

LEE WINTER



Hotel Queens

Two rivals, one dream deal, so many secrets



Chapter 1

Playing with Fire

KAI FISHER DREW IN A deep gulp of coffee to shed another layer of *too damned early*.

She headed toward the beautiful Grand Millennium Hotel, a gracefully aging building in the heart of Manhattan that had existed for longer than all the surrounding monstrosities of towering glass put together.

As tired as Kai was, the sight of the building never failed to nudge her spirits higher, reminding her of how her life might have turned out if she hadn't stepped through its regal doors.

Today, though, like every other day before dawn, her destination was not the hotel itself but its elite ground-floor gym, which drew to it like moths those with excess wealth, influence, and power.

"Hey, Vince," Kai said, trying to sound awake as she reached the main doors.

"Mornin', Ms. Fisher." The doorman sprang to attention.

"Lovely weather," she suggested, wondering if she could produce it by sheer force of will.

They both glanced up at the gloomy sky, barely holding back rain. Dawn light was slowly creeping across the horizon.

Vince's snort was soft and skeptical.

She chuckled in agreement.

"Do you know what day it is, Ms. Fisher?" Vince asked.

Kai frowned. "Um...Friday?"

"Anniversary of you joining Grand Millennium. Fifteen years today."

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“What...” *No.* She did her math. *Actually, yes.* “How do you know that off the top of your head?”

“Oh, I recall the day real well. Your first day on the job, you took one look at me and asked Mr. Stein, completely straight-faced, mind, whether freezing the door staff was company policy. And before the boss could answer, you said he should either give me a thicker coat with my uniform or a raise to buy one.”

“How bold of me. Did you get your new coat?”

Vince smiled. “Well, Ms. Fisher, I ended up getting a new coat *and* a raise. And I remember that day well because when I got home, Aliyah told me she was pregnant.”

“That’s—”

A blur of fluorescent green shot past her. Kai slammed herself into the side of the building to avoid being hit. The bicycle courier didn’t even slow.

Him!

It was the same jackass who’d been terrorizing pedestrians along West 35th St. for months. He’d caused an elderly news vendor to fall and fracture a hip.

“Watch it, asshole!” she shouted, peeling herself off the glass.

The cyclist flipped her the bird over his shoulder and laughed.

“You okay, Ms. Fisher?” Vince asked.

Kai took stock of herself. “Son of a bitch!” Coffee coated her wrist and had drenched her watch. Her *designer* watch, which had cracked upon impact with the wall.

A beat later, she registered the scalding burn. *Goddamnit!* She hurled her coffee cup away. Adrenalin spiked her throw, and the cup slammed into the back of the cyclist, who’d just braked hard for a wayward pedestrian. Brown liquid splattered up his ass, legs, and bicycle.

Kai blinked.

“Ouch.” Vince murmured, sounding impressed.

The cyclist shrieked, did a little wobble, then hit the ground in a tangle of man and machine that Kai probably shouldn’t have found quite so satisfying.

She strode over to assess the situation. The man scrambled to his feet, pulling his bicycle up with him. “You fucked up my bike!”

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“Your *bike*?” Kai’s burnt arm throbbled, her watch looked ruined, and tales of all the pedestrians this asshole had half-flattened filled her head. “You’re worried about your damned *bike*?”

He stared at her, finally registering her fury.

“You could have killed me, the speed you were going!”

“Shoulda got out of the way then. *Shit*. I think the handlebars are bent.”

“You shouldn’t have *been* on the sidewalk in the first place. What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Whatever.” His gaze raked his machine. “Thanks for screwing up my bike.”

“*My bike, my bike!*” she mocked as rage flooded her. Kai snatched the clip-on bell from his handlebars and shoved it under his nose, where she dinged it obnoxiously three times.

He gaped at her stupidly, then tried to grab it.

Kai snatched her hand away and hurled the bell out into the road.

A second later, a delivery truck rumbled by and crunched it flat with a sad ding.

“The fuck, lady? I needed that!”

“All evidence to the contrary. If you’d used it, we wouldn’t be here.”

He straightened to full height. “You itchin’ to get hurt for real?”

She lifted an eyebrow. The man was lean, with a hipster neck beard, earrings, and mean brown eyes. “Oh, for God’s... Threats of violence? Must we?” Kai huffed out an indignant breath. “Don’t bother. I have a black belt.”

“So do I.” He offered an ugly smile.

Oh shit. Kai wondered if her temper had finally written some checks she couldn’t cash.

Plan B. She glanced at the logo on his shirt, then whipped out her phone and snapped a photo of him.

“The hell you do that for?”

“I will be notifying your company that mine...” Kai poked a thumb over her shoulder at the doors behind her, “...will no longer be using Couriers Direct USA for any deliveries, and that you are the reason.”

He glanced to where she’d gestured and laughed. “You think anyone’ll give a shit that some gym doesn’t want to use us?”

Kai leaned in close and said silkily, “Look. Higher.”

His gaze shifted to the sign above the gym. In towering letters, it read *Grand Millennium Hotel*.

“There are sixty-seven Grand Millenniums across the US,” Kai said. “None of which will ever use your company again. Well, unless you apologize and agree to stay off the sidewalk in the future.”

“You expect me to believe *you* have the power to blacklist a company?” He took in her dark-brown, shoulder-length hair and gym outfit of black tights, ethically sourced sneakers, and a padded jacket over her tank top. “Yeah, right. What are you really? Receptionist? Housekeeping? Some entitled Karen who goes around saying ‘I’ll call the manager?’”

Kai regarded him. “Test me. I dare you.”

His eyes hardened.

From somewhere behind them came a guffaw. “She doesn’t have to *call the manager* for anything, son,” Vince called to him. “She *is* the manager.”

The courier’s eyes widened. Then came the flash of panic. “Uh...”

Finally. Kai gave him a withering look, turned on her heel, and strode away.

“No, look,” he called after her, voice tight. “Wait up, lady, there’s no need to get hysterical. If you could just calm down, we can talk about this and...”

Calm down? Hysterical? Oh, she would crush him.

“Wait!” His voice was now an annoying, high-pitched whine.

Kai left him to his meltdown. She had better things to do. As she was about to pass Vince, she murmured, “You know I’m not actually the manager, right?”

“Close enough,” he replied with a grin. “Hey, Ms. Fisher? You really got a black belt?”

“Sure.” She smirked. “Lovely Donna Karan number. Goes with my heels.”

* * *

Amelia Duxton studied the morally diseased employee seated in her visitor’s chair, her lip curling in distaste.

She snapped her gray jacket sleeve back to perfection and waited for Douglas to cease his witless blather, his streams of denial falling like the rain sleeting down her London office window.

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She glanced at her Yellowspotted Scorpionfish in its bowl on the edge of her glass desk. Privately, Amelia thought it was pretty cute for a voracious predator, with its sweet, round face, orange-and-yellow spotted skin, and huge eyes. Publicly, she enjoyed stressing its more lethal attributes to visitors. It sent a certain message.

Quinn, her second-in-command, had been trying to convince her to name it for a year. That always seemed a bit ridiculous. The fish wouldn't know any different. What was the point?

Amelia straightened the name plate on her desk with one poke of her finger. It read *Amelia Duxton, Vice President — Hotel Duxton International: Europe.*

One would think such a title would prevent her having to listen to this. *Apparently not.*

She regarded the man opposite. Chaos in devolved, fleshy form. Amelia hated chaos about as much as she loathed imbeciles who thought they could put one past her.

Douglas paused for a breath, his face flushed despite Amelia's precise room temperature of 66F. Too cold for some, she supposed. She ran comfortably on ice—a fact her detractors loved to point out.

“So, obviously,” the man declared with a flourish of hands, “it couldn't be me.”

Uh-huh. Amelia was only hearing Douglas out in the first place because of who his father was. And because Quinn said people were less likely to create legal problems when you gave them a fair hearing before pointing out they were a waste of skin and oxygen.

She peered at Douglas so hard that, for a moment, he looked as if he'd slither right out of his rumpled suit in an anxious puddle of sweat. Guilt choked his expression.

“Oh, very convincing,” she drawled.

Looking startled, Douglas launched into round three. “Look, I know the suppliers screwed up. Don't worry, I'll fix it. I'll find us new suppliers.”

Seriously? He was delusional if he thought she believed a word of this. “You're fired.”

There now. Order restored. Universe realigned.

As much as Amelia hated chaos, she loved discovering an order within things that seemed disordered. She had a keen eye for puzzle solving. That's

what had led her to this moment, leaning back in her tall, Herman Miller graphite chair, terminating her Head of Purchasing.

Several months ago, she'd noticed a pattern in the invoices sent to her Accounts Department from technology suppliers. Suddenly the details on new computers and accessories her company had bought were all far too short, barely even stating what the product was. What did it mean? Multiple suppliers had all suddenly decided brevity was the new black?

