

B L A C K
S W A N



CHAPTER ONE



Cold, unrumpled sheets were all that greeted me when I rolled over to the other side of my bed.

The sun beamed through the curtains, illuminating the spot where there should have been another warm body. I stretched and then let out a breath, scrambling to get upright. When I sat up, my hand brushed against something, a piece of paper laid neatly on the pillow next to mine. There was a single rosebud taped to it, plucked from the bush outside the very front of our building.

I picked up the note. It had Hannibal's lovely scrawl all over it.

My darling, it read. He was always one for baroque flourishes of the language. It made me giggle sometimes. Even now, I smiled in spite of myself, all former traces of annoyance vanishing into thin air.

I apologize for not being here when you woke this morning. I had a rather urgent meeting to attend. I will return home as soon as I am able.

He hadn't signed it. No "Love, Hannibal" or anything like that. Instead, he stamped it with his official seal, a monogram of his initials encircled with raised dots. I'd seen him put it firmly to important documents on so many occasions that by now, he surely repeated the action on muscle memory alone.

I was annoyed again. Full frown and all. Dammit, it was *Saturday*. I was starting to wonder why my husband even bothered to leave notes at this point.

I sighed and hopped out of the bed, throwing back the plush satin comforter and using one of the smooth wooden posts to haul myself to my feet.

I grabbed a shower, brushed my hair and pulled on a tee shirt and some leggings. Then I rounded the King-size bed and started to straighten the sheets. It always upset Carlotta, our cleaning lady when I made the bed myself, but it was a habit I had a hard time breaking. A habit I didn't want to break, honestly. Making the bed kept me just a little sane. And besides, it wasn't as much of a chore when you were only making up one side of it. Hannibal often scolded me for offering to help the help. "*It's what I pay them for,*" he'd say. "*Just let them do it.*"

My stomach growled, and I told myself that I would be in a better mood once I'd eaten something.

With the bed straightened, I sunk my feet into soft slippers and padded down the spiral staircase to the main floor. I walked past the parlor and into the dining room, sitting down at the end of the carved wooden table. It was meant to seat up to twelve people, which was ridiculous because we never had that many people over at once. I picked up the Times, still neatly folded in half, and thumbed through it. Hannibal always left it for me before going to work in the mornings, saying I should stay on top of what was going on in the world. I usually skimmed the metro section and ignored the rest. Sometimes I'd try to read through the financial section. Hannibal was constantly watching the markets, and so I had taken to studying these pages as well. The news went right over my head most of the time. But I still looked. I wanted to be ready in case he one day decided to discuss his work with me. I wasn't sure if he kept so quiet about his business dealings because he didn't think it would interest me, or if it was because he was trying to keep his work life separate from our married life. I suspected it was the latter, though he didn't do such a good job of that on most days.

There was an article about the Atkinson Firm that caught my attention. Simon Atkinson was Hannibal's main competitor and the two men openly loathed each other. His firm had reported record earnings this quarter. I thought about taking that page out, but it wouldn't do any good since Hannibal had likely already seen it.

Simone, a short, portly older woman, came waddling in from the adjacent kitchen. "Breakfast, Mrs. Barbas?"

I nodded to her with a smile.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

She was back a couple of minutes later with a spinach omelet spread out on a warm, white, bone china plate and some fresh squeezed orange juice served in a crystal goblet. Sterling silver flatware was wrapped carefully in a white linen cloth and set beside me.

“Thank you, Simone,” I whispered before she hurried off behind the double doors.

I unwrapped my fork and dug in, going over my to-do list in my head. It was painfully short. *Make the bed* was at the top of the list and that was already crossed off. I frowned.

Exactly 60 seconds after I took my last bite, Simone reappeared to take my plate away. “And how was everything this morning, Mrs. Barbas?” Simone had asked that question every day in the same servile tone for the last two years.

“Excellent, as usual, Simone.”

She dropped the knife on the ground as she turned back toward the kitchen. I started to bend down to pick it up for her, but I stopped myself. “So sorry, ma’am,” she muttered as she disappeared again behind the door.

Just once, I’d like someone in this house to call me by my first name.

“Tess,” I heard someone call just then.

Anyone except her.

I heard my mother’s impossibly high heels clicking on the hardwood floor in the direction of the dining room. She paused for a second, just standing there. Then she walked up behind me and rounded the dining room table. She sat down across from me, and immediately, the cloying, deeply floral smell of her perfume overwhelmed me. She was wearing too much, as she often did.

“Hannibal not at home?” she asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

She was wearing long sleeves, a navy blue silk pantsuit, even though it was now the beginning of June. She had on the necklace Hannibal had given her for Christmas, and she was wearing her favorite lipstick. I found myself struck, as I often did, by how beautiful my mother was. And how much more beautiful she'd be if she didn't set her mouth in quite that way. She didn't eat a proper breakfast, only asked Simone for some coffee and some fruit. She was impossibly vain. Watching her figure, she said. Though she looked better than any 50-year-old I'd ever seen.

