the charm.

Because, honestly, I deserved to die for what I had done.

Exhaling, I squared my shoulders, shook the macabre thoughts away, and forced myself to focus on the task at hand, which wasn't as daunting as it was disappointing. Presently, I was in a courtroom, giving closing testimony to twelve jurors charged with the laborious task of weighing scientific evidence against compassion and sympathy for the plaintiffs, a group of seven individuals who had accused my client, Du Vert Industries, a billion-dollar pharmaceutical conglomerate, of committing consumer fraud by deceiving doctors about the health risks of a popular anti-depressant.

Standing before the jury box in my conservative yet classic navy Chanel suit and matching ballerina flats, with my hair pulled back in a smooth, neat bun, and wearing reading glasses I didn't really need, I implored the jury to reject the plaintiffs' claims of negligence and find in favor of my client.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the plaintiffs bear the burden of proof, and after weighing the evidence, if you cannot decide that something is more likely to be true than not true, you must conclude that the plaintiffs did not prove their claims against my client," I said. "You have a choice to examine and evaluate the scientific evidence, and I am confident that you are intelligent enough and capable enough to do so despite the enormous amount of scientific evidence presented to you throughout this trial. Ladies and gentlemen, it may be difficult to find against the plaintiffs, but your oath as jurors is not to be swayed by sympathy but to logically and rationally evaluate the evidence and come to the reasonable conclusion that my client, Du Vert Pharmaceuticals, should prevail in this cause of action. Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you once again very much for your time and your service."

Walking back to the defense table, I stopped in my tracks, paralyzed, horrified.

A woman dressed in black stood at the back of the courtroom, smiling, pointing a gun at me.

I opened my mouth to scream.

The bullet hit me in the chest.

Chaos broke out in the courtroom. Chairs overturned as my

support team and the opposing counsel jumped to their feet. The judge banged his gavel, but order would not be restored.

Dropping to the ground, I looked past the Du Vert executives, shocked, realizing I knew the woman with the smoking gun. The bitch who had shot me was—

“Miss, are you okay?”

Dizzy and disoriented, I blinked a few times, trying to remember where I was, trying to open my eyes. It took me a minute to realize someone was asking me a question and then another minute to respond. “Huh?”

“You were asleep, but then you screamed,” said the woman, a slim, gorgeous *Sports Illustrated* babe. “I think maybe you had a nightmare.”

“A nightmare,” I whispered, groggy and confused.

“Want me to call the flight attendant?” the woman asked. “She could bring you some water.”

“Oh, no, thank you,” I said, embarrassed, slowly becoming aware of the attention from my fellow first-class passengers. Beneath their worry and concern, I noted traces of suspicion, imperceptible frowns, and slight narrowing of the eyes, non-verbal clues indicating doubt. Maybe. Maybe not. I wasn’t quite sure.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I stood and made my way down the narrow aisle to the first-class lavatory.

In the tight, cramped space, I splashed cold water on my face, staring at my reflection. Surprisingly, I didn’t look like a stark raving lunatic. Despite having just escaped a nightmare, I looked pretty good. I could be beautiful, when the situation called for it, but usually I was just pretty with dark brown hair styled in a sassy Tinker Bell pixie cut, delicate features, a heart-shaped face, and expressive eyes. People sometimes claimed I had a sultry sweetness. Or, was it a sweet sultriness.

Moments later, struggling to shift to a more comfortable position in the plush, leather first-class seat, I tried not to dwell on the nightmare I’d had, but I was worried. I was flying to paradise, the island of St. Mateo, specifically, which was supposed to be the cure for my paralyzing anxiety, so I couldn’t understand why I’d had another nightmare.

The anxiety dream hadn't been invited to my tropical getaway. Why had it invaded my subconscious?

Sighing, I replayed the dream, trying to make sense of it, which would probably be a pointless endeavor.

Being shot to death during closing arguments was actually one of the many nightmares I'd been plagued by for the past five months. There was another one in which I exited the courtroom, triumphant and arrogant, having scored a victory for my client, a powerful pharmaceutical company, and was promptly shot by a woman in black. Despite being hit in the chest, the bullet didn't kill me. In my hospital bed, I stared at the morning news headlines on my iPad, one of which read, "*ATTORNEY SHOT IN COURTHOUSE EXPECTED TO RECOVER.*" And then, inexplicably, I was transported into the point of view of the woman who shot me, who was also reading the newspaper, pissed because she hadn't killed me, and thinking, *The bitch is still alive.*

The nightmares had become more prevalent and potent, robbing me of the ability to relax and disturbing my sleep. Though reoccurring, the dreams weren't exactly repetitive, but during my struggle to interpret the dreams, I realized they featured two disturbing similarities.

The lawyer who was shot in the dream was always me, Harlequin Miller, Esquire, senior associate at Ellison, Zupancic, and Cox, LLC, a premier full-service defense firm with offices around the globe, founded more than a century ago, focused on complex commercial litigation.

And the shooter was always me.

I'd been having anxiety dreams about killing myself. I should have been able to figure out the meaning of, and reasons for, my disturbing nightmares. What made me a hotshot litigation superstar—deductive reasoning and strategic thinking—was no match for these crazy dreams. Besides, my legal super skills actually weren't as effective as they had once been.

All the weapons in my arsenal were misfiring lately. My complex problem-solving skills, logical decision making, and discriminating judgment were also on the fritz. Everything that had made me the envy

of the law firm was failing me for some reason I couldn't seem to figure out.

The plane shook. Worried, I clutched the armrests. Usually, I wasn't a nervous flyer, but just in case, I grabbed the seatbelt, trying to fasten it with trembling fingers. Shit. Why couldn't I fasten the seatbelt? What the hell had happened to my hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills? I needed to calm down, but I couldn't. Not only was I still dwelling on my nightmare, but now I was thinking about the so-called cure for my anxiousness, worrying about what would happen when I got to the island of St. Mateo.

Once the plane touched down, my fabulous fantasy getaway would begin, according to the letter I'd received from the hotel where I would be staying.

It had arrived yesterday afternoon while I was in the middle of my large hexagonal walk-in closet, surrounded by a sea of clothes, furiously trying to pull together a decent wardrobe for my trip to paradise.

Made of sheepskin, the envelope was pale aqua with an embossed heliconia flower on the front and sealed with an iridescent wax stamp. Inside, words in fancy, flowing calligraphy outlined what was in store for me, with enough detail to get me excited and a fair amount of mystery to leave me breathless with anticipation.

Thinking about the letter, tucked away in the Chanel bag under my seat, I was both jittery and terrified. But mostly terrified. Maybe this fantasy trip would end up being a huge mistake. I couldn't help but think of the old television show, *Fantasy Island*, where the guests would fly to a secluded island to have their wishes come true. But in the end, those fantasies sometimes became nightmares. Or, maybe not always nightmares, but definitely not what they'd thought they desired.

Still, part of me thought a fabulous, relaxing getaway might be just what I needed, a grand plan to get rid of my anxiety so I could get my mojo back. Said mojo being the most important weapons in my legal arsenal—critical thinking skills, discernment, deduction, and sound decision making.

Technically, a trip to paradise wasn't my idea. It had actually been orchestrated by my best friend, Lisa, who began designing it after I'd

told her I couldn't sleep because I'd been having disturbing dreams about shooting myself for the past six months.

"Dreams are a way of dealing with problems or identifying problems that may need to be addressed," Lisa said.

Lisa was a therapist. A shrink. A neuropsychologist, actually. In her practice, she often encouraged patients to journal their dreams as a way to identify issues and concerns. So, she knew what the hell she was talking about. She wasn't giving me advice from a dream dictionary she'd picked up from the bargain book bin at Barnes & Noble.

"When did the dreams start?" Lisa asked, as we lounged on chaises by the pool in her backyard and sipped mojitos, basking in the warm sunshine on a lazy late afternoon in May.

"About five, maybe six, months ago."

"And what was going on in your life?"

"Nothing bad," I said. "Certainly nothing that would have given me anxiety."

Things had been going great six months ago, which was why the dreams made no sense.

"Well, if you want to skip the self-reflection and self-examination," said Lisa, in her "therapist" voice, a slightly condescending, dulcet tone, totally devoid of her urban twang, "then I could prescribe something for you."

"Something to stop the nightmares?" I asked, skeptical.

"Girl, please." Lisa dropped the "therapist" tone. "Something to put your ass to sleep so you can get some rest."

But, I didn't want any pills, especially any anti-anxiety medication. I knew all too well about the scary, adverse effects of mood-altering drugs. Didn't need my mind cluttered with rainbow-colored unicorns and psychotic thoughts. I'd made enough bad decisions.

"What are you anxious about?"

Shrugging, I said, "I don't know. Lots of things, I guess. Nothing really specific, I don't think."

"Anxiety is sometimes a tertiary emotion," Lisa said.

Lowering my sunglasses, I glanced at her. "A tertiary emotion?"

"It's an emotion that results from the primary emotion, which often hides behind the tertiary emotion, because often, the primary

emotion is too difficult and painful to deal with,” Lisa explained. “Once the primary emotion is exposed, it has to be validated and addressed. The tertiary emotion is usually easier to deal with, often with medication. But, the primary emotion may require psychoanalysis or more intense therapy, and most people are averse to that.”

“So, my anxiety is hiding behind some primary emotion,” I said, not sure I was on board with Lisa’s theories, which were beginning to sound a bit like psychobabble.

