

Fighting the Pull

A River Rain Novel

By Kristen Ashley

Prologue

Familiar Feeling

Corey

Then...

It was not a good idea to roll up to his son's baseball game in a chauffeur-driven town car.

However, it was either that or miss another one of Hale's games.

No, that was incorrect.

It was either that or miss the entire season, since this was the championship, and until then, Corey hadn't been to a single game.

But weather had been atrocious in Minneapolis, where he'd been that morning. Their takeoff had been delayed for over three hours.

One of his assistants had made all the plans, and Corey should have had plenty of time to get home, get changed and drive to the field in one of his personal vehicles, all of which were high-performance, and thus expensive. But they weren't chauffeur-driven town cars.

Regretfully, after their late takeoff, that became impossible.

But he couldn't miss another game. Sam would be livid, and Corey would have to put up with her attitude.

And his son Hale would be...

Corey didn't finish that thought as he stood beside the bleachers in his ten-thousand-dollar bespoke suit trying to figure out what was happening on the field.

He'd never been into sports. However, since Hale played baseball, if Corey had more time, he'd look up the rules and regs, even read up on the history and watch a few games.

Although he didn't know much about baseball, he could see his son's natural ability. His focus. The ease with which he maneuvered his body, even at fifteen years old.

Watching him, Corey had a funny taste in his mouth because Hale reminded him of...

He didn't finish that thought either.

Nevertheless, Corey was a busy man. He didn't have time for much of anything, but work. If he had time, he'd have been at more than one of Hale's games and would have learned by being there, not reading a book about the history of baseball.

He stood where he was, not-so-easily ignoring the attention he got from both sides of the bleachers.

Yes, Corey was wearing a suit that no doubt cost months of their mortgages.

Yes, Corey was in a suit, rather than wearing something far more casual, like everyone else.

Yes, his chauffeur was also his bodyguard, and the man was not only sticking close to his charge, but also being obvious about it.

Yes, Corey was more famous than many in that town, and considering it was Los Angeles, that was no small feat.

And yes, he was by far richer than *any* in that town, and that was no small feat either.

What made the attention not so easy to ignore wasn't about any of that. Normally, he would have no issue with it. He was used to it. And in these instances, he could share it. Genny and Tom were in the bleachers watching Hale. As were their kids, Chloe, Matt and Sasha.

Or, as Corey understood it, but Sam did not, Hale's real family were watching Hale play baseball.

Now, *they* never missed a game.

Genny—or America's Sweetheart, Imogen Swan—wasn't richer than Corey, but she was far more famous. Tom, partly by association, was as well, considering he wasn't only Genny's husband, but many said he was one of the greatest tennis players ever to play the game.

And Corey could feel their censure, particularly Tom's.

Tom was a busy man too, but he'd cut off his own arm before he'd miss something important to his wife or one of his children. In fact, if the situation came up (and it had), Tom would fly from Australia to LA just to walk Genny down a red carpet, then fly right back in order to continue commentating the matches, which was what he did now that he'd retired.

Tom would find a way...and did.

Genny, the highest paid actor in Hollywood, would find a way...and did.

Corey showed up in the seventh inning, and he might not know much about baseball, but he knew there were only nine innings.

However, it wasn't only Genny and Tom being disappointed in him that was difficult to ignore.

It was his ex-wife Sam's seething fury that Corey could feel all the way to where he was standing.

She was there, and probably had been since before the game began, so she could get a seat where Hale could see she was present, and his father wasn't.

And she'd taken all that time Corey hadn't shown not to cheer her son on, but to feed her fury at her son's father. So now, she wasn't even paying attention to the game. She was glaring at Corey.

He had to admit, she had reason to be angry, and that reason wasn't (all) about him missing Hale's baseball games. He'd confessed he'd cheated on her (when he hadn't, but she didn't know that). He'd told her it was with Genny (when it wasn't). Considering he'd been in love with Genny since he was ten years old, it was a play to win Genny (it failed). He and Sam had only been married a short time, and she'd been pregnant with Hale when he'd done what he'd done.

