

Gilded cages were deceptive things. People tended to focus only on the “gilded” part, the glitz and the glamour, and gloss over the fact that even though the bars were made of gold, they were still bars. And now that she was out of that cage, Alexa Fairfax was certain that she never wanted back in.

The opulent dining table sparkled in the dim light from the chandelier above, the Carpathian elm gleaming, the edges of the black-and-gold serving ware shining. All around her, conversations buzzed through the air, mingling with the jazz floating from an invisible speaker in the ceiling. Her father sat at the head of the long table in the Fairfax mansion’s dining room, smiling as he talked with the directors and producers flanking him, all hanging on his every word. And although he was laughing, there was a hardness in his eyes, a sharpness in the set of his jaw, that had her on edge. She’d seen that look enough to know that he was scheming, plotting something with his cronies. *Cronies* felt like such an old-fashioned word, but it completely suited the men surrounding her father, with their expensive cigars and hungry grins.

She just hoped that this particular scheme, whatever it was, didn’t involve her. She couldn’t do that again. She wouldn’t. She fought the urge to nibble at a fingernail or play with her hair, knowing she’d catch hell from the well-preserved woman sitting across from her.

“I’m so glad you were free for dinner, honey,” said her mother, leaning forward slightly. “You know how your father likes so much for you to make appearances at these parties.”

Alexa took a deep breath and smoothed her hands over her black-and-white strapless silk dress, bracing herself.

“He’s still upset about you moving out, you know.”

She’d moved out of her parents’ Malibu mansion two months ago now, and it was one of the best decisions she’d ever made. For the first time in her twenty-five years, she was out from under their thumb. Feeling free. Happy. And realizing that the life she’d led up to that point wasn’t what she wanted for her future. She hadn’t fully realized just how much she hated being in this house until she’d moved out. As soon as she’d walked in earlier that evening, a weight had settled over her.

“It was time, Mom. Besides, aren’t most parents desperate for their kids to leave?”

As a response, her mother murmured something unintelligible that sounded a lot like “Ungrateful, spoiled brat.”

Alexa refused to take the bait, although the words still stung. “I can’t stay long. I have another party to go to.”

“That would explain the dress,” said her mother, taking a tiny sip of her wine, one perfect eyebrow arched in disdain.

Alexa clamped her teeth together and clenched her hand into a fist under the table. All the things she wanted to say danced on the tip of her tongue, but as tempting as it was to spew some of her mother’s nastiness back at her, she knew it wouldn’t accomplish anything. It would only feed the beast, when all she really wanted was to get this dinner party over with and leave as soon as possible.

If Alexa hadn’t looked so startlingly like her mother, with the same blond hair so light it was nearly white, the same silvery blue eyes, the same button nose crafted by the same plastic surgeon, she’d have wondered if she was adopted. But she wasn’t. The only child of Jonathan and Melanie, destined—or so she’d always been told—to carry on the

Hollywood dynasty started by her great-grandparents back in the days of silent film. Fonda, Barrymore, Huston, Fairfax—all were names synonymous with glamour, with Hollywood, with fame. With talent, success, and power.

And she wanted nothing to do with it, because she knew the cost of that success and power. Knew the ugly truth behind them.

Gordon Kramer, a producer in his early sixties, sat down beside her mother. He swooped a hand over his short salt-and-pepper hair and smiled at Alexa, his eyes traveling from her face and down to her breasts, leaving an imaginary trail of slime in the wake of his gaze. She suppressed a shudder and took a sip of her water, trying to hide the revulsion crawling over her skin.

“Alexa, darling, you look lovely this evening,” said Kramer, taking a healthy sip of wine and then settling his hands on his protruding stomach. “And you’re here alone, I see. No young man with you this evening?”

Her mother jumped in. “I’ve been trying and trying to set her up with someone, but she won’t let me.” She stuck out her bottom lip in a fake pout. “And I know so many men—powerful, rich, successful men—who’d love the chance to date her.”

Kramer’s eyes once again slid over Alexa’s body, and she managed a thin smile, not wanting to participate in the conversation. She was checking her watch, wondering how much longer until they ate and she could leave for the party at her friend Sierra’s, when a server appeared silently at her elbow and placed a salad down in front of her.

“Could I please have a glass of wine?” she asked, picking up her fork to dig into the salad.

“Of course.” The server nodded and continued down the table.

“You know, if you’d asked for a vodka soda, you could’ve saved thirty calories.”

Her mother shot her a pointed glare from across the table.

