

contessa your blessings

*Mid-November*

*Soho House, West Hollywood, California*

The girl at the door looked up from her computer sleepily and said, "Yes?"

It was 11:03 A.M. on Sunday, so if Sophia hadn't known better she might have thought the girl just wasn't a morning person, but Sophia did know better and knew that Clarabelle would have looked exactly that slow and sleepy at 11:00 P.M. or 2:00 A.M. or anytime. It was part of the mystique about Soho House, the fact that the people who worked the door were so much cooler than the patrons that they literally didn't have time to deal with them. "Hi, Clarabelle. We're meeting Hunter for lunch upstairs," Sophia said, already moving past her toward the hall with the elevators.

"Reynard?" Clarabelle said, and a large bald man with a tattoo on his face stepped out of nowhere, blocking their path.

Sophia loved Soho House once you were inside, but getting in if you weren't a member—it was, as her sister Ava said, almost enough to make you forget their excellent yogurt-strawberry cheesecake. *Almost.*

"We're meeting Hunter here for lunch," Sophia said patiently. "I'm sure he called it in."

"And your names?"

Her friend Lily couldn't take it anymore. "Clarabelle, don't make me remind you about third-grade PE. You know what I mean."

"It's protocol," Clarabelle hissed at her.

"This is a club, not the White House," Lily hissed back.

"Fine," she said. "Welcome back, Miss London. Miss London. And"—she glared at Lily—"you."

"Thanks, Spot," Lily said, and Sophia couldn't help noticing that Clarabelle's face went from normal to flaming pink in one second. Lily had grown up in LA and seemed to be connected to nearly everyone there by either blood or secrets, which meant she could find a lever to get almost anyone to do almost anything.

"Why did you call her Spot?" Ava asked when they were in the elevator.

Lily gave her a sideways glance. She had cornhusk-blond hair, olive skin, light green eyes, and a face that made people's jaws drop, which would have made her a tedious friend except that she had the sense of humor of a fourteen-year-old boy and was completely nuts. "Trust me when I tell you that you don't want to know." She looked at Sophia. "Don't worry, it's only 11:06."

Sophia tried a smile. "I know." The smile felt tight on her face and she could tell she wasn't fooling anyone.

There wasn't really anything wrong, it was just that she hated to be late. And she especially hated to be late for Hunter because it upset him so much.

"I worry when you're not where you're supposed to be," he told her early on in their dating, with one of his knee-melting smiles. How could she argue with that?

She glanced for the fourth—or maybe fourteenth—time at the Cartier watch he'd given her

two weeks earlier on their one-month anniversary. The face was gold with a little blue sapphire on the side, the same color as his eyes. Giving her the watch was so perfectly Hunter, so perfect period.

It was just another example of the way that he never chastised her if she did something he didn't like, just came up with a solution that would charm them both. The watch was his thoughtful, elegant, and effective way of telling her that time mattered to him. He was seriously the ideal boyfriend.

He had been since their first date. That had taken place the day after the nightmare of the Pet Paradise fund-raiser. Just thinking about it sent a little chill up her spine.

After she and Ava had apparently doomed their makeup line with LuxeLife cosmetics by having a knock-down-drag-out sister fight during the big launch, they'd reconciled and poured themselves into organizing a benefit for the animal shelter where Ava had been volunteering. And it had gone spectacularly—until the very end, when they'd been led away by the police, accused of having stolen the money they'd raised. It took less than an hour to get it all sorted out and for the police to arrest Ava's friend Dalton for the theft, but it had still been ... unsettling.

That wasn't the only unsettling thing about that period, if she was being honest with herself. She'd been surprised not to hear from Giovanni again. She'd seen him for the last time a few days before the benefit, outside the gallery where her photographs were debuting.

"Your work is wonderful, *stella*," he'd said, his face all shadowy planes in the dim light of the parking lot. "It is just that you are more wonderful. What I see is a beginning most impressive. And the more you become comfortable to show of yourself, the more outstanding your pictures they will become. Do you understand?"

She had. "But I'm scared," she'd admitted.

And he'd smiled at her and told her it was natural. "But you won't let it stop you from doing what you want." And then, knowing her too well, he'd added, "And do not say you don't know what you want. You will when the time is right."

That was the last thing he'd said to her, more than six weeks earlier, a compliment and challenge wrapped up together. As though he were saying he believed in her ...*but*.

Hunter had come out of the gallery to find her then with the news that all of her photos had sold. He'd told her they were wonderful just as they were. That she was wonderful just as she was. There was no "but" with Hunter.

Which was why when Hunter had called the night after she and Ava came home from being arrested and asked her out on a date—"no more playing at just friends," as he'd put it—she'd said yes without hesitating.

