

PRIVATE  
POWER & POSSESSION  
ENCOUNTERS

FORTUNE'S

*Edge*

RYAN MOORE

# Private Encounters: Power & Possession

*FORTUNE'S EDGE*

*by*

*Ryan Moore*

## ***A Power & Possession Story***

Julian Winslow isn't supposed to be at the poker table—he's only there to meet a potential investor for his struggling green tech start-up. But when the meeting gets delayed, he's pulled into a private high-stakes game hosted by billionaire venture capitalist Weston Price, a man known for breaking people slowly—with charm.

Julian doesn't trust money. Weston doesn't play unless he's sure he'll win. What begins as playful banter turns into a wager: a weekend at Weston's remote estate. If Julian wins, he walks with funding. If he loses—he stays the night. No rules. No escape.

The cards are on the table. But in Weston's world, the real stakes are never the ones you see coming.

# **Copyright ©2025 by Ryan Moore**

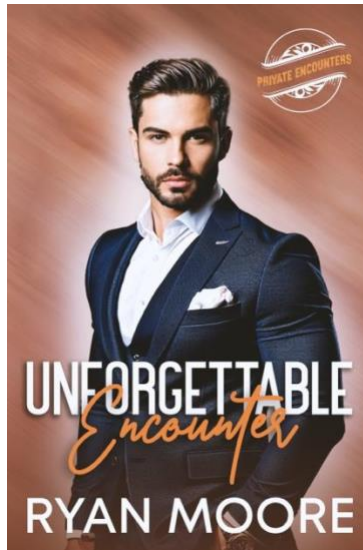
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

# Free Gift!

Thank you for buying this Private Encounters story. As a token of appreciation, I have a special gift for you. By joining my mailing list, you'll receive a complimentary copy of "Unforgettable Encounter" along with exclusive back stories featuring the characters from this story and others. Stay in the loop with the latest releases, giveaways, contests, cover reveals, and much more.

Rest assured, your privacy is paramount to me. Your details will not be shared or sold to any third parties, and you'll only receive book-related content.



## **One night. One dance. One unforgettable encounter.**

Grayson Hart wasn't supposed to be at the Westwood masquerade. Crashing an elite gala was a risk, but he never expected Logan Westwood—a powerful billionaire who sees right through him.

A stolen moment turns into a night of passion, but by morning, Grayson is gone. Logan never lets anything slip through his fingers—and this time, he's not letting Grayson go.

Unforgettable Encounter is a seductive MM romance packed with sizzling chemistry, high-stakes tension, and a love that refuses to be forgotten

**SIGN UP TO RECEIVE YOUR  
FREE COPY NOW!**

## **Contents:**

Chapter 1: Opening Hand

Chapter 2: The Driver

Chapter 3: Blinds

Chapter 4: Raise

Chapter 5: All In

Chapter 6: Second Deal

Chapter 7: Fortune's Edge

## Chapter 1: Opening Hand

When Julian stepped into the Craven Club, it was everything he'd expected—and more.

The club's dark, velvet-lined walls seemed to swallow sound, leaving only the faint hum of whispered conversations and the clink of highball glasses. The place wasn't just a venue for games—it was a temple for the rich, a room where power wasn't flaunted but quietly held. The air was thick with the unspoken pretentiousness of it all, wrapped in exclusivity, the kind of place where every glance was a calculated move.

He was ten minutes early for his meeting with the investor who was supposed to help him secure the funding that would take his clean-tech start-up from the brink of failure to something real. The kind of funding that could change everything.

But as the minutes ticked by, his hope began to fray. The investor wasn't here, and he received no message explaining the reason why. He could feel the disappointment building in his chest, but he pushed it down.

The host of the club had been curt when he arrived. The investor was "delayed indefinitely," he'd said, offering no more than that, no apology, no reason. Just an unspoken dismissal.

Julian didn't know what he had expected, but it was certainly not this.

He stood in the middle of the room, caught between the desire to leave and the need to stay. His fingers drummed against the surface of the counter beside him as he assessed the room, taking in the men seated around it, each one poised, calculating, and assured.

He could play, he supposed. He wasn't all that bad at cards, but he didn't know how much the people here were putting on the table, and he didn't have much left to lose after trying to do whatever it took to keep his start-up afloat.

The walls seemed to hum with a quiet, invisible tension, the kind that made Julian's throat tighten. A much larger game was happening at every table—here, it wasn't about cards or poker chips. It was about control. Every gesture, every word, was a subtle power play.

No one seemed in a hurry to speak, to move, to do anything that might reveal their thoughts. And yet, the silence had its own rhythm. It was the kind of place where even waiting felt like a calculated maneuver.

As he stood there, unsure whether to stay or go, his gaze drifted across the room, settling on a figure.

Weston Price.

Julian knew him, of course—everyone with a cellphone did. Weston was an extremely successful venture capitalist, brilliant and cunning and absolutely loaded. His empire extended all around the globe. The tabloids called him a billionaire, but there were whispers in certain circles that he was one of the wealthiest people in the world, richer than kings and queens and the most corrupt politicians.

He wasn't seated at a table, not quite part of the crowd. He merely stood near the back of the room, watching, but it wasn't the kind of watchfulness that simply made you feel observed. It was the kind that made you feel like you were under a microscope, and every inch of you was measured, dissected, and criticized.

His dark eyes locked onto Julian's without a flicker. It was immediate, unsettling. A slight tilt of Weston's head signaled recognition, but nothing more. There was no smile, no friendly gesture. Just a stillness that commanded attention.

For a moment, Julian felt the urge to look away, to break the stare, but he didn't. He stood his ground. Weston's gaze lingered a second longer before he turned back to the rest of the room, as if Julian had been nothing more than a passing thought.

The host approached Julian again, slipping a folded note into his hand. "For you, sir."

He unfolded it, and his brow furrowed as he read the simple message: *"If you're staying, please take a seat."*

*It couldn't hurt*, Julian thought.

He walked toward a table missing two players, his footsteps measured and quiet on the plush carpet.

It was too late for Julian to change course when he realized Weston had arrived at the same table, filling in the final empty chair. He didn't look up as Julian approached, but the latter felt the air shift around him.

Weston was tall, broad-shouldered, with a presence that told Julian he dominated any room he entered. There was an almost unnatural stillness to him, a quiet that hummed beneath the surface, the kind that made people hold their breath just to see if he'd move.

His dark eyes—sharp, too, in a way that made people uncomfortable—flitted over the room, taking in every detail, and then rested on Julian. His lips twitched at the corners, but the smile never reached his eyes.

There was nothing open about Weston. Nothing inviting. Just pure intimidation.

When he finally gestured toward the empty seat across from him, his hand moved slowly, almost deliberately. No question. No invitation. Just the expectation that Julian would sit.

And Julian, despite his initial impulse to refuse, did. His body settled into the chair, the velvet cushion creaking under him, the weight of the gesture dragging at him.

Weston's gaze never left him, studying him with a quiet intensity that almost felt like a test.