"Good morning, Mother," I said, ignoring her question.

"Good morning, Tess." Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

"He went out," I said, knowing she wasn't about to let it go. "Said he had some business to take care of."

"Hmm." That was all she said before turning her attention to her cup of coffee. This was the part where I was supposed to ask her to elaborate or say what was on her mind. But I wouldn't give her the satisfaction. Not today.

Simone came through the door, setting a plate of fruit in front of my mother, and she broke our eye contact for a second. "Thank you, Simone," she said, and then turned her gaze back to me. "Tess, sit up straight."

It was only then that I realized I was slouching. The heat rose in my face a little. It always did when she told me what to do. As if I wasn't grown. As if, up until a few short years ago, I wasn't the mother in the relationship and she the petulant child. I glared at her.

She dropped her fork and glared back at me. Then she grabbed her coffee and fruit and got up from the table. "I'm going to finish reading my book," she said. "I can't be around you when you're like this. Come find me when you're ready to talk like adults." She clicked away without looking back, and I wondered why she always wore high heels in the house.

It was after 3 o'clock when Hannibal came through the door. I sat and watched him from the living room couch. He shrugged off his jacket and hung it from one of the knobs next

to the front door. He stood, facing away from me, now dressed in two pieces of a dark and expensively tailored three-piece suit — an admitted hot button of mine — the rear view of him showcasing a powerful back encased in his vest.

“Tess,” he called, not realizing I was right behind him. My name sounded like rich cream rolling off his tongue, and my belly did a little flip-flop. He turned, and I stood. Suddenly I was no longer annoyed. I wanted to be, but his smile had effectively erased that feeling. I tried hard not to smile back but failed pretty quickly. He strode over to me and swept me up in a big bear hug, lifting me an inch or two off the parquet flooring. “Hey,” he whispered into my hair.

“Hey.”

I buried my face in his chest, relishing the warmth of his body. Taking my face between his hands, he kissed me lightly on the lips. Then he leaned his forehead against mine and said, “I’m sorry again about this morning.”

Immediately my annoyance returned, and I felt a tightness in my throat. His words lacked depth; there was no truth to them. They were calculated. Rehearsed. Something he’d said over and over again until it came out of his mouth with no conscious effort.

I pulled away a little and muttered a rehearsed phrase of my own. “It’s OK.”

He grabbed me by the hand and squeezed, leading me over to the dining room. Simone came bustling out of the kitchen again. “Mr. Barbás, sir. Something to eat for you?”

“Just some coffee please, Simone,” he answered without looking up at her. He didn’t even look to see if she did what he asked. He just sat and motioned for me to sit in the chair next to him.

I sat next to him and breathed him in. He had a distinctly masculine scent. Cologne, musk, and coffee. Instantly, I was mad at my body for betraying my mind. I was supposed to be angry, but apparently my hormones had missed that memo. A familiar ache spread through me. How long had it been?

“Tell me about your day,” he said, opening the paper. He’d opened it right to the page that contained the Atkinson article. I studied his face as he skimmed the page. His expression didn’t change but for the briefest of moments, something in his eyes did.

There wasn't anything to tell. He knew that. He preferred it that way. But still I went on and on about something or other — the garden, the guest room — while he flipped through the pages. He was so well-timed with his “mm hmm’s” and “oh really’s” that at first, it seemed like he was actually listening. I knew better, though, and I stopped talking.

After a moment, he looked up, set the paper down. “I’m sorry, darling,” he said smiling, touching me lightly on my chin. “I’ve just been so preoccupied with this deal. It’s a big one, and I’m worried that even after all the work I put in, it still won’t go through.”

I nodded and put on my best smile, opening my mouth to tell him, again, that it was OK when his cell phone rang. I snapped my mouth shut without saying a word.

He looked down at it and then back up at me. He held out a hand, and I already knew what was coming.

“I’m sorry, love. I need to take this.”

He didn't even wait for me to approve. In the next second, he was on his feet. "Please tell me you have good news for me," he muttered into the phone. He walked off toward his study, not looking back at me, and closed the door behind him.

I let out a breath. Once he was behind that wall, the door to his study, it was tough to get him out again. I went upstairs to our bedroom to get ready for dinner. When I came back downstairs, the door to Hannibal’s study was still closed. He hated to be disturbed when he was in there but still, I went over and knocked, hoping to stir up some trouble.

“Yes,” he said. “What is it?” He was annoyed, the words coming clipped and fast.

“Are you coming out to dinner?”

“Have Simone send a plate in here,” he bellowed.

I nearly stomped my feet down the stairs. I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw my mother sitting down at the dining room table. I hadn’t seen when she’d arrived.