And she hadn't looked back since. The next day Hunter had stood in the doorway of their apartment, the sun at his back making a golden halo around his head, and said, "I hope you don't mind, I chose somewhere a little out of the way. I thought you'd like to avoid the press."

Sophia had smiled, and before she could thank him, Hunter had said, "That. Right there."

"What?" Sophia had asked, looking around.

"That smile. It's what I've been waiting to see."

From that moment he'd swept her off her feet so well that she hadn't had time to think about anything except him. She remembered blushing and feeling like she was floating or in a movie, and being so distracted that she hadn't even thought to notice where they were

going until the car was turning into the driveway of the Santa Monica Airport.

"A little out of the way" turned out to mean a late dinner at a corner table at the quaint, candlelit garden of a French bistro—in New York City. Afterward, as the car drove them through Central Park toward his parents' place, he got quiet and seemed distracted.

"Did I do something wrong?" Sophia asked.

He shook his head and when he looked at her, he looked like a little boy, his blue-blue eyes wide and vulnerable. "No. You've done everything exactly right. And I'm scared of messing this up."

"You're the perfect one," she said. "This was the most amazing date I've ever been on."

"Really?" he asked, as though he genuinely didn't know.

"Really," she told him honestly.

He'd leaned over and kissed her then and it felt warm and familiar and comfortable. Right. "I could get used to having you by my side," he'd said, squeezing her hand.

"Me too."

They had spent the night at his parents' "little place in the city"—a four-bedroom apartment at the Plaza—and gone sightseeing the next day, before flying back to LA that night. The entire time, everything had just clicked, and by the time they touched down it felt like they'd been a couple for months, not hours.

Hunter was like a good-luck charm. Since they'd been together amazing things had been happening to her, and to London Calling. She couldn't believe she'd ever thought about *not* dating him. In fact, the only thing not perfect about her relationship with Hunter was how little they got to see each other because Sophia was so busy.

Which made being even six minutes late for brunch with him feel even worse.

She knew he would understand, especially when she told him that what had really held them up was Ava waiting to Skype with Liam from the set of his latest movie in Romania. Or was it Slovakia? Sophia couldn't remember, not because she hadn't paid attention but because Ava hadn't seemed sure herself.

She wasn't positive what was going on with Ava and Liam—whenever she asked, Ava said they were just friends, and yet she seemed very eager to talk to him. Much more than "just friends" eager.

Although, looking at Ava now, Sophia thought that her sister didn't seem sad that she hadn't gotten to talk to him, the way she would have when they were going out; she seemed more frustrated.

Trying not to check her watch, Sophia ran her hand through her long blond hair and straightened the French cuffs on her pink minidress. "Is it me or is this elevator set to Sloth?" she said.

"It's you," Lily told her as it dinged a final time.

Sophia practically exploded out of the elevator and into the dining room. Her heart was beating fast as Massie, the hostess, showed them to the corner-view table that Hunter had reserved, but it slowed down when she saw that the table was empty.

Hunter was late, too. She hadn't kept him waiting. Relief flooded through her.

Then she saw that she was wrong. He was there, only his head was on the table and he was dozing.

She rushed to his side and put her hand on his shoulder. "Hi, sweetheart," she said. "I'm so sorry we're—"

His blue eyes opened. "Well, don't you look gorgeous," he said, standing to take her in his arms. He pulled her close and ducked his head to kiss her in a way that was much more of an after-dinner than before-brunch kiss.

"Wow," she said as they separated and only their noses touched. "You took my breath away."

He smiled at her lazily. "Now you know how I feel every minute I'm with you."

Sophia brushed the dark blond hair off his forehead, struck like she always was by how hot he was. There was a faint line of gold stubble over his square chin that caught the light and made him look like he was glowing. She ran her fingers along his cheek and said, "I wish we could just do this for the rest of the day."

"Me too," he told her. "Only maybe with fewer people around." He yawned. "And I might need a nap."

Sophia remembered that he'd been at a poker tournament the day before. No wonder he was so tired. "How was it? Did you win?"

He shook his head. "Nope, I lost," he said, shrugging it off the way only people with plenty of money can. "But the experience. Some of the biggest names in poker were playing there. It was like getting to play piano with Mozart."

"That's amazing," Sophia said.

"It was an audition, actually. I'm trying to get one of the top coaches to work with me."

"You're really taking this poker thing seriously."

"A prince has to do something while his princess is busy all day beautifying the land," he said. He said it with a grin but Sophia caught the slightest tinge of frustration as well, which made her feel guilty. Luckily, things slowed down from December until February, and she would dedicate herself then to being the best girlfriend in the world.

Sophia smiled up at him and could have spent the rest of the day staring into his handsome face if she hadn't heard Ava say, "No, he just said *every* minute, not *every single* minute."

The two of them were sitting, heads together, on the other side of the table.