So, yes. That was bad.

But for shit's sake, it had all gone down fifteen years ago.

She needed to get over it.

Hale wouldn't miss his mother's mood. And Hale wouldn't be taken in by his mother's show of support either.

Corey had no idea where his son got his athletic prowess, since it certainly wasn't from Corey or Sam, but he got his brains from his father.

It was the top of the ninth when Sasha skipped over to him and threw her arms around his legs, tipping her head back and shouting, "Hello, Uncle Corey!" like he was a baseball field away and not right there.

He put his hand on her shining, golden hair and replied, "Hello, Sasha."

"Hale got a home run in the third inning," she shared. "Dad nearly had a *heart attack* he was so excited. Dad said it was a special one because there were a lot of people on the bases."

Of course, Hale got a home run with "a lot of people on the bases."

"And he's stolen *three bases*. Dad says that's *a whole bunch* for one game," Sasha relayed.

“Excellent,” Corey murmured.

At this point, Chloe sauntered over, more naturally self-possessed than most adults Corey knew...and she was ten years old.

“Hey, Uncle Corey,” she greeted.

“Chloe.”

She got up on her toes and he bent to let her kiss his cheek.

Sasha, only six, kept hold of his leg while Chloe came to stand at his other side.

Sasha was there because she was a bright, sunny child who loved everyone, and it was probably doing her little soul irreparable harm to allow Corey to stand by himself at the side of the bleachers for a single moment longer.

Chloe was there because she knew her mother, father and Aunt Samantha were pissed at him, and she loved her Uncle Corey. The game would end soon, and she was either going to run interference, or simply with her little-kid presence make it difficult for anyone to confront him in an ugly manner.

If it was any other child her age, Corey would be more comfortable thinking she didn’t understand what she was doing. Something like that would be uncanny in a ten-year-old.

However, this was Chloe. She knew precisely what she was about at all times.

And she was there to fend off Samantha.

He loved Sasha.

He cherished Chloe.

Things happened on the field that meant the game was over surprisingly quickly, with Hale’s team winning, and Chloe, knowing Corey, instantly explained, “Hale’s team was the home team. They were leading so they don’t have to have an at bat.”

Ah.

There you go.

Sasha had lost interest in her Uncle Corey in order to dance to the chain link fence, shout her excitement and yell Hale’s name repeatedly.

Matt, Genny and Tom’s middle child, didn’t go to Corey. He went to Sasha. She was six, and her parents were right there, and Corey was close, but more importantly Corey’s bodyguard was, and Matt wasn’t but a little over a year older than her, but Matt was protective.

Like his father.

Even though Genny and Tom were standing, clapping and calling congratulations to Hale and the team, Sam left the bleachers in a hurry and made a beeline to Corey.

He felt Chloe's arm brush his side as she closed in on him. He looked down at her.

"You going to challenge her to a duel?" he quipped.

"If she's mean to you, yes," she replied in all seriousness.

Oh yes, he cherished this child.

He smiled at her.

She smiled back.

"Nice you could make it *for an inning.*" Sam's snide voice captured his attention.

"Hey, Aunt Sam!" Chloe cried with fake excitement.

"Chloe," she said shortly, then turned her gaze back to Corey and opened her mouth.

His ex was not one to worry that a ten-year-old was standing there. When it came to her loathing of her ex-husband, and her need to express it, nothing stood in the way.

But Sam underestimated her opponent, and that opponent was not Corey.

Chloe took his hand, tugged and announced, "Mom and Dad are having pizza and ice cream for the team at our house. Come on. Those boys are gross and dirty, and they'll eat all the pepperoni if we don't get there first." While tugging him toward his town car, she then yelled, "Mom! Dad! I'm going with Uncle Corey."

