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**KING
OF
SLOTH**

ANA HUANG



PIATKUS

LBRIS

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**KING
OF
SLOTH**

CHAPTER 1

Sloane



BREAKING INTO A TEN-THOUSAND-DOLLAR-A-NIGHT Greek villa hadn't been in my plans for the day, but plans changed and people adapted, especially when they had clients who insisted on making their life as difficult as possible.

My knees scraped against concrete as I hauled myself onto the terrace ledge and over the railing. If I ruined my brand-new Stella Alonso dress over this, I'd kill him, bring him back to clean up the mess, then kill him again.

Luckily for him, I landed on the terrace without incident and slipped back into the heels I'd tossed over earlier. The heavy drum of my heartbeats followed me to the sliding glass door, where I tapped the master key I'd "borrowed" from one of the maids against the card reader.

I would've gone through the front door, but it was too exposed. The back terrace was the only way.

The card reader whirred, and for a single terrifying second, I thought it wouldn't open. Then the reader flashed green, and I allowed myself a breath of relief before I set my jaw again.

Breaking in was the easy part. Getting *him* to another country by sunset was another.

I made a quick detour to the kitchen, then crossed the living room to the primary suite. I winced when I saw the empty beer bottles littering the kitchen counter, and it took every ounce of willpower not to toss them in the recycling bin, sterilize the marble, and spray the room with air freshener.

Stay focused. My professional *and* personal reputations were on the line.

The villa was cool and quiet despite the early-afternoon sun splashing through the windows, and the bedroom was cooler and quieter still.

Perhaps that was why, when I walked to the bed and unceremoniously dumped a large bowl of ice-cold water over its slumbering occupant, the speed of his response startled a rare gasp out of me.

A strong hand shot out and grasped my wrist. The empty bowl clattered to the ground, and the room tilted as he yanked me down, rolled over, and pinned me against the bed before the gasp fully left my mouth.

Xavier Castillo stared down at me, his handsome face etched with a scowl.

The only son of Colombia's wealthiest man (and my least cooperative client) was usually laid-back to a fault, but there was nothing laid-back about the way his forearm pressed against my throat or the one hundred eighty pounds of solid muscle trapping me beneath him.

His scowl relaxed as anger gave way to recognition and a touch of horror. "Sloane?"

"That *is* my name." I lifted my chin, trying not to focus on how warm he was compared to the damp mattress against my back. "Now, if you could release me immediately, it would be appreciated. I'm ruining a seven-hundred-dollar dress."

"*Mierda.*" He spit out the curse and relaxed his hold on my neck so I could get up. "What the *hell* are you doing here?"

"My job." I pushed him off me and stood. Was it just me, or was it exponentially colder now than it'd been five minutes ago? "It's the twelfth. You know where you're supposed to be, and it's not here." I glared at him, daring him to argue.

"I thought you were an intruder. I could've hurt you." Now that we'd established I wasn't here to rob or kidnap him, a familiar grin replaced his frown. Xavier retook his spot on the bed, the picture of insouciance. "Technically, you *are* an intruder, but a very beautiful one. If you wanted to join me in bed, you only had to say so. No need to go to all this trouble." He arched an eyebrow at the bowl on the floor. "How'd you get in anyway?"

"I stole a master key, and don't try to distract me." After three years of working with Xavier, I was used to his tricks. "It's one in the afternoon. Your jet is waiting for us at the airport. If we leave in the next half hour, we'll make it to London in time to get ready before tonight's gala."

"Great plan." Xavier stretched his arms over his head and yawned. "Except for one problem—I'm not going."

My nails dug into my palms before I caught myself. *Breathe. Remember, murdering a client is considered unprofessional.*

"You *will* get out of bed," I said, my voice chilly enough to freeze the droplets of water lingering on his skin. "You will board that jet, attend the gala with a smile, and stay for the entirety of the event like a good representative of the Castillo family because if you don't, I will make it my personal mission to ensure you never have another second of peace. I will crash every party you attend, warn off any woman stupid enough to fall into your orbit, and blacklist any of your friends who enable your worst impulses from my events. I can make your life a living hell, so *don't* make an enemy out of me."

Xavier yawned again.

This had been our dynamic since Xavier's father hired me

three years ago, right before Xavier moved from Los Angeles to New York, but I was done going easy on him.

“So, you’re my new publicist.” Xavier kicked back in his chair and propped his feet on my desk. White teeth flashed against tanned skin, and his eyes sparkled with a slyness that made me bristle.