“The primary emotion is probably fear,” Lisa said, with an authoritative finality I found annoying and worrisome.

“Fear?”

“Fear can cause anxiety,” Lisa said. “So, the question to ask yourself is, what are you afraid of?”

Lisa’s question bothered me, and the defense attorney in me wanted to object. *Assumes facts not in evidence*. There was no proof my anxiety was based in fear. I suspected Lisa was right, though.

“Anxiety dreams are usually symbolic of some issue,” Lisa went on.

“So, I’m not really suicidal?” I asked. “Even though, in all of the dreams, I end up shooting myself?”

“You might want to kill something that you don’t like about yourself,” Lisa deduced. “That’s probably why you never die in the dream.”

I sat up and stared at her. “But which part of myself do I want to kill?”

“Maybe a personality trait, or a certain belief,” Lisa said. “Could be an attitude you secretly want to rid yourself of because you think it’s holding you back or keeping you from recovering from something.”

“Recovering from what?” I asked, my gaze drifting to the pool, where sunlight glinted on the surface like shimmering sparks.

Recovery implied that something had been damaged, broken, destroyed. Recovery implied some type of trauma had been sustained, either emotional or physical. But I wasn’t broken or traumatized. Or maybe I was. Possibly. Or maybe not.

“You know what I think you need?” Lisa poured herself another glass of sangria from the pitcher on the little glass bistro table between our lounge chairs.

“No, but I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“A good vacation.”

“You think so?” I asked, not convinced.

Lisa was adamant, however, and according to my best friend, the best way to deal with my anxiety was to indulge in a nice, opulent solo vacation. And while on vacation, I needed to have sex.

“How is having sex going to help me get over this anxiety?”

“Dirty, mind-blowing sex with multiple nonstop orgasms is the best way to release tension and stop the anxiety dreams.”

“Multiple nonstop orgasms? Not interested.”

“And there is only one place where it can happen,” she continued, again as though she was not listening to me. “There’s only one place you can go.”

“And where, pray tell, is that?” I asked, already feeling a bit worried by that mischievous gleam in her dark brown eyes. “Kalamazoo, Michigan? Djibouti, Africa?”

“St. Mateo.”

Ah, St. Mateo. That was going to be my third guess. That wasn’t true, though. I didn’t even know where St. Mateo was. I’d never even heard of St. Mateo. But, after Lisa declared St. Mateo as *the* place to go for wild, mind-blowing sex, she began flooding my email inbox with all sorts of links to travel websites about the place. Eventually, I caved and did research on the island to get the basics. The Internet provided lots of glossy photos of a sun-splashed paradise with white sand beaches, tall, swaying palm trees, and clear turquoise water.

St. Mateo was part of the Leeward chain, about ten miles southwest of Montserrat, and with its four sister islands, St. Felipe, St. Cera, St. Basil, and St. Kilian, it formed what was called the Palmchat Islands. The island quintet was known for its breathtaking natural beauty and diverse culture, but the most interesting articles were about the fact that each island had its own separate and unique personality.

St. Mateo was the hedonistic party island, St. Felipe was the prettiest but poorest island with the least tourists, St. Cera was the island of saints, where lots of missionary work was done, St. Basil was the place to go for a quick, painless divorce, and St. Kilian was the place for lively nightlife.

A few days later while we were having lunch, enjoying grilled

lobster tails and drinking too many screwdrivers, I told Lisa I was thinking of booking a suite at the Hibiscus Resort and Spa, the most exclusive hotel in St. Mateo.

“No, you can’t do that,” Lisa said.

“Why can’t I go to the Hibiscus Resort and Spa?”

“Because you have to go to the Heliconia Hotel,” she said.

“The Heliconia Hotel?”

Her smile sly, Lisa said, “It’s the place where all of your fantasies will come true.”

All of my fantasies? Each and every one of them? I’d wanted to scoff and toss her some sarcastic quip about how that was a tall order, one I didn’t think some island hotel could fulfill, but the hint of mischief in her eyes intrigued me, made me want to know more about this Heliconia Hotel.

Later, despite my vodka-and-grapefruit-juice headache, I Googled the Heliconia Hotel, but nothing came up except informational links about the heliconia flower and about a bazillion links to various and sundry hotels. There were no hits for Heliconia Hotel.

“You won’t find anything about this hotel on the Internet,” Lisa said, being vague and mysterious when I called her the next morning. “They don’t have a website. And they’re not on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Snapchat.”

“What the heck kind of hotel doesn’t have a website?” I’d asked, pissed by her evasiveness. “You know what, never mind. It doesn’t matter. I don’t even care because I’m not going.”

“But you have to go,” she insisted, as though the fate of the world depended on it. “You need some sexual healing to get rid of that anxiety.”

“I don’t have time for sex,” I insisted, slightly less intense.

“I shouldn’t tell you this,” Lisa said, voice lowered. “But, last year, one of my patients, a high-powered female CEO, was desperate to get over a devastating divorce, and she told me that a friend of hers suggested that she take a sabbatical to recharge and refresh her mind, body, spirit, and soul.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Well, she was able to make peace with the divorce by getting in

touch with her chi and her inner whatever the hell. But, she got more out of it than just deep contemplative meditation.”

“Okay,” I said, wishing Lisa would get on with it.

“She also got some damn good sex during her sabbatical,” Lisa said, her voice low and conspiratorial. “Specifically, some damn good sex at the Heliconia Hotel.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I stopped Lisa, holding up a hand. “The Heliconia is a sex hotel? You want me to get rid of my anxiety by going to a sex hotel?”

“It’s not a sex hotel,” Lisa chided. “It’s a hotel where all your fantasies come true and fantasies usually involve sex, so—”

“Are you out of your mind?” I asked. “I am not going to a sex hotel.”

“Will you just think about going?” Lisa asked. “From what my patient told me, you don’t have to have sex, it’s only an option. They also have lots of sensual pleasures that don’t involve intercourse. The point is, you’ll be pampered and catered to, and I think it will really help with your anxiety.”

Sighing, I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“Listen,” Lisa said. “If you decide to go, I’ll book everything for you, even the plane flight. All you’ll have to do is fly to St. Mateo and get on with getting your mojo back.”

Lisa had fulfilled her promise. She’d booked the entire trip—moments after I’d capitulated and agreed to go to the Heliconia to have all my fantasies come true. I wasn’t so sure I could fulfill my end of our bargain. I was starting to think I should get off the plane, go to the reservations desk, and book an immediate departure flight back home.

Except I didn’t really want to, and I suspected I knew why I was reluctant to go back home. *So, the question to ask yourself is, what are you afraid of?* The answer was simple though hard to admit. My career was in shambles, which was both an overestimation and an over simplification of the issue with my current employment. Suffice it to say, anyway I looked at it, and I had looked at it from all conceivable angles, things were not looking up for me at the firm.

Not anymore, anyway.

I'd gone from the top of the heap to the bottom of the pile in less than six months. After losing my last three cases, I'd suffered a long, heart-stopping fall to a hard, unforgiving landing. The most recent case I'd botched would be appealed, and I'd hoped to have the chance to redeem myself. I was desperate to convince the firm's founders, senior partners, and, most importantly, the partner steering committee responsible for recommending senior associates for partnership in the firm that they hadn't been wrong about me. I wasn't a fluke or a one-trick pony or a flash in the pan, which was what my colleagues said about me behind my back.

I could still be the rainmaking litigation superstar they expected me to be. I needed to prove I could be trusted to litigate for my clients and secure unimpeachable verdicts in their favor. Most of all, I had to get back on the track to partnership. At twenty-seven years old, I had been on the fast track to becoming the firm's youngest partner before being derailed by crucial verdicts against the clients I'd represented in three separate causes of action.

Last month, however, I'd been informed that the client had refused my continued representation of their company. Thus I would not be working on the appeal, which, thanks to my faulty decision making and negligent strategy, would most likely be eschewed in favor of secret settlement negotiations.

Three strikes and I appeared to be on the way out, much to the delight of a few fellow employees who'd joined the firm when I did but were still languishing at the junior associate level. Rumor was they were taking bets on how long I would last, though none of them were shedding any tears for me.

They figured I would end up back on my feet, walking right into a plum job at A.B. Miller & Associates, P.C., the premier powerhouse personal injury firm founded by my grandfather, Absalom Bartholomew "A.B." Miller, and currently managed by my dad, Absalom Bartholomew "A.B." Miller, Jr. However, the last thing I wanted was to be bailed out by my father. I didn't want to end up in a cushy corner office at my grandfather's firm trying to ignore the whispers of nepotism and wondering if people were only being nice to me because I was the boss's daughter.

After I passed the bar, Dad had been disappointed when I'd announced I was taking a position with Ellison, Zupancic, and Cox, LLC. My father had predicted I wouldn't last long at a firm specializing in "defending evil, greedy drug dealers" and prayed I would escape without having to sell my soul.

"Quinn, good lawyers don't belong at bad firms," Dad had said after I'd told him about the last case I'd screwed up, something he'd been telling me for the past five years. "Ellison, Zupancic, and Cox are the evil dead. Eventually, those vampires will demand blood, and once they've sucked the life from you, they'll leave your rotting corpse for the vultures."