“Simone,” I called out.

“Yes, Mrs. Barbas?”

“Send dinner to Mr. Barbas in his study. And then send another plate upstairs to me.” I took one more look at my mother. The look on her face was at the same time probing and accusatory. The hell if I was going to eat with her right now. After a minute, she sighed and motioned for me to come and sit. I ignored her and went back up the stairs to my bedroom and closed the door.

I plopped down on the bed and then got back up a few minutes later when I heard a knock. Simone, with my dinner. Except I wasn't at all hungry.

After setting a covered sterling silver tray down on my dresser with smooth efficiency, Simone closed the door behind her. I was alone again, eating dinner in my bed, with only my memories to keep me company. Like so many other times during the past year, I began tracing how I got here.

It hadn't always been like this.

Though I'd stopped spending the summers with Asa right before I turned 20, we still saw each other pretty often. I got a call from him one day telling me he was in the city on business and wanted to see me. I had started giving private piano lessons that year and my client list was quickly filling up. But I happily cleared my schedule for him the way he always had for me. He was the closest thing I had to a father after mine died, the one solid, unflinching part of my life. Though he wasn't my blood, still, he was family to me.

He was staying at the Waldorf in Midtown, and he asked me to meet him there for lunch. I arrived early, and both seats at the table were occupied. “You're in my seat,” I said to the man sitting across from Asa.

Asa was annoyed at having been interrupted but softened the minute I bent to hug him. The man looked up at me, and I calmly returned his gaze. He had dark hair and dark, mysterious eyes that crinkled a little when he smiled. For a second, it was like Asa wasn't even there. The man set his fork down on his plate and leaned all the way back in his chair. The look he gave me, with eyes starting at the very top of my head and traveling slowly, all the way down to my feet while a slow smile spread across his face, was almost predatory and made my breath catch.

“Tess, manners,” growled Asa. “I was just finishing up here.”

“Shall I wait at the bar?”

“No.” He asked the staff to pull up another chair, and I ordered a drink while the two finished their business, going over ledgers and spewing endless numbers and percentages. The man glanced at me more than once, and I felt myself blush.

Asa began rambling on again, staring down at a complicated looking spreadsheet while the man nodded.

I was conscious of his eyes on me again.

“What does this mean right here?” Asa asked, pointing to a spot on the sheet.

“Aren’t you going to introduce us?” he asked.

Asa looked up, momentarily stunned at having his thoughts interrupted. He glanced at me, pausing a moment before muttering, “Hannibal this is Tess, my granddaughter. I’m supposed to be having lunch with her right now, but I didn’t know our meeting would run a little long. That should explain the look on her face. Tess, this is Hannibal. He’s been handling some of my accounts.”

I said hello to him, and when I extended my hand, he pressed it to his lips, keeping his eyes locked on mine the entire time.

“You always lay it on this thick?” I asked, though my insides had effectively started to boil and I was sure the evidence showed on my face.

“Don't mind Tess,” said Asa with a hearty laugh. “She's a pistol alright.”

Hannibal’s only response was to smile a knowing smile. A smile that told me I wasn't fooling him, that he knew he'd gotten to me, even if it was just a little. Gorgeous smile? Strike one.

I zoned out as the two resumed their meeting. Finally, Hannibal stood, all six feet, four inches of him towering over me as he looked down. I happened to like them tall, so that was strike two. He bent low, lips close to my ear and whispered that it was very nice

meeting me while I shifted in my seat. Then he shook Asa's hand, and they set a time to meet and finalize things the next day. Asa and I began our lunch with no more mention of the stranger.

The next day I got a call from him.

“Tess, I presume?”

I was taken aback by the voice on the other end of the call. It was deep, honeyed.

“I’m sorry. Who is this?”

I could hear the smile in his words. “It’s Hannibal Barbas. We met yesterday.”

I hesitated probably a beat longer than was normal. “How did you get my number?” I asked, genuinely surprised.

“Asa gave it to me.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Because I asked him for it. I told him I wanted to take you to dinner and wanted to make sure that was OK with him.”

I paused, not sure what to say. I wasn't sure that I even wanted to see him. Sure, I was attracted to him. I suspected most women were. But I didn't think we'd have anything in common. And I was kind of avoiding any dealings with men at the moment. At least until I figured out a way to stay out of trouble where they were concerned.

He didn't give me time to answer. “I’ll send a car for you around seven o'clock.”

“Wait,” I said. “I haven't said yes.”

“You haven't said no, either.”

I was silent.

“Seven o'clock then?” he said. “I’ll see you soon.”

I took a deep breath and wrung my tee shirt in my hands. Then I combed my closet for a dinner-appropriate dress, something sophisticated and not too sexy. When I didn't find anything that quite fit the bill, I searched my mother's closet. She had an infinite supply of dresses it seemed, and even though the apartment that Asa had put us up in was scarcely bigger than a closet itself, she always found room for more. I settled on a simple black sheath and got ready for my dinner date.