Ten seconds after meeting my most lucrative client, and I already hated him.

“Remove your feet from my desk and sit like a proper adult.” I didn’t care that Alberto Castillo was paying me triple my usual fee to look after his son. No one disrespected me in my own office. “Otherwise, you can leave and explain to your father why you got dropped by your publicist on the very first day. I imagine that’ll have a negative impact on your cash flow.”

“Ah, you’re one of those.” He acquiesced, but his smile hardened at the mention of his father. “Uptight rule follower. Got it. You should’ve introduced yourself that way instead of with your name.”

My favorite pen cracked from the force of my grip.

I wasn’t a superstitious person, but even I could tell that didn’t bode well for the future of our relationship.

I’d been right.

I let him slide when it came to certain things because the Castillos were my biggest contract, but my job was to keep his family’s reputation pristine, not kiss the heir’s ass.

Xavier was a grown man. It was time he acted like it.

“That’s quite a threat,” he drawled. *“Every party and woman? You must really like me.”*

He slunk out of bed with the lazy grace of a panther awakening from slumber. A pair of gray sweatpants rode low on his hips, revealing golden-brown skin and a V cut one wouldn’t expect from someone who spent the majority of his days partying and

sleeping. Inky tattoos swirled up his bare chest and shoulders and down his arms in intricate patterns.

If it were anyone else, I would’ve admired the raw masculine beauty on display, but this was Xavier Castillo. The day I admired anything except his commitment to non-commitment was the day I could somehow physically cry again.

“Don’t worry, Luna,” he said, catching my scrutiny with a small grin. “I won’t tell your other clients I’m your favorite.”

Sometimes he called me by my actual name. Other times he called me Luna. It wasn’t my nickname, middle name, or any name close to Sloane, but he refused to tell me why and I’d given up on getting him to stop or explain long ago.

“Be serious for once,” I said. “The event is honoring *your* father.”

“Even more reason not to go. It’s not like my old man will be there to accept the award.” Xavier’s smile didn’t budge, but his eyes flickered with a spark of danger. “He’s dying, remember?”

The words crashed between us and sucked all the oxygen out of the room as we stared at each other, his unflappable calm a rock against my mounting frustration.

The Castillos’ father-son relationship was notoriously thorny, but Alberto Castillo hired me to manage their reputation, not their personal issues—that was, until what happened behind closed doors spilled into the public eye.

“People already think you’re a good-for-nothing trust fund brat for shirking your responsibilities after your father was diagnosed.” I didn’t mince words. “If you miss an event honoring him as Philanthropist of the Year, the media will eat you alive.”

“They already do, and *honor*?” Xavier raised his eyebrows. “The man writes a check for a couple million every year, and he not only gets a tax write-off but also fawning praise for being a philanthropist. You and I both know the award doesn’t mean

shit. Anyone with deep enough pockets can get it. Besides..." He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "Mykonos is way more fun than another stuffy gala. You should stay. The ocean air will be good for you."

Dammit, I recognized that tone. It was his "you can put a gun to my head and I still won't cave because it'll piss you off" tone. I'd heard it more times than I cared to count.

I did a quick mental calculation.

I hadn't gotten to where I was in my career by fighting losing battles. I *needed* to be in London tonight, and our window for a timely departure was rapidly shrinking. Missing my rendezvous was not an option, but if Xavier stayed in Greece, my job required me to stay as well and look after him.

Since I didn't have the time to guilt, threaten, or persuade him into doing what I wanted like I usually did, I was left with one last resort.

A bargain.

I crossed my arms, mirroring his stance. "Let's hear it."

His brows arched higher.

"Your condition," I said. "The one thing you want in exchange for attending the awards ceremony. Anything involving sex, drugs, or illegal activities is off the table. Other than that, I'm willing to bargain."

His eyes narrowed. He hadn't expected me to give in so easily, and if I didn't need to be in London by eight p.m., I wouldn't have. But I couldn't miss my date, so a deal with the devil it was.

"Fine." Xavier's cheeks dimpled with his signature smile, though a shadow of suspicion remained on his face. "Since you're so forthcoming, I will be too. I want a vacation."

"You're already on vacation."

"Not me. You." He pushed off the wall, his steps languid yet deliberate as he crossed the room and stopped mere inches from

me. "I'll attend the gala if you promise to join me on vacation after. Three weeks in Spain. No work, just play."