"Let's pass the time," Weston's voice came low, almost a murmur.

It was the kind of voice that didn't feel like an invitation so much as an order wrapped in a friendly tone. The words didn't land as light as they should have. There was something beneath them, something more than just idle conversation.

Julian wasn't sure if it was the way Weston's mouth curled slightly or the way his eyes studied him from behind those narrow slits, but it didn't sit well with him. Still, his pride wouldn't allow him to back away. He couldn't let this man see how much those four simple words affected him.

"I'm not here to waste time," Julian said under his breath as he took his seat.

"Good," Weston replied, his smile thin. "I don't plan to."

Julian's fingers clenched momentarily around the edge of the table before he let them fall to his side.

The game began, the shuffle of cards cutting through the air. The other players at the table were quiet, focused on their hands, but Julian could feel them—feel the power shift between Weston and himself, feel it like a quiet hum that reverberated through the room.

Weston played his first hand with quiet ease. Julian couldn't help but watch the way he moved, the slow, deliberate way his fingers brushed over his cards, the way he folded without hesitation. Every move was calculated, every gesture a part of a larger design Julian couldn't yet see.

The next hand was quicker, a test of Julian's resolve. Weston won it, but Julian didn't flinch. He held his ground, never showing how much the loss had stung. He wasn't a natural at poker, but he wasn't an easy man to break either.

The third hand was different. Julian won. It wasn't flashy, no dramatic moment, but he won. The cards were dealt, and he felt the silence fall in the room once again. Others were starting to watch. The other two players at the table might as well have been invisible.

His victory wasn't celebrated. Weston didn't even look surprised. But something about it made the older man pause—something in the way Julian's fingers gripped the cards a little tighter, something in the slight shift of his posture.

"I underestimated you," Weston said, his voice a whisper, but sharp all the same.

It wasn't praise, but it also wasn't an apology. It was an acknowledgment—but of what, Julian wasn't sure.

Weston leaned back slightly in his chair, his eyes never leaving Julian.

"I think we're done with child's play here," Weston said, his fingers tapping lightly on the edge of his glass. The other players kept silent, sensing the change, the subtle shift in the air.

Then Weston spoke again. "A weekend at my estate."

The new wager was proposed as if it were nothing more than a simple proposition. Julian didn't know whether he should've been scared or frustrated.

"If you win, we talk money. I know who you are; I hear your start-up could use a donation. If I win..." Weston let the words hang in the air, a challenge, a dare. "You stay."

The room went still. The air thickened.

Julian's heartbeat quickened, but his face remained impassive. He was surprised Weston even knew who he was in the first place, but he supposed Weston knew everything.

This wasn't just a game anymore. This wasn't about the cards or the money or the funding. This was about something else entirely—about power, about control. Weston had made his move, and now Julian had to decide: would he accept the challenge, or walk away?

The players around the table held their breath, waiting for Julian's response. The silence stretched on, tense and electrifying.

He met Weston's eyes, locked in a silent battle of wills, and in that moment, Julian knew there was no turning back. His pride surged within him, and he nodded once, sharply.

"Cut the deck."

The dealer's hands were steady and precise as he laid out the final cards on the green felt with an almost ritualistic air. The atmosphere in the room grew strained, settling into each corner like a slow-moving fog.

The other players had retreated into themselves, no longer participants but silent spectators in a game that had long ceased to be about the cards themselves. In this final moment, it was only Weston and Julian. Nothing else mattered.

Weston's gaze never left Julian, unwavering and sharp, like a hawk watching its prey. He leaned in, just enough to suggest proximity without overstepping, his presence barely contained within the confines of his tailored suit.

There was no aggression in the way he moved, no purposeful effort to intimidate; only a quiet observation, the kind that left Julian feeling like he was being peeled apart, layer by layer. His every motion—no matter how small—was being cataloged in Weston's mind, processed, judged.

Julian, for all his restraint, could feel his pulse quicken, a subtle thrum beneath the surface of his calm. His hands rested on the table, his fingers slightly spread, trying to keep the tremor from betraying him. His eyes flickered over the cards before him, calculating, reading, trying to hold back the swelling rush of thoughts that wanted to flood him, as he fought to keep his face still.

The cards moved slowly, the moments stretching thin like taut wire. Each pass of the dealer's hand, each slight shift in posture from Weston, felt like a slow burn in the pit of Julian's stomach.

The game—what little of it remained—was no longer a contest of skill or chance. It had become a dance, one Julian could never hope to lead, but which he still had to follow.

No words were spoken for what felt like an eternity. The only sound in the room was the soft shuffle of the dealer's cards and the soft clink of ice in crystal glasses. The tension wasn't loud or brash, but exacting, like a fine-tuned instrument played on the edge of silence.

Every glance, every shift of weight, was part of the performance. And Julian was being drawn deeper into it, whether he wanted to be or not.

Finally, Weston revealed his hand. Royal flush.

Julian's breath hitched in his chest, the briefest tremor catching him off guard. He looked down on his own cards. Straight flush. *I'm fucked.*

He'd known the odds. He'd seen the hand unfold. He even allowed himself the faintest wave of hope. But even so, there it was—the final loss. Barely. It was the smallest of margins, the faintest of edges, and yet it was enough.

He had lost.

Not just the hand, no. He lost *everything*. His pride, his resolve, the tenuous control he'd held over himself. Gone.

The room didn't erupt. No one cheered, no one sighed in relief. The players around the table, the dealer, their crowd of spectators had all ceased to be part of this moment. It was just Weston and Julian, and the rest of the world outside this cocoon of tension was irrelevant. This wasn't about cards anymore. Maybe it had never been.

Weston, unperturbed by the outcome, didn't gloat. There was no smug smile, no mocking tone. His voice, when it came, was low and clean, almost indifferent, but still carrying that quiet command.

"Be ready by seven tomorrow." The words were as final as the snap of a closing door.

Julian's hands curled into fists. The rage inside him was hot and intense, the kind of fury that burned quick and sharp. But beneath that heat was something darker, something more dangerous: curiosity.

None of it made any sense. Why Julian? What did Weston want with him? What was the man trying to prove? And more importantly, what was Julian willing to lose to find out?

He stood up, his chair scraping softly against the floor. The motion was controlled, but his body felt taut, like a coil waiting to snap. He gathered his things in silence. His eyes never left Weston as he moved, but Weston did not return the gaze.

Instead, he stared into the middle distance, as though already lost in the next game, the next move, the next test.

Julian turned away, his steps measured, each one a small defiance of the pull he felt drawing him back. But as he reached the door, he pondered on how Weston hadn't watched him leave. He didn't need to.

Weston already knew Julian would hold up his end of the deal.

## Chapter 2: The Driver

Julian stood in his apartment, staring at the small, open bag on his bed.

It was nothing more than a carryall, the kind that could be thrown together in a moment's notice. A lie he told himself: he wouldn't need anything more. Not for this. Not for the weekend, anyway.