Despite my dad's penchant for melodrama, he was sympathetic about my current professional dilemma. Though, I suspected he secretly hoped I would get fired. Then I would be free to work for him, which was what he'd assumed I would do upon my graduation from law school. I'd been able to resist my dad's wishes and had gone against his carefully constructed plans for my legal career. I wanted to control my own destiny and chart my own course.

For a while, it had been smooth sailing. Five years of spectacular, stunning victories, and then, six months ago, the first setback. A verdict against my client. The wrong expert had derailed the case. A month later, I didn't pick the right jury and lost again. Last month, I didn't employ the correct legal strategy. With my logical reasoning skills failing me, I made bad decisions, multi-million-dollar mistakes which could very well cost me the career I worked so hard to achieve. Pragmatism, intelligence, keen discernment, critical thinking, and rational judgment had guided me through all sorts of legal quagmires, successfully, efficiently and productively. With the recent failure of these skills, I felt unmoored and adrift in unfamiliar waters.

I had to get my career back on track, but I wasn't sure how. I wasn't sure I trusted myself to make logical, sound decisions. Case in point, the trip to paradise for no-strings sex. What the hell was I thinking? Did I really believe engaging in wanton escapades could get rid of my anxiety? How could that possibly make sense? The attorney in me wanted to argue it wasn't practical or rational, but the attorney in me

had recently lost three cases, so what the hell did the attorney in me know?

The attorney in me could no longer be counted on to make the right decisions, I reminded myself.

As the plane glided over another air pocket, I grabbed my purse, opened it, and took out the envelope I'd received from the hotel. Removing the letter, I unfolded the fine, smooth paper and skimmed the words, focusing on the phrases that inspired trepidation and excitement.

Your fantasy awaits and will begin as soon as you arrive.

My gaze traveled to the second paragraph, below the welcome and introductory salutations.

We are delighted that you have chosen our deluxe luxury fantasy experience, which is the story of a woman, undervalued and unappreciated, who embarks on a journey to paradise and—

"Feeling better?" the supermodel lookalike asked, her gaze sympathetic.

"Hmmm? Oh, yes, I am," I answered, putting the letter away. "I'm fine now."

"Which island are you going to?"

"St. Mateo. What about you?"

"I'm taking a hopper to St. Marco," she said and then added, "Quickie divorce."

"Oh," I said, not sure how to respond, with sympathy or congratulations, because from her passive stare, I couldn't really tell if she was upset about the dissolution of her marriage or not.

"Well, hopefully, you'll have a better time than I will," she said. "I've heard St. Mateo is really fun."

"Hopefully," I agreed, though I wasn't convinced paradise could help me get my mojo back. I had to get over the crazy nightmares, relax, and restart my career. I had to become, once again, the smart, savvy, superstar litigator. Once my sabbatical was over, I had to go back to work, start winning cases, and then make partner.

If I couldn't, then my career was over and so was my life.

Chapter Two



As the United Airlines 757 floated over the island archipelago, I looked out the window, spellbound as the island came into view, gazing at the verdant tropical rainforest, ringed by brilliant, shimmering turquoise waters.

The plane banked left as the captain announced the beginning of our initial descent into the St. Mateo International Airport. Ten minutes later, we landed. After grabbing my purse and Louis Vuitton carry-on from the overhead bin, I followed my fellow passengers down the narrow aisle and eventually stepped over the threshold of the opened cabin door.

It was a gorgeous day in paradise. The sun was shining, the palm fronds were swaying lazily, and the breeze wafting across my flushed skin smelled slightly floral.

Stepping out onto a set of metal stairs, I walked down the steps to the tarmac. Heat rose from the concrete as I headed into the airport terminal, a low, squat, one-story building surrounded by towering palm trees.

Inside the airport, the mood was lively and festive, like a mini carnival. Making my way through security and then customs, I passed several groups of old men sitting on overturned crates. Some played

steel drums, others beat bongos, and another quartet shook maracas and sang a rousing chorus of a salsa-inspired version of “The Girl From Ipanema.” Despite my nervous trepidation, I found myself entranced by the festive island mood and swaying to the lively rhythms.

At the luggage carousel, I scanned the bags circling the conveyor belt for my suitcase. Minutes later, I realized there was no more luggage on the carousel, and the other passengers who’d been waiting with me had gotten their bags and dispersed.

Where the hell was my luggage, I wondered, my blood pressure spiking. Had it been stolen? Or, had the airline lost it? Maybe put it on a plane to St. Maarten instead of the plane to—

“Ms. Miller?” said a voice behind me, very deep and slightly gruff, the island accent prevalent.

Turning, I stared up into a pair of dreamy brown eyes, as potent as whiskey. The rest of the man was dreamy as well. He was tall, broad, and muscular in his chauffeur’s uniform. And he was heartbreakingly handsome with a strong, square jaw, full lips, and a Roman nose. A ripple of excitement fluttered through parts of my body that hadn’t fluttered in years as I remembered the letter from the hotel I’d read on the plane.

Your fantasy awaits and will begin as soon as you arrive.

“My name is Icarus.”

“Icarus ...” I repeated, my voice a breathy whisper. The name was intriguing, and yet I was wary. In Greek mythology, Icarus was the boy who flew too close to the sun. His tale was cautionary, a warning against being too prideful or arrogantly trusting in your own abilities. Somehow, a handsome driver named Icarus seemed a bit too much like a harbinger of grim tidings.

Maybe I was making too much of things. Sometimes, a guy named Icarus was just a guy named Icarus. Maybe his mother thought the name was cool. Or, most likely, Icarus wasn’t even his real name. The Heliconia Hotel was all about fantasy, I reminded myself. Mysterious aliases were probably *de rigueur*.

“On behalf of the Heliconia Hotel,” he said, giving me a dazzling smile, “welcome to St. Mateo.”

“Thank you. But, um, my bags,” I said, remembering my missing

luggage. “I think maybe—”

“I have your bags in the car.”

“Oh, thank God,” I said, relieved. “I thought they’d been stolen.”

Icarus gave me a reassuring gaze. “This way,” he said, placing a hand on my back and guiding me, gently but firmly, out of the airport and toward a limo parked at the curb. My heart slammed as we walked toward the car, and I couldn’t help but feel self-conscious. Maybe I was paranoid, but I imagined the throng of tourists, milling about, waiting for taxis and shuttle buses, was watching me. I couldn’t help thinking that they knew, somehow, I was one of those sex-starved, neglected women headed to the Heliconia to have her brains boffed out by a bunch of buff Island guys.

After opening the door and helping me inside the limo, Icarus got in behind me and closed the door.

Startled, and suddenly claustrophobic, I scooted across the bench seat. Trying my best to bury myself in the crook between the rear seat and the side sofa that ran the length of the limo, I noticed a bouquet of gorgeous red roses, a bucket of champagne on ice, and a crystal bowl piled high with fresh fruit cut in the shape of flowers. Nice but a little kitschy, although not entirely cheesy—the fruit hadn’t been dipped in chocolate, thank goodness.

“So, here on the island of St. Mateo, much of our economy is dependent upon the crops we grow and sell to neighboring islands and a few countries in Europe,” Icarus said. “Our island is known for its fruit, which is sweet and succulent, because of the intense concentration of minerals in the volcanic soil high in the mountains.”

I nodded, not sure what to say.

“Would you like to try some mango or pineapple?” he asked, leaning a little too close, but he smelled good, a faint, intoxicating mix of sandalwood and something that was smoky and vaguely sweet, although not sugary.

Clearing my throat, I said, “Maybe later.”

He nodded and then asked, “Champagne?”

“Yes, please,” I said, hoping the Krug would calm my nerves. “Thank you.”

He opened the champagne; the cork popped and foam erupted

from the opening, spilling down the side of the bottle. Icarus laughed as he grabbed a napkin. Nervous, I giggled and perched on the edge of the seat as the chauffeur poured bubbly into a flute and handed it to me.

He put the bottle back into the bucket and said, "Once again, welcome to St. Mateo. It is my pleasure to serve you so please let me know what I can do to make sure that you are satisfied."

It was one of those trite, stock "customer service 101" phrases, but considering the reason for my trip to St. Mateo, the words *pleasure* and *serve* and *satisfy* were practically dripping with sexual innuendo.

The generous sip of champagne I'd just indulged in nearly came spewing out of my mouth, and I had to force myself to swallow, which, of course, sent a bit of bubbly into my nose, and it was an effort to cough delicately and not hack like I longed to do.

"You okay?"

Taking a deep breath, I managed to nod and said, "Just too much in my mouth at once."

The slow lift of Icarus's brow was seductive, curious, and mischievous. Mortified at how my words could be misinterpreted, I coughed again, a bit less ladylike.

"Would you like some water?"

"I'm fine," I said, putting the flute on the wet bar.

"Okay, we'll get going now," he said. "Should take about an hour or so."

After he got out and closed the door, I winced, embarrassed by my behavior. Why was I acting like some silly, giddy teenager? Why was I giggling and behaving like this was the first time I'd ever had champagne? Why was I nervous and jumpy, as skittish as a filly? Maybe because Icarus was a dreamboat. *Dreamboat?* I shook my head at my choice of description as the limo's engine fired up and the wheels started to roll. *Who the hell says dreamboat? Well, I didn't actually say it out loud,* I thought, settling back on the leather sofa. I'd thought of Icarus as a dreamboat, and since no one could read my thoughts, I didn't care that it was a term from the 1950s.

