

“This is it, people. The defining moment in your lives; the very moment I unseat the current owner of Hastings Group and put him away for good.”

Liam circled the signet ring worn by a young man whose photograph was displayed on the large projector screen.

“This is mine,” he said. “Bring it to me, Brida.”

“You got it.”

Liam interlocked his fingers and sniggered to himself.

His big plan was finally coming together. There had long been no love lost between him and his “perfect” older brother, Leonard Hastings anyway.

It was time to finish him off.

That lucky bastard grew up with everything handed to him on a platter of gold—wealth, fame, the world-renowned family business, and the most important heirloom in the Hastings family passed down only to the most prominent of descendants—the eighteen-carat family crested signet ring.

Too bad he was about to lose it all—along with his life.

“Have you decided, Liam? On who to take his place?” quizzed Tony.

Liam bobbed his head slowly.

“I gave it a bit of thought over the weekend and I couldn’t find any reason to not take things over myself.”

Brida’s eyes dilated with shock. “You? Liam, I thought you said that...”

“I will not go through all of this just so that bug-eyed old fool can take my rightful place!” retorted Liam. “Rupert Hastings is one of the naysayers that dared to talk down on me every time he got the chance. I will not be handing my seat to him...”

“Liam, your uncle is human. That seat cannot be occupied by our kind; we agreed on that! The plan was to put him there and have him do everything at your whim...”

“The plan is what I fucking say it is! Now, just...do as I say and stick to your part of getting Leonard in between your thighs at the party and after.”

Appalled by the reek of condescension in his tone, Brida’s face flushed.

The room had fallen silent and Liam did the rest of his communication with his intense glare. Brida got his message clearly and backed off.

The back and forth was of no use.

However, just like everyone else in the room, except Liam, Brida feared that crowning himself, a vampire, King of the Hastings Empire was going to be Liam's greatest undoing—a colossal waste of her efforts.

The sudden change in plans was hardly unprecedented, though. Liam Hastings had always been unstable, consistently making up for his ineptitude and dire lack of charisma with reckless overambition.

Very often, she had given thought to why she chose *this* side.

Leonard Hastings was a complete gentleman and deserved none of what was about to be meted out to him. She didn't have to go this far in cahoots with his misanthropic younger brother to punish a man she once loved.

It wasn't fair.

And just when she started to have a rethink, she'd remember.

She'd remember what Leonard did to her all those years ago, and how much it hurt. How much she struggled to move on from it.

Leonard Hastings must die, she'd remind herself. He must pay for what he did. I don't care whose hands I have to hold for it to happen. I don't care how filthy those hands are.

She'd deal with Liam later after Leonard was out of the way. She was going to let him use her to take down the common enemy.

It wasn't any different for Liam. What he lacked in the art of scheming and its execution, Brida possessed, along with her irresistible charm and beauty as a tetra vampire. She was going to be his stepping stone to the power seat of Hastings Group.

Once and for all, he was going to prove his father and the world wrong by unmasking Leonard Hastings for the overprivileged nonentity that he was. A mere human. A dirtblood.

And unlike any other, the grand countdown to Leonard's death day would begin on his birthday. From meeting Brida to falling for her like he once did...to his life falling apart in pieces.

Liam would see to all of it.

And *nothing* could stop him this time.

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“This is my wife, Felicia Downing.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Felicia, thanks for coming,” said Leonard, extending his hand to Herbert’s smiling wife. Meets and greets were pretty much his itinerary for the entire night which had only just begun.

Classical music seemed to resonate well with all his party guests that night, so, Leonard let them have it. It only happened once every year, letting people into his home—just like his father did.

The occasion was his thirty-fourth birthday and he would not have it any other way. The grand banquet hall in Leonard’s mansion was swarming with guests, mostly relatives and business associates.

The air smelled of the exquisite colognes and fragrances, competing with the aroma of canapés and other delectables that were sitting pretty in the food trays going around.

Every year, Leonard threw a party of this magnitude as a getaway from his busy corporate life. He barely had time to attend parties and other socials all year long, and in the words of his mother:

“You work too hard, Lenny. You should take a cue from your brother and cut yourself some slack, hm?”

Sadly, she was no longer around to tell him that. His older sister, Lora was filling in her shoes quite nicely though.

“Where on earth is your tardy brother?” came Lora’s voice to his ears, only slightly thinner than their mother’s.

Leonard turned around and there she was, approaching him draped in her very elaborate onyx velvet thigh-high slit dress, a glass of champagne in hand.

“He’s more your brother than mine, and you know it,” laughed Leonard, greeting Lora with a cheek kiss.

“I told him to be here on time. It’s the very least he can do now that he’s ruined things with Annalise.”

“Please don’t bring up Annalise when he gets here; you know how...emotional he gets.”

“Ugh, ‘emotional’ my fat ass, he made us lose millions of dollars because he could not grow a fucking pair and get a grip on his relationship with her. He deserves to be reminded painfully of his foolishness until he’s old and grey,” replied Lora, helping herself to a sip of champagne afterward.

Times like this were when Leonard all but wished that he could snap his fingers and change everything about his relationship with Liam for better.

It had taken him a second too long to realize how different thing could’ve been if only Liam were given more than one chance—but again, that wasn’t up to him.