The bag was stuffed with the essentials—a few shirts, toiletries, a notebook he would probably never open. He couldn't tell if his reluctance to pack stemmed from the situation or from the growing sense of unease curling in his gut.

Either way, it didn't matter. He wasn't staying long. That was the story, and Julian was good at telling himself stories.

His phone lay still on the countertop. No new messages. Nothing from the original investor, the one who had invited him into this world, then vanished. Silence spoke louder than any words.

Julian realized just then that the meeting had been bait. Weston had probably known it, planned it, and Julian had allowed himself to be reeled in.

But the question remained. *Why?*

He stood for a moment in front of the window, half-drawn blinds casting lines of soft light across his face.

The view of Brooklyn was quieter in the early hours, the streets empty save for the occasional car passing. The rhythm of the city was slow as the world took its time waking up. The skyline loomed in the distance, the jagged silhouette of Manhattan breaking the horizon. He'd seen it a thousand times, and yet now it felt as though he was already leaving it behind, like perhaps crossing the bridge would be the final step of a journey he hadn't agreed to take.

The low hum of an engine pulling up outside interrupted his thoughts. A sleek black car stopped in front of the building. Its hybrid engine settled quietly as it idled, as if it had no intention of ever being noticed.

Julian grabbed his bag, checked the room one final time, and left his apartment with the same reluctance that clung to him ever since the meeting was set in motion.

The driver didn't speak, offering only a silent nod as Julian slid into the backseat. The doors clicked shut with an almost imperceptible sound, sealing him in. The windows were tinted, the air inside sterile and cool. Nothing in the car invited conversation. Nothing in the world outside, either. Julian thought it fitting for someone like Weston.

The city fell away slowly, the buildings shrinking into the background as the car made its way through the quiet streets, heading toward the bridge.

Julian pulled his phone from his pocket, staring at it one last time. He wasn't sure if Weston's estate had signal. His thumb hovered over the screen before he sent off a final email to Alex, his business partner. A backup. Just in case.

There was no reply. No message came to confirm his suspicions. This was a game of chess, and Julian was the pawn.

The car slipped smoothly over the bridge, the Manhattan skyline shrinking in the rearview mirror. Julian couldn't help but glance back and watch as the city grew into a distant, fading mass of glass and steel.

The car ride continued in silence, one so firm it became oppressive. It was a silence designed to make one think, and Julian found himself doing as much, trying to discern the truth from the shifting smoke of his thoughts.

When the car came to a stop, Julian barely noticed. As abruptly as this whole situation had begun, the forest opened up suddenly around them. The trees parted, the earth exhaled, and there it was.

The estate loomed like a monument to cold ambition—sharp steel lines that sliced through the sky, stark black glass windows that revealed nothing of the inside. It was as if the house had materialized from nowhere, an absence of warmth, a structure formed of intention and dispassion. It made no apologies for existing, for dominating the land. It was pure mathematical architecture, bereft of humanity, nothing to soften the edges.

The long driveway ended in a smooth arc at the foot of the house, but there was no welcome at the gate, no sign of staff, no sign of anything but the house itself.

Weston stepped out of the front door without looking directly at Julian, moving with an assurance that only someone who had seen this all too many times could possess.

No words were exchanged as the car drove away, as Julian brushed past Weston and entered the space.

Inside, Julian was hit by the sterile, deliberate quiet of the space. The air smelled faintly of polished wood and metal, of something too clean. He moved through the house like a visitor in a gallery—a place to be admired but never touched. Everything was expensive, meticulously arranged, each piece of furniture an object devoid of history or heart. There was nothing here to suggest warmth, nothing that invited a person to linger.

Weston didn't offer a tour, didn't even pause to point out anything that could be of interest. He simply said, in that flat, almost bored voice, "Most guests never make it past the first night."

Julian didn't respond.

Instead, his gaze wandered across the room, landing on a painting that was more abstract geometry than art. He opened his mouth to speak, to ask something more, but Weston's smile was already there—a flash, something that told Julian all he needed to know.

Weston didn't need to say anything more. He was the master of the room. Julian was nothing but a guest.

The room that was to be his was minimalist to the point of cruelty. White walls, black furniture. The bed was stark, a slab of polished wood with black sheets, its angles harsh against the softness of a human body. The closet stood open, empty except for a few garments—an organized nothingness that suggested it would remain that way for the duration of his stay.

Weston turned on the lights, his hand never touching the switch, just a casual wave that sent the overhead fixture glowing. He pointed toward the closet, his eyes not quite meeting Julian's.

"Make yourself comfortable."

Then, without another word, he turned and left. The door clicked shut behind him with such precision that his words sounded more like a command than a polite line from a welcoming host.

Julian stood for a moment, his hand still on the handle of his bag, with Weston's presence hanging in the air long after he had gone. He didn't know whether to laugh or to recoil. He wasn't even sure why he was still here, why he hadn't tried leaving.

Something had anchored him to the space, something about the way Weston had spoken—quiet, sure, deliberate—and the weight of what had passed between them since they first met.

There was no immediate impulse to unpack. No need to change, to settle. Instead, he set his bag down at the foot of the bed, moved to the window, and opened it.

Outside, there were only trees, dense and heavy, watching him. That was the only view—no horizon, just the walls of nature closing in around him.

He checked his phone. No service. There was Wi-Fi, but it was password-protected and he sure as hell wasn't going to ask Weston about it. The screen's emptiness seemed to mock him, as if reminding him that there was nothing here for him. Nothing but the silence that stretched out in all directions, engineered with a clinical sort of meticulousness.

Julian sat on the edge of the bed, his spine ramrod straight and his hands clenched tightly in his lap. He wasn't sure whether he was angry or afraid or simply lost. The stillness of the room, the way it pressed in on him, was so manufactured, so calculated, that it felt as though someone had designed it specifically to make him uneasy. Weston probably had.

A sudden, unbidden thought flashed through his mind: *This is what it feels like to be prey.*

The realization came without warning, as cold and certain as the metal of the bedframe under his hands. He wasn't sure when it had happened, when the balance had tipped, but now he knew.

Whatever game Weston had invited him to play, it was already too late to walk away.

## Chapter 3: Blinds

Julian spent most of the day wandering the estate. When he tired of the house, he ventured outside, walking in circles through the trees that surrounded them. As he returned from his aimless exploration, his pulse still quickened by the unsettling quiet that hung like a fog over the place. Weston had remained as enigmatic as ever, offering nothing more than a fleeting smile and a quiet command.

Now, here he was standing at the threshold of the library, trying to reconcile the chill of the house with the uneasy feeling that lingered in his chest. The words Weston had left him with earlier still echoed in his mind.

*Most guests never make it past the first night.*

It had been hours since Weston had sent him off to his room, and yet the peculiar nature of the estate weighed on Julian with a suffocating force. The mansion had felt like an observation chamber, as though every step was being measured and accounted for.