Icarus was a dreamboat chauffeur.

He was tall and gorgeous, and he wanted to please me and make

sure I was satisfied. But, no, not really, I reminded myself, reaching for the flute of champagne. The pleasure he wanted to provide me with had been bought and paid for; I couldn't forget that.

This was all fantasy. Nothing was real.

About ten minutes later, the intercom came on, and Icarus spoke through the system, informing me that he would point out a few sights along the way.

"But, if you would rather just have a relaxing ride without the narration, that's okay, too."

"No, that's fine," I said, looking toward the closed partition separating us. "I'd like the narration, please."

We headed away from the airport, down a wide avenue lined with palm trees, red hibiscus bushes and pink oleander trees, their leaves fluttering in the breeze.

Moments later, Icarus navigated the limo through the center of town, providing a bit of narration.

It was a thriving, bustling enclave of activity set amidst palm trees, plumeria, bird of paradise, oleander, and other flowering shrubs, all basking in the brilliant sunshine under a cloudless blue sky. Everywhere I looked, I saw a mix of St. Matean people and European tourists, going about their day, walking, talking, and shopping. We shared the narrow, paved road with taxis, cars, and small vans or jitneys.

The limo sailed along and we passed an open-air flea market where vendors sold everything from fresh fruit to hair extensions, hawking wares spread out on tables beneath blue tarps.

After some rather aggressive maneuvers through a busy traffic circle, we headed down a boulevard where there was a shopping plaza with various souvenir shops, a grocery store, and a few fast food restaurants.

We turned another corner, and Icarus pointed out the post office, the police station—a cute lavender building with a wide, wraparound veranda and tropical landscaping—the First Bank of St. Mateo, which had several branches throughout the Palmchat Islands, and several churches.

"We are all Catholic here," Icarus said. "And on Sunday, we all go to church, and the whole city pretty much shuts down, we don't work."

Leaving the city, the island's elevation increased, and I was able to look over the rainforest and down to the lovely white sand beaches, a small fishing village that fronted a bay where several boats bobbed in clear waters, and a banana plantation.

Silence ensued for about twenty minutes as the limo followed the winding road, ascending around the mountainous terrain. Icarus said, "In a moment, we'll stop so you can take a few photos at Plantain Pass. It is one of St. Mateo's most famous sites. Lots of tourists like to take a photo there because it is the only place where you can have our sister islands in the background of the picture."

As he promised, moments later, the limo angled left, slowly veering off the main road and onto a large gravelly shoulder. He parked the limo close to a low guardrail behind a shuttle bus whose passengers had already disembarked and were excitedly posing, positioning themselves for the perfect photo, which would feature the four islands in the background.

The limo door opened, and as I was about to get out, Icarus grabbed my hand. "Watch your head," he advised, and I was careful of the car's roof as he helped me out.

The balmy breeze carried a hint of the salty ocean as it propelled me toward the guardrail. The shoulder was a precipice overlooking several stories of rainforest, clusters of trees with large, dark green leaves.

"I'm afraid it might be awhile before we get a chance to take your photo," Icarus said, behind me, his deep voice close to my ear, the timbre brusque and yet tender, like a rough caress.

Nodding, I agreed. The shuttle passengers were hogging the scenery, crowded in clusters, jockeying for the best angles. "Maybe I could come back another time."

"Or, maybe you could have your picture taken somewhere else," he suggested. "A place that's much more beautiful than Plantain Pass."

Facing him, I had to step back to look up at him since he was so huge and imposing. And much too handsome. Entirely too sexy.

"There's a place just across the road," he said. "It's behind that little shack."

Hesitant, I turned and saw the shack, a small clapboard structure

with peeling paint and boarded-up windows. Surrounded by a dense snarl of tropical trees, it seemed just about ready to collapse. Alarm bells went off within me, loud and blaring. Did he really think I was about to go behind that shack with him? He was handsome, absolutely. But not handsome enough to fool me into following him into the rainforest where he could do God only knew what to me.

“It looks a little dicey,” he said, as though sensing my wariness. “But trust me, the photo you’ll have will be worth it.”

Glancing at the shuttle passengers, I silently cursed them for being inconsiderate tourists. I wanted them to hurry up and take their damn photos and then pile back into the shuttle so I could have my picture taken, but I wasn’t holding my breath.

And Icarus was waiting for my acquiescence. I still wasn’t sure about the photo opportunity behind the dilapidated shack, but something about those whiskey-colored eyes intoxicated me, and like someone under the influence, I stopped thinking clearly and said, “Okay, let’s go.”

He took my hand, and after several cars passed and the road was clear in both directions, we ran across the road. My heart slammed as we walked closer to the shack. Yards away, it was in worse shape than I thought, and I was half-convinced that Icarus planned to drag me into it and murder me.

“You okay?”

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Um, yeah, I just ...” I glanced back at the shuttle passengers, still striking poses and taking selfies. Would any of them even hear me if I screamed bloody murder?

“We don’t have to go if you don’t—”

“No, no,” I heard myself say, even though everything within me was telling me not to go because I wouldn’t return. My body would be found hacked to pieces. *If* it was found. And yet, some strange practical part of me rationalized that Icarus had to know he would be the prime suspect if anything happened to me. For one, the hotel had sent him to pick me up. And two, I was sure airport surveillance had us on camera. There was sure to be video of our brief conversation and of him getting into the limo with me.

“After you,” I said.

Smiling, Icarus took my hand again and led me around to the back of the shack, where we were greeted by a cluster of elephant trees. Pushing back the broad leaves, he guided me into the tropical forest. Beneath the wide, green leaves of more elephant trees, we took a natural path between bamboo and banana, shrouded by flowers, cool and dim. The path seemed to descend and slope downward for the next few moments, and Icarus tightened his grip on my hand, making sure I didn't slip over any low-lying branches. Soon, we reached a clearing, and when I looked over my shoulder, all I could see was a tangle of trees and bushes. A wall of flora and fauna, impenetrable, I could never have found my way through if I needed to escape.

"You okay?" Icarus asked.

"Yeah, I just, um ..." Scratching my eyebrow and my heart slamming, I said, "I just wondered ... I mean, you do know how to get back to the car, right?"

"I know every inch of this island," he said, stepping closer to me, his voice low and deep, the timbre brushing over my skin like the whispery breeze floating through the trees.

Swallowing my fear, I nodded and we continued on. As we angled through more trees, the breeze seemed to pick up, tempering the humidity, and I heard a sound I wasn't really prepared for—waves crashing. Icarus pushed through another wall of huge, waxy elephant leaves. I hurried behind him, and moments later, I was walking on sugar-white sand.

It stretched before me, a shimmering white blanket that unfurled into the clear turquoise waters.

"So, here is the place I told you about," Icarus said, arms outstretched, smiling. "What do you think?"

Looking around, I couldn't help but be awed by the beauty. The beach was beyond gorgeous, a lovely ribbon of land dotted with towering palm trees. Practically deserted, it seemed unspoiled, as though it hadn't been tread upon since the Carib Indians had inhabited the island centuries ago.

"It is beautiful," I said, taking a few steps toward a palm tree, enjoying the breeze wafting from the ocean waves.

"And most people don't know about it," he said. "So it's nice for

taking photos. When you show the picture to someone else who has been to St. Mateo, they will ask you, where did you take that photo? And you will have an interesting story to tell them.”

Turning to him, I said, “I don’t want to take any pictures. Not of me, I mean.”

“You sure?” he asked. “This is a beautiful setting.”

“Yes, it is,” I said. “And I would like some pictures of the area, but I don’t want to be in the pictures.”

“You would look lovely in front of that palm tree.”

I stared up, slightly irritated, at Icarus. I was sure he said that to all the women he led through the rainforest to see the secret beach. Still, I felt my cheeks warm, and felt foolish because I was sure I was blushing. The hint of amusement in his luminous, bedroom eyes told me that he knew how his compliment had affected me.

“I’m sure,” I said, as politely as I could, considering I was still annoyed by the idea that I was just his latest co-star in a play he’d starred in countless times with countless other women. “Anyway, I’m so crazy. I think I left my camera in the limo.”

Icarus gave me a sympathetic smile and offered to snap a few pictures of the scenery on his smartphone, but I told him not to bother.

We headed back through the elephant leaves, and I followed him along the path, but something about it seemed different. “Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

“Actually,” he said, “I just need to make a quick stop.”

“A quick stop?” I asked, my pulse racing. “Where?” What I really wanted to ask was why he needed to make a quick stop? What did he need to do? Locate a machete to hack me to death?

“It’s just this way,” he said, grabbing my hand, forcing me to follow him. “Won’t take too long to get there.”

“What do you have to do?” I asked, unable to pull my hand away or even dig in my heels to stop our progress, and as we hurried along, I looked over my shoulder and saw nothing but trees. Where was the beach? Which way was the path back to the limo? How the hell was I going to get away from him and—

“Here we are ...”

“Huh? What?” I stammered, glancing up at him and then forward. Before us, several yards away, was a charming thatched-roof bungalow made of bamboo. “What is this place?”

“It’s the hotel’s spa,” Icarus explained, leading me to the door, flanked by hibiscus and oleander. “The spa is known for special body treatments which require ocean water and seaweed from the beach. My supervisor wanted me to make sure that the bungalow was secure. The spa specialist wasn’t sure if she’d locked the door.”