I adjusted the dress one more time in the mirror. Then I reached for my lipstick and applied another coat. The butterflies in my stomach were on overdrive. I grabbed my hand lotion from my purse and noticed that my palms were starting to sweat.

The doorbell buzzed at 7 o'clock on the dot. I took a deep breath and then went down the stairs. A sleek, black Mercedes with tinted windows was parked out front. Beside it, a man was standing with his hands folded. I could only assume this was Hannibal's driver.

As I walked up to him, he smiled and gave a slight nod of his head. "Good evening, miss," he said with a deep, mature voice.

"Hello."

He walked over to the passenger side door and opened it for me. Then he held my hand as I stepped inside. We had driven for around 30 minutes before the car came to a stop. "This is your destination," said the driver. "Enjoy your dinner." He got out to open my door and led me to the front door of the building. By the looks of things, we were somewhere downtown in the Tribeca area.

I walked in and went up one flight of stairs. There was a large door on the landing that I assumed was the one I needed to go through.

I gasped, and immediately I started to think I was in the wrong place because it was empty. It was a restaurant alright, but no one was there.

It was then that I saw Hannibal, standing in the far corner of the room, and staring out of a large, floor to ceiling window. I watched him for a second, studied him. I smiled to myself and then walked over to him.

The view of the city from the window was breathtaking.

He turned to me when I reached his side and let out a low whistle. "You look beautiful," he said with a smile. He leaned in and kissed me lightly on the cheek. "I trust the ride was good."

"Yes, it was," I replied, still a little overwhelmed by this whole scene. "Um, where is everybody?"

He turned to me and flashed that smile again, and my knees threatened to buckle. "It's just us tonight," he said.

"Just us? What does that mean?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "It means I called in a favor and my dear friend here was good enough to accommodate my request. It means no interlopers. No interruptions. Just you. And me. Some good wine and a good meal."

He put his hand on the small of my back and guided me toward the middle of the room. "We can sit at any table you want," he said.

I chose the table closest to the window, and we sat.

I took in the ambiance, low light, candles, fresh flowers. There was some music in the background, something instrumental.

"You like?" he asked.

"Yes," I smiled. "This is a very nice place."

He handed me a menu. "Would you like to choose the wine?"

I waved my hands. "No, no. Please, go ahead."

He ordered a bottle, and the waiter nodded and shuffled off. He came back a minute later with the wine and then poured a little into Hannibal's glass. He picked it up, swirled it, sniffed it, and then nodded his head. Hannibal then filled my glass.

I shifted in my chair.

“OK. So it is me,” he said.

“Pardon?”

“You’re tense,” he continued. “You tensed up at the table yesterday as well. I thought it might have been because Asa was there. But now we’re alone, and you’re still tense. So it must be me.”

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s not that. And I’m not tense. I just don’t think we have anything in common.”

He seemed amused by this because the corners of his mouth turned up into that sexy smile of his. “Try me.”

I took a sip of my wine. And then another.

At that moment, our food came. “I ordered for us in advance,” he said.

The meal looked incredible, a large braised short rib over a generous helping of creamy polenta with greens on the side. “Italian,” I said. “My favorite.”

“See?” he said with a smile. “We do have something in common.”

He was making fun of me, but I didn’t mind. I was pleasantly surprised at how nice a time we had. He had a surprisingly easy manner for someone who would lock eyes with and kiss the hand of a woman he didn’t know.

I thought the whole way home about whether I should see him again. I felt drawn to him and intimidated by him at the same time. He seemed to have all the qualities I was supposed to be looking for in a man. But there were also qualities he possessed that I’d learned to be wary of. And I also felt acutely that I was about to get in over my head, felt like I was already being sucked into his world after just one dinner. I could stop now before it got harder to walk away, before I lost myself completely.

He turned to me when we’d arrived at the front door of my building. “I want to see you again.” It was a statement, not a question.

I opened my mouth to answer him, and my thoughts must have shown on my face because he cut me off before I could say anything. “Before you say no,” he started, speaking quietly and taking a half-step closer toward me. “Take a good look at me and tell me if you see a man who's easily deterred.”

“Tomorrow.” The word left my lips before I could even think it through properly. He smiled and then closed the distance between us with easy, confident strides. Circling one arm around me he swept me into a kiss that left me literally breathless, like the stuff you only see in classic movies. He pulled back and looked at me with dark eyes, eyes that held a fierce determination and a hint of danger. Strike three. I was out.