Most people would have shrugged and moved on. Not Amelia. She'd read the fine print on all one hundred eighty-two IT invoices, all ordered by Douglas over the past four months.

Silence fell. And fell some more. It yawned out between them, but Amelia had no interest in obliging Douglas by easing his discomfort.

"How did you know?" he asked finally.

"An asterisk." She shuffled her papers. "Every computer part you ordered contained an asterisk. You were supposed to be buying *new* computers for our European concierge desks. Instead you bought refurbished goods and told suppliers to hide that within the terms. Our suppliers have confirmed to me that you instructed them to do this. You pocketed the difference in cost."

"A fucking asterisk." The shock was all over his face.

"Attention to detail," she corrected. "And no need for profanities. Pack your things." She swiveled her chair to face the window, unwilling to endure the sight of a man who had offended her so deeply.

It wasn't the lying, although that had been predictable. Nor even the embezzlement. She'd make sure she wrung him out until she got every penny back. No, it was that he knew who he was dealing with, better than most, and yet he assumed she wouldn't figure out his criminal endeavors.

Why did people do that? Underestimate her? So many people assumed she'd just inherited her job title. Well, she supposed that was somewhat true, even though she had a CV worthy of her position, too.

Amelia heard no movement. "Still here?" she asked the window in front of her. The view of London's streets far, far below was always absorbing, even through the shimmer of rain. The city was a geometric puzzle to solve. Sudoku in human form. Which way would the little dots flow to achieve the most efficient route around each other? Mathematics in nature. Pure wonder.

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Douglas's chair creaked.

Amelia calculated the odds of the man's next move. More denials? No, she'd already laid out the proof.

Was he working out a face-saving retreat? Possibly.

Blaming it on an underling, perhaps? Hmm.

"My secretary—" he began.

Bingo. "—is innocent," Amelia said. "I investigated her first. And it's not Betty who has the six-figure gambling problem."

Amelia spun her chair back to face the man who had just thrown her schedule out by half an hour. *Unacceptable.*

"Look at you, Douglas, thirty-three years old and *this* is all you're good for? Embezzlement? Your father is going to be so disappointed. You only got this job because he begged me."

Douglas shot her a sour look. "You don't have to tell Dad," he mumbled, with little conviction.

"I think he'll notice when you miss Hanukkah for the next seven to ten years."

He paled. "You'd call the cops on me? I'm your *cousin!*"

"Yes, you are. Regrettably." She toyed with a silver pen on her desk, a gift from Hotel Duxton's Chief Financial Officer, Joe Duxton. He was Amelia's favorite uncle—although that was setting the bar low given the choices on offer—and he was also Douglas's father.

She gave a weary huff. "You embezzled from the family business. By my estimates, you stole £127,553 but had planned to take much more." For conciseness, Amelia left out the pence, although it made her itch not to be strictly accurate.

"But that's chicken feed to you! Come on, we can sort something out. Something that won't be embarrassing all round. Think of the family name even if you don't give a shit about me."

"I *am* thinking of the family name. That's the point. Security will escort you out." She punched a button on her desk to summon them. "They'll detain you downstairs until the Fraud Squad arrives. And don't mention our family to me again. You're a disgrace to the Duxtons."

"You little cunt." Douglas's soft white hands formed fists.

Amelia narrowed her eyes. "Eloquent as ever."

“Stuck-up bitch, aren’t you? Always lording it over us. About as approachable as a dog’s snout in winter. No wonder you’ve been exiled here.”

“At least I’m not going to prison.” Her words were soft and goading, delivered with a mocking smile. She refused to show how close he’d come to hitting a nerve.

Fear flashed into his eyes, but apparently he wasn’t done yet.

“You act like you’re better than everyone else but you’re just bitter. Because your brother got America instead of you, and you were sent packing.” Douglas’s eyes glittered in triumph.

She arched an eyebrow. “That was years ago. I’m content running the European division.” Amelia folded her arms. “And the main thing is that our company’s prospering. I’m sure Oliver has everything under control at Duxton USA.” Like hell she’d admit anything else.

Douglas’s laugh was explosive. “You think Oliver has things under *control*? Haven’t you seen the headlines today? Very entertaining.”

Worry snaked through her. What the hell had her little brother gotten himself into now? She hoped it was just another of his ridiculous publicity stunts gone wrong, nothing worse.

“I have no time for what passes as ‘news,’ unless it’s in the financial pages,” Amelia said. “I have thirty-four hotels to oversee. All I care about right now is the fact that you’re making me late for my Mayfair Palace final negotiations. If we don’t get this deal signed because of you, I’ll point that out to your father, too.”

Douglas’s mouth instantly clanged shut, proving he wasn’t completely stupid. Everyone at Hotel Duxton knew how huge Mayfair Palace was to them. Uncle Joe had been especially anxious for her to finalize the blue-chip hotel deal that had been so long in the making.

His constant phone calls about it were a little insulting. When had she messed up even once? Amelia’s operations were run efficiently, with carefully managed risk and little room for budgetary fat. And there were none of the showy flights of fancy that her brother indulged in back home. To be fair, Oliver’s manic marketing campaigns seemed to play well in North America. No accounting for taste.

Amelia’s cell phone rang, a distinctive ring tone that could only belong to one person.

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Douglas's eyebrows flew up, but she wasn't about to explain to him Taylor Swift's "Shake It Off" ...or anything else.

"Darling," she answered warmly, then gave Douglas a slow, taunting smile as she replied, "No, nothing important." Amelia spun her chair back around to face the window and listened to her nine-year-old cousin, Imogen, in full flight. After a minute, she got a word in.

"No, I don't *think* owls have knees, but that's an excellent question. We should research it together." Amelia did her math from Sydney to London time, then paused. "Why are you calling me at midnight?"

Amelia listened patiently as a stream of exuberance filled her ears. "Well, I understand that a new Taylor Swift album is 'too exciting to possibly sleep after hearing,' but you should at least try. Make a list of your questions and we'll go through it soon."

There was an almost audible pout down the line before Imogen asked, "What sort of soon? One that isn't really?"

"It's soon—like a promise from *me*."

"That's soon." Imogen sounded cheerful now. "Okay."

"Night, darling." Amelia swiveled her chair back to face Douglas as she ended the call.

He was wearing a bemused expression. "Either you have weird taste in girlfriends, or my niece is up to her usual nonsense. Why not tell the brat to Google shit like everyone else?"

"A thirst for knowledge is never a bad thing." Amelia eyed him coolly. "A shame *you* never had a similar inclination for self-growth, or we might not be sitting here right now."

His expression darkened, but before he could answer, security arrived in a thunder of boots.

Amelia nodded toward Douglas. Meaty hands clapped her cousin's elbow and shoulder, assisting him to the door.

The sight of the back of his bespoke suit—no doubt paid for with his illicit gains—grated on her. She scowled until he left, then slumped a little.

Douglas had been right about one thing. This would be damned embarrassing for the company.

Amelia exhaled and pressed a button on her desk phone. "Quinn? A moment."

Her second-in-command, a dark-skinned, charming East Londoner, flung herself into the room with her usual boyish exuberance. At thirty-six, Quinn Hartman was almost ten years younger than Amelia, but some days it felt like twenty. Quinn was all pent-up energy contained in a sharp, chic, quixotic plum suit.

Amelia had always appreciated fierce, independent women. Spare her the simpering waifs with weak handshakes and insincere laughs, hiding their clever minds from the world. Women should be upfront and honest about who they were.

Of course, that bold approach had not gone down well in her own family, had it? Still, Amelia could no more change her own bluntness than Quinn could present as a dowdy pushover.

“Bad?” Quinn asked, folding her arms, gaze flicking to the now vacated visitor’s seat.

“No. Just tedious.”

Quinn nodded.

“I need to call Joe.” Amelia sighed. “I’ll have to tell my dear uncle what his offspring’s been up to at work these past four months. Not only hasn’t Douglas kept his job, but this time he’s off to prison.”

“Crap.” Quinn dropped into the visitor’s chair. “Why would he do that?”

“Douglas has a gambling habit big enough to have blown through his trust fund. My greater concern is why he chose to harm the family.”

“I think he’s still butt-hurt about Simon getting that job in Sydney that he always wanted. Must be frustrating as hell when your younger, stupider brother gets the job you always thought you’d be better at. Or, in your case, *would* be far, far better at.” Quinn looked pointedly at Amelia.

Not this again. “Don’t you have work to do?” Amelia muttered, shooting her an evil look.

Quinn smirked, apparently unintimidated.

“Well?” Amelia tapped her desk. “Could we not be lounging around speculating about my dysfunctional family? I need to talk to Joe before Douglas spins his firing as some innocent misunderstanding.”