“Oh,” I said, my heart rate returning to normal.

At the door, Icarus released my hand, and I walked toward one of the hibiscus bushes, feeling a bit silly and overwrought for thinking he was trying to kill me.

“Damn ...” Icarus muttered.

Turning to him, I asked, “What is it?”

“The door was still open,” he said. “I need to go in and make sure nothing has been stolen. You can stay out here or you can come in, whichever you prefer.”

Shrugging, I said, “I’ll come inside.”

Icarus went inside and I followed, stepping into a cool, dark room with bamboo walls and bamboo floors. A reception area, I guessed. From there, I headed down a short hallway and into a room which featured long panels of gauzy material hanging from the thatched ceiling, forming partitions, billowing like sails in the wind.

“Icarus ...” I said, hesitant as I walked through the gauze, vaguely wondering where he’d gone. The bungalow intrigued me. I couldn’t imagine a spa treatment which required someone to travel through a gauzy gauntlet. Considering the nature of the Heliconia Hotel, though, I imagined that the trip through the whispery fabric was meant to be made with no clothes on with the gauze caressing intimate places.

Soon, I was lost among the gauzy panels. Pushing through the fabric, I headed right, trying to find my way.

A shadowy figure, obscured by the filmy fabric, stood on the opposite side of the gauze panel in front of me. Gasping softly, I squinted, trying to make out the face, trying to see through the fabric.

“Icarus?” I asked. “Is that—“

Strong arms encircled me from behind, startling me, but instead of

flinching or struggling to twist away, I stood still, my heart slamming.

“Looks like everything is okay in here,” he whispered, his lips close to my ear, his deep baritone resonating through me, and I felt a dull throbbing between my legs. “But I need to check the back room. Make sure no bums are using the place to sleep off a bender.”

“Okay ...” I said, wondering how he’d managed to slip behind me so quickly when, seconds before, I could have sworn he’d been standing on the other side of the panel.

“Will you come with me?”

“Sure,” I said, cringing at the strange, high-pitched squeak in my voice. I thought I heard him chuckle softly as his arms slipped away, and then he stood next to me, taking my hand. The throbbing increased when I saw he’d removed his coat, revealing muscles barely contained by the white dress shirt he wore.

Icarus guided me through a passageway and into another room. After passing through another hallway, we stepped over the threshold and into a large room dominated by a king-sized canopy bed, draped in mosquito netting.

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anyone in here,” I said, heart thundering, terrified by what might happen next, and yet curious and even excited.

“No one except us,” he said, moving to stand in front of me.

I swallowed again but not for fear this time. A burgeoning lust erupted within me, so intense I was afraid I might not be able to control it, afraid the feeling might compel me to do things I wasn’t sure I should do, irrational things. And yet, hadn’t I come to St. Mateo to be wild and decadent, not chaste and modest? I’d agreed to come to the Heliconia Hotel so I could live out my most erotic fantasies with good-looking, sexy men.

Like Icarus, who was staring at me as though I was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen and all he wanted to do in the world was make love to me.

Which obviously wasn’t true, I thought, forcing myself to be cynical.

Icarus was probably a master at enticing and entrancing women like me. Women who had allowed anxiety to damn near ruin their

careers. Women who needed to get their mojo back in order to get their lives on track.

“It’s a little warm in here, don’t you think?” he asked, unbuttoning his dress shirt and then unfastening the cuff links. He took his shirt off, and I ogled him without realizing it, enjoying the show, marveling at his muscles and how broad his shoulders were and how he towered over me. When he unbuttoned his pants, I turned from him and stared at the bed, my heart racing. I wasn’t sure if I was ready to see him naked. A moment later, I felt him standing close behind me, and figuring that he had no clothes on, I trembled and my heart beat wildly. Part of me wanted to run for my life. Another part wanted to allow the fantasy to play out as the hotel had obviously intended it to. The story line was fairly simple, I surmised. *Woman comes to island and gets spectacularly banged by her hot chauffeur.* It made me excited just thinking about it. But I wasn’t sure if I wanted to live out the fantasy. I didn’t know if I could ...

Icarus took off my sundress, pushing the thin straps from my shoulders. The flowing, A-line dress dropped to the floor, and I stepped out of it, shivering despite the balmy atmosphere in the bungalow. As he reached around and unhooked my bra, I stiffened as his fingers brushed my breasts, and my nipples immediately hardened. The pink lace bra sailed across the room and landed in the seat of a chair next to a small round table. My panties would be next, I knew, and I didn’t know whether to prepare myself or protest, but during my mental debate, Icarus placed his hands on my hips and then inserted his fingers beneath the waistband of the matching bikini-cut underwear. Paralyzed by a jolt of lust, I shivered, feeling his hands trail down my legs as he slid my panties down until they ended in a little pink pool around my ankles. Gently, he lifted my right foot, so I could step out of the underwear, and then my left foot.

He picked up the panties and tossed them onto the chair, and then just like that, I was completely naked.

I felt both embarrassed and liberated. Physically, I had nothing to be ashamed of; in high school and college, I had run cross country, and though I wasn’t the most dedicated athlete, I hadn’t dropped the fitness routine. I still ran six miles five days of the week. Naturally, my

frame was slender, but I had nice curves and cleavage that men paid attention to. Still, I wasn't feeling entirely confident.

Skittish, and wary about what Icarus thought of my body, I decided to crawl onto the bed. I felt something huge and heavy settling next to me. Icarus had joined me in the bed. Still worried about facing him, I flattened my body, lying on my stomach, with my face pressed against the soft, downy pillow.

Gently, he turned me over onto my back. Moving onto his side, propping himself up on an elbow, he stared at me. His whiskey-colored eyes roamed my body, his gaze so intense I swore I could feel it, and when his eyes dropped below my navel, the throbbing made me gasp softly, and I felt an urgent need to arch my hips, an urgent need to be filled completely.

His hand landed on my cheek, his fingers caressing and then trailing along my jawline and chin before moving to my mouth. Parting my lips with his thumb, he lowered his head toward mine.

"Wait ... " I said, panicked.

He stopped, arching a brow seductively.

"I don't want to ..." I stammered. "I mean, I want to but ..."

"Not with me?"

"Not yet ..." I clarified. "I don't want to right now, I mean."

I wasn't sure what I meant or what I wanted. Everything seemed to be happening too fast. And even though I had been told, or warned, it now seemed to me that my fantasies would start immediately, per the letter from the hotel, I wasn't ready to start the fantasy, not just yet. It felt too soon. I needed a moment to prepare. More than a moment, really. *Forever*, I thought. I needed forever to get myself together. Or maybe never, I amended. Maybe never was how long it would take.

"Are you sure?"

"No," I blurted out, feeling foolish and confused. "I mean, yes. I think. I don't know, I mean ..."

"It's okay," he said. "Let's just take our time and see what happens. Everything is all about what you want, remember?"

I nodded, remembering that it was *my* fantasy. Supposedly. Although, honestly, I had never actually fantasized about having sex with a limo driver, so I wasn't quite sure why the hotel had thought I

would enjoy this story line. I wasn't really complaining. I didn't know if I was enjoying myself either.

I tried to remember I'd come to St. Mateo to revive, or maybe resurrect, the woman I had been before losing three high-profile cases, but maybe I'd been fooling myself. Maybe I shouldn't have allowed Lisa to talk me into coming to this place. Maybe I didn't know what to do. Maybe I did know, deep down, that sex wasn't going to solve anything. This trip to paradise was a misguided reaction to the deplorable state of my once meteoric career. What I really needed was another chance to successfully litigate a high-profile case.

Closing my eyes, I let out a small sigh.

Icarus's lips brushed against mine, and when I gasped, his tongue slid into my mouth, slow and sensuous and strangely as though it belonged there, as though he had been waiting to kiss me. Eagerly, I opened my mouth to give him more access. I slipped my tongue between his lips as I wound one arm around his neck and the other around his back, kissing him greedily, like a parched woman, swirling my tongue around his in a desperate frenzy.

Without warning, he broke the kiss, and I moaned in protest, but his eyes communicated he had more in mind for me.

A moment later, he pressed his mouth against my forehead. His lips trailed along my hairline, and then he brushed his mouth across my closed eyelids. After a quick peck on the nose, which was playful enough to make both of us smile, he trailed a line of blistering kisses along my cheek and jaw and then behind my ear and down to my neck.

The throbbing between my legs had escalated to an urgent clenching, and it was all I could do not to slip my fingers inside myself and rock against my own hand, and I might have, but I knew it would be so much better if I was patient and allowed the fantasy to run its course.

Icarus dragged his lips across my throat and then moved down to my collarbone and continued on to my shoulder and down my arm to my elbow, wrist, and palm. Taking my hand, he pressed his mouth against my lifeline and then kissed each fingertip.

Taking my other hand, he reversed his order, starting with the fingertip kisses and then brushing his lips against my palm before kissing the inside of my wrist and then trailing his kisses up my arm,

past my elbow, and to my shoulder. From my shoulder, he moved to my breasts, taking one nipple in his mouth, licking and flicking his tongue across it while caressing my other breast with his fingers and hand.