I sighed loudly and put my half-eaten salmon back onto the tray and covered it. I got out of the bed and went down the hall to the drawing room. I sat down in front of a grand piano. Sleek and shiny, it took up most of the room. Hannibal had gotten it for me as a wedding gift. “Now you don't need to go all the way downtown to play,” he'd said. “You can stay here.” The place was so dark; walls painted gray, cool surfaces, metals, leather, very masculine and devoid of soft, feminine touches. The piano was the only thing in the entire house that was completely me. That first night, I played it all night and woke the next day to an unusually cold morning greeting. “What's wrong?” I asked him over breakfast.

“You kept me up last night,” he said.

I frowned. It wasn't like he'd been sleeping anyway. He was in his study working.

Reading my thoughts, he continued. “It disturbed my work.”

“Oh, I see,” I started, getting just as riled as he was. “Your work is more important than mine. Is that what you're saying?”

“No, that's not what I'm saying.” He let out a breath. “Look, I don't want to fight. Can you please just stick to playing that thing when I'm not around?”

I swallowed the piece of grapefruit I was chewing on noting that it was bitter. “Sure.”

I sat down and pressed a few keys. There was a song that had been playing in my head. It had been awhile since I'd written something and I wanted to get this down before I forgot. I stretched my fingers and started playing some notes, and soon a bluesy melody filled the room. Within only a few minutes, I'd forgotten I was angry, sad. I'd forgotten Hannibal and everything.

I paused, trying to think of a good way to end the song and then I heard feet shuffling by the door. I took my time turning around, thinking it might be Hannibal coming to scold me for playing piano while he was trying to work.

“It sounds lovely,” said a soft voice that I barely recognized as my mother's. I spun. She was leaning in the doorway, eyes closed. She'd already changed into soft, lilac-colored silk pajamas. She opened her eyes and smiled a little at me. I smiled back. “What are you going to call it?”

“I don't know yet. It's not done, though. Trying to finish it now.” I started playing again and heard her humming along. The sound brought a rush of memories, though I could scarcely remember the last time I heard my mother's voice in song. I stopped and turned to her. “Maybe you could come with me when I go and record this.”

The look on her face, serene and contented, vanished and was immediately replaced by the implacable mask she so often wore. “No thanks,” she said and then turned away. “I'm going to bed early. Goodnight.”

CHAPTER TWO



I woke up alone again the next morning. No note this time.

I wondered if Hannibal had even come to bed at all. There seemed to be no trace of him, no creased sheets, no faint remnants of his scent. I sighed and got up, determined to go about my day as if everything were normal.

I shrugged on my robe to guard against the constant draft, and I went downstairs to find my mother sitting on the living room sofa, a huge, black leather sectional. She was wearing a long gray satin skirt and a white blouse. Long sleeved. Most women her age didn't like showing their arms. But that was usually because they were trying to hide flab. My mother's arms were slim, however. It was the marks she was ashamed of, even though they had healed and were fading. She never showed them. She'd even taken to wearing opera length satin gloves to formal events. It was supposed to be some sort of fashion statement. Like she was bringing back Old Hollywood glam. But really, she didn't want to remind people (herself included) that not that long ago, she'd been sticking needles into herself over and over.

She got up when she spotted me and floated over to where I was standing. She was always so graceful. The way she walked, it never really looked like walking. It was more like gliding. "Good morning, Tess," she said coolly, hooking her arm through mine and walking with me into the dining room. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You don't look it. You seem tired. You should eat something." She sat with me at the dining room table and ordered Simone to bring me something from the kitchen. She studied me, frowning. "Hannibal sleep in his study again last night?"

I didn't answer her because she already knew the answer. Her question was a condemnation. As if it were my fault Hannibal was a workaholic when, in truth, he'd always been that way.

I remembered going long stretches without seeing him when we were dating, which would always make me angry. I was tired of always being an afterthought. I wanted to be a priority for once. He tried to appease me by giving me the keys to his penthouse, but he was never in it so what was the point? I eventually got so frustrated with everything that finally, I decided to break it off with him. That first day, I had to leave my phone at home to keep from calling him. He hadn't even realized I'd disappeared until the second day. Then he started calling me around the clock. I was starting to miss him, but still, I turned the ringer off so that I wouldn't be tempted to pick up. When I hadn't returned his calls for three straight days, he showed up at my apartment. I let him in, but told him I didn't want to see him anymore. He immediately called my bluff. "You think you can say a few words and end us? That's not going to work for me," he said flatly. Then he told me he was in love with me and had no plans on letting me break up with him. That was the end of that discussion.

My mother tried to soften her voice. "Don't be upset with me," she started. "I'm just trying to help. You've got everything you need to be the perfect wife for a man of his stature. But you're still replaceable, Tess."

My jaw tightened. "Are you done?"

She sighed. "You think I'm a cold-hearted gold digger, but my concern is maternal, believe it or not. I know how happy he makes you and I just don't want you to lose him."

"You mean you don't want to lose him. That's what you mean, right?"