"What are you doing?" Sophia asked.

"Collecting dialogue for my new play," Lily told her. "The rule is I can only use things I've heard people say in real life." She grinned at Sophia and Hunter. "Pretty much all the best romance lines come from you two."

Sophia said, "I know Ava's doing a boytoxy, but you're no shrinking violet. You must have your own romantic dialogue."

"Yeah," Hunter concurred, pulling out Sophia's chair for her. "Get your own."

"Somehow, 'You look hot in that droid costume' doesn't sound as good out of context as," Lily dropped her voice. "'Now you know how I feel every minute I'm with you.'"

Hunter and Sophia grinned at each other. "Be careful," he told Lily, "or we'll start charging royalties."

"Hey hey, did I just hear my favorite word? Royalties?" Rusty Green, president of MeanGreen Productions, had a long red braid and always wore green suits. "How are my favorite future reality stars?" he asked.

"Hello, Mr. Green." Ava said. "We're well."

Rusty Green was one of the first producers to have contacted them about doing a reality show after their charges of theft were dropped by the police, and over the past six weeks he'd also been one of the most persistent.

Sophia hadn't even had time to change her clothes the morning she got back from her NYC date with Hunter before Ava had hauled her out the door to their agent Corinna's office. Corinna had stood by them through the LuxeLife debacle and their arrest and was always a calm, rational voice.

That morning she'd looked harried.

"Everyone loves a damsel in distress—especially if she's young, beautiful, and nice to animals," she said. "You two have practically attained Disney Princess status now. And boy have people been noticing."

The proposals poured in; reality shows like Mr. Green's, pet-care lines, home-care lines, and many random product-endorsement offers in foreign countries. The one they'd fallen in love with was an offer from HomeSweet to do a line of homewares, starting with a bedding collection that they were launching for Valentine's Day.

Or, as Rusty Green put it now, "How's your little sewing project doing?"

Sophia said in her sweetest voice, "You mean our housewares line?"

He shrugged. "If that's what you want to call it."

"Actually, we're calling it Live Love London," Ava told him, purposely misunderstanding.

"And our first collection is called Romp. It's all bedding, sort of country French meets English—"

"Great, great," he said, and Sophia wondered if his reaction would have been any different if Ava had told him they were making couches for baboons. "I've already got someone else on the hook for my project but seeing you two here, if you begged, I would still give it to you. Tell me you've changed your mind."

"I'm afraid we haven't," Sophia said. "We were approached with so many quality reality concepts, but we want to build our brand from the ground up, not just through flash PR."

"I've got to take this," he said, holding up his cell phone and drifting away.

Ava followed him with her eyes to make sure he was really leaving, but said to Sophia, "He didn't have a call, did he?"

Sophia shook her head. "Nope."

"What word do you think it was that scared him off? I want to know so I can use it repeatedly, maybe even have an amulet made."

Lily glanced up from her iPad. "Was he the Martian show?"

Ava laughed. "I'd forgotten about that. No, he was the bachelorette style show set in a rain forest, *Love Is a Jungle*."

"*House of Mars* was my favorite project you were offered," Lily said. "I can't believe you passed on a show with the pitch line, 'Big Brother set in a biological and gravitationally accurate Martian colony.' What was their slogan?"

"Red. Hot," Sophia told her.

"I might hold you personally responsible if that show doesn't get made," Lily said.

Sophia became aware of people behind her speaking Italian but it wasn't until she heard the phrase *stella mia* that she really began to pay attention.

*Giovanni*, she breathed, and her heart began to pound.

He'd said it that night at the gallery, *stella*. The last time she'd seen or spoken to him. Said it and then disappeared without another word or text or phone call. He hadn't even bothered to reply to hers.

And now here he was. Presumably talking to a woman, someone else, maybe it wasn't even

him, maybe—

"*Stella mia*, for the sake of Pete please do not try to stab yourself with the buttering knife. The tablecloths here are much too nice for such things."

That had to be Giovanni. Unable to stop herself, she turned to look at the table behind them. It was occupied by a model-gorgeous Italian woman in her thirties wrapped in a leopard fur, pointing a butter knife dramatically at her heart, a shorter man with round glasses who gazed at her adoringly, and a boy somewhere around twelve with wide brown eyes and curling golden hair who could have modeled for a Renaissance angel except for the way he winked at every waitress who went by.

No Giovanni.

She wasn't disappointed, Sophia told herself as she turned back to her friends. She leaned back and felt Hunter's arm around her shoulders. Who had time for friends, even funny ones who mangled English and made you see yourself ... differently.