A glance outside, at the surrounding trees, told him little more than the suffocating vastness of the land. Not a soul had passed by since he'd arrived, no sound of a distant car or airplane passing overhead. The stillness had become a slow burn beneath his skin, each moment stretching out in a way that felt like there was something just beneath the surface that he was supposed to be scared of.

He was being watched, but there was nothing here to see.

And so he wandered, searching for something that might reveal the truth, or perhaps simply a glimpse of humanity. But instead, he found only more silence, more emptiness.

He'd tried to shake the feeling, tried to keep himself busy by exploring, but eventually there was nothing else to do but return to Weston. And now, as he walked into the library, he felt the weight of the entire evening pressing against him.

The library was its own separate building, a modest size compared to the main house but still impressive nonetheless. The exterior was clad in weathered stone and climbing ivy, its arched windows glowing faintly with warm light. Inside, the scent of old paper and cedar hung in the air, and the high shelves rose to a vaulted ceiling, casting long shadows across the polished floor.

Weston was seated next to the fireplace, his bare feet resting on the cold marble floor while a book was nestled in his hands. He hadn't moved, hadn't even looked up when Julian entered. The silence, though softer inside, felt just as oppressive.

"You're early," Weston remarked.

He didn't hear Weston approach, but the man was there, a low bottle of Islay single malt in one hand, two glasses balanced in the other like offerings. He didn't speak as he poured. The whiskey flared bronze in the glass.

"Sit," Weston said, handing him one of the glasses.

Julian sat. The fire crackled, made a sound like language: dry, insistent, close to meaning.

Weston made himself comfortable in the seat across from him. His posture was loose, one arm hooked along the bench as if he were always meant to be there, as if the scene had been built for this exact image—his stillness, the flame, the drink in his hand.

Julian raised his glass. "So, what is this, then? A welcome? A test?"

Weston's mouth moved, not into a smile, but into the idea of one. "A conversation."

Julian drank. The whiskey burned, and he welcomed the sensation.

"You invest like you build mazes," he said. "No entrance. No exit. Just traps disguised as opportunity."

Weston considered that. "I invest like nature consumes. Impartially."

"That's the lie," Julian replied. "Nature doesn't pick favorites. You do."

Weston's head tilted, just slightly. "And who do I favor?"

"Yourself," Julian said, flat. "You like acquisition. That's why you're so good at it. You don't invest. You collect."

For a second, something edged behind Weston's eyes—not coldness, but a deeper emotion sharpened by Julian's words. He laughed once, short and blade-clean. Not amused. "You think you see clearly."

"I see you're bored."

"And you're angry," Weston said, without looking away. "Why?"

Julian fought back a laugh of disbelief. "I'm not here by choice."

"You're not here by accident either."

They sat in a silence that was neither comfort nor threat, just heat and breath and fire between them. Julian studied the flames, then Weston.

"You're lonely," he said.

It wasn't an accusation. It was a mere description. Weston's gaze didn't break. He blinked once, then said, "I made my first deal at ten. Bought a kid's rare card collection with a counterfeit Game Boy. Made a profit before I'd grown all my molars. That kid told everyone what I'd done. They called me a thief for a week. Then they started coming to me with trades."

His voice never changed pace. Not self-pitying. Not proud either.

Julian nodded slowly. "And that taught you what? That trust is a resource?"

"That people lie to themselves about fairness," Weston said. "The ones who complain are just the ones who didn't win."

"That's not the point," Julian said. "You keep talking about control. Power. But that's not true connection."

Weston reached for the bottle to refill his glass. For a moment, there was no sound but the crackling of the fire.

"And what are you after, Julian?"

For some reason, the name landed in Julian's chest. Weston had never used it before tonight, and Julian didn't know why it felt unusual to hear it coming from his mouth.

Even so, Julian didn't flinch. "Something real. Not something bought."

Weston didn't answer. He studied him instead—the way a man studies a painting, or a riddle that refuses to be solved. His jaw moved slightly, like he'd almost said something, then thought better.

The fire flickered between them, catching the sharp edge of Weston's cheekbone, turning his profile into a weapon. He moved an inch closer. Not enough to touch, but enough to be felt.

Julian didn't move. The fire cracked. A single branch gave way in the flames. Neither looked away.

At last, Weston rose. The fire cast him in copper light as he brushed away unseen dust from his palms, composed, unreadable. Night peeled the color from the trees as they parted without comment. The fire still hissed behind them, shadows thrown long across the stone. He didn't look at Julian, only poured the last of the whiskey into the fire, where it caught with a soft exhale.

"Get some sleep," he said. "Big day tomorrow."

Julian raised a brow. "Doing what?"

But Weston had already turned back to the house, barefoot on dirt and gravel like it didn't bother him, like the cold never got close enough to matter. The trees swallowed his silhouette.

Julian lingered, long enough to feel ridiculous, then followed.

The path back was less clear in the dark. The house glowed in places—slivers of light through blindless windows, warm but withholding. The gravel underfoot made no sound, as if noise, too, had been subtracted from the land. Only the wind spoke, and even that was cautious.

Inside, the silence returned like a ghost that refused to pass on. No footsteps, no voices, no sign of life other than the lights that had turned themselves on.

He passed through the house slowly. There were no portraits, no clutter, no indication that anyone had ever lived here longer than a weekend. The minimalism wasn't aesthetic; it was surgical. Nothing here that couldn't be erased. No fingerprint but Weston's—and even that was deliberate, precise, calculated for effect.

Julian found his room unchanged. The door opened with a sigh, and the sheets were turned down.

He paused in the doorway. Something about the room felt slightly too perfect, like it was performing a version of comfort—temperature set exactly right, bedside light at an appealing dimness, the glass on the nightstand already filled halfway with water.

He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, and sat on the edge of the bed.

Weston hadn't touched him. Hadn't said anything that could be called flirtation.

And yet, he was still in Julian's head, pacing the corridors of his brain, leaving fingerprints on the thoughts inside his mind. That look across the fire, measured and unmoving. The way he'd come closer without invitation or explanation, just that inch that made everything mean more than it was supposed to.

He lay with his hands folded over his chest, eyes open, watching the ceiling where the light cast long bars across the surface like a cage. There was no noise in the room, not even the hum of wiring or air vents. The quiet wasn't passive—it was engineered.

Weston had built this world to hold people. Not welcome them.

The thought didn't leave him.

Somewhere in the house, Weston was still awake. Julian could feel it, like heat through a wall.

He closed his eyes, told himself to sleep.

He could not.

## Chapter 4: Raise

Morning found Julian as it never had before—restless, disconcerted, and already an hour late to whatever rhythm the estate claimed to follow. He woke not with urgency but irritation, the kind that clung to the underside of his ribs.

Weston was nowhere in sight, and the silence had grown teeth. He dressed slowly, avoiding mirrors.

The house stretched around him like a riddle that never finished asking the question. He took a wrong turn past a stairwell that looked identical to another, found a dead end, retraced his steps through what might've been a music room once, though it bore no instruments.