"No," she said evenly. "That's not what I mean. Just be careful. That's all I'm trying to say. Don't give him any reason to turn away from you."

I turned and looked her in the eyes. They were intense, but they seemed normal, and her breathing was even. I realized then that today was Sunday, and that she had a meeting. She was always extra hateful on meeting days. "Heading to your meeting after this?" I asked.

Her mouth twisted, showing just the slightest trace of a frown before it straightened again. “Yes,” was all she said. She didn’t like to talk about her meetings. She hated having to identify as an addict. She said that the people in her meetings were so hung up on being ex-drug abusers and that she had moved past all that. Having to go to meetings put a damper on her illusion that everything was perfect, that she was perfect. Even in a room full of people who struggled with the same addiction she had, my mother still somehow managed to convince herself that she was better than them.

I smiled and nodded. “Good.”

Her eyes flashed anger at me, but then she turned her attention to her food. I knew, however, that she was busy thinking up a way to punish me for my comment. She finished her breakfast in silence and then rose to leave, placing a cold kiss on my cheek before exiting the dining room.

My mother attending meetings was something of a condition of her living here. Though truthfully, she genuinely seemed to have no more use for drugs shortly after Hannibal came into the picture.

He and I had only spoken of my mother’s condition on two occasions. The first was in passing one night after we’d been dating a few months. “Can I ask you something?” he asked, the tone of his voice changing.

I giggled at his sudden turn to seriousness.

“I don't mean to pry, but your mother...” he trailed off and my smile vanished. He sucked in a breath, and I knew that he knew. But there was no judgment in his face, his voice. He pulled me closer and crushed me against him almost painfully while I bit back tears. “How long?” he whispered.

I breathed. “A long time.”

“Don’t worry,” he reassured me. “She’ll pull through. She just has to do it on her terms or it will never work. Not in the long run.”

I shook with the memory of all the years I spent taking care of her, trying to get her clean. She was constantly in and out of rehab, and on Asa’s dime to boot. Each time she’d relapse, he’d say, no...this is the last time. And each time I’d go to him, begging,

pleading, sinking to the floor with tears streaming down my face. “Try a new place,” I’d say, shoving papers I’d printed out from the internet at him. “I researched.”

And he’d relent. “Tess, get up,” he’d said. “Stop crying. I can’t take it.” Then he’d pull me into a hug and say, “OK we’ll try again.”

Then I’d give her the same talk I always did. “You need to clean up for real this time, Mom. Please make an effort. I—” I broke off. I wanted to tell her that I needed her, but somehow the words wouldn’t come out. She’d look at me and smile sadly. “Yes, baby girl. I promise it will be different this time.”

She would detox on the couch, alternately sweating and freezing, crying out in pain sometimes, looking so sick that it broke my heart, but I knew she had to go through it. I knew this was part of the process. I made her tea, fed her soup, and physically held her down in crazed moments when she’d go wide-eyed and start to scramble for her needle. Then I’d say a small prayer that she’d come back fixed.

It never lasted. Inevitably, I’d come home one day and find her sky high, with pupils so dilated that her brown eyes were more black. “Mom,” I’d say, my voice breaking. And she’d just laugh. No matter how much I pleaded with her, begged, threatened to leave, she wouldn’t get clean. Not for me, anyway. But Hannibal was a different story.

We didn’t talk about it again until he’d asked me to marry him. I hesitated at first, not sure what answer to give him. “I’ve already spoken to Asa if that’s what you’re worried about,” he said. I didn’t know how to feel about that. Part of me thought it was terribly romantic, and the other part was annoyed that he wouldn’t just ask me first.

“Tess, say something,” he urged. His face had changed, and I saw then that he hadn’t even considered the possibility that I’d say no. Still, I couldn’t find the words.

“Tess,” he pressed. “Answer me.”

I sighed. “I don’t know, Hannibal.”

“What’s not to know? You love me, right?”

“Yes, I love you.”

“And you trust me?”

I nodded. “Yes.” I had no doubts that he'd make a good husband. But there was something else.

“What is it then?”

“My mother,” I said. “I can't leave her.”

I expected him to argue, to get annoyed. But instead, he laughed and pulled me to him. “You won't be leaving her. She'll be with us.”

“What?” I broke away and looked up at him, positive that I'd heard him wrong.

“I would never try to separate you two. Your mother can live with us. As long as she keeps going to her meetings.”

And with that, I pressed my lips to his. “Yes,” I whispered.

We were married a few months later in a small ceremony in Central Park. We assembled on Bow Bridge that spring morning. The frost had only just melted away. It was a small group of us — only the photographer, my mother, Asa, and Benjamin, Hannibal's mentor who officiated. I wasn't sure if Hannibal had just not told his family he was getting married, or if he had and they declined the invitation. Either way, he made it clear he didn't want to talk about it. The entire thing was over in less than a half hour, functional and to the point. We exchanged the usual vows, promised to love, honor, and respect each other through the good times and the bad. Then we kissed for the camera and met up with everyone later that evening for dinner at Per Se.