"I'm going to go take a gallery tour. I need to start working on my Christmas tree," Lily said, picking up her iPad. A gallery tour, for Lily, meant that she was walking around the restaurant taking pictures of everyone's plastic surgery, which at this time of year she would then have printed on Christmas-tree balls. The year before, her tree had been all noses, but she'd been talking about doing all lips and chins this year. Although all of Lily's perfect parts were original, part of her Los Angeles-childhood heritage was a fascination with plastic surgery, both its practitioners and its recipients.

"Am I wrong thinking Lily is wearing one of the sheet sets from the Romp campaign?" Hunter asked as she wandered off.

"You are *not* wrong," Ava said. She tapped the coat draped over Lily's chair. "And this is one of the comforters. There was some extra yardage from the samples they sent over so I repurposed it."

Sophia had always known her sister had a good eye and could put patterns together well, but it seemed Ava's creativity had gone into turbo overdrive since she'd started her boycott. One day Sophia would get up and there would be an entirely new concept for the throw pillows on the bed. The next, she'd find a dress made from the fabric samples. Ava had made one with leather-fringe trim that they were considering for pillows, which Sophia had been dying to wear for weeks.

"The silk straps were Sophia's idea," Ava was telling Hunter. "She's the trim-and-finishings genius. I just do the grunt work."

"I bet you could sell that stuff," Hunter said. "But I am not suggesting that. I want you to have more free time, not less." He tugged Sophia toward him.

"I'm sorry, Prince Charming. As soon as we finish shooting the Romp campaign, I'll have three, maybe even four days off."

"Four whole days," Hunter marveled.

"Did I say days?" Sophia said. "I meant hours."

"Actually she meant minutes," Ava told him.

"I'll take them!" Hunter went along with the joke. "As long as they're—"

There was a discreet throat clearing, then the same Italian-accented voice Sophia had heard before said, "Please excuse me for the interruption." They turned and saw the man with the round glasses. "The Contessa humbly requests a word with the beautiful ladies, if they are the friends of that one"—he pointed at Lily—"there."

"We are," Sophia said. Her eyes met Ava's and she could tell they were both wondering what Lily could possibly have done now.

"*Prego*," the man answered, holding his arms out to the side, one for each of the London sisters to take. Hunter tagged along, and they made a slow, stately, and as far as Sophia and Ava were concerned incredibly mortifying procession from their table to the Contessa's, three over.

If there was anyone talking or moving or looking anywhere but at them in the dining room, Sophia didn't see them.

When they reached the Contessa, Sophia had a moment of panic about the etiquette when addressing a contessa. Did you curtsey? Kiss her hand? Her ring?

The Contessa herself solved the problem, standing and giving them each two kisses on the cheek. She beamed at them, holding one of each of their hands for a moment, then pointed them into chairs the busboy had brought.

"*Che belle*, how beautiful you are," she said. "We are going to be biff, I know this already." Sophia and Ava must have looked puzzled, because she said, "Biff? This is an American thing you say, no?" She turned to the boy, snapping her fingers to get his attention, and said something quick in Italian.

"BFF," he explained, with only a slight accent. "You will be the best friends forever with my mother. Good luck to you." He winked at them.

The Contessa leaned toward Ava. "I am told you are the hand that made this." When she said "this," she flourished her right hand toward Lily.

"I made the outfit, yes," Ava said, wanting to be completely clear.

"I am the Contessa Antonia di Bellevista. You have heard of me of course. You know, I do not speak idly. Your outfit is *molto bello*. Or, as you Americans say, the Wow. I must have it. So, it is decided. You will make a fashion collection for me for New York Fashion Week."

Ava said, "Right now we are really focused on—"

The Contessa reached out and placed a perfectly manicured finger over Ava's mouth. "This is not a conversation, blah-blah you blah-blah me. This is me telling you, you will do this."

"All business proposals must go through our agent," Sophia told the Contessa, hoping her voice sounded calming. Since she had just seen the woman pretend to try to kill herself with a butter knife.

The Contessa smiled and nodded, only then remembering that she still held a finger over Ava's mouth. She let go and patted Ava on the cheek. "*Bene*. You give me the name of your agent. I will go buy him. Very good." She brushed her hands together. "It is done. You are mine now."

"Didn't that sound like that should be followed by an evil laugh?" Ava asked Sophia in the car going home.

"Completely," Sophia told her. "But I don't think we need to worry about hearing from our new *Biff*. She forgot to ask for Corinna's number. Or name."

"What a relief," Ava said.

*LonDOs*

*The truffle-and-cheese pizza at Soho House*

*Promptness*

*Serendipitya*

*The Wow*

*Repurposing*

*Fast-drying nail pens*

*New York Fashion Week!!!!!!!!!!!!*

*LonDON'Ts*

*Mess with people who had PE with you in third grade*

*Underestimate the Contessa*

*Ever say, "But I don't think we need to worry..."*

*Go to sleep without taking off your eye makeup*