Quinn hesitated. “Sooo, about your uncle... Joe’s called already.”

“How could he know so soon? Douglas will still be sitting under guard downstairs.”

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“It’s Oliver he called about. And check your email. It’s...well, it’s really bad this time.”

“How bad? Worse than that hot-air balloon stunt?” Amelia pulled her laptop closer. “What could my brother possibly have done now?”

Quinn winced. “A better question is, what hasn’t he done?”

Chapter 2

The Thrill of the Chase

KAI'S FEET FLEW ALONG THE treadmill, fueled by the adrenalin of her encounter with the courier. She was so damned close today; that personal best that had been eluding her for months was hers for the taking.

Heat was swallowing her whole, flaring outward from inside her muscles, encasing her thighs like tendrils of fire. She loved this: the delicious, heady burn, the power, the feeling of victory.

Her eyes darted to the numbers flying on her machine. It'd be good to have a win—something she needed badly after the past week.

Kai's boss, Benjamin Stein, CEO of Grand Millennium Hotels, had asked her to acquire an overseas hotel for him.

Mayfair Palace in London was nearing completion and would soon be coming on the market. Mr. Stein had decided this would be the one: A hotel so beyond compare that it would be worth his company dipping a toe in the foreign market for the first time.

The hotel dripped with opulence and elegance, boasting everything from pillow menus and a pool suspended over the atrium, to upside-down trees dangling artfully in the foyer. Architects, travel writers, and designers swooned over it.

Kai was more curious about how it all worked than anything else. What was the deal with the upside-down trees? Why didn't the dirt fall out?

Maybe she should get her assistant to see if inverted trees would be doable in Kai's executive office. It might be worth it just for the look on everyone's faces. Unsettle them. That was always a good business tactic.

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“Please have a seat,” she’d say earnestly. “Mind your heads on the ficus, gentlemen. It’s just been watered.”

She snorted, before remembering the rest of that meeting with Mr. Stein. Her seventy-four-year-old boss had given her a look of such faith that any thought of not pulling off the Mayfair Palace deal made her slightly nauseous.

Worse had been the revelation that Mr. Stein had his pride on the line.

“I need this one, Kaida.” He’d drawn out her full name in a plea, so it sounded like *Kayyy-da*. Mr. Stein had then leaned over his antique desk and puffed out his ruddy cheeks until he looked like a ventriloquist’s dummy. “Last month when I was in London, I met Mayfair Palace’s developer to express our interest in buying it. And this Nedal al-Hamadani just smirked at me.”

He’d growled. “*Smirked*. Like Grand Millennium was chicken feed to him! How dare he? Sixty-seven luxury hotels all over the US and the seller doesn’t see us as a credible buyer!”

His eyes had become slits. “You *know* why. More lies from the *mamzerim!*” He wagged a pudgy finger at her. “Mark my words.”

Whipping out the Hebrew for “bastards” meant he was truly furious at the snub. Of course, every time a deal went sour, her already slightly paranoid boss was convinced that his arch-rival of the past fifty years, Hotel Duxton International, had torpedoed it somehow.

This time, though, his suspicions might actually be well founded. Hotel Duxton would have to be after Mayfair Palace, too. It was exactly the sort of monument to decadence loved by the pretentious hotelier family.

Mr. Stein had finished his rant with a rueful smile. “I know I’m not the best with the making nice and the *talk, talk, talk*. That’s why I hired you, Kaida, my dear. You are The Closer for a reason. Your networking and charm are unmatched, and you’ve got a golden touch with people. Well, the people who don’t want you twitching in a gutter.” He chuckled.

Hilarious. It’d be nicer if he’d been kidding.

“Nail this for me so I can laugh in the Duxtons’ smug faces. If you do, I’ll give you an end-of-year bonus that’ll make last year’s look like a stale bagel.”

Well, hell. No pressure. Besides, weren’t all bagels stale? Kai had never developed a taste for them despite being a New Yorker.

She applied a new burst of speed at the reminder of what she was up against. Her muscles protested, but she pushed harder. Pain meant nothing compared to winning.

Kai hissed in a breath as she recalled the rest of her week. Having renowned negotiation skills were of no use when someone refused to take your calls. Why would this Mayfair Palace seller duck her? Didn't he want the best deal for his project? Competition only drove up prices.

She'd scoured social media, hoping to find an event Nedal al-Hamadani might be attending that she could corner him at, even if she had to fly to London, only to discover he wasn't online. *Anywhere.*

Kai had pulled apart the internet like a possessed woman, hunting for photos of him, LinkedIn accounts, business interviews, places he socialized, people he partied with. She'd scored big fat goose eggs all around.

How unusual. Oh, plenty was written about the elusive businessman, but not one single article had been written with his input. And no photos existed of him at all.

When she'd finally made phone contact with Hamadani's officious personal assistant, he'd told her his boss wasn't interested and would be leaving England shortly anyway, so she should "give up" her efforts to see him.

She should just *give up*? Did the dismissive little toadie not realize her reputation? Kai wasn't called The Closer because she sold zippers.

The assistant's information was disturbing. If Hamadani was readying to leave the country, it meant he already had a buyer lined up for Mayfair Palace. *Three guesses as to who.*

Mr. Stein would not be happy.

It *was* puzzling, though. Surely Hotel Duxton's offer couldn't be so generous as to completely shut out any rival bids?

Which negotiator could have possibly pulled off that coup? Duxton's in-house lawyers had all the ingenuity and charisma of dung beetles, while Oliver Duxton, who was known to occasionally attempt a deal himself, made "useless" at least look pretty.

Kai slid that question—*Duxton's Mayfair Palace negotiator*—to the top of her mental list for her assistant to research, just ahead of figuring out inverted trees. With a smile, she pictured Milly's pained expression at the request.

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Seriously, the woman was far too tightly wound. Kai's eternally harried assistant needed more fun in her life. Maybe the frizzy-haired redhead, with her pale skin and huge green eyes, forever swamped in cream cardigans and sensible dresses, needed a hot new lover to put a spring in her step. Or any lover, come to think of it.

Hmm. Did Milly even have a life outside work? She'd never mentioned it. Well now, that didn't sound terribly well-rounded, did it? Even Kai found time to keep her engine purring fairly regularly.

She flicked a glance to the treadmill's screen. Sixty seconds left. Kai distracted herself from her shaky legs by trying to picture who Milly Valentine's type was.

Complete blank.

Thirty seconds. Kai went all out. Her mind shifted back to her impending failure to deliver Mr. Stein's dream hotel. Kai's ability to ferret out information, figure out what mattered to people, and charm the socks off them meant she'd rarely lost a business deal in a face-to-face meeting. Except it was impossible to charm thin air.

Her treadmill beeped. Through sweat-filled eyes, she made out the red flashing numbers. *Damn it.* She'd missed her target by two seconds.

Kai hit Recovery mode and cooled her pace, eventually slowing to a walk.

Perspiration gleamed on her arms, and she grabbed the bottom of her tank top and wiped her face with it.

An athletic, blonde, ponytailed woman powering along on the spin bike opposite shot her a long, appreciative look.

Well, well. That's flattering. Still attracting the college girls?

Kai glanced around. It was still early, so they were alone except for an intense-looking muscle man on the far side of the room, lost in his own world, doing bicep curls in front of a mirror.

Gaze fixed back on the woman, Kai's imagination meandered to entirely pleasant places and possibilities. Oh yes. Speaking of keeping her engine purring...

She scolded herself. *Not today.* She had two hotel deals to assess and a missing Mayfair Palace seller to track down. There was no time for passing distractions, even if they looked like they'd tumbled straight out of a Nike ad.

Her machine beeped again and stopped. Kai stepped off the treadmill and languidly stretched. Okay, so it was closer to preening than stretching, but her audience seemed to enjoy Kai's gleaming biceps and clinging tank top.

Kai's gaze flitted to the large TV screen on the wall, which had been running the financial news. A breaking news headline began to scroll the crawl feed. She froze.

Oh. No way. No fucking way.

She stalked across the room. Ponytail's smile widened as she neared, dipping when Kai strode straight past.

Finding the remote control, she cranked up the volume.

Oliver Duxton, Vice President of US Operations for Hotel Duxton, has been arrested.

Just after three in the morning today, six police cars followed the hotel boss in his Porsche convertible across Manhattan in a slow-moving police chase. Duxton was reportedly driving erratically, side-swiping parked vehicles and throwing cans of beer at passing cars, buses, and pedestrians.

Police cornered Duxton, arresting him for driving under the influence, leaving the scene of an accident, reckless endangerment of another person, and multiple traffic offenses.

His companion, porn star Scarlet Lay-Dee, was released without charge. Police seized bags containing a suspicious white substance from the car. Further charges are expected.