He saw Genny nod, Tom's failed attempt to hide a scowl, and last, Sam's face get beet red that she'd been denied her opportunity to sink her claws into her ex-husband.

Allowing himself to be led, Corey looked beyond all of them to the field.

He caught Hale's eyes on him.

He lifted his chin to his boy.

It was a familiar feeling, but even so, it nevertheless decimated him as he felt something die inside when Hale didn't acknowledge his father's attention.

He just turned and walked away.

Corey didn't know it in that moment, and it would take over a decade for him to figure out why, but that was the last baseball game Hale would ever play.

* * * * *

Hale

Now...

“Are you going to open it?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.”

“Hale—”

“Chloe, leave it.”

At her fiancé Judge’s murmured demand, Chloe shut her mouth.

And Hale, not for the first time, wondered why he hadn’t chucked the box his father left him after he’d committed suicide right in the trash.

Especially since every time Chloe set eyes on it, some version of this conversation would happen. And since Genny and Duncan had a place in LA, and Judge worked with Hale on the not-for-profit arm of Hale’s business, his de facto sister and her fiancé were in LA a lot.

So they had this conversation often.

And still, he hadn’t thrown that fucking box away.

“Do you want me to open it for you?” Chloe asked gently.

“Babe, *leave it*,” Judge whispered, a thread of harshness in his words.

Chloe shut up again, not because she was a woman who let a man tell her what to do.

No, it was because she loved two men who both lost parents in ugly ways.

Judge and Hale shared something hideous. Chloe had no idea. She had two loving parents who thought the world of her, were always there for her, and who she knew to her bones she could count on.

Hale avoided her eyes.

Chloe was worried and she wasn’t the kind of woman to hide her feelings, especially when she was feeling something for someone she loved.

And Chloe and her family were the only real family Hale had ever had, he loved her too, all of them, and he didn't want her to worry at all, but especially not for him.

He should just let her open the box.

But he couldn't.

He couldn't open it. He couldn't throw it away.

It was just there, in the living room of the house his father left to him, along with his company, his many other properties, and his billions. That box was now like a small art installation, it'd been sitting on that shelf for so long.

As far as he was concerned, it could stay there until Chloe's children inherited it, because Hale didn't intend on having any kids, nor did he intend to get married. He wasn't about to repeat the sins of his father. And he was going to leave Chloe the house when—sometime he hoped was a long time from now—he died, not only because Hale knew she loved that house, but because he knew his father would want her to have it.

She'd been Corey Szabo's favorite.

It wasn't obvious.

But to his son, it still totally was.

On that thought, abruptly, he stood.

Chloe started and her face grew a little pale.

Judge tensed.

“I have a flight to New York to catch,” he announced.

Chloe looked at her watch, saying, “Yes, in two hours.” She turned her gaze to him, and quickly went on, “We were going out to lunch. And by the by, you own the plane, *mon frère*. You can leave whenever you like.”

“It'll be best if I—” Hale started.

“I won't mention the box again,” she promised.

“Ever,” Judge put in.

She pressed her lips together, not willing to go that far.

At that, Hale smiled.

Hale didn't have any favorites in the Pierce family. The sisters and brother Tom and Genny had given him, the parents they tried to be, they all held equal places in his heart.

In fact, they took up the whole of it.

“Right, then, let’s go to lunch,” he said. “But I should get to the airport sooner rather than later. I’ve got shit to do, and I don’t want to be landing at midnight.”

Chloe popped up instantly, not about to miss her shot at lunch with her big brother.

Judge followed more slowly.

They went out and had tacos.

On his way to the airport, Hale got out his phone and sent a text.

As you know, since I told you days ago, I’m going to be in the city for a week. I arrive this evening. Can we finally set this fucking interview and be done with it?

He did not receive a return text by the time he boarded his father’s custom jet.

He still had not received one by the time they landed.

And now, this had been going on for too long.

It was her that wanted this interview in the first place.

He’d made a promise.

And whether the woman liked it or not, he was going to keep it.