“I don’t like vodka.” She looked down at herself, keeping her hands on the table and not giving in to the urge to adjust her size-six dress. And it was a six only because she couldn’t fit her 34C’s in a four.

Another server came down the table. “Prime rib or salmon, miss?”

Before she could open her mouth to say, “Prime rib,” her mother shooed the server away. “She’s fine with the salad.”

Anger and humiliation prickled through her, tightening her skin and leaving her feeling hot and itchy. She tugged at her dress, smoothing it over her stomach and then letting her hands rest for a moment on her thighs, digging her fingers into the flesh hard enough to make dimples pop up. An ache settled right in the center of her chest, and she swallowed, hard, pushing it down.

Her mother leaned toward Kramer and spoke in a stage whisper. “She’s such a pretty girl, but her figure is a bit challenging.”

Alexa didn’t ask, already knowing exactly what her mother meant by *challenging*. Short, with boobs and hips. Feminine, but not “skinny.” At least not by Hollywood standards. She worked her butt off—literally—to keep her stomach flat and her thighs slender, but there wasn’t much she could do about the rest of her curves. They weren’t going anywhere, and she was fine with it, most of the time, even if her mother wasn’t. Her mother, on the other hand, had that willowy slenderness that often came with height and borderline starvation.

That was the thing about Hollywood. Everyone was always hungry, in one way or another, and that hunger dictated *everything*.

And Alexa knew, better than most, that starving people did desperate things.

So she sipped her wine, ate her salad, smiled and nodded politely at those around her, and silently counted down the seconds until she could get in her car and get the hell out of here. Mindless chatter filled the space around her, and she zoned out, focused on the lettuce at the end of her fork. As she'd done so often as a kid, she slipped into a fantasy that both amused and soothed her, and she imagined her mother's reaction if she told her to fuck off, threw the salad in her face, and stormed out of the house, middle finger held high. It was an incredibly appealing image, given her mother's nonstop passive-aggressive barbs.

"So, Alexa, what are you working on these days?" asked Kramer, pulling her from her reverie as the server cleared her empty salad plate away. He smiled at her, not even trying to hide the fact that he was staring at her boobs. He wiped at his mouth with his napkin, his prime rib having disappeared in record time.

"Actually, I'm taking some time off," she said. "Trying to figure out what I want to do."

"I have a project that might be right up your alley. You know my studio's making an Aquagirl movie?"

Her mother bit out a sharp scoff. "Alexa's not exactly superhero material, Gordon." She eyed Alexa skeptically, one eyebrow arched as she sipped her drink.

"I'm not looking for a new acting project right now," Alexa bit out, watching as the servers circulated with luscious-looking slabs of chocolate cake. She didn't take one, knowing she wouldn't be able to enjoy it in peace. "I'm taking some time away from acting, and I've been doing volunteer work with UNICEF."

Her mother rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Alexa. You’re so strange. You don’t want to act, but waste your time volunteering. You don’t want to date anyone. Your fashion sense is...interesting. Sometimes I wonder if you’re actually my daughter.” She shot Kramer a smile. “We couldn’t be more different,” she said, as though she was embarrassed by Alexa while assuring Kramer that none of Alexa’s perceived shortcomings were her fault.

Despite that she was sitting in a crowded room having dinner with her family, a sense of loneliness wrapped itself around Alexa, thickening her throat.

“You are *so* right, Mother.” Something hot and dangerous clawed at Alexa’s insides, begging to be set loose, and she nearly snapped. She stood and tossed her cloth napkin down on the table, more forcefully than she’d intended. Her hands trembled slightly as she stood. “Excuse me.”

“What?” Her mother looked up, her eyebrows raised in question.

Alexa forced herself to take a deep breath. She seemed to be forcing herself to do a lot of things tonight. “Bathroom.” She didn’t need to pee, but she did need some space. A few minutes to get it together, to rein in the anger pounding through her veins. But it wasn’t just anger. No, there was something smaller and darker there too, thrumming right along with it. Something desperate and inadequate and fucking miserable. She pasted a small smile on her face as she strode through the massive house, nearly running toward the swooping marble staircase in the foyer.

The scent of roses hit her as she reached the first landing, and she slowed. She leaned a hip against the banister, glancing first left and then right at the curved staircases branching off the main one, leading to the west and east wings of the house. The sounds of the party had faded into a soft, gentle murmur of voices, clinking dishes,

and music. A burst of laughter erupted, her father's booming laugh at the center, and she plucked one of the white roses from the giant urn on the heavy wooden table and took the stairs toward the east wing two at a time, wanting to spend a few minutes alone in her favorite spot.