The request soared from so far out of left field I gave myself whiplash trying to follow it. "You want me to take *three weeks* off work?"

"Yes."

"You're out of your mind."

I'd taken a total of two vacation days since I started Kensington PR, my boutique public relations firm, six years ago. The first was for my grandmother's funeral. The second was when I was hospitalized with pneumonia (chasing paparazzi in the dead of winter would do that to you). Even then, I'd kept up with emails on my phone.

I was work. Work was me. The thought of abandoning it for even a minute made my stomach cramp.

"That's the deal." Xavier shrugged. "Take it or leave it."

"Forget it. It's not happening."

"Fine." He turned toward the bed again. "In that case, I'm going back to sleep. Feel free to stay or fly home. It doesn't matter to me."

My teeth clenched.

That bastard. He *knew* I wouldn't fly home and leave him here to sow chaos in my absence. With my luck, he'd throw a public orgy on the beach tonight just to set tongues wagging and drive home the fact he wasn't at the gala when he should be.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. We needed to leave in the next fifteen minutes if we were to make it to the gala in time.

If it weren't for my eight o'clock date in London, I might have called Xavier's bluff, but...

Dammit.

"I can do two days," I said, relenting. One weekend wouldn't kill me, right?

"Two weeks."

"One week."

"Deal." His dimples blinded me again, and I realized I'd been tricked. He'd deliberately started with a higher offer to barter me down to his original plan.

Unfortunately, it was too late for regrets, and when he held out his hand, I had no choice but to shake on the time frame I'd proposed.

That was the worst part about Xavier. He was smart, but he applied it to all the wrong things.

"Don't look at me like I killed your pet fish," he drawled. "I'm taking you on vacation. It'll be fun. Trust me."

His smile widened at my icy stare.

One week in Spain with one of my least favorite people on the planet. What could possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER 2

Xavier



NOTHING BRIGHTENED MY DAY MORE THAN RILING Sloane up. She was so predictable in her responses and so spectacular in her anger, and I loved seeing her ice-queen façade melt long enough to reveal a glimpse of the real person underneath.

It didn't happen often, but when it did, I added it to the mental drawer where I collected all things Sloane.

"Ah, you're one of those." I flicked a gaze over my new publicist's tight bun and tailored dress. "Uptight rule follower. Got it. You should've introduced yourself that way instead of with your name."

The glare she bestowed on me could've leveled an entire city block.

Objectively, Sloane was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever met. Blue eyes, long legs, symmetrical face...Michelangelo himself couldn't have sculpted a better female form.

Too bad none of that came with a sense of humor.

She said something sharp in response, but I'd already tuned her out.

Fuck my father for forcing me into this stupid arrangement. If it weren't for my inheritance, I'd tell him to piss off.

Publicists were glorified babysitters, and I didn't want or need a babysitter. Besides, as pleasing to the eye as she was, I could already tell Sloane was going to be a major buzzkill.

That'd been our first meeting. My initial animosity toward her had run out of oxygen since then, leaving...hell, I didn't know. Curiosity. Attraction. Frustration.

Much more complicated emotions than hostility, unfortunately.

I didn't know when the switch flipped, but I wished I could go back and *unflip* it. I'd much rather hate her than be intrigued by her.

"Stand up straight," Sloane said without taking her eyes off the man beelining toward us. "You're at a black-tie event, not the beach. Try to *pretend* you want to be here."

"There's alcohol, food, and a gorgeous woman by my side. Of course I want to be here," I drawled, telling the truth in the first part and lying my ass off in the second.

My gaze skimmed over her quickly enough to escape her notice yet long enough to imprint the image in my mind. On anyone else, her simple black gown would've been boring, but Sloane could wear a grocery bag and still blow everyone else out of the water.

The silk skimmed her lean frame, highlighting her flawless skin and smooth, bare shoulders. She'd swept her hair into a fancier version of its usual bun, and other than a pair of small diamond-drop earrings, she wore no accessories and barely any makeup. She'd obviously dressed with the intention of blending in, but she could no more blend into a crowd than a jewel could blend into mud.

I'll be honest—I hadn't expected her to accept my deal. I'd hoped she would, but she was married to her job and the gala wasn't *that* important. It was a run-of-the-mill event honoring my father, not the Legacy Ball or a royal wedding.