Chapter One

Under His Thumb

Elsa

As I walked from my apartment to the studio, I had a million things on my mind, which wasn’t good considering, in this neighborhood, you needed to keep your senses sharp.

But my mother had texted that morning, saying my brother and his wife were going to be in town, and she wanted a family dinner Saturday night.

I had no plans on Saturday, but I wanted to sit down and break bread with my family like I wanted someone to pluck my hair out with tweezers, one strand at a time.

I had a lot of hair.

That said, I wasn’t sure how to get out of it.

As mentioned, I didn’t have any plans that night, which would be strike one according to my family, since not only was I not dating, I wasn’t seeing anyone. Or better, engaged. Or the best,

giving up “that parasitic hobby” and spending my time dusting, making dinner and producing babies for my husband.

In other words, I was already losing before I even showed at dinner.

And using work as an excuse to get out of it...

Well, one could just say that I’d rather spend three hours fielding questions about how I’m “putting myself out there” than dealing with the response of sharing I was too busy with work to show.

In other words, strike two would be the fact I still was engaged in “that parasitic hobby.” That being my “Elsa’s Exchange, Celebrity News and Interviews” channel.

Did it count for them I had over thirty million followers?

No.

Did it count for them that I was currently assessing three...I’ll repeat *three* seven-figure...and I’ll repeat again, *seven-figure* offers to stream on a major platform?

No.

Okay, to be fair, by “for them” I meant Mom, my brother Oskar and my sister Emilie. Dad got a kick out of my show. He didn’t say that often in front of Mom, but he found his ways to make it known to me.

But Mom’s censure made up for Dad’s acceptance.

Nugget of news: it always had.

Strike three would be...

Well, everything else about me.

Since the only real excuses I had were work, and that would be unacceptable, or I already had plans with girlfriends, which would also be unacceptable (for Mom, family trumped friends, even if my brother and I weren’t close, didn’t really get along and never did, ditto with my sister, and then some with my mother). Further, my girlfriends weren’t popular with Mom. They were too ambitious. Too independent. Too modern.

I mean, seriously, Mom was from one of the most progressive countries in the world, and she moved to one of the most liberal cities in the world.

And yet.

Thank God Dad found his ways to balance her out.

Though, how long that would last, I didn't know. And that same thought had been rattling around in my head for ages.

Since I could remember, the strain in their marriage was like a fourth child. I'd ridden a wave of lowkey guilt also since I could remember, hoping they'd break up, and Dad would get custody of me and only me.

Not my momma's-best-boy older brother, not my perfect-last-child sister.

Only me.

Alas, that had not happened.

Still, lowkey, one hung on to the hope.

The other million things on my mind started with those offers my agent was assessing and ended with my work mobile being clogged with texts and emails of celebrity sightings, scuttlebutt, and notices of pictures I needed to bid on.

So I had all of that to get through, and I needed to glamorize myself because we were taping a segment that morning. Something I intended to write before I left home but decided to stick to my guns and keep work and home life separate. So instead, I was going to get into it at my office at the studio.

It was seven in the morning. With what I had to get through, I'd be lucky to leave by seven that night.

At least now I had the money to hire an assistant, something I'd done.

I'd give her the phone to tackle the texts while I looked at the photos. It wouldn't be good for someone else to get juicy exclusives and only I could make decisions about what money was going to be spent.

The thing on my mind that I wasn't admitting was taking more headspace than it should was the fact that Hale had texted the day before.

Again.

Why he wasn't letting himself off the hook about this interview he never wanted in the first place, I did not know. And it wasn't going to be me who let him off the hook. Oh no. Not officially.

But I wasn't returning his texts, so unofficially, the guy should take a hint.

We'd made a deal almost a year before. The deal was, I'd kinda, sorta lay off his family, he'd give me an interview.

I couldn't totally lay off his family. They were the most celebrated celebrities in the world. Even the ones who hadn't sought that out, like Chloe Pierce and Judge Oakley.