And then, finally, the kitchen: a cathedral of chrome and silence. The place was pristine, monastic. Cabinets gleamed without fingerprints. The fridge sighed open to reveal its contents: exact, sparse, almost defensive in its order. A dozen eggs, organic. Bread from a French bakery three towns over. Glass bottles of milk aligned like trophies.

It wasn't stocked for use. It was stocked for inspection. Julian cooked anyway.

The hiss of the pan, the crack of eggshell, the scrape of knife over toast—the house resented each sound, as if insulted by life. Julian didn't care. He brewed coffee strong enough to sting, contemplating the addition of whiskey before deciding otherwise. The warmth on his hands felt almost defiant.

Behind him lay a silence even sharper.

Weston stood in the doorway, sleeves rolled to the elbow, barefoot again. His eyes moved like surveillance—cool, thorough, faintly amused. He didn't speak. For a while, he just watched.

Then, he said, "Didn't know you could cook."

Julian didn't turn. "Didn't know you liked to watch."

Weston smiled at that, but only with his mouth.

They ate in the glass-walled dining room, a table designed for twenty, used by two. Light poured in from every angle, but the space remained cool, architectural, sterile as gallery air. Ikea showrooms had more personality than this, Julian mused vaguely in his mind.

Weston sat at the head of the table, as expected.

Neither of them talked. Every clink of cutlery landed like punctuation in an argument no one had started. When Weston finally spoke, it was too casual to be uncalculated.

"When you look at me, what do you see?"

Julian finished his toast before answering. "A man trying too hard not to want anything."

A pause, then a slow sip from Weston's coffee cup.

"And you?" he countered. "You want everything but refuse to pay."

Julian didn't blink. Didn't respond. But he didn't deny it either.

The meal took longer than it should have. Eventually, Weston placed his utensils down with deliberate quiet, and no clink came as the metal met the ceramic plate. Outside, the leaves on the trees swayed gently in the wind. Inside, the table remained untouched except for their half-finished plates.

"You could win," Weston said, "you just won't let yourself."

Julian leaned back, eyes narrowing. "What the hell does that mean?"

Weston tilted his head slightly, not in challenge but clarity. "You want control more than victory."

A humorless laugh came from Julian's chest, tight and sharp. "And you think surrender is strength?"

Weston didn't flinch. His voice lowered, not in volume but in pitch, grounded. "Only when it's earned."

They reached for the coffee pot at the same time. Fingers brushed.

Neither moved.

Julian felt the contact like static—trivial, temporary, and completely altering. For a moment, the entire house seemed to pause.

He pulled back first.

His hand trembled.

Weston noticed. Said nothing.

He stood, slowly, walked around the table and behind Julian's chair. There was no brush of air, no accidental contact. Only presence—impossible not to notice.

Then, quietly: "Dinner's yours tonight."

Julian didn't look up. "What happens after dinner?"

Weston didn't turn. "That depends on whether you're done bluffing."

He left without another word.

## Chapter 5: All In

The kitchen seemed quieter than it had been this morning, as though it too were bracing for what was to come.

The soft hum of the refrigerator, the quiet sizzle as Julian slid his knife through the vegetables—by noon, the fridge had suddenly become more stocked with ingredients—it all seemed to occupy a space outside of time, a rhythm he had found again after too many years of losing it.

He was aware of every movement, every gesture, as he chopped and stirred, more careful now than he had been previously. The atmosphere around him seemed to hold its breath. He didn't look over his shoulder when he heard the door open, nor when he felt the weight of someone else in the room.

He already knew it was Weston. He knew he would come, knew the silence between them would stretch thinner than it ever had, and that it would be him who would fill that space first.

The knife scraped against the cutting board, the sound almost too loud in the stillness.

And then Weston spoke, breaking it.

"You didn't have to do this," he said, his voice low, neither dismissive nor complimentary. He stood in the doorway, his presence both too quiet and too commanding all at once.

Julian didn't glance up immediately, but there was a shift in the air, a change in the way he moved, as if Weston's arrival had settled something inside him. He set the knife down, his hands slow, calculating.

"You said dinner was mine tonight," Julian answered, a quiet pride swelling in his chest at how his words sounded flat, almost matter-of-fact. No more wariness in his voice, no more pretense. He had crossed that line, and he was grateful to himself for that. He wasn't scared of Weston anymore. He never should've been, in the first place.

Now, he was just another person making dinner.

Weston didn't move for a moment. His gaze tracked Julian's movements, sharp but unblinking, studying him as if there was something to find in the way Julian held the knife, the way he arranged the food on the counter.

"What do you want?" Weston's voice was soft, almost a murmur, though it demanded an answer. It wasn't a question about the food. Julian knew that. He paused, just long enough to consider it.

"To be left alone," he said, the words falling from him before he could stop them, sharp and truthful.

His eyes met Weston's, and for the first time, there was no hesitation, no avoiding the question in the air between them. It hung there—heavy, expectant, waiting.

Weston's expression didn't change, but Julian could see the subtle shift in his posture. Something was different this time, in the way they interacted. He wasn't merely standing against the wall anymore. He was waiting, too.

Julian turned his attention back to the meal, his motions smooth and practiced as he tossed the vegetables into the pan, the heat making them sizzle and hiss. It felt oddly comforting, the noise of the food cooking, the motion of his hands. It was familiar, something he'd done all his life. It was the only thing that gave him comfort in this place.

They didn't need to speak, didn't need to fill the silence with meaningless words. And yet, there was something in Weston's quiet that made Julian's pulse quicken, made him aware of the proximity in the room, the way the space between them was slowly being bridged with each second.

"You didn't answer my question," Weston said again, a bit more insistently this time.

He hadn't moved closer, but the way he spoke—leaning slightly forward—suggested that he was done waiting for the usual evasions. He wanted something real from Julian, something he could understand.

"I did. I want to be left alone."

"You didn't answer my question *truthfully*."

Julian's grip on the spatula tightened, his knuckles whitening. There was no pretending now. "Then you'll have to figure it out for yourself."

The words lingered in the air, a challenge thrown out with no more thought than a breath. And yet, the way they hung there between them, the weight of them, felt as though the room itself had just shifted around them.

For a long moment, Weston didn't reply. He just watched, his gaze heavy, almost thoughtful.

But then, in one smooth motion, he reached forward, taking the plates from the counter where Julian had set them, his arm brushing against Julian's as he did. The contact was brief, almost imperceptible, but it left an echo in the air, something unspoken, something neither of them acknowledged.

Weston didn't look back as he carried the plates to the dining room. He simply moved, his every motion calm and controlled, as though he were orchestrating the world around him with no more effort than it took to breathe.

When the meal was finally finished, Julian followed, the silence between them unbroken, but somehow more laden with meaning than the last. It was a silence that wrapped itself around him, that clung to his chest and made his breathing heavier than it should have been.

In the dining room, the space between them felt even more pronounced. Julian sat, his movements measured, his eyes steady as he watched Weston fill two glasses with a bottle of red.