It had never been up to him. A second chance was a gift that only *that* man could've given while he was alive.

Unfortunately, their father, Lord Jameson Hastings was not a believer in second chances.

One shot was more than enough generosity in his rigid books. The instant the man figured that his son Liam was not worthy of a spot in the vast Hastings Empire, Jameson discarded him like filth and was not subtle about it.

While Leonard and Lora thoroughly enjoyed the benefits of their proven competence in the family business, Liam took to globetrotting—all to be out of his estranged father's sight.

"Liam's a fool," Jameson would say to his favorite children. "I will never have anything to do with one so irresponsible. He's no son of mine."

Leonard had always been out to mend bridges between his family and its errant black sheep, but things weren't so simple.

Flanked by an unforgiving father and a sister who did not give a hoot about family intricacies, it was harder to reach out to Liam. In a matter of years, a lot of water had passed under the ruined bridge.

"I just want tonight to go on smoothly without any drama, can you do that for me, Lora?" implored Leonard.

Lora downed the last gulp of her drink and rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Sure, birthday boy. But only because you asked nicely."

Leonard chuckled and mouthed a thank you.

The music in the background faded away to a brief still, and the grand piano at a corner of the room came to life, drawing all attention to the tuxedoed pianist.

Silky hair, designer tux, and a tacky version of *Fur Elise* emanating from the ivory keys? It was Liam Hastings for sure.

"Dad spent all that money on music classes when we were kids and he still can't get past basic Beethoven," teased Lora.

"Ha-ha, like him or not, Liam *does* know how to make a compelling entrance," Leonard said. "Our very own Ludwig Van Hastings."

"You give him too much credit."

"You give him far too little."

Lora sighed in agreement. "I guess he needs a bit of both. I'm going to get some more champagne."

Liam's rather subpar performance was over-rewarded with resounding applause, and the background classical music struck up again while guests returned to their conversations and merriment.

"Happy birthday, big man!" Liam said, advancing toward his brother with his arms spread wide enough for an embrace. "That performance was for you."

Leonard gladly took it, and a long embrace.

"Good to have you here, Liam. Lora and I were just wondering when you'd show up."

"You mean 'if' I'd show up?" Liam asked with his eyes discreetly scanning the room as if looking for someone.

"No, I mean 'when.' There was no way in hell you were not coming to my party, was there?"

Liam's lips widened with a casual smile, and he could not restrain himself from stealing occasional glances down at the signet ring that graced his brother's pinky finger, glimmering under the light.

"Well, none of that matters now. I'm here, bro. I got you a present too."

"Oh hell no, not another one of those. Not this year, please..."

"Ha-ha, calm the fuck down, Lenny. It's a decent present, I swear on my father's life."

"He's dead, Liam," interrupted an approaching Lora. "And some nerve you have, swearing on his name."

"It's nice to see you too, Lora. I almost forgot you haven't joined him..."

Leonard had had enough already. "Guys, can we please not do this..."

"It is so unfair that you do this every time he draws first blood, Leo," argued Lora with a sip of champagne. "The kid clearly wants war."

"Ooh, what are you gonna do now, big sis? Whip out your gigantic machine gun?" asked Liam playfully.

"You know this. And pop gigantic pellets up in your pretty face. Then you can join *your* father instead of me and give the world some fucking peace."

Leonard had been around Lora and Liam long enough to no longer be affected by their incessant trash talk episodes, but there was no getting used to it. As usual, all he could do was wait for it to be over—soon.

"Wooooaaaaahhhhh," Liam said, clapping slowly and loudly. "You win this round, ma'am."

Lora flipped her ponytail proudly and hugged Liam.

“A walkover.”

“Granted you by my generous concession,” said Liam. “Okay, let’s stop before Lenny explodes in his birthday suit.”

Leonard cast at his brother a grimace. “I assume you don’t mean this…”

“Relax, prude. It’s your birthday and you’re wearing a suit. That is all I meant,” Liam quickly explained, to Lora’s amusement.

“You two need to stay away from each other for the rest of the night,” said Leonard for his sanity.

“Yeah, before she attempts to annoy me by bringing up Annalise. I know it’s on your to-do list, Lora.”

Lora shrugged. “See? His words, not mine,” she said to Leonard.

“Talking behind my back, I see? What else did you gossips discuss?” quizzed Liam, snatching Lora’s half-empty glass for himself.

“Besides your catastrophic piano performance? Nothing,” said Lora.

And in the nick of time, Leonard’s gaze struck upon a familiar face; a young woman that strutted into the hall.

She seemed to be moving in slow-mo, or perhaps it was the depths of his mesmerization. Voices of his brother and sister became indistinct echoes, along with those of others in the hall.

All that mattered to him at that moment; visually and audibly, was this uninvited guest.

Skin like glass; showed off in a halter neck silk dress that matched her red lips, blonde hair chignonned to perfection, and an elegant gait.

Five long years had passed since he last laid eyes on this beauty, but how could he ever forget her?

Nothing about her magnetic aura had changed, even from afar. She still had that graceful neck, that killer, intriguing smolder in her hazel eyes, and that presence that changed the air in the room whenever she walked in.

“Brida,” he said aloud, unintentionally.

And like a sheep lured to slaughter, he hurried in her direction.