Oliver Duxton is best known for his wild parties, famous girlfriends, and publicity stunts for the American arm of the international hotel chain he manages.

Bystanders' phone footage showed Duxton face-down on the road as he was cuffed, shouting at police that he'd have their badges.

Insulting arresting officers? They loved that.

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Kai stared at the mug shot that flashed up on screen. Well, well. So Duxton's Chosen One was going down? Couldn't happen to a nicer asshole.

Reaching into the discreet pocket at the back of her leggings, Kai withdrew her cell phone and fired off a quick text to alert her boss, keeping one eye on the TV.

A reporter had moved on to backgrounding the Duxton hotel business and how Oliver was supposed to be inheriting the entire kingdom when his CEO father retired next month. Shareholders would be stampeding away when markets opened.

Oh, to be a fly on the wall when conservative Conrad caught up with his cokehead son today. The man had been training his wayward offspring since Oliver was fifteen. That was a lot of time and investment to just throw away, but surely Conrad would have to consider it now? Although, who could replace Oliver? The rest of his family were too old, too useless, too inexperienced, or... *Wait.*

Kai stabbed her phone, eyes sharp on the TV.

"Milly?" She waited a beat for her assistant to wake up a little before plowing on. "Yes, I know the time. Stop yawning and pay attention." Scrabbling-for-a-pen noises filled her ear. "Okay, I want you to pull together a file on Amelia Duxton, Oliver's sister. She's based in London, I think."

Kai tapped her lip and tried to picture the woman. Being over in Europe, Amelia had been of no strategic interest, so Kai had mostly ignored her.

Milly mumbled a question.

Kai's attention snapped back to her cell. "Don't you watch the news? Yes, even at..." she glanced at her phone's clock, "five fifty-three I expect my dotting and impressive assistant to be abreast of breaking news affecting our industry. Oliver's just been arrested. And if his sister replaces him, we need to be ready with a strategy. This could change our negotiation approach when we're up against Duxton bids. Have a full work-up on her on my desk in two hours."

"Yes, Ms. Fisher."

"And while you're at it, get our mailroom to blacklist a courier company. Couriers Direct USA." She paused. "Yes, yes, *another* company boycott. So sue me if I don't like organizations with reckless bullies. I'll text you a photo of the reason for the boycott. Make sure the company knows he's been nearly killing pedestrians for weeks. Hell, maybe we'll save a life."

“Right. Photo.” Milly yawned again.

She smiled at Milly’s struggle to sound coherent. Kai did like to keep the woman on her toes. But she also paid Milly twice what most senior executive personal assistants earned to put up with her.

“Sorry, Ms. Fisher.”

“How many more times will I have to ask you to call me Kai? Especially this early.”

“At least once more,” Milly said, a smile in her voice. It was an old debate, one Kai always lost.

Kai said goodbye, then contemplated her next move. Mr. Stein would love it if she stirred the pot a little on his worst enemy. Obviously, there was mileage to be had with the Duxtons’ heir-apparent imploding so spectacularly. It would be so easy to make Oliver’s shit go from bad to apocalyptic, and she knew how to work the news cycle to her advantage.

“You know that guy?”

Kai jumped.

The spin-bike behind her had stopped whirring. Ponytail now stood beside her, staring up at Oliver’s face on the screen.

“I’ve heard of him,” Kai hedged. You never knew who the Duxtons’ friends were. They had tentacles everywhere. “Do *you* know him?”

“Not personally. He’s a spoiled brat.”

Kai relaxed a little. “He does have that face.”

“Nasty boss, too. You should see all the stuff Scorched Earth’s dug up on him.”

“Scorched Earth?” Kai gave her a blank look.

“It’s this name-and-shame citizen-journalism outfit that goes after bosses who mistreat employees. It used to have this whole big website, but now it’s just a Twitter page. Either way, that Duxton guy’s who they hit most. They’ve named him New York’s Worst Boss five years in a row.” She pointed at Oliver’s mug shot, with his blood-shot eyes and unshaven jaw.

“I could believe it.” Kai nodded. “Why are you so interested?”

“I think it’s good to stay in the loop. Information is power.” The woman smiled, and a pair of adorable dimples appeared like matching lawn divots. “I’m Tracy. Tracy Fox.”

Information was *not* power, connections were power, but Kai didn’t correct her. *Tracy Fox*... The name skittered around Kaida’s head. “You’re the fitness blogger.”

Hotel Queens

“I prefer ‘fitspo guru.’ You know...fitness inspiration?”

Ab yes. Kai had seen her posts on occasion. Fitness tips and aspirational photos of Tracy—and her delightful, lean muscles—filled social media. She was wildly popular, forever posting motivational quotes about girl power. *Women can do it. Don't bow to the patriarchy.*

“So, how many followers?”

Tracy puffed up a little. “Two-hundred forty-three thousand.”

The number mattered to her. Kai filed that away and smiled. “Impressive.” The spark of pride in Tracy’s eyes told her she’d said exactly the right thing.

“You should talk. When I was on the elliptical before...” Tracy waved at the equipment facing the large tinted windows, “I saw your run-in with that courier. I laughed my head off when you threw his bell under a truck.”

“What can I say? My blood was up. And I’m a sucker for justice.”

“Well, *that* and he’d ruined your coffee,” Tracy said. “If my cappuccino had gone to God, I’d totally understand the impulse to throttle something.”

“Cappuccino girl, huh?” Kai grinned.

“My secret weakness.”

“That’s not a bad weakness to have. It’s not like you sit up at night eating double-chocolate-chip ice cream from the carton and shouting at the judges on *Dancing with the Stars* for kicking out the wrong person.” Kai coughed. “Not that that has ever happened to me.”

Tracy laughed. “So you’re not even slightly cool? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“I thought we agreed this *didn't* happen.” Kai feigned innocence. “If anyone asks, I was not throwing things at my screen when Paige VanZant, supreme goddess of salsa, lost.”

“That UFC fighter? And wasn’t that years ago?”

“Time has no meaning when injustice occurs.” Kai’s lips twitched.

“At least you had your ice cream to console you. Tell me the truth—did you like her just because she’s really hot?”

“Who, me? Have my head turned by a woman’s breathtaking beauty?” Kai’s eyes fell to Tracy’s shapely form. “That doesn’t sound like me at all.”

“That’s quite a come-on.” Tracy’s amused expression said she’d heard every pick-up line going.

“Well, in my defense, you’re really attractive and my brain reached for the flirt button by reflex. Does it bother you?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just, you don’t even know me.”

That wasn’t a no to the flirting. Kai beamed. “You’re right, so let me fix that. Hi, I’m Kaida Fisher. Kai, for short.”

“Unusual name.”

“It means *little dragon* in Japanese.”

“Why a Japanese name?”

“Well,” Kai leaned in, warming to the subject, “my mom’s an artist who was going through her *shikki* phase—that’s lacquerware—and decided to learn from the best in Wajima, Japan. While she was there, she had a fling with a European backpacker. Mom can’t remember exactly where he was from anymore. She has a hopeless memory and it was decades ago.” Kai shrugged.

“Oh.” Tracy blinked at her, mouth slightly open at that revelation. “Right.”

“I might do one of those DNA tests one day,” Kai said with a casual wave, trying not to laugh at Tracy’s baffled expression. “To find out.”

“DNA...”

“But I digress. So when I was a baby, Mom’s Japanese neighbor dubbed me Kaida, because I roared like a dragon. Mom liked it so much it stuck. My ‘real’ name’s Annabelle.” She winced at the reminder. “What else? I’m a hotel executive, a Leo, briefly a Buddhist, and probably a fair bit older than you. Just being up front about that one.” Her smile turned impish.

An answering smile tugged at Tracy’s lips. “Are you always this sure of yourself?”

“It depends on who I’m with.”

“So you’re not the same person with everyone?”

“Is anyone?”

“I like to think I’m always myself.”

Kai smiled. “Well, among other things, I negotiate hotel purchases for a living. Want to know the secret to my success?” Her voice lowered to conspiratorial. “It’s giving a negotiating party their *optimal interaction*. They think they’re funny? I feed them some straight-man lines to allow them to be hilarious. Sometimes they want ‘uptight lawyer’ me, reeling off facts and figures to make them feel safe, or ‘charm-offensive’ me, telling them how

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sharp their tie is, to make them feel like they still *have it*. Whatever they want, I supply, whether they're aware of what that is or not."

"You're a chameleon."

"I prefer 'covert fulfiller of unspoken needs.' Well, more or less—I don't fulfill *all* needs. The sharp-tie guys get compliments; nothing else."

"And they don't realize you're just changing who you are to suit who *they* are?"

"No. It doesn't work if they know what I'm doing."