Weston's presence was commanding, but there was something else in his stillness, something that hinted at deeper currents beneath the surface. He didn't speak right away. Neither of them did. The quiet stretched between them, thick with anticipation.

Finally, Weston spoke, his voice a low murmur. "You still haven't told me."

Julian didn't reply immediately. He reached for his wine glass, his fingers grazing its stem, his mind racing to find a way to respond, to push back against the question. But he knew it wasn't an easy question to answer. It was a question about what they were, about what he was allowing to happen.

Weston leaned back slightly in his chair, his gaze never leaving Julian's. His lips curled into something approaching a smile, though it was faint, almost imperceptible.

"Don't play games," Weston said, his voice like velvet, yet there was steel behind it.

Julian wanted to laugh at the irony. Instead, he sat back, matching Weston's gaze. "Who's playing?"

"You, Julian." Weston's smile deepened, just enough to show the faintest glint of amusement. "You're the one pretending this is something it isn't."

Julian's breath caught in his throat, the words landing like a blow he hadn't been prepared for. He clenched his jaw, but he didn't look away. He wasn't sure if he wanted to run or if he wanted to stay, but somehow, he knew that neither option mattered now.

"What do you want from me?" Julian's voice was low, raw with a vulnerability he hadn't meant to reveal.

Weston didn't answer immediately. Instead, he studied him, a deep, unspoken understanding passing between them in the silence.

Finally, Weston leaned forward slightly, his gaze softening. "I don't know yet."

Julian's heart skipped a beat.

Their meal had long since lost its purpose as sustenance. Now, it was merely a prelude to something else—a game, unspoken, yet understood.

The plates sat half-finished, untouched, as their conversation sank deeper into unfamiliar territory. Words now had weight, and they were both careful with them, testing the boundaries, seeing how far they could push.

"I didn't tell you everything about the investor you were supposed to meet that night," Weston said, his voice lower than before, threaded with something like a confession. His eyes, too, had softened, though the sharpness was still there. He sat back in his chair, fingers absently tracing the rim of his wine glass.

Julian didn't react immediately. His gaze held steady, but the pulse in his neck quickened. He had been waiting for this. The truth, whatever it was, had been inevitable. It would come, like

everything else had—slowly, with a carefully planned intentionality, just out of reach until it wasn't.

"The original investor," Weston continued, the words falling from his lips as if they didn't matter, as if they were just facts in a report. "He was never coming. I pulled strings. I wanted to see what you'd do. What you were made of."

The admission landed between them like a stone sinking into a dark, still pool. Julian already knew, of course. He'd had a hunch, thinking about it as he'd packed for the trip and perhaps even as they'd sat at that damned poker table, but he still felt the weight of Weston's admission, the quiet violation in the maneuver. Hearing Weston say it solidified the feelings he'd been trying to ignore for the sake of showing he was unintimidated by him.

He didn't flinch though. He didn't lash out the way he had wanted to in the beginning, when Weston's presence had first unnerved him. Instead, he simply absorbed it. His mind moved faster than his words, calculating, processing.

"And now?" Julian asked, his voice a thin thread of calm, the air around him almost imperceptibly changing. His eyes stayed fixed on Weston, unblinking. "Do you want the company, or me?"

Weston didn't immediately respond.

He studied Julian, as if weighing the question, but also something else—something buried deeper than the answer. And then, as if the question itself was unimportant, Weston shifted in his seat, the tension between them stretching taut as a drawn string.

"You're here," Weston said simply, his voice carrying the weight of finality. "That's the point."

Julian didn't respond at first. The answer frustrated him with its vagueness. 'You're here' and 'You're *here*' meant two completely different things, and he knew that was what Weston had intended.

Julian stood instead, the scrape of the chair legs against the floor a quiet interruption in the stillness. His movements were slow, deliberate, as though the act of rising was a declaration in itself. He wanted to leave, but something kept him rooted, an invisible pull that he couldn't quite name, couldn't quite escape.

Weston remained where he sat, his posture relaxed, but the quiet pressure of his gaze held Julian still. He waited, knowing Julian would move, knowing that the game they played had reached its threshold.

But neither spoke. The air between them had thickened to an almost suffocating degree, and in that silence, they both understood. The tension had cut deeper, turned into something far more intimate than either of them had anticipated.

Weston spoke again, his voice lower than before. "What happens next?"

He didn't wait for a reply. He stood in one fluid motion, the muscles in his thighs flexing beneath the dark fabric of his trousers, his broad shoulders rolling with the effortless grace of a

man who knew his own power. His eyes—dark, fathomless—held Julian's for a heartbeat, a silent exchange that sent heat licking down Julian's spine.

Then, without a word, he turned and walked toward the door. He didn't look back.

The door remained open behind him, an unspoken command.

*Follow.*

And Julian did.

The hallway was shadowed, the only light spilling from the room ahead, golden and beckoning. The air here was cooler, laced with the rich, earthy scent of cedarwood—Weston's scent—and something primal that made Julian's skin prickle in an oddly exciting way. His footsteps were silent against the hardwood, his body moving as if drawn by an invisible thread, taut and unyielding.

Weston's room was sparse, almost severe in its simplicity—no excess, no distractions. Just a bed, its sheets crisp and untouched, a single chair by the window, and the faintest glow of moonlight spilling across the floor.

Weston stood near the bed. His back was facing Julian, and his silhouette was sharp against the silvered light. The fabric of his shirt stretched across his shoulders, the muscles beneath shifting as he breathed slow and steady.

Julian didn't move.

Neither did Weston.

The space between them hummed with something unspoken, something hungry.

Then, with agonizing slowness, Weston turned. His eyes, dark as sin and heavy with intent, locked onto Julian's. He didn't speak. He didn't need to. He never needed to.

His hand lifted, fingers outstretched, and Julian felt the air leave his lungs in a rush. Weston's touch was uncharacteristically gentle, reverent, his fingertips brushing against the metal strap of Julian's watch. The contact, though feather-light, sent a jolt through him, electric and undeniable.

With a quiet click, the watch loosened. Weston's fingers slid beneath the band, and his knuckles grazed the delicate skin of Julian's wrist. The sensation was maddening—too light, too fleeting—and Julian's breath hitched.

Weston removed the watch with a slow, deliberate motion, his fingers lingering just a second too long before placing it on the nightstand.

He should've said something. He should've done something.

But Weston was already moving again.

His hands—those damnably sure hands—returned, this time to the buttons of Julian's shirt. His fingers worked with unhurried precision, each brush of skin against fabric sending sparks skittering across Julian's nerves.

The first button gave way, then the second, the third, each one a surrender, a silent yielding to the inevitability of this moment.

Julian's breath came faster now, his chest rising and falling beneath Weston's touch. He could feel the heat of him, the intoxicating nearness of his body, the way his breath ghosted over Julian's collarbone as he leaned in.

Then finally, Weston's lips touched his throat.

Just a whisper of contact, barely there, but it sent a shudder through Julian so violent he nearly swayed. Weston's mouth was warm, soft, his breath hot against Julian's skin as he pressed another kiss just beneath his jaw, then another, lower, tracing the line of his pulse.