And then he took me halfway across the world for a month. He took such good care of me and was extra attentive. I remember feeling able to breathe, able to actually relax, for the first time in a very long time. The majority of my life up until that point had been spent putting out fire after fire. I hadn't realized how exhausted I really was.

And so now I was wondering how I'd gone from that to struggling to remember the last time he'd touched me.

I pretended not to notice or care very much when my husband got home from work the next night.

But that lasted only about five seconds because he had that knee-weakening smile on his face again. And a large box in his hands.

I didn't put down my book when he bent to kiss me. He asked me how my day was, and I gave him an unaffected, one-word answer. "Fine."

He raised his eyebrow at me. "Hmm," he said and then turned to go up the stairs.

I snuck a glance up at him when he reached the landing. He was smiling down at me. A knowing, indulgent smile. "Come on up here, Tess," he said. As usual, he didn't wait to see if I'd comply. Still, I put my book down and scampered up the stairs to our bedroom.

Hannibal already had his jacket and vest off and was tugging off his tie. I plopped down onto the bed.

"Long day?" I asked.

He nodded in reply, undoing his platinum cuff links. "We're going out next Friday," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I've been invited to a party of sorts."

"Of sorts?"

"A business function disguised as a party. Black tie sort of deal."

"Oh." I couldn't be less interested. I'd been to these things with Asa, and they were always the same. I stifled a yawn.

Hannibal turned and flashed me that million dollar smile again. "I know, darling," he said. "There must be a list of things you'd rather do that night. But I did hope you would

accompany me. I always enjoy these functions more when you're there." He walked over to me and laid the box on the bed. "For you."

"What's this?" I asked, pretending I didn't want to just rip the box open.

"Open it."

I lifted the lid. Inside was a sleek piece of black fabric. A gown. And underneath, a pair of jewel encrusted heels. I didn't say anything at first, but my grin must have said it all.

"I thought you'd like it."

"It's beautiful."

I was about to tuck the dress back in the box when I noticed a small slip of paper at the bottom of it. It was dated yesterday and had the Saks Fifth Avenue logo on it. The very next thing I noticed was the price, and it didn't look quite right. Surely one dress couldn't cost that much? Then I squinted and looked again.

Not one dress. Two.

I was silently wondering where the other one was.

"I would very much like to see you in it." He took my hand, making me stand and walking me over to the mirror. Then he swept my hair to the side and nuzzled my neck. "Try it on for me," he whispered in my ear.

There was something in his voice that I hadn't heard in quite some time. Something exciting.

"Unzip me."

He smiled and pulled on the back zipper of my dress, slowly, until the straps fell from my shoulders. I turned to face him, slid my arms free and then slipped the dress from my body. His eyes traveled over me the way they had when we first met, and then he caught my wrist in a swift, firm, motion.

My breath hitched.

He grabbed my other arm and pulled me toward him. "Never mind the dress," he whispered. He inched me over to the bed, and then suddenly all the lights were off, and I tumbled backward feeling his lips on mine as he hovered over me.

He fell asleep next to me for the first time in forever, his arm still wrapped possessively around me. In the middle of the night he stirred, and I expected him to get up and start tiptoeing around again. But instead, he slid his hand down my body and slipped it between my legs. "Wake up," he whispered, pressing his lips to my throat. And then he started up again.

He was still there, sleeping soundly when morning came.

I woke to the smell of bacon and Hannibal's arms still around me. He was awake, smiling, stroking my face.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

I stretched and purred like a kitten. Hannibal was a skilled lover, his movements practiced and patient, but that was because he was good at everything he did. "Like a baby."

"Don't get up," he said after kissing me good morning. "I'm having breakfast sent up." Then he got up and started dressing.

He was either in a really good mood, or he was apologizing in advance for dragging me to this function. Knowing him the way I did, it was the latter. I studied him while he dressed, shuffling around the bedroom, looking everywhere but at me. With every second that passed, I felt him withdrawing, the connection between us slipping further and further away. I found myself shrinking into the bed, mimicking the distance I felt building between us. All the warmth I'd felt receded into a marked chill, cooling me enough that I pulled the covers around me again. Of course, Hannibal would treat our lovemaking like a business transaction, some kind of mandatory meeting. Another thing to check off his endless to-do list.

I tried to straighten my face when he turned, not wanting to betray my thoughts. He bent and kissed me quickly on the forehead. "I'll see you tonight," he said, and then left for work.