But there were a great many different kinds of celebrity news, and it didn't seem like Hale Wheeler had cottoned on to the fact I wasn't a mudslinger.

Sure, I also wasn't an objective journalist. But I wasn't TMZ either.

Nugget of news: you could share gossip for a living and still be classy. I was proof of that (or I thought I was).

I had my key ready to put into the four locks on the door to the building where my studio was in Brooklyn, and with practiced ease, I was out of the New York autumn morning cold in no time.

I locked the door behind me and headed to the space in the sectioned off warehouse that I rented for my studio.

I had to unlock that door too (only three locks this time), and once inside, I practically ran into Chuck, my cameraman, who was for some reason right there and crowding me.

My space was small, but this was weird.

I looked at his face, and...great.

We'd probably been burgled.

It wasn't like I had a ton of expensive equipment, but what I had was hard won. I had offers coming in, and they were healthier than I'd allowed myself to dream, but I hadn't signed on any dotted line. So, for the foreseeable future, ongoing operating costs, and any expansion, was on me.

I didn't have time to deal with police reports and insurance companies telling me how little they could actually replace seeing as some small line in their contract exempted them from doing what I paid them to do. Nor did I need to be shelling out to replace stuff.

"What's up?" I warily asked Chuck.

"Hale Wheeler is here," he whispered.

Oh no.

That was worse than being burgled.

My gaze flew beyond Chuck to my set which was a one-step dais on which sat a mint green velvet swivel chair with a glass-topped gold side table beside it. These were in front of a greenscreen backdrop we could make anything we wanted it to be. Though usually it was subtle

pastel green and peach swirls against a soft white with the words “Elsa’s Exchange” repeated throughout.

And damn it all to hell, there he was.

Tall, ridiculously handsome, athletically built Hale Wheeler, the richest man in the world.

“He was here when I got here,” Chuck told me.

As he could be, since he’d bought the building.

He wanted to control what I said about his famous family.

I wanted the freedom to do my job.

These twains did not meet.

“I’ll take care of it,” I muttered to Chuck.

Even as I said that and moved around him, I felt Chuck shadowing me as I approached Hale Wheeler.

I couldn’t think on Chuck.

With his presence filling up the space, I had no choice but to be all about Hale Wheeler.

I mean, really. How was his existence even fair?

He was gorgeous. He had great taste in clothes. He was fit. He was fiendishly loyal to his family. And he had enough money to end food insecurity around the globe, and he might, because he wasn’t about being rich, he was about something else entirely.

All that and integrity too?

It was annoying.

“If it isn’t the Extraordinary Mr. Wheeler. To what do I owe this honor?” I asked.

His pale green gaze flicked to Chuck before it came back to me.

“Your office. Alone. Now.”

Four words. Each one of them uttered in a deep, rough growl.

For a moment, the only response I could focus on was what those words did to my nipples.

After I recovered from that, I noted he appeared ticked.

Although I’d been in the same place at the same time as him, I’d avoided him for reasons I refused to explore.

Nevertheless, I’d seen what could amount to hours of footage, not to mention thousands of photos of him going in and out of buildings, entering and alighting from cars, walking down

sidewalks, attending events, and doing such things I normally blocked out, like surfing or eating dinner with a beautiful woman.

So much of all of this, it felt like I knew him.

Therefore, I could tell when he was angry.

Like, for instance, now.

I studied him.

I liked what I saw.

I stopped studying him.

“All right,” I agreed, that infernal characteristic I would swear I’d been born with—curiosity—overriding good sense (as it had a wont to do, hence my occupation).

“I don’t—” Chuck started.

I turned to him. “I’ll be okay.”

Chuck stared down at me for a beat. I knew he didn’t like it, but he eventually jerked up his chin.

I led Hale to my office, which was tiny, windowless, and not all that attractive. Everything in it was secondhand.