Julian's hands found Weston's shoulders and his fingers dug into the hard muscle beneath his shirt, holding on as if he might drown otherwise. Weston's lips curved against his skin—a smirk, a promise—before his tongue flicked out, tasting him, savoring him.

A low sound escaped Julian's throat, raw and unbidden.

Weston's hands slid around his waist, pulling him closer, his touch possessive, demanding. There was no hesitation in him, no uncertainty—just the slow unraveling of every barrier Julian had ever built.

Julian's voice, when he finally found it, was rough, wrecked.

"Is this what you wanted?"

Weston didn't answer with words.

He answered with his mouth on Julian's, with the scrape of teeth against his bottom lip, with the press of his body, hard and unyielding, against Julian's own.

And Julian let himself fall.

\*\*\*\*\*

The room had softened since their last touch, its edges now blurred by the calm that surrounded them. The only sounds were the quiet breath of two bodies lying in the same space, bound by something neither could name, nor wanted to.

Weston, stretched beside Julian, lay perfectly still. He had no words for this, no expectations to place on the moment. His gaze lingered, though—watching Julian as he lay there half-asleep, quiet and almost serene in the dim light, the rise and fall of his chest the only true indication of life.

Weston's fingers rested lightly along the curve of Julian's spine, not pulling him closer, not pushing him away, but simply there—hovering in that unspoken space. As if letting go of him would undo everything. As if keeping his hand there might, for a moment longer, preserve the unspoken promise that still lingered between them, unsaid but felt.

Julian's skin, warm beneath his touch, didn't tremble at the contact. His back remained still, even as Weston's hand rested there—no protest, no hesitation. There was something in that stillness, something that tethered them in this strange quiet.

For all the tension that had led them here, for all the dangerous dance of power and attraction, now there was only silence. Weston supposed they should've been used to it by now, but this silence was different. It was... peaceful. Not like the calm before a storm.

Weston could feel his own heartbeat slowing. He closed his eyes, his body following the rhythm of the night as the exhaustion began to creep in. But the sensation of Julian's presence was too strong, too immediate. He couldn't fully let go. Not yet. Though he would never admit it out loud, not even to himself, Weston wanted to treasure this moment, hold onto it—to *him*—for as long as he could.

Julian's eyes remained closed as well, but not in the same way. Weston had known the difference between sleep and stillness for a long time. He had seen it in countless faces over the years—people pretending to sleep, hiding from what their thoughts might reveal.

Julian was doing that now. Weston knew it. He didn't need to see the slight tension in his jaw, the barely perceptible quickening of breath when Julian was awake, when he was conscious of the space Weston occupied beside him.

But he didn't pull away. Didn't push it. Didn't retreat into his mind like so many others would. He simply breathed, as if the world had momentarily shrunk down to this one moment in time, where nothing else mattered but the steady rise and fall of his chest, the warm presence beside him.

Weston's gaze lingered on Julian for a few more moments. His eyes held a strange stillness, as though everything he had kept locked inside was being sorted through, parsed in the dark spaces where words couldn't find him.

The weight of everything they hadn't said, everything they still wouldn't, pressed down on him, but it was no longer a burden. There was something different in the air, something that felt more like surrender than anything else. Weston knew well of surrender, but this time he realized for what felt like the first time in his life that he was on the other end of it.

He let his eyes close fully then, the long hours catching up to him, the sharp clarity of the day's decisions finally drifting into something like a lull. He wasn't sure if he was asleep, not really, but he didn't care. His mind drifted between wakefulness and dreams, each thought sliding seamlessly into the next.

The room grew quieter, yet, something inside the room had shifted, something in the way the world turned on its axis.

Weston could have stayed like that forever. Could have let the night draw on and on until the dawn came, until everything he had carefully built around him crumbled. But instead, he let himself drift. Let himself relax into the weight of the silence that stretched between them.

But hours later, just as his breath evened out, just as the edges of sleep began to claim him, he felt the change.

It was so slight at first, like the brush of a finger against skin, but then it grew. Julian's body stirred, a faint movement—nothing more than the shift of weight. It was an imperceptible thing, but Weston felt it. Julian was awake. He wasn't pretending anymore.

When Weston opened his eyes again, he found Julian's gaze meeting his. The room, once again, was still. No words, no demands. Just a shared understanding. Julian didn't move away, didn't pull back. He didn't need to.

The silence between them stretched, long and comfortable, as they stared at each other. The distance that had once felt so insurmountable was no longer there. Weston closed his eyes once more. The steady pulse of Julian's breath beside him was a comfort now, a rhythm that he didn't want to escape. It was enough to remain, for now, in the dark, in the space where the world outside didn't matter. Where nothing had to be spoken to make it real.

Julian didn't leave. He could have. But he didn't.

And that, Weston realized, was enough.

## Chapter 6: Second Deal

Julian woke before the light, before the moment the world outside could take hold.

The dim slivers of dawn crept around the edges of the blinds, pale enough to be a suggestion, not a promise. The room was quiet, silent in that way only a place untouched by time could be, where every corner seemed to hold its breath.

He moved with practiced care, the way one does when no drama is needed, when the departure has become a quiet ritual, a thing of routine. His shirt, then his pants, then his watch, collected with the efficiency of someone who had spent years in the art of leaving.

No sudden movements, no lingering thoughts—only the soft tug of fabric, the faint clink of a belt buckle, the hiss of breath as he slipped into his shoes. His motions were careful, as if to say that nothing in this room, in this night, had ever mattered, and perhaps nothing would.

Weston was awake, though he pretended not to be. He listened with the precision of a man who had grown adept at discerning the rhythm of another's life, even in its smallest details. Each step Julian took, each shift in the weight of his body as he stood, stretched, moved. Weston felt it all.

His eyes remained closed, a mask of sleep, but his mind was elsewhere. He was present in the quiet spaces Julian filled, in the absence of words, in the soft thud of shoes against the floorboards. The sensation of Julian leaving was not lost on him, but it did not stir him to action. It was the understanding, the knowing, that Julian would go without a word, without ceremony, as was his way.

Julian didn't look back, didn't speak a single word, his departure as clean as the room had been when he first entered. There was no goodbye, no promise of return. Just the whisper of movement, the sound of the door opening and closing softly behind him.

The weekend was over. He had paid for his loss, and there was nothing else keeping him here. At least, that was what he told himself.

Julian retrieved his things from his room and found the car waiting, its engine a quiet hum outside. He slid into the backseat, staring through the glass as the estate receded behind him, its towering walls and manicured grounds fading into the distance.

The silence in the car was only broken by the low hum of the engine. It was the same silence that had followed him out of Weston's bedroom, the same silence that seemed to have taken root in his chest.

As the city skyline came into view, Julian's phone buzzed once, then again. He ignored the first message. Then the second. He let them pile up, let them fill the empty space. Investor offers—ones that had been absent for months, forgotten like a dying ember, rekindled out of nowhere.