The sucking and tugging on my nipples was driving me insane, making it almost impossible for me to keep my hips still. His mouth left my breasts and moved down to my abdomen, and then his lips trailed even lower until he was inches from my navel. But, then he changed course and he trailed his tongue diagonally, down to my left hip. After a few kisses there, he dragged his mouth across to my right hip, and then he inched his mouth down below my naval again and began a dangerously delicious descent toward my—

“Stop,” I said, assailed once again by panic. Sitting up, I scooted away from him, avoiding his gaze.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m not sure I want to ...” I took a deep breath, feeling like a ridiculous liar. I suspected we both knew that wasn’t true. I was practically soaking wet, and the scent of my desire for him floated around us, like a hypnotic aphrodisiac.

“Then you don’t have to,” he said.

Glancing at him, I was shocked to see he wasn’t naked. He rose to his knees, giving me a full frontal view of the massive bulge in his boxer briefs. My mouth went dry at the sight of it. So big and thick, I didn’t think it could possibly be real. Involuntarily, my body continued to prepare for him as a deluge of natural lubrication slipped from between me.

As if sensing my disbelief, he took my hand and helped me to my knees, pulling me closer to him. Dipping his head to mine, he kissed me and then slipped my hand into his boxer briefs. My fingers brushed the wide, slick head. Growing bolder, I inched my fingertips along the shaft and then moved my hand around it, realizing I wouldn’t be able to encircle it entirely by touching my thumb to my index finger.

I slid my hand down and then back up, feeling the veins against my palm. I glanced up at him and gasped under my breath, startled by the raw lust in his intense gaze. I could tell he wanted me, and I wanted him, too, and yet, I knew if I gave in and had sex with him, there would be no turning back.

Still conflicted, I moved my hand down again, and his penis twitched against my hand, setting off another round of throbbing between my legs as I imagined what it might feel like if it twitched inside me.

Again, as though he could read my mind, Icarus moved me back down onto the bed and then moved off it to remove the boxer briefs. Completely nude, he was magnificent, but I was worried. I wasn't sure if I would be able to take all of him. Even though I wanted all of him. I needed every inch of him inside me.

Icarus moved next to me, lying on his side. He lowered his head to mine and kissed me, slipping his tongue into my mouth, and at the same time, he trailed a finger along my opening while his thumb brushed my clit. Gasping loudly, I started to rock my hips against the strong fingers twirling in and around my vagina. Opening my legs wider, I arched my back, feeling a delicious ache between my legs. Closing my eyes, I moved my hips in a circular motion against Icarus's nimble fingers, digging my heels into the mattress. A powerful jolt of what I could only describe as electric pleasure sent a charge throughout my entire body, leaving me gasping and shaking as though I'd been struck by lightning.

While I was still trembling, I felt the head of Icarus's penis against the opening of my vagina, sliding along the slick, wet slit, sending more shocking sparks of pleasure through me. Those sparks were nothing compared to what I felt when the broad head pushed inside of me. Clenching around him, I lifted my hips, desperate to have him deeper within me. Searing sparks of pleasure made my body thrash and twitch as Icarus continued, separating the walls of my vagina as he maintained his sweet excavation into me, making his way to my core.

I'd wanted every inch of him, and he was obliging me, sending my body into delightful spasms as he filled me completely. Astonished by the size of him, I wrapped my legs around his waist and spurred him into action, goading him to begin, eager to be screwed like there was no tomorrow.

He began slowly, drawing back and then slipping inside with long, sweeping thrusts. Over and over, he gave me all of his length and thickness, retreating and returning until I was gasping and crying out,

exploding again. My body trembled and shivered in an orgasmic bliss, leaving me dazed.

Pulling back until only the thick, broad head was inside me, Icarus gave me quick, shallow thrusts, again and again. My body seemed to be breaking apart and then coming back together and then breaking apart again.

Holding me close, Icarus kissed me, thrusting his tongue into my mouth in the same way he thrust in and out of me. Grasping him, I moved my mouth from his as I felt the pressure building between my legs again. As I closed my eyes again, anticipating my next explosion, I felt Icarus's mouth near my ear and heard him asking me how I wanted him to make love to me. Faster? Harder? He trailed a tongue along the edge of my ear before grazing the lobe with his teeth.

He hadn't asked if I wanted him deeper. He was already deeper than I thought was possible. Honestly, I didn't know what to tell him. Fast or slow, it didn't matter. Either way, I knew he could make me come like I never had before in my life, over and over, with an intensity so powerful I thought it might drive me insane.

In response to his question, I could only manage an unintelligible moan. Icarus took it upon himself to thrust faster and then harder. He changed his rhythm more than once as he pushed into me and then drew back, sometimes slow, sometimes faster. He slid into me with unrestrained passion and then with tenderness until I was panting at the searing pleasure rocketing through me.

Soon, his thrusts became more determined and tumultuous. He stared at me with those whiskey-colored eyes as he drove harder, his thickness moving within me in a desperate furor that seemed different somehow as he reached a place I wasn't aware existed, a sensitive spot he stimulated over and over until my body seized, and then it felt as though some sort of sensual detonation went off between my legs, stealing away my breath and all my thoughts and everything I needed to survive.

Seconds later, Icarus had his own explosion, and the vehemence of his orgasm was powerful enough to cause more implosions deep inside me, jerking me violently until I went limp.

Chapter Three



The limousine pulled under the portico and stopped at the front entrance of the Heliconia Hotel.

The grand façade was impressive and reminded me of a tropical version of the palace at Versailles with its arches and rows of columns amid mid-sized palm trees nestled in oversized planters.

The journey to the hotel had taken a little over an hour, due to our bungalow detour. The experience had been indescribable. Never in a million years had I expected to be made love to moments after arriving on the island. The hotel had said the fantasy would start immediately, but I'd thought they'd meant the fantasy was merely being miles away from my disappointing career.

I still couldn't believe it had happened.

Couldn't believe I had done it.

Couldn't believe I hadn't stopped it from happening.

Still slightly dazed, I tried my best to pull myself together and somehow ignore the insistent throbbing between my legs and prepare to get out of the car and check into the hotel.

Icarus opened the door and helped me out of the limo with a polite deference I found slightly strange and distant, considering we had just

made love with the sort of wild, reckless abandon reserved for the romance novels I used to read in high school.

Now, he was professional and a little too polished.

I tried not to feel disappointed, but I sensed a broken connection between us, which was ridiculous because I hadn't come to St. Mateo to make a connection. The inconsequential sex was about releasing tension and getting rid of anxiety so I could stop having crazy nightmares. A few mind-blowing orgasms would just be icing on the cake. And yet, I worried I'd become attached to Icarus, for some reason. I hoped not. I didn't want to be one of those women who latched onto the first man who gave them some good sex.

Maybe Icarus was being distant because his role in the fantasy was over. He was "off the clock." The lusty limo driver had played his part. He'd exited stage left, so to speak, and was now back in the real world, where he was a hotel employee who drove a limo.

Icarus escorted me up the grand stairway, where four uniformed bellmen stood at attention. In the expansive, opulent foyer, a young, slim, attractive St. Matean woman was waiting to welcome me to the island and to the hotel. She introduced herself as Liberada and announced she would be my personal assistant for the duration of my stay. "In addition to myself," she went on, "you will have, at your disposal, a personal staff, which will consist of a concierge, a butler, two housekeepers, a secretary, and a driver, Icarus, who you've met."

Nodding, I glanced back at the limo, where Icarus was removing my luggage.

Icarus handed my bags to one of the bellmen, and then without as much as a nod, smile, tip of the hat, or any other acknowledgment to me, he got back into the limo. As he drove off, I couldn't help but wonder if he was heading off to play the sexy chauffeur in some other woman's fantasy, and I felt a weird spark of jealousy. Quickly, I squashed the envy and reminded myself that this experience was supposed to be a fantasy.

As such, I was supposed to enjoy the fantasy, not wrestle with bizarre feelings about a man I'd just met and didn't even know.

Leaving the foyer, I was shepherded down a wide hallway, featuring

lots of marble and soaring ceilings, and into a large office, furnished in French Rococo style.

Liberada sat behind the large desk and indicated I should take the chair opposite her.

After explaining a bit about the town, and confirming the length of my stay in paradise, she explained that the history of the hotel's origins was cloaked in secrecy and mystery, obviously.

"The hotel's founder is not widely known, outside of the current owners; however, there are rumors that the hotel was once the private estate of a wealthy French baroness who fell on hard times after the death of her wealthy husband, who left her in debt. To satisfy her creditors, she began offering them certain favors, if you will."

Smiling naughtily, Liberada went on. "Upon her death, it is believed her daughter decided to turn the estate into a hotel. She apparently belonged to a secret society of young noble women, including some members of royalty, who were dedicated to exploring their sexuality in the most decadent ways possible. They were supposedly devoted to debauchery, but due to their positions in society, they had to perform these bacchanal activities in secret. So the baroness's daughter made the hotel available as a place where they could indulge in their wanton desires."

"I see," I said, the throbbing between my legs increasing as I recalled my own wanton debauchery.

"But that's all conjecture and rumor," Liberada said with a saucy wink. "Most likely, this place is owned by rich Arabs."

"Probably so," I said, not sure I really agreed.

"Nevertheless, this is a place of impeccable discretion," she said, the sassiness replaced by stone-cold seriousness. "We take privacy very seriously, and if you feel your privacy has been violated, in any way, you are to please contact me immediately to handle the situation. Sounds good?"

I nodded, thinking that it sounded like she would cut the violator's tongue out to keep him from spilling secrets, but I supposed I was reassured.