The fact she would give up a week of precious work time in

exchange for my attendance here? It reeked of fishiness, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

I'd been dying to get Sloane away from the office for a while. She was wound so tight she was bound to explode, and I didn't want to be there when it happened. She needed a release. Plus, the trip was the perfect opportunity to corrupt her—get her to let her hair down (literally and figuratively), loosen up, have some fun. I would *pay* to see her lounging on the beach like a normal person instead of making people cry on the phone.

Sloane Kensington needed a vacation more than anyone else I knew, and I needed—

"Xavier!" Eduardo finally reached us. My father's best friend and interim CEO of the Castillo Group clapped a hand on my shoulder, interrupting my thoughts before they strayed down a dangerous path. "I didn't expect to see you here, *mijo*."

"Me neither," I said dryly. "Good to see you, *tío*."

He wasn't my biological uncle, but he might as well have been. He and my father had been friends since childhood, and he'd been one of his most trusted advisors before my father fell ill. Eduardo was currently running the ship until the board made a final decision on whether to wait for my father to get better or find a new permanent CEO.

Eduardo turned to Sloane and gave her a customary Colombian cheek kiss. "Sloane, you look lovely," he said. "I assume I have you to thank for this one showing up. I know how hard it is to wrangle him, eh? When he was a kid, we called him *pequeño toro*. Stubborn as a little bull."

Her earlier ire melted into a professional smile. "It's my job. I'm happy to do it."

She was as good a liar as I was.

The three of us chatted for a bit until another guest pulled Eduardo away. He was accepting the Philanthropist of the Year

award on behalf of my father since I'd refused to do it, but everyone seemed eager to talk business instead of charity with him.

Typical.

I caught Sloane checking her watch again as we wound our way toward our table. "That's the dozenth time you've looked at your watch since we arrived," I said. "If you're that eager to leave, we can skip the boring ceremony and get hammered at the bar."

"I don't get *hammered*, and if you must know, I'm meeting someone in an hour. I trust you can behave yourself after I leave." Despite her cool tone, visible tension lined her jaw and shoulders.

"Meeting someone this late in London?" We settled in our seats just as the emcee took the stage and applause filled the room. "Don't tell me you have a hot date."

"Whether I do or don't is none of your business." She picked up the calligraphed menu card and scanned it for walnuts, no doubt. Sloane had a strange vendetta against them (and it wasn't an allergy; I'd checked).

"I'm surprised you find time to date." The emcee began his welcome speech. Reason told me to drop the issue, but I couldn't. There was something about Sloane that always made reason fly out the window. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"Xavier." She dropped the menu and looked at me. "Now's not the time. We don't want a repeat of the Cannes fiasco."

I rolled my eyes. Get caught dozing off *once* during a major awards speech and I was suddenly the bad guy. If these types of events weren't so damn boring, maybe I'd have an easier time staying awake.

People didn't know entertainment these days. Who wanted stuffy elevator music and the same boring drinks they served at every gala? No one. If I cared enough, I'd give the organizers a few pointers, but I didn't.

The servers brought out the food, which I ignored in favor of more champagne as the ceremony trudged on.

I tuned it out and ruminated on what type of guy Sloane might be seeing. In all our years working together, I'd never seen her with or heard her mention a date, but obviously, she had to have been with someone.

She was prickly as hell, but she was also beautiful, smart, and accomplished. Even now, there were multiple men sneaking peeks at her from surrounding tables.

I downed my drink and glared at one of them until he looked away, his face red. Sloane was my date in name only, but it was bad form for other people to ogle her when she'd come with me. Did no one observe proper etiquette anymore?

The room erupted into its loudest round of applause. Eduardo stood, and I realized the emcee had just announced my father as the organization's Philanthropist of the Year.

"Clap," Sloane said without looking at me. A tight smile affixed her face. "The cameras are watching."

"When *aren't* they watching?" I clapped half-heartedly for Eduardo and Eduardo only.

"It's my honor to accept this award on Alberto's behalf tonight," he said. "As you know, he's been my friend and business partner for more years than I can count..."

Sloane glanced at her watch and gathered her belongings when Eduardo wrapped up his thankfully short speech.

I straightened. "You're leaving already?" It'd only been fifty minutes, not an hour.

"In case there's traffic. I trust you'll behave in my absence." She emphasized her last sentence with a warning stare.

"The minute you leave, I'm throwing my drink in another guest's face and hijacking the music system," I said. "Sure you don't want to stay?"