"Yet you've just told *me* what you get up to." Tracy's eyes danced. "You realize you've ruined your superpower with me."

"I wonder what that means?" Kai drawled. "Blurting out all my secrets? I must like you."

Tracy chuckled. "Very smooth. I bet you're great at your job."

"My boss hasn't fired me yet."

"I'll bet he hasn't." Tracy studied her. "Would I be right in thinking you're one of the best in your field?"

A smile curled Kai's lips. Yes, she was the best. She'd won ten times more deals than she'd lost. She could read people effortlessly, which helped enormously.

Tracy Fox, for instance, was fairly easy to work out. Social-media influencers responded well to people over-sharing personal tidbits. So Kai had supplied a personal story about her origins—admittedly one she didn't care if anyone knew.

Next, she'd tossed in a business secret. People felt special when given insider information. And because Tracy then felt she was inside Kai's personal bubble, she hadn't noticed she'd just been gifted an "optimal interaction" of her own.

Maybe all of this made Kai calculating or something, but it seemed hard-wired in her to charm people using every skill at her disposal. Half the time she wasn't aware she was doing it.

But all the charm offensives and games aside, Kai had to admit Tracy was very much her type: smart, beautiful, and interested in the wider world. A pity Kai was such a train wreck at relationships.

"So you are the best, huh?" Tracy's look became considering.

"I didn't actually say that," Kai pointed out.

Lee Winter

“Your eyes did.” Tracy pivoted and walked back to a small towel that was slung over the spin-bike’s handlebars. She ran it over her bare arms, then tossed it over a shoulder. With a playful look, she added, “I can believe it. And are you always so...passionate...about everything?” Tracy’s eyes danced. “From closing deals and shouting at TV judges to avenging your spilled coffee?”

“Always. Life’s meant to be lived, loved, swallowed whole. Otherwise, what’s the point?”

An intrigued look flitted across Tracy’s face. “Interesting.” Her gaze lingered. “Well, time for me to hit the showers.” She wiggled her shoulders. “You know, I might need a hand washing my back. Someone with skills like yours might be useful.”

Kai raised her eyebrows. “You never know.” A thrill skittered through her, but she hesitated. The woman’s blue eyes glowed a little too brightly to be safe. “I’d really love for us to have some fun together. Just putting this on the record, though... I don’t do relationships. Is that okay with you?”

“Never?” Tracy studied her curiously. “Bad breakup?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just, I’m barely able to keep a goldfish alive, let alone a relationship,” she admitted. “Work is my whole, sole focus. I live for it. Love it. Even dream about it. And it’s not fair to expect someone else to put up with me, always off hunting the next deal.”

“I see. Thanks for explaining.” Tracy studied her for a moment, then walked away, leaving Kai watching the pleasant rear view.

Well, that was that then. It was best to be up front, though—fewer broken hearts all around. Kai had been there, done that, and piled up plenty of regrets. She never again wanted to be the cause of another woman’s tears.

Besides, as delicious as Tracy was, as impressive as the sway in those sashaying hips, Kai had a lot of work to do.

When Tracy reached the exit, she glanced back, a playful smile on her full lips. “Coming?” There was no mistaking the wicked innuendo.

Kai swallowed thickly and smiled. “Only if I’m not the only one.”

Tracy chuckled.

Okay, so maybe Kai’s disastrous week was looking up after all.

* * *

Hotel Queens

Amelia locked her office door and set a small dish of paper clips in front of herself. She considered her options. Okay. Her brother first.

“Calling to gloat?” Oliver’s tired voice was its usual snarky self, but instead of cockiness, there was defeat.

Amelia’s eyebrows lifted as she reached for a paper clip. “Ollie, I’m worried about you.”

“Well, save it. I’m fine. As I’ve told Mom and Dad, plus my lawyers, the court-appointed psych evaluator, the judge, and Isabella. Fuck.” His tone turned dark. “She’s dumped me! So much for ‘stand by your man.’ What a bitch.”

“I see.” So Isabella had some self-respect after all.

Oliver huffed. “I suppose you’re circling now? Especially since I can’t get to the emergency board meeting. My lawyers have me stuck at the penthouse on house arrest as a bail condition.”

Amelia’s twisting fingers stopped. “What board meeting?”

“Uncle Joe’s calling everyone in. Didn’t he tell you?”

She relaxed. “I’m returning his call next.”

“Well, you’ll be told to attend. Everyone who’s anyone at Duxton is being brought in.” His voice became indignant. “Apparently the *future* of the company’s being discussed.”

She froze. “Is that so?”

Oliver grunted. “I asked if I could Skype in. They said no. Don’t have to guess why.”

There’d be no Oliver? They’d be discussing replacing him then. And if Joe wanted her there, could it mean she was being considered as a serious contender at last?

Hope slithered through her before she could stop it. *No*. She’d been down this path twice before, thinking she might have a chance at one of Hotel Duxton’s highest jobs. Although...that was before Oliver had committed public career suicide.

“...and then the judge said I’m banned from even crossing the state line! Bastard.”

What?

“I’m on *all* the fuckin’ news broadcasts. Like no one else in history has screwed up before! What’s that about?” He sounded mystified.

“You really can’t see it? It’s about a rich, famous, showy executive acting like a drug-addled frat boy. People love it when people like you implode. Makes them feel better when someone who has it all gets taken down a peg or two.”

“People like *us*, you mean. You’re also rich.”

“But not showy or famous. And I’m not the heir-apparent to Hotel Duxton International.”

“Not yet,” he muttered. “So...does it make you feel better, too, Lia? Seeing me taken down a peg or two?”

“No.” She sighed. “It doesn’t. Shocked?”

“I guess. Although it’s you, so not really. But I believe all’s fair in love and war.”

She was well aware that if it’d been her who’d humiliated herself all over the news, Oliver would have ordered the party starters and left mocking messages.

“S’pose you finally got what you wanted?” Oliver continued, his breath shaky. “My job running Duxton USA? And you’ll be given CEO instead of me? You’ll get all of it?”

That just didn’t seem real. “Oliver, come on, you’re more slippery than Teflon.”

“Not this time.”

If succession plans were changing, she’d have heard from their father. She hadn’t. Amelia deflated. How delusional she was even entertaining the idea. “You know Dad will never see me as an option. Especially not when he’s been grooming you since birth.”

The pause was long. “Yeah,” he said. “Hell, yeah, you’re right!”

Great. Amelia snapped her paper clip in half and reached for another.

“Hey, sorry. That was a bit shit of me, I guess.”

Just a bit?

“I’m not oblivious, you know. I know you hate me.”

“For what?” she asked, curious.

“That you’re way better qualified than I am. I know you pulled some clever shit during the financial crisis to save all your hotels. Honestly? I wouldn’t have had a fuckin’ clue what to do. So I get why you’re pissed at me being in line for the company, not you.”

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Amelia wondered where this rare bout of self-reflection was coming from. He was dead wrong, though. She didn't respect her brother, but she wasn't about to be angry at Oliver for a decision he hadn't made. Resentment was wasted energy. Amelia's sole aim in life was to be the best manager at Hotel Duxton, so even her father couldn't miss it.

"Shit, I need something for this headache." The sound of liquid pouring came down the phone. A clink of ice. Then gulping. "Where was I? Oh, right. You're better than me at hotels. Blah-blah-blah. But it doesn't matter, does it?" He sounded positively cheerful now. "It's not like Dad's gonna evolve any time soon about your...*tendencies*. Sucks to be you." He sounded anything but sorry.

She sighed. Her fingers twisted hard. "I don't know why I bothered to call."

"Me, either." Oliver snickered.

Amelia tossed the warped paper clip down. She was a fool to hope anything might have changed for her in the fallout. "I wasn't calling to gloat," she muttered. "Just for the record."

"I'm getting that now." He laughed. "I'm glad you did, though. I'm feeling so much better."

Of course he was. "Think you can stay out of the headlines for the rest of the month?"

"Sure. I have an ankle bracelet and random drug tests to guarantee that. Mom's staying with me, too. Says she wants to keep me on the straight and narrow until my next court date."

Naturally. Her do-no-wrong son would need much pampering and feeding. For their eternal peacemaker mother, the natural order was fulfilling the ambitions of whatever the men in her life needed.

"Oh, and thanks," Oliver said, more seriously. "For agreeing to do my shit while I'm out of action."

"Your what?"

"Ask Joe to fill you in."

"Why don't you tell me?"

"Ask him." He sounded cagey. "I'm bailing. Need more sleep. But hey, thanks for the pick-me-up." He hung up without waiting for her reply.

She stared at the phone. What the hell had Oliver gotten her into now? And how badly would it screw up her life this time?

Chapter 3

That Way There Be Dragons

KAI SETTLED INTO THE CHAIR behind her desk and reached for her steaming coffee.