I’d splurged on what sat on the dais, as well as my makeup table and director’s chair, both of which were out in the studio.

This space?

Well, even though I attempted to balance work and life (I failed daily, by the by), I did my best to shut down when I went home, so I tried not to work when I was at home. This meant I spent a lot of time in this studio, and the office.

Still, what my watchers saw was more important than what they couldn’t see. So I didn’t bother investing much in my office.

However, leading Hale to it, for the first time, I was embarrassed by it.

I entered, he came in after me, and I turned to him just in time to watch him shut the door in a way that was both controlled, and still furious.

When he turned his attention to me, I began, “I know I haven’t been returning your tex—”

He cut me off by asking, “What the fuck is this shit, Elsa?”

I tried again. “I was just about to explain—”

“I bought the fucking building having no idea you could relocate to Syria and be safer going to work.”

I shut my mouth in surprise.

Hale didn’t.

“Jesus Christ, there’s not even a security system in this fucking place.”

Nugget of news: we’d spoken on the phone, exchanged texts, and as mentioned, I’d been in the same place as him. But we’d never officially met.

So much for *how do you do*.

“I—”

“I’m shutting it down until I can get some security measures installed.”

I felt my eyes get huge and my heartrate spike.

“Coded doors. Outdoor cameras. Indoor cameras,” he continued. “New windows with wire in them. Uniformed personnel conducting drive-bys and random checks. And it’s fucking freezing in here and your guy out there said the heating is constantly on the fritz. I’ll be seeing to that as well.”

My eyes stayed huge, but this time, my breath went funny.

“I’ll have my assistant inform you when you’re safe to reenter the building,” he finished.

It took some effort, but I found my voice. “Hale, you can’t shut me down. This is where I do my work. If I don’t have access to this space, I can’t do my work.”

“You can take a week.”

What?

“I can’t take a week,” I snapped. “And furthermore, *you* can’t tell me I can take a week. You don’t know the first thing about my business. So allow me to educate you, celebrity news is a twenty-four seven thing. It never stops. You have to be on it all the time. I haven’t had a vacation in three years.”

“Now’s your shot.”

Was he crazy?

“Hale—”

“This isn’t up for discussion, Elsa,” he stated dismissively. “The world can live without your *on-dits* for a week.”

My *on-dits*?

“I take what I do seriously,” I informed him.

“I can tell. However, we both know what you do isn’t actually serious.”

Oh my God!

No. No, no, no.

I wasn’t going to take the bait and get into a discussion about my work with him.

I sidestepped that and retorted, “I’m not vacating this building for work that can be done while I’m using it and *paying rent* to use it.”

“First up then is changing the locks so you can’t access the building while the work is being done. I’ll reimburse you for a week’s rent.”

My eyes narrowed. “Is this your new ploy to shut me down?”

“No, it’s my ploy to make sure you can do your work without someone coming in and stealing all your shit and or doing something hideous to you if they show while you’re in here working.”

All right, the neighborhood wasn’t the greatest. It was in a borough of New York City, one of the biggest cities in the world. One could argue every part of NYC could be dicey.

But it wasn’t Syria, no matter what he said. Not even close.

“I’ve had this space for two years without incident.”

“You’ll have it for two more with less chance to court an incident.”

“I’m a native New Yorker, Mr. Wheeler, I know how to look after myself.”

“Did you miss the part where I said this isn’t up for discussion?” he asked.

Another nugget of news: He sure was pretty. And an absolute asshole.

One thing I knew was that I could not go dark when I had three huge offers on the table.

I could find some temporary space, but that would be a pain in the ass. And it wasn’t like I could tape my segments days in advance. Celebrity news waited for no woman. I couldn’t be talking about Prince Harry when Harry Styles was up to something.

As I thought all of this, Hale watched me.

He then said, “If you’re that bent out of shape about it, I’ll relocate you at my expense while the work is being done.”

If I was that bent out of shape?