I got out of the bed and went out onto the balcony to take in some of the morning sun. When I looked down onto the street, I could see Hannibal's sleek, black Bentley waiting out front, and his driver, Charles, sitting in the front seat. The door to the car opened, and a long-legged woman stepped out. She was wearing dark sunglasses, but I recognized her instantly as Hannibal's new assistant, Lana. I thought he had enough assistants, but apparently, he needed another one. I'd seen entirely too much of her since she started working for him. Lana looked like a breath of fresh air in a cream-colored sheath dress and cherry red heels. She dug into her purse for a few seconds and then produced a slim cigarette. She smoked leisurely while she leaned against the car and a few seconds later, I saw Hannibal come out of the front of the building. They appeared to exchange a few words and then Lana outed her cigarette. Hannibal held her by the elbow as he helped her into the backseat and a minute later the car pulled off.

I frowned and then went back inside to get ready. I had an early afternoon lunch appointment. I was barely able to get my shoes to match because my mind was on Lana and why she'd been in Hannibal's car. Didn't she have a MetroCard?

My phone buzzed with a message. It was Englishe. *Where are you?*

I sighed and grabbed my keys from the nightstand, grateful for once to have this lunch to attend. I needed the distraction. I ran down the stairs and passed my mother on my way to the door. I mumbled a quick greeting and told her I'd be back later. Then I stopped and turned to her. She looked at me over the top of her magazine. "What?" she asked.

"Has Hannibal bought you any new dresses lately?"

She shook her head. "Why?"

"Nevermind." I left and made my way across town to Englishe's place. Hannibal insisted that I made friends with "the other wives." But all they ever did was talk about whoever wasn't there at the moment and other things that bored me. These were kept women who lived and breathed tension, pressure, and silent disapproval.

Englishe, a tall, willowy redhead, was the de facto leader of our group and probably my only friend. Everyone deferred to her because she had the richest husband. She was the only one able to snag an apartment in the Time Warner Center when it opened, a much-

coveted location. We all met at her place twice a month for a stitch and bitch. Except there was no knitting.

I stopped at Whole Foods, which was in the basement of the building, to get some sweets for the girls to go with our tea. I also picked up some purple tulips for English. Then I checked in with the front desk when I arrived. I was on the pre-approved list of visitors, so I simply got into the elevator and took it to the 20th floor.

Mostly everyone was already there when I arrived. English opened the door immediately wrapped her thin arms around me, pulling me inside. I said my hellos and kissed everyone else on the cheek and then sat down near the window just as English put a plate of tiny sandwiches in front of me.

The conversation went on in much the same way it always did, with talks of china and linens and paints and nannies and strollers. They shared tips as if they were career women doling out advice on how to get ahead at the office. One of the other girls talked on and on about how motorized window treatments had completely changed her life, gushing about how wonderful it was to not have to go from room to room adjusting blinds or opening shades when she could now just press a button.

Cassie looked at me and rubbed her belly, swollen with her fourth child. “You look a little piqued, darlin’,” she drawled. “Are you alright? Pregnant finally?” She raised her eyebrow.

I tried not to roll my eyes at everyone being so interested in my womb. They would never let me forget that I hadn’t yet had any children.

“I’m feeling OK. And no.”

“Well have you guys started trying?”

She went on before I could tell her to mind her business.

“You gotta go on a schedule, darlin’. Know your fertile days and mark them on his calendar. He’s got to commit to it the way he would any other meeting.”

“Jesus, Cassie. You make it sound like work.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Honey,” she said when she’d composed herself. “It is work.”

“We have time,” I said wearily. “Neither of us are in a rush.” I tried not to be obvious about glancing at my watch, another gift from Hannibal. It had a cream-colored satin strap and a mother-of-pearl face that was littered with tiny diamonds. I sipped on my tea and let the other women talk.

“Tess, want to come into the kitchen and help me with the dishes?” Englishe asked when she circled back around. I grinned at her. She always knew exactly when I needed rescuing. I grabbed a handful of plates and followed her into the kitchen to help her load the dishwasher.

“Just me and you now,” she said. “What’s really up?”

I shrugged.

“You really should cheer up, dear,” she said to me. “I would have thought you’d be used to all this by now.”

“It’s not that.”

“How are things with Hannibal?”

I sighed. “Hannibal is Hannibal. You know. He’s busy. That’s nothing new.”

“Something else bothering you then?”

“No. Just wish he was around more.”

Englishe gave me a sharp look. “OK well if you ever want to talk.”

“I know,” I said.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about where Hannibal’s concerned,” she said as she closed the dishwasher door and turned it on. “He’s so in love with you, and it shows.”

I didn't answer her, but I wondered how she knew this for sure when even I didn't. At the moment, I wasn't so certain.

"Go on. Get out of here," she said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'll just explain to the girls you weren't feeling well and had to run. Go home and hug your husband."

I said goodbye to everyone and left, figuring I'd drop by Hannibal's office on the way home.

TO BE CONTINUED...