“Perfect timing. Thanks, Milly,” she murmured, drawing in a deep gulp. The caffeine hit went some way toward rejuvenating her after the morning’s strenuous workout. Not to mention all the non-gym muscles she’d put through their paces. “Did you get my email about upside-down trees?”

“I did,” Milly said, only her eyes betraying her incredulity. “I’ll get right on it. In the meantime—the information you requested on Oliver’s sister.” She slid a folder across the desk.

It was suspiciously thin. Kai lowered the coffee to her desk. “Is this everything?”

“There’s not a lot on her. She’s just turned forty-six. Never married. No kids. No hobbies beyond work that I can see.”

“How dull.”

Milly’s expression morphed into a polite version of “you should talk.”

Touché.

“Like Oliver, she was born in New York,” Milly continued. “She’s based in London and oversees three dozen Duxton hotels across Europe. Apparently she made a play to run Duxton USA in ’95 when there was a management reshuffle. One of the business magazines ran a small piece on the rumors when it happened. She’d have made her pitch just after she finished college.” Milly tapped a paragraph to draw Kai’s eye.

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Kai whistled. “She did a Bachelor of Science in International Hospitality Management at École Hôtelière de Lausanne? That’s the best hotel management course in the world.”

“She did.”

“Most CEOs would kill to have an École Hôtelière graduate in charge of their hotels.”

“Conrad Duxton isn’t most CEOs. And he didn’t just say no to his daughter once. She made another attempt to be VP of Duxton USA in 2002, which was just before Oliver was due to take over the job.”

“Two goes? She must have really wanted it.”

“Or she thought her younger brother was a poor choice. After that, she dropped off the radar. She’s kept a low profile in Europe. No social media, scandals, or much of anything else I can find.”

“How can anyone raise a hotel’s profile without *any* social media?” Kai frowned. “Her marketing manager should be shot. Even Mr. Stein does the occasional tweet for Grand Millennium, and he’s seventy-four!”

“Only because you make him,” Milly reminded her. “She might just be a really private person.”

“Or maybe she simply has more humility than her brother.”

“Oh, she’s *nothing* like her brother.” Milly pushed a few pages at Kai. “Look at the rest of her background. One year she was profiled in a Hotel Duxton annual report.”

Well, well. So Amelia Duxton had followed her École Hôtelière BSc by doing an Executive MBA in Hospitality Administration. Superb credentials that could see her running any hotel in the world. By contrast, Oliver had no formal qualifications. He’d dropped out of high school and been mentored by his father ever since. “I see what you mean about being nothing like him.”

“It gets better.” Milly slid over a printout of a news story. “During the European economic crisis in the late 2000s, hers was one of the few hotel operations across Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Italy that didn’t get into financial trouble. She even managed to snap up a couple of quality bankrupt hotels at bargain prices.”

“How on earth did she manage a profit during that mess? A lot of excellent hotels went to the wall.”

“She ran this huge international promotion that gave away free conference rooms for any convention with over two hundred people.”

“Ah. Conventions bring guests. Guests pay for rooms... Smart,” Kai conceded. “Typical of the Duxtons, though, isn’t it?”

“Ms. Fisher?” Milly asked.

“They have some underrated business genius on their hands, so they’ve parked her over in Europe, out of sight, out of mind, while the idiot son runs the main company and is set to inherit it all.”

“Um... except Ms. Duxton’s not exactly underrated.”

“How so?”

“*New Economy* named her its Businessperson of the Year in 2010 for how she thrived during the economic crisis.”

“That just makes it worse. There really is no excuse for her not being given a greater position in the company.”

“I guess they just really like Oliver.”

“That could be about to change. All right, so what does our Duxton business wunderkind look like?”

“I don’t know.” Milly sighed. “They never include her in family photos or in the AGM reports.”

“Never? Is she self-conscious about her looks or something? Hit every branch of the ugly tree on the way down?”

Milly frowned and made a tiny tsk.

“Just a question.” Kai lifted her hands in surrender. “Would you prefer ‘genetically unblest?’”

Milly sighed.

“No, you’re right. Anyway, it’s unlikely. The Duxtons might be bastards, but they’re all beautiful bastards. Okay, are there no photos of her *anywhere?*” Kai tapped her lip in thought. “What about whenever she’s done press? Or when she won that business award? She’d have been interviewed then.”

Milly pointed to the folder. “Look at the last page.”

Kai flipped to it and stared. A lengthy news feature on Amelia Duxton in a British finance magazine. It contained a photo of the businesswoman staring out a window, taken from behind her chair. All that was visible was the sleek line of a charcoal-suited arm and the top of light-brown hair. “So she’s media shy?” Kai’s gaze fell to Amelia’s quotes within the story:

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The best thing about hotels for me is they're about tradition, offering guests a sense of belonging. They're somewhere comfortable, reliable, and wonderful to escape to when you need a break. They'll always be there. At Duxton Europe, we try to establish a connection with our guests so they feel like they're part of our family, no matter how far away from home they are. That is one of the core values our hotels stand behind.

“Oh hell!” Kai laughed. “That’s priceless. I have to use that.”

Milly’s expression shifted to unsettled. “But she seems so nice.” She paused. “Well, not *nice*. I mean people call her colder than the polar caps, but she seems better than the other Duxtons.”

“That isn’t saying much.” Kai whipped out her phone and called up the Scorched Earth Twitter page. With a small smile at the tiny dragon logo next to the feed’s name, she logged in. “Family, core values, and Duxtons in the same sentence?” She snorted. “Sure, okay.” She cracked her knuckles. “Time for The Dragon to have some fun.”

The Scorched Earth website might have been semi-retired well over a decade ago when Kai had moved into hotel management from law, but her Twitter feed and its two million loyal followers remained. Right now, Kai didn’t feel even slightly retired, and the familiar thrill of the hunt came roaring back as she slipped into her anonymous alter ego.

*Drugs, booze, porn stars, hit and runs, and all before sun-up.
Good luck bribing your way out of this one, Oliver Duxton.*

Kai added a link to a juicy news story about his arrest before posting it. A second tweet followed, this one including his mug shot.

New York’s worst boss, shittiest human, and greatest ad for toxic entitlement behind bars. Not even an Insta filter will save this sorry look.

And in case people didn’t know what he’d been up to all these years, she dropped in a third tweet.

Full list of 100s of complaints of wage theft made against hotel heir Oliver Duxton over the years. A Dragon never forgets.

Kai dug up a story outlining the worst of Oliver's misdeeds and added that link to her tweet, posting it with a gleeful stab.

Already her followers had begun retweeting Scorched Earth's first tweet with comments along the lines of "Good to see you back, holding the bastards accountable."

Hmm. She wondered if she could get #OliverTwisted trending. His downfall was long overdue, and this time, his wealth and connections wouldn't get him off the hook so easily.

Now then, something for the sister and her ridiculous comments. Kai typed in her name, then contemplated what to say.

Milly murmured, "Aren't you just going to make the Duxtons angrier stirring this all up? And you're targeting the only Duxton who's never hurt anyone. She has no employee complaints against her."

Kai glanced up, having forgotten her assistant was still there. "That we know of." She resumed tapping out the tweet.

Milly and Mr. Stein were among a tiny handful of people who knew her secret cause. The anonymity had been necessary given how many deep-pocketed, vindictive, bad bosses would have loved to see The Dragon permanently silenced.

"Look, we know how bad Oliver is, underpaying his staff and treating them like automatons," Kai said. "So if *we* know, Amelia does, too. And you sure as hell can't be talking about family values when your brother has his mug shot on the news. That makes you a hypocrite."

"Ms. Duxton talked about family *and* hotel core values, not family values. You know there's a big difference," Milly said with the world's tiniest tut. "Besides, she said it over ten years ago."

"And her brother was an asshole then, too. That's not a secret." Kai finished her post. "But I'm not just stirring up this hornet's nest for fun. I'm trying to draw out this mysterious Amelia Duxton. If she comes out swinging, we learn something about her. It's tactical. Besides, if she doesn't want her earnestness used against her, she shouldn't make it so easy."

Hotel Queens

Kai posted her tweet, suppressing the tiniest twinge of guilt for dragging the sister. Still, for a tweet from The Dragon, it was tame. Kai had only quoted Amelia's words next to Oliver's mug shot, and added, "Some core values."

"By the way," Milly said, "I think I've found your businessman. The one you've been trying to track down in London?"

Kai sat up straight and dropped her phone to her desk. "If the next words out of your mouth are 'And I know exactly where he is,' I'll double your Christmas bonus. And find you a hot date. Someone juicy." She leaned forward. "I do know everyone."

Milly looked at her skeptically. "No thanks. Last time, you tried to hook me up with a weird guy who kept looking at his reflection in the fork."