Growing up, she'd been terribly lonely. Her only real friends had been the staff—her nanny, the cook, the maids. They'd all been kind to her, and as a young girl, she'd taken to using the servants' passageways to get from one part of the house to another, and she'd discovered all sorts of nooks and crannies throughout the mansion. Her absolute favorite one was just off the library. One of the bookshelves was actually a narrow door in disguise, and behind it was a small room with a dusty window, an old leather couch, piles of books, and a small, broken table. If her dad had ever known about the room, he'd apparently long since forgotten about it. Although she had a lavish bedroom, Alexa had claimed this space for her own, because she could hide there in a way she couldn't in her bedroom, and the staff had kept her secret.

She stepped into the dark library and pulled the door shut behind her. The room was one of her favorites in the house, the walls lined with bookshelves stuffed to the gills with books. A fireplace—dark and cold—sat nestled in one of the walls, plush leather armchairs arranged around it. Huge floor-to-ceiling windows lined the far wall, facing the backyard with its fountain, sculpted gardens, and infinity pool. Silvery moonlight streamed in, slanting across the Oriental rug that covered much of the gleaming hardwood floor. After striding quickly across the room to the far corner near the window, she pulled open the bookcase door and shut it quietly behind her, then paced to the window.

“Breathe. Just breathe,” she whispered, but as she tried to take a deep breath in, it turned into a shuddering gasp and she felt her throat thicken with tears. She pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window and scrunched her eyes shut, trying to prevent the tears from falling. She lifted the rose to her face and inhaled deeply, pulling the scent into her lungs, trying to focus on something besides how much she *hurt*.

She looked up at the ceiling, and she let out a small, choked half sob, half laugh. Twenty-five years old and she was hiding, crying because of something her mother had said to her. She suddenly felt fourteen again, and the ridiculousness of it—she was a grown-ass woman, and it was time to start acting like one—gave her the strength to fight back most of the tears, despite the tangled ache welling up inside her. She pulled one of the petals free and worried the velvety softness between her fingers, letting the texture soothe her. She swallowed thickly and swiped a thumb under her eye.

She spent a few more minutes alone, relishing the peace and quiet, collecting herself, watching dust motes float through the pale moonlight.

Screw this. She had friends to go see—friends who loved her. She was done wasting her time here when she had a celebration to go to.

She began to push open the narrow door to head back into the library when the library’s main door swung open, and light from the hallway cut a swath across the floor. Her father entered with Kramer, and, not wanting to deal with either of them right now, she quickly eased the door shut again, sealing herself away.

“It’s done?” she heard her father ask on the other side of the wall.

“Yes. Jeff Astor’s dead,” said Kramer, his voice low but still audible.

Alexa gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth, her other hand curling around the rose’s petals. Jeff Astor was the president of one of the largest film studios in

Hollywood, and he'd gone missing over a week ago. The story had been all over the news. Before his disappearance he'd made a play to buy Innkeeper Films, the production company her father had a large stake in. She'd thought the deal had simply fallen through.

"You saw to it yourself?" Her father's voice was tense, urgent.

"Bullet to the forehead, point-blank. Burned and ashes dumped, just like you asked."

"Good. That motherfucker was a pain in my side."

Alexa's heart pounded in her ears as she tried to wrap her mind around what she was hearing. Because it sounded an awful lot as if her father had ordered Kramer to murder Jeff Astor. A tremor coursed through her, and she closed her eyes, trying to center herself against a wave of dizziness.

"Have you made a decision about Morales yet?" asked Kramer.

Her father hesitated, making a low humming noise she recognized as his "I'm thinking" sound. "Not yet. Morales knows a lot, maybe too much. But killing a cop is the last resort."

"Understood."

"And what about Crosby?" asked her father. Alexa racked her brain, trying to figure out if she knew who Crosby was. She licked her lips, her mouth dry as fear and panic worked themselves into a tight, cold knot right in the center of her chest.

This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be real.

"Still on the list. It's in the works."

"Make it happen, and soon. He knows too much about us."

“And what about me?” Kramer’s tone shifted slightly, and his voice took on an edge. There was a pause that stretched out for several seconds before her father spoke.

“If you kill Crosby, you can have Alexa.”

She crushed the rose until crumpled petals littered the floor around her feet. Sweat prickled along her hairline, and her stomach churned.

Oh God. Please, no. You can’t do this to me again.

“You promise she’ll cooperate?”

Her father snorted derisively. “Alexa will do what I tell her.”



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