"After you decided to stay with us," Liberada said, "you should have

received a letter thanking you for choosing to vacation at the Heliconia.”

I nodded, remembering the letter I’d received from the hotel after Lisa had booked the trip to St. Mateo.

“Obviously, there were some details about the hotel that had to be omitted, for discretion.”

After clearing my throat, I agreed. “Obviously.”

“Considering the nature and objectives of the hotel,” she began, the naughty gleam in her gaze again, “I must explain that the experiences we offer are categorized according to three different levels. Sensual, sexual, and salacious.”

“I see,” I said, not sure I really did.

“This is a hotel where you can experience your fantasies,” she said. “And we try not to be blunt, but to explain the categories, I find it best not to employ euphemisms.”

Worried, I nodded. “Okay.”

“Sensual is no penetration, but you will have orgasms, mainly manual and oral stimulation,” she said, as though listing the ingredients of some processed snack food. “Sexual, there will be penetration, and if you want to be tied up or whipped or play sex games, you may request that. Finally, salacious is really any perversion you can think of. For example, if you want to screw a goat, we can get you a goat. Sounds good?”

Flabbergasted, and appalled, I gaped at her. “Are you serious?”

“We don’t judge,” she explained, then shrugged, and said, “So, were you satisfied with Icarus?”

“What?” Thrown by her abrupt question, I felt heat spreading across my face and was terrified that somehow, somehow, she knew what Icarus and I had done in the bungalow. And, if so, was it because she had orchestrated it? As my personal assistant, was she responsible for creating my fantasies and making sure they all came true?

“In the past, some of our guests have complained that he’s stand-offish and not very friendly,” Liberada said. “He has been making an effort to be more congenial, and I just wanted to make sure that he was accommodating and that his behavior was to your satisfaction.”

Worried by her seemingly coded speech, I stared at her, searching

her delicate features for signs that she was well aware of just how accommodating Icarus had been. She gave me a polite, blank “customer service” gaze.

“He was nice,” I decided to say, wondering if the hotel had some kind of unofficial rule that fantasies should be experienced but never really acknowledged, and as such, everyone had to be vague and evasive.

“That’s good to know,” Liberada said. “So, we’ll meet the rest of your staff, and they will help you get settled in your room. Sounds good?”

Chapter Four



Standing in the living room of the luxury suite, I looked around, admiring the Baroque and Rococo furnishings, high tray ceilings, triple crown molding, and rows of French doors which opened to a private terrace surrounded by a tropical jungle.

Feeling giddy and decadent, I walked to one of the four couches, grouped in a square with a low coffee table in the center.

I wasn't quite sure what to do next.

I'd met the staff, a deferential group who assured me of their desire to fulfill my every wish during my time in St. Mateo. I was thankful and appreciative, but, since the Heliconia was a fantasy hotel, I couldn't help but wonder if all their talk about vowing to go out of their way to make my stay as enjoyable as possible was just pretense.

However, to their credit, they sought to prove their promises by unpacking my luggage and hanging my clothes in the closet, placing my undergarments in the dresser and arranging my toiletries in neat rows on several built-in shelves in the bathroom.

Walking into the sleeping salon, I figured I probably needed a shower. I could smell Icarus's heady scent on my skin. Maybe some tropical-scented bath gel would help wash away the memories of his kisses, and I might be able to forget the feeling of his lips on my flesh.

As I reached for a bath towel, I thought about the levels of fantasy you could indulge in at the Heliconia.

I'd forgotten to ask Liberada how my fantasy experiences would be categorized, though after my encounter with Icarus, I was sure they would be more than *sensual*. Anyway, I'd come for *sexual* experiences, pun intended. Anything *salacious* would not be tolerated, however.

The hotel's definition of salacious had really thrown me. Did they really offer experiences in bestiality? Was there really some woman out there who actually fantasized about doing it with a barnyard animal? Again, I questioned my rationale for coming to this place.

After my shower, I stepped back into the bedroom. As I was putting on a robe, there was a knock at the door. It was one of the housekeepers. She reached into the pocket on the front of the apron tied around her black dress and pulled out another aqua envelope. "For you."

"Thank you." I took the envelope from her, closed the door, and headed to the couch.

After a moment's hesitation, I opened the letter, pulled out the piece of lambskin, and unfolded it, reading:

Evening experience: Terrace Dinner

Focusing on the word experience, I felt a jolt pass through me, knowing what it meant. Dinner on the terrace would be much more than five courses and a bottle of expensive wine. Another sexy guy would be joining me, I figured.

I wasn't sure if I wanted another fantasy experience.

Correction: I wasn't sure if I wanted another fantasy experience with anyone except Icarus. The thought shamed and sobered me. The point of coming to the Heliconia was to live out lots of fantasies with lots of different guys. I wasn't supposed to get hung up on the first guy who made love to me like both our lives depended on it.

Maybe I was overthinking things. Maybe the sex hadn't been that great. After all, what the hell did I know about great sex? As soon as I'd walked through the doors of Ellison, Zupancic, and Cox, LLC, my sole focus had been my career. I was too busy to indulge in scorching hot sex. Sure, I'd had a few dalliances, but nothing truly mind-blowing, nothing to distract me from my goal of making partner. Maybe what

I'd thought was great sex in the middle of the rainforest with the hottest guy I've ever seen in my life was really just sex that was a bit better than what I had experienced.

Nevertheless, in the interest of not wasting the money I'd shelled out to stay at the Heliconia, I decided to soldier on and see what the hotel had in store for me.

"My name is Joshua," said what the hotel had in store for me.

Standing just outside the doorway of my suite, the star of my current fantasy wore a custom-tailored suit that appeared to have been molded to his lean, athletic frame. He reminded me of an international soccer star. He was good-looking, in a pretty, male model way, with a sculptured face, full lips a bit on the pouty side, and piercing blue eyes incongruous with his golden tan complexion.

Joshua gave me a smoldering gaze as he announced his intentions, which were to be my dinner companion and late-night entertainment, but I wasn't convinced by his fake desire. Maybe I was still drunk from Icarus's sizzling, whiskey-colored stares.

I decided to go with the flow and see how the fantasy would end.

After the polite introductions, Joshua and I walked out onto the terrace. A nice, balmy breeze carried the scent of the tropical flowers surrounding us. The sun had set, but the sky had a coppery glaze, and it spilled onto our setting, casting a golden tint over the outdoor furnishings and the travertine tile and the white hibiscus bushes.

A mixologist showed up a few minutes later to make cocktails for us, and then she made herself scarce, leaving Joshua and me alone to engage in awkward chitchat. Mostly, the conversation consisted of him telling me how good I looked in my dress—one of those bandage numbers that accentuated curves and cleavage—and me being demure.

"So, how do you like St. Mateo so far?"

"It's gorgeous," I said, taking another sip of my mojito. "Breathtakingly beautiful."

"Have you been to St. Mateo before?"

"No, this is my first time."

“You’ve never been to any other Palmchat Island?”

“No,” I said. “Actually, I hate to say this, but before I came here, I hadn’t even heard of the Palmchat Islands.”

“A lot of people haven’t,” he said, taking a modest sip of his drink. “We get overshadowed by the U.S. Virgin Islands, but once people discover our islands, they always come back.”

“Well, I can see why,” I said. “It is a beautiful place.”

“So, how did you eventually find out about St. Mateo?”

“A friend told me,” I said and took a more generous sip of the mojito.

I had the sinking suspicion this particular fantasy was not going as the hotel had designed it and the ending would be vastly different from what had been intended. The basic story line made sense. *Beautiful hotel guest has dinner with handsome, dashing man who charms her right out of her panties and finds his way into her bed where they make love, passionately and vigorously, all night long.*

The problem was, Joshua was all wrong for the part. Well, not completely wrong, I supposed. He was certainly handsome, so he fit the bill for that part of the description. But he wasn’t dashing. His conversational skills were sorely lacking. Not to be blunt, but I found him boring. Talking to him was a chore, and as he continued to pepper me with banal questions about my travel experiences, I racked my brain, searching for some sort of exit out of the stilted banter between us.

I was just about to feign a headache and tell him I wanted to cut the evening short when dinner arrived. Three servers rolled two carts out onto the terrace and began the task of preparing our table. A sommelier followed and educated us on the evening’s wine selection. Ecstatic about the intrusion, I struck up a conversation with the sommelier about the wine. I wasn’t really a connoisseur, but I was able to ask the sommelier about the composition of the wine he’d selected, how it had been made, and why he thought it would pair well with our menu.

Joshua didn’t seem to mind my interest in the sommelier. Maybe because he knew he was the most handsome guy in the room. The servers were decent-looking, but they were average guys with average

builds, and I couldn't imagine the hotel casting them in any fantasies.

The servers finished setting the table and then stepped back. Joshua held out a chair for me, and I sat, thanking him. Joshua took his seat, and then the sommelier went through the pretense of presenting the wine selection to Joshua.

After opening the wine, he offered Joshua the cork, which Joshua took from him and then sniffed a few times, furrowing his brow and looking contemplative, as though he actually had a nose to discern whether or not the wine was acceptable.

Then the wine steward offered Joshua a small tasting sample, and Joshua looked at the wine and took a quick sniff before he tasted it. Joshua gave the sommelier a dismissive nod, which I assumed meant the wine was fine to pour, because the sommelier returned the nod and filled our glasses.