"Well, he was a model."

"I keep telling you, Ms. Fisher, I can find my own dates. And I'd rather not have to threaten them with a butter knife again."

"Wait, you did?" That seemed awfully proactive for Milly.

She sighed. "Remember? He tried to steal my iPhone? *While* I was using it?"

"Oh. That. Right, yes." It was all coming back. The brazen robbery attempt. Milly's valiant tackle as he fled the restaurant, despite being a third his size. "Well, I'll do much better next time."

"Oh God." Milly groaned softly. "Ms. Fisher, you're impossible."

"Not *entirely* untrue," Kai agreed. "So can we get to my businessman? Where is Nedal al-Hamadani?"

"I don't know where he is now, but I know where he will be. And it'd be an easy thing for you to be there, too, to mix, mingle, network, and... negotiate."

"Yes! Milly Valentine, you are a gem." Kai leaned in. "Okay, tell me everything."

"The big international hotel conference in Las Vegas next week. I've heard he'll be there."

"*Vegas?*" Kai blinked. "Seriously? This mysterious, international hotel developer, who few ever get an audience with, has decided to go hang out in... *Vegas?*"

“It seems Mr. Hamadani’s always had an interest in the future of our industry. He wrote a paper on it once, how technology is transforming hotels. And ‘The Future of Hotels and Hospitality’ is the conference topic. That’d be why he’s attending.”

Ab. That did make sense. “All right, send me the paper he wrote.” Kai rubbed her hands. “I need to know what gets him excited. Get inside his head. Then I need our corporate jet booked, along with a room at the hotel where the conference is and...”

Milly slid some paperwork across the desk. “I’ve already emailed you what he wrote, made the accommodation arrangements, and notified Mr. Stein you’ll be gone for a week.”

“Book everything for two.” Kai eyed her. “I’ll need you there.”

Milly didn’t bat an eye. “Done. The jet’s ready when you are.”

How did I cope before Milly Valentine? “Good,” was all she said.

“By the way,” Milly said, “I heard the Duxtons are making a play for Mayfair Palace, too.”

Aha! “I thought they would. Who’s negotiating for it?”

“Since Mr. Hamadani is based in London, the Duxtons chose someone on the ground there.” Milly tapped Amelia’s folder.

Now it all made sense. Of course the usual Duxton negotiators felt inadequate to the task—because *they* weren’t the ones doing the deal. So this Amelia Duxton was Kai’s competition? Bring it on.

“But we might be too late.” Milly winced. “I hear Ms. Duxton’s been in talks with Mr. Hamadani for months. A deal is close to being signed.”

Damn it. Still... “Close is not final, and Hamadani hasn’t met me yet.”

“Okay.” Milly hesitated. “So about the conference? The hotel it’s at?”

“Hmm?” Kai gaze drifted back to the magazine article in front of her, trying to get a bead on this mysterious Duxton VP with her back to the camera. That arm was long and shapely. Elegant outfit. What sort of negotiator was she? A good one, obviously, if she was close to nailing the hotel world’s deal of the decade.

“It’s about where we’ll be staying in Vegas. *You* have to tell Mr. Stein,” Milly said in a rush. “I’m not going to break the news. And I won’t just slide it in on expenses, either. He’ll notice, and you know he’ll go crazy.” Her head tilted toward the hotel booking confirmation. “He won’t be happy about paying his enemies one dime.”

Hotel Queens

What? Kai's gaze dropped to the booking confirmation in Vegas—for *Hotel Duxton*. "Oh."

* * *

Amelia inhaled deeply, then reached for her phone again. No putting it off.

"Really, Amelia? You had to do that?" Joe snapped before she could greet him.

Yes, well. She had just fired his eldest son and called the cops on him. With a sigh, she pulled the dish of paper clips over and selected a red one. "It was my corporate responsibility. Failure to deal appropriately and promptly with criminal behavior would have led to all sorts of—"

"We could have dealt with him in-house."

"And have Douglas repeat his embezzlement at someone else's company? A company where they won't find it as quickly as I did?"

"Damn it, you're always so...black and white. Rigid. Did you even ask Douglas why he took the money?"

"His gambling debts said it all."

A startled noise came down the phone. Wait, Joe hadn't known?

"Did it occur to you to find a way for it to be paid back, and our family name kept out of it?" he demanded.

"I have a fiduciary responsibility to..."

"Yes, yes, and I am Duxton's Chief Financial Officer. You think *I* don't know what our responsibility is, Amelia?"

His anger startled her. Joe had always been the moderate uncle, the foil to her father's aloofness and hostility. Did he really not understand why she'd been forced to do this?

"Look," Joe exhaled, "I know Douglas has had issues with keeping jobs. It just bothers me you didn't even consider any other options before you got the authorities involved."

"But if anyone found out that we'd done a cover-up, we'd be liable for—"

"Amelia," he cut her off. "I know. I was hoping you understood on a *human* level why what you've done is so difficult. This is more nuanced to me as a father than simple corporate embezzlement."

“There *is* no nuance, though.” Couldn’t he see that? “I’m protecting us. I’m putting Hotel Duxton first.”

“We’re going in circles. I like to believe that deep down, somewhere, you know why I’m frustrated, even though you didn’t hesitate at being the cause of it.”

The cause? She wasn’t the cause! “I—”

“No. Don’t bother. You are who you are. Let’s...shelve it. I rang to tell you an emergency board meeting’s been called. It’s to brief everyone involved given the...recent events.”

“When do I need to be there?” She clicked on her computer’s online diary.

“Amelia...” he cleared his throat. “You aren’t invited.”

She froze. “What?”

“Neither’s Oliver. Because we want to talk about you both.”

“Oh?” She didn’t dare hope. He couldn’t mean...

“There’ll be a full board meeting after Oliver’s court case next month, which will result in a vote on who should be named CEO. But this emergency meeting next week will consider our options. The contenders will be debated.”

“And...am I on that list?” She stilled, heart pounding.

“Yes, Amelia. You’re being mentioned as a serious option. You’ve impressed a lot of people by keeping Europe on an even keel in the worst circumstances. Me included.”

Amelia drew in a breath. “Is it just me being considered?”

“No.” Joe sounded dissatisfied. “A couple of other less well-known contenders are on the table, but they’re miles behind you in credibility, qualifications, and experience. You’re by far the frontrunner.”

“But Dad would never—”

“I know. Conrad wouldn’t. He wants to stick with Oliver. But this is too important. You’d be an excellent choice to lead Duxton when your father retires. If I’d had my way, the US division would have been yours in 2002. Hell, maybe even ’95.”

“Oh.” That was astonishing to hear. Joe had been on her side all this time? He’d never said.

“Even if Conrad won’t budge, while his views might carry a lot of weight, that isn’t enough, not now with the shareholders in an uproar and

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the share price sliding. I think I might be able to swing the other votes to you.”

“Thank you,” she said, shocked.

“It’s time for a change. Even if Oliver skates away with a rap over the knuckles in court, we can’t keep being held to his erratic whims.”

“No. Chaos is not sound business,” she said firmly.

He chuckled. “Yes, Amelia, your views on chaos are well known. Anyway, so while we’re waiting for Oliver’s case to get heard and for the board to deliberate on the contenders, I need you to take over a couple of Oliver’s responsibilities stateside. I’ve emailed you the details. I’m assuming you’re up for it?” The challenge in his tone was unmistakable.

“Of course,” she said smartly, opening her email. She skimmed. *Right. Yes.* She could evaluate a staff-turnover problem at one poorly performing Duxton USA hotel. Evaluating efficiencies was a point of pride for her.

“It’s probably another bad run of troublemaker employees causing a fuss, then everyone starts leaving. Oliver assures me we do everything by the book there, despite the lies from Scorched Earth.”

Was that toxic whistleblower feed still targeting their business? “Okay. I’ll look into what’s happening and send a report. Is that all?” She could do this in her sleep. Why had Oliver been so cagey?

“Amelia, didn’t you see which hotel it is?” Joe asked, sounding amused. “Las Vegas.”

Oh lovely. The sweaty delights of Sin City with its wall-to-wall gambling and sleaziness? Just great.

“No. Problem,” she said through gritted teeth.

“There’s one other thing. Oliver was supposed to give a keynote address at the hotel conference being held there. Unfortunately, the judge won’t let him leave the state.”

Her heart sank. “I don’t do speeches, Joe, you know that. Well, nothing beyond annual meetings and maybe briefing financial journalists.”

“The CEO of Hotel Duxton International does, and if you want that to be you, then you’d better start learning to. For all his faults, Oliver has no problem with the public side of things.”

Amelia winced at his pointed message. And, of course, Oliver had agreed to give the keynote—because it was all about him being in the

spotlight. And, most likely, he wanted to gamble, drink, and bed a pretty showgirl or three.