“Thank you so much for that offer, which I will accept, considering it’s the least you can do when you’re shutting me out of space you’re contractually obligated to allow me to use for the

purposes I'm using it," I returned. "But allow me to register my complaint at terminology such as 'bent out of shape' about you feeling you can allow or disallow me to work at all."

Hale ignored that and declared, "And we're filming our interview on Saturday. Forward the questions you intend to ask me tomorrow so I can have a look at them."

On the one hand, I wanted to jump at this. It was the perfect excuse to get out of dinner with my family. Even Mom wouldn't turn her nose up at me missing dinner because I was interviewing Hale Wheeler at his father's penthouse apartment.

On the other hand, as big as this interview was going to be—and it was going to be huge, he might have his office make statements to the press, but he'd never sat down to an interview like the one I intended to capture—after this friendly tête-à-tête, I didn't want to be in his presence again for oh...I didn't know. Twenty years, at least.

"I'm booked on Saturday," I lied.

He studied me.

I held his stare and fought the need to cross my arms on my chest protectively.

Then he said, "We either do this shit on Saturday, or it doesn't happen at all. We made a deal. I don't renege on deals. You've ignored my communications or sidestepped making plans for an entire fucking *year*. If you can't do Saturday, I'll accept that as you renegeing on our deal."

Dammit, dammit, dammit.

I couldn't lose this interview.

An interview like this could add another zero to the negotiations I was currently in.

Seriously.

I should have done it months ago.

A year ago.

Dammit!

"Fine," I bit off.

"Excellent," he drawled.

"But the deal was, no pre-approved questions. Just pre-approval before broadcast," I reminded him.

"I didn't say I was going to approve them, I said I wanted to have a look at them." He tilted his head toward the studio. "I take it it's just going to be you and that guy out there?"

I hated it that he'd witnessed the wizard behind her curtain.

But he had. No sense dwelling on it.

I nodded. "Chuck will do the filming and set up the lighting. I also have an assistant who might be there. Her name is Zoey. Do you need me to arrange for hair and makeup for you?"

He stared at me like I was insane.

"Please tell me you've heard about the Kennedy-Nixon debate," I said.

"I'm not running for office," he replied. "I don't want to do this at all. But we made a deal. And you kept up your end of it. So we're doing this. And then you and me are done."

Why his last words felt like a tiny, poison-tipped arrow penetrating my heart, I didn't know (yes, I did, he was just that pretty...and he wanted to save the world, and had the means to do it, which was ludicrously attractive).

Even so, as evidenced by our conversation, he owned this building. He'd also purchased the building where my apartment was located. So, until he sold them, we'd never be *done* done.

I'd be under his thumb, always. Even when I signed one of those contracts, with his money and power, if he wanted to keep me under that thumb, he could.

"What time do you want us there on Saturday?" I asked.

I hoped he'd say five at night. The city lights I was certain he was afforded from his apartment would make an amazing backdrop for the segment.

It'd also be my get-out-of-dinner card.

"Nine," he answered.

"At night?" I asked, my brain still taken up with hopeful thoughts.

"No, of course not. In the morning," he replied.

"An evening interview would be a better visual and offer a cozier atmosphere for viewers," I pointed out.

"I don't want to get cozy with you, Elsa. I want to get this done so we can be done."

I fought a flinch and managed not to point out he was about to embark on some expensive upgrades to the space I rented from him (and really, what was that about?), so it didn't sound like he spoke truth.

"Right, we'll be there at nine," I agreed.

"You come in the front. The concierge will be expecting you. Your guy comes in the back. There's a freight elevator there where he can load in the equipment. There'll be someone waiting to assist him."

And now he's offering assistance.

I didn't comment on that.

I nodded.

"I'll be in touch about your alternate space. Get me those questions by five tonight."

That was his parting shot, because after he said it, he turned, opened the door, walked through it and out of my studio.

So when I muttered my irate, "Bye, bye, bossman," he wasn't around to hear it.

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