The entire scene was so ridiculous to me I almost laughed out loud.

But then I cautioned myself not to throw stones. The fancy dinner fantasy might have been enjoyable to some other woman, and maybe I would have been more enthusiastic if not for my encounter with Icarus in the bungalow.

I couldn't get the torrid lovemaking out of my head. Couldn't get Icarus out of my head either, and I wondered if the hotel would be able to cast another fantasy guy capable of making me forget about the dreamboat with the whiskey-colored eyes.

The servers remained with us during the entire dinner service and were attentive and yet unobtrusive, doing their best to blend into the shadows. As Joshua bored me with more tedious conversation, I felt slightly paranoid, assuming the servers knew what this dinner on the terrace was all about.

The servers and the sommelier were well aware that dessert would not be some fancy confection but instead would be Joshua giving me something better than the famous "Better than Sex" cake. I wondered what they thought, if anything. I wondered if they saw me as some depraved bitch who, for whatever reason, couldn't get a decent lay so she had to sneak off to some island to pay for it. I wondered if they cared at all and decided they probably didn't.

Maybe I was hoping they didn't. The idea of them judging me made me angry.

They didn't know a damn thing about me or how I'd sabotaged my own career with bad decisions and faulty strategy, which had been the motivating factor behind my decision to come to the Heliconia Hotel. They had no right to declare me depraved and desperate or think of me as some horny, sex-starved, neglected woman.

Of course, I didn't know what they were thinking, so there was no need to give them the evil eye. Most likely, I was projecting my own feelings onto a group of guys who were probably thinking about getting off work and going home to their own families.

After dinner, the servers and the sommelier got lost in a hurry, leaving me alone with Joshua.

Instead of more small talk, he asked me if I wanted to dance. Confused, I said, "But, there's no music."

Smiling, he said, "Well, I can fix that."

Puzzled, but curious, I watched him walk through the French doors into my suite. A moment later, he returned and soon the melodious strains of a string quartet filled the air.

"Well, that's a neat trick," I said, resolved to be more involved in the fantasy, as he pulled me into his arms.

"I have a lot of neat tricks," he said, voice low, gaze intent on me.

I was sure he did, but I still wasn't interested, and so as not to encourage any more double entendre, I put my head on his shoulder, hoping he would get on with twirling me around the terrace.

We swayed slowly for a few moments to what sounded like Bach. Our movements awkward, we struggled to find a rhythm, but eventually, I relaxed enough to let him lead, though I felt as though I was at a high school prom. We weren't exactly cheek to cheek, but we had our arms wrapped around each other, and there was a bit of space between us, which I was thankful for. I didn't want him pressed close, grinding his erection against me. Especially since he didn't exactly have an erection.

He stared at me with those blue eyes that I should have been more entranced by than I was, and then his head dipped toward mine. His kiss was reluctant and then bold and daring. When he slipped his

tongue into my mouth, it didn't feel right. The tip darted in and out, and when I tried to pull away, he became more aggressive, wrapping his muscular arms around me, and plunged his tongue deep into my mouth, nearly gagging me.

Twisting my mouth from his, I pushed away. "Wait a minute, please."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I lied, extricating myself from his embrace, which had slackened. "Just need some water."

"Did I do something wrong?"

I went back to the table and grabbed a glass of lukewarm water. "My throat is a bit dry."

"Look, I'm sorry, okay," he said, "I'm new ..."

"You're new?"

"This is only my second week working fantasies," he said, sheepish and apologetic. "I guess I, um ..."

"Forgot your lines?" I suggested, stepping away from him and walking back to the table to take my seat again.

"I'm sorry," he said, joining me at the table.

"It's okay," I said, relieved he hadn't tried to waltz me into the bedroom to do the horizontal tango.

"I could start over," he said. "I was just a little nervous. I've never done a premium deluxe fantasy before, and I've been anxious about getting it right, and, naturally, I fuck it up."

"Really, Joshua, it's okay. I understand about you being nervous," I said. "To be honest with you, I'm nervous, too. I've never had a premium deluxe fantasy come true for me. I've never had any of my fantasies come true."

"This would have been your first fantasy experience?" Joshua asked, a shocked, stricken look on his face.

"Um ..." I faltered, not wanting to lie but not ready to talk about the encounter with Icarus. "What I meant was, I'm not used to the things I want to happen happening for me, you know."

"Why not?"

"Well ..."

"I mean, you got money, right? Because you're at this hotel and it

ain't cheap," he said. "Most people that have money can make stuff happen."

"Well, yes, but ..."

"But?" Joshua prompted, as though he was genuinely interested.

"But, sometimes, the things you want to happen are things that you can't pay for," I said, wondering if maybe he'd remembered his lines and was playing the attentive potential lover. "Things you can't buy, you know."

Nodding, Joshua claimed to understand me, but I didn't believe him. I didn't fault him for not understanding because I wasn't entirely sure I'd done a good job of explaining my feelings. Not that my explanations mattered. I wasn't at the Heliconia for sympathy and understanding. How could I make Joshua understand that I was here to figure out why I was having recurring nightmares about shooting myself?

"So, what didn't happen for you that you wanted to happen?" Joshua asked.

"What?" I asked, surprised by his question, shocked he hadn't lost interest in that particular thread of our conversation. "Oh, um ... too many things to get into right at this moment."

"Yeah, I get it," he said. "You didn't come to this hotel to talk, right?"

"I don't mind conversation," I said, maybe a bit too quickly.

"Okay, well ..." He sighed and then smiled a little and said, "Anything in particular you want to talk about?"

"Tell me about yourself," I said, grabbing my half-empty wine glass, hoping to steer the conversation away from anything about me. "You said you were new, right? Where did you work before you came here?"

"I didn't quit my job to work here," he said. "This is like a part-time gig. I'm really a bartender but not at this hotel. At the sister property, the Hibiscus."

"How did you end up at the Heliconia?" I asked.

"My friend recruited me," Joshua said. "He's been working here for a few years. He was always telling me I could make way more money at the Heliconia doing fantasies. Plus, I'd have all the pussy I want."

Clearing my throat, I said, "Is that right?"

Sheepish, he laughed. “Anyway, my friend was always telling me that the women who come here, they’re horny and lonely. Most of them are married to rich old farts that can’t get it up, no matter how much Viagra they pop. The women haven’t been screwed right in years. They’re eager for some good dick.”

Affronted, I glared at him.

“Sorry.” He gave me an apologetic smile. “But I’m sure that’s not the case with you.”

Taking a sip of wine, I looked away from Joshua’s gaze, which held traces of sympathy and pity he couldn’t hide, and said nothing. The woman he’d described, the typical woman who came to the hotel, sounded *nothing* like me. I was at the hotel to distract myself from anxiety-fueled nightmares, but I didn’t really belong at this place.

So, why the hell was I booked in a premium deluxe suite at the Heliconia? I wasn’t the type of woman who visited a sex hotel to deal with anxiety caused by acute onset career failure. I was the type of woman who would develop a pragmatic strategy to combat anxiety. Or, I used to be. Obviously, that woman wasn’t me anymore. Maybe I would never be that woman again. Maybe I was a failure, especially in my ability to make sound choices critical to my success and well-being.

Not one to throw pity parties, I sighed and pushed the defeatist thoughts away.

“Listen, I don’t mean to be pushy, but ...” He cleared his throat and glanced to the left, toward the French doors that opened to the bedroom, and then back at me. “Do you want to—”

“No,” I blurted out, knowing what he’d been about to ask me. “I mean, I don’t but ... not because of you or anything that you did wrong.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive,” I told him and tried to give him a reassuring smile. “It’s me, I’m just ... still sort of nervous and trying to wrap my mind around all of this, you know?”

“Yeah, I get it,” he said. “This place is kind of intense.”

“Can I ask you,” I started, curious about something. “Earlier, you said your friend who recruited you said you’d have the opportunity to be with a lot of women.”

“But, he only said that because he was trying to convince me to apply for the job,” Joshua said with a quickness that suggested he was worried he’d offended me or said something that would get him terminated.

“I was just going to ask about the men who come here,” I said. “Would you have to—”

“Oh, this hotel is for females only,” he said. “It’s unique that way. Women are not usually catered to, you know. Men have always had the opportunity to live out their fantasies in real life and they are encouraged to, with high-class escorts. But, women are expected to just go buy a romance novel and take care of themselves.”

I nodded, thinking his little speech sounded like something he’d heard from the HR manager.

“This hotel will give you whatever fantasy you want,” he said. “Well, not whatever you want. Nothing that would hurt anybody.”

“Oh, yeah, I get that.”

“Some women want just guys to be in their fantasies,” he said. “Some just want girls. Some want a combination of both.”

“Hmmm ...” I said, distracted, thinking that I just wanted Icarus.

“Well, Ms. Miller.” Joshua stood, holding a hand out to me, and I knew the curtain was about to close.

I placed my palm over his and rose. He told me he enjoyed meeting me, said dinner with me was wonderful, and again reiterated how beautiful I was. After he walked me into the bedroom, he gave me a kiss on the cheek and wished me sweet dreams.

Once the door closed behind me, I sank down on the bed, flooded with remorse and relief. Kicking off my heels, I lay back against the pillows and looked up at the ceiling.

I wasn’t sure what to think or feel.

I was starting to wonder if coming to the hotel had been a mistake.

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