“It requires courage to put yourself out there,” Joe continued. “To be the face of a company... To be watched by the industry’s movers and shakers at a big event like this is important for our corporate image. Oliver understands that. You need to as well. The media will be there for the speech, so make it good.”

Distaste filled her. Being in the public eye was akin to a cavity search. People prodding you as if they had the right to.

“And in case you’re working out how to say no,” Joe continued, “consider something else: Oliver is seen by board members as bold, a risk taker, unafraid of grabbing a chance. And sorry, Amelia, but you aren’t. You need to shake off that academic, ivory-tower image. You need to seem adaptable, confident, and ballsy. I can only talk you up so much; you have to show them I’m right. Treat Vegas as a CEO audition.”

“I see,” she said stiffly.

“You can do this. You have to. Anyone with half a brain knows you’re Hotel Duxton’s best hope—even if Conrad’s too stubborn to see it.”

“Then I’ll make sure I don’t screw it up.”

“Good. I’ve just sent you Oliver’s speech. You’ll have to rewrite it to tailor it to you, but for God’s sake, keep it interesting. Do not do some statistical monologue that sends everyone to sleep. Make it exciting. Fight your natural instincts and be engaging.”

Engaging? And who didn’t love statistics?

“We’ll need you over there ASAP. A week’s barely enough time to do a thorough evaluation on the staff turnover mess. Make the efficiency report a good one, too. Give us something powerful to show the board you can root out issues as needed.”

Powerful? For an efficiency report?

“Before I go, what’s the status on Mayfair Palace?”

“I’m meeting Nedal at three. I anticipate a deal signed by COB today.” Amelia’s fingers tingled at the prospect.

“Good.” He paused. “You know, if you pull this off, it’ll be a massive tick in your column.”

“Of course.”

“And a huge cross if you don’t.”

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“I hardly think Nedal’s going to pull out now. We’ve been negotiating this for months.”

“Right. When you finalize it, we want to make an official announcement from HQ in New York. Don’t put anything out from London. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“All right, that’s everything. Bye, Amelia.” He hung up.

Fine. New York could take the credit. The real prize was winning the most beautiful hotel ever conceived. And that reality was so close she could taste it.

* * *

Quinn peeked in on Amelia after she’d finished with Joe and slid a steaming tea on her desk. “Courtesy of Tamara.”

Amelia took a sip. *Lovely.*

She eyed Quinn, wondering why she was playing messenger for the office assistant...and lingering. “What?” Amelia grumbled.

“What did your uncle want?”

“They’re having an emergency board meeting in New York next week about Duxton’s next CEO. Oliver is no longer the automatic pick.”

“Yes!” Quinn punched the air.

“Premature.”

“You getting the top job isn’t out of the question, though?” Quinn sounded so hopeful.

“No, not out of the question.”

This time, Quinn double punched the air. “And? Why does your face look like that?” She made a circular motion around Amelia’s head.

“I’m not invited to the meeting.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I have to go to Vegas straight after Nedal’s signing to do some of Oliver’s work.” She glanced at her watch. “Can you order our closest corporate jet to be fueled up ASAP?”

“Why Vegas? *You* in *Vegas* is different.” She tapped out a text on her phone as she spoke.

“I have to give a keynote speech at a conference and work out some efficiency issues at Duxton Vegas while Oliver’s sidelined. It’s a test of my suitability, apparently.”

“You’re giving a speech?” Astonishment lit Quinn’s expression.

“Mmm. I’ll email you Oliver’s draft. Maybe you can come up with ideas that don’t start with a joke about showgirls’ cleavages.”

“Ouch.” Quinn rocked back on her heels. “Okay, boss.” Her phone pinged. “Good news. The jet’s already fueled up. Bad news is, it’s been booked to pick up Simon in Sydney and get him to New York.”

Amelia drew in a sharp breath. Douglas’s lightweight younger brother, a man as dim as a broken light bulb, was invited to the board meeting? Well, she supposed as the head of Duxton Australasia he’d get a vote, too, on who ran the empire. Amelia wondered if he’d back Oliver over her. About the only thing they had in common was a shared love for Simon’s daughter, Imogen.

“What about our other jets?”

“Both busy stateside, getting everyone to HQ for the board meeting.”

“Can I jump ahead of Simon?” Amelia asked. “Vegas needs me on the ground today. It’s only a ten-hour flight. If I wait for the pilot to do a return trip to Sydney, I’ll have lost...” She did a quick mental tally of the pilot’s route, adding in refueling time. “Forty-six hours. I cannot waste two days.”

Quinn tapped away at her phone for a few minutes. “Okay, the pilot says he *can* get you to Vegas first, but he’ll need to have wheels up today at Farnborough by fifteen-thirty if he’s to also get Simon to the meeting on time. Can you be ready by then?”

Amelia frowned. “But I’m supposed to finalize Mayfair Palace at three.” She paused. “Can you see if Nedal will agree to ride with me on the way to the airport? We only have one clause left to sort out and it’s not a tricky one. Then our driver can turn around and run him straight back to our office. You can meet Nedal here and ensure all the paperwork is signed, stamped, and approved by our in-house lawyers.”

“Should be no problem. Especially since Nedal loves our limo.”

“He does? Why? He has his own. Several in fact.” Amelia gave her a perplexed look.

“Ours comes with Zane, who’s as crazy about the Al Wasl football team as he is. Makes sense since they’re both from Dubai.”

Amelia blinked in surprise.

“You really didn’t know, even though Zane’s driven you for thirteen years?”

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“Why would I know where he’s from, or that he loves some boring game involving melodramatic men clutching their legs at random intervals?”

Quinn laughed. “Oh, shit. Don’t ever say that in public around here. Wait, you can calculate every variable of world-hopping flights but don’t know even the basics about your driver?”

“It hasn’t come up. Our discussions involve only where he has to drive me.”

“I can see we’ll have our work cut out for us on your speech. Connecting with people really isn’t your strength.”

“Well, I can’t be expected to know everything. I focus on important things. Like keeping my forty-five thousand staff paid and my 3.942 million guests across Europe happy each year.”

Quinn chuckled. “Love the three decimal points, boss.” Her phone pinged again. “Nedal’s agreed. Pretty fast, actually. Something to do with Al Wasl *crushing* Hatta at the weekend.” A few more taps. “I’ve let the pilot know to expect you by 3:20. So you can go home and pack while I finish up things here if you like.”

“Good.” Her second-in-command’s efficiency was matched only by her occasional cheekiness. Still, Amelia had never met a smarter or more hard-working employee. The trade-off was worth it. She made to rise.

“Oh, by the way, just a head’s up,” Quinn said, “there’s some bad stuff on Twitter about the Duxtons. Social media’s not a fun place for the company today.”

“I’ve avoided social media so far. Why would I change a habit of a lifetime? Twitter’s just verbal effluent from the lowest rungs of society.”

“I mention it because Scorched Earth’s been attacking Oliver since his arrest.”

“Juvenile and predictable, but hardly a concern. Really, Oliver should expect—”

“Actually, they just named you.”

“Me?” Amelia snatched up her phone and poked around the nightmare that was Twitter until she found a series of tweets that made her scowl.

Will NY’s worst boss Oliver Duxton need big sis Amelia to clean up his sordid mess? #DuncetonHotels

Dunceton? Hardly high wit at work. Her eye fell to another post. Amelia's quote from years ago about family and core values at Duxton was staring back at her. Mockery dripped from the tweet.

"How mature." Amelia snapped. "Who did this?"

"No one knows who Scorched Earth is. Plenty have tried to find out, especially Oliver. Repeatedly."

"I see." Apparently her brother was useless on multiple levels.

"This is killing Duxton on the PR front," Quinn said. "It might be time to fight back. Fight fire with *ice*." She gave Amelia a pointed look, leaving no doubt as to who she thought the ice was.

"No." Amelia narrowed her eyes. "Absolutely not. It's beneath us."

Quinn looked unsurprised. "Your call, boss."

"Okay, while I'm in Vegas, hold the fort here until Mayfair Palace is set in stone, then meet me out there in time for the conference next Saturday."

"Sure thing."

"And Quinn?"

"Yeah?" She glanced up.

"You stay off social media, too."

"You don't even want to hear my best comebacks for The Dragon?"

"I'll just have to imagine. Besides, you can't spell to save your life."

Quinn laughed. "True. Right, let me brief our lawyers, and you can go get ready for Vegas." Her brown eyes brightened. "You know, I've never been to Vegas. That place could actually be fun."

At the reminder of her destination, Amelia's lips thinned. "Unlikely. All right, I'm going home to pack for the most un-fun place on planet Earth."

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HOTEL QUEENS

BY LEE WINTER

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