The sudden interest made no sense. There were no good reasons, no fair explanation. His pitch had been rejected, his dreams stalled. And yet, here they were—messages, calls, offers. It felt off, as though he were being handed something he had no right to hold.

Julian scrolled past everything, his eyes moving without focus, as if he were reading something that didn't belong to him. Nothing stirred within him—no rush, no triumph. He could only feel the weight of the questions that had yet to be answered.

Then, he stopped. One message stood apart from the others, its simplicity unnerving.

*Wasn't just about the cards.*

It was from an unknown number. Julian stared at it for a moment, the words etched into his mind as if they had been printed there, permanent and undeniable.

He contemplated deleting it, as though the mere act of acknowledging it would grant it more power than it deserved. But even as his thumb hovered over the delete button, the words lingered, as they always did.

He turned his phone off.

The car ride stretched on in its monotony, and Julian's mind remained tethered to the past few days, to the room, to the sensation of Weston's touch, to the strange exchange between them. He had never been one for attachments, never been one to linger in the mess of what could be. But now, there was something in him that didn't want to leave, something that wanted to stay, to turn around and return to that place where everything had been laid bare.

He wasn't sure if it was regret or relief, but the thoughts swirled in him until they made him dizzy. He stared out the window, the cityscape blurring around him, a reminder of how small everything felt, how close they'd been.

When the car finally pulled up to his apartment, Julian didn't hurry to get out. He lingered for a moment, his gaze still fixed on the skyline as it melted into the background. His fingers brushed over his phone, still shut down, tracing the outline of it absentmindedly. He didn't know if he was waiting for something, for someone, or if it was just the slow, creeping sense of things left unsaid.

Inside his apartment, the air was dense with a familiarity that was unsettling. The place was a mess, sparse and unkempt, but it felt lived in, like a refuge from a world that hadn't quite understood him. The weight of it pressed in on him as he unpacked his bag, his movements slow, contemplative. He touched things he hadn't noticed in months—an old notebook, a jacket thrown carelessly over a chair—and each object seemed to carry its own weight, its own quiet narrative.

He opened a beer and stared out the window, watching the city stretch in front of him. It felt louder now, more intrusive than it ever had before. He could hear every sound—the honking of

horns, the chatter of people, the distant hum of a streetlight flickering on and off. It all felt too close, too suffocating.

He turned his phone back on and went through the investor messages again. He didn't respond, just let them sit there, acknowledged yet unresolved. The occasional quiet buzz of the phone was a reminder of the strange shift that had taken place, of the game he was now playing, one he didn't fully understand.

Julian hesitated. His fingers hovered over Weston's number, the digits lighting up on his screen. There was a moment—just a moment—where he thought he might delete it, might sever whatever thread had been left between them.

But again, he didn't. He paused, his thumb still, as if waiting for something to tell him what to do.

The phone buzzed again, the screen lighting up with another message, another push, another invitation into a world he couldn't leave behind. He turned the phone face down. He couldn't bear to look at it any further, unable to escape the feeling that Weston was still with him, somewhere just beyond reach.

Later that night, long after the city had quieted, Julian found himself unable to sleep. His mind cycled through the memories—of firelight, of silence, of being seen in a way he had never allowed before. He couldn't dismiss it. It wasn't something he could forget.

He rose from the bed, pulled out his laptop, and began to draft a new pitch—not the one he had used before, not the one that had been ignored, but something different. Something new.

He clicked one tab, and there it was—Weston Price. His name, his holdings, his press. It was all there, all laid out in front of him, yet he clicked nothing. Just stared at it.

Then, slowly, his fingers moved over the keys.

*"I know,"* he typed. And for the first time, it felt true.

But he didn't send it. He stared at the message, the words lingering on the screen. His heart pounded in his chest, a quiet rhythm that matched the pulse of the city outside.

Still, he didn't send it. Not yet.

## Chapter 7: Fortune's Edge

Julian arrived at the rooftop terrace just as the last rays of daylight slipped beneath the horizon, casting a wash of amber and gold over the city's jagged skyline.

He wore a suit so sharp it could cut through the evening air. Tailored, precise, a perfect reflection of the man he had become. His posture was assured, his steps unhurried, but there was something more to him now. Something new. A quiet confidence that came with the knowledge that the game was no longer beyond him.

He no longer felt like an outsider—he had learned to navigate the currents of this world, to read the room like a chessboard. The pieces were in motion, and for once, he was among them.

As he moved through the crowd, conversations flowed around him like a murmuring river. Fellow founders, the names of which Julian had once only heard in passing, now nodded at him with a newfound respect.

It wasn't an act born of kindness, but of recognition: they saw him now as one of their own. Their silent assessments no longer laced with skepticism. He could almost hear the unspoken verdicts, the internal "*he's one of us now.*" It wasn't just the suit—it was everything he had become. The power, the influence, the subtle mastery of the game.

Julian never got over the feeling of being conflicted. He was torn between the wholehearted belief that his work was important, that he deserved to be standing among these people, and the frustrating thought that he was only here because everyone was told he should be, by *him*.

A random partygoer, an investor whose name Julian knew only from deals he'd never been invited into, spoke of Weston in passing. The name, so familiar now, so tethered to the back of his mind, was dropped casually into conversation like a stone thrown into a placid pond.

Julian didn't flinch. Didn't show a thing. His expression remained even, his eyes distant. The words didn't matter. Not here, not now.

But even in the midst of the murmur and laughter, Julian was scanning the crowd. Observing. Watching. Waiting for something—or someone. There was a moment when the crowd shifted, and in that quiet lull, Julian's gaze found its mark.

Weston stood alone, away from the sea of faces. His presence was the opposite of the others around him—no conversation, no posturing. Just watching. Just waiting. Like Julian.

Their eyes met across the terrace, and for a brief second, time seemed to stretch out between them, like a taut wire.

Julian didn't move, didn't even acknowledge the pull he felt. But Weston's approach was inevitable, like a gravity he couldn't resist.

Before he could think, Julian's feet led him to the bar. Here, the hum of the crowd didn't seem to touch them. It was as if everything else had been muted, as though the space between them was the only one that mattered now.

Weston followed, stopped a few feet away. He didn't smile. Didn't reach for anything. His voice, low and direct, cut through the silence. "Looks like you won after all."

Julian took a slow sip of his drink, the cool liquid sliding down his throat, easing the heat that had been building in his chest. "Did I?"

His voice was even, as if the statement was a question only for the sake of form. He didn't need to confirm it. The weight of the words lingered between them, the quiet acknowledgment that things had changed.

The pause stretched out, a beat rich with everything they hadn't said, everything that had been left in the dark since that first night, the card game, that first confrontation between them. A battle, in a way.

Weston, ever composed, ordered a simple drink—nothing extravagant or flashy. His fingers brushed against Julian's when he paid, an accidental touch or perhaps something else.

Julian didn't pull away. Didn't recoil. The moment hung between them, thick with what had been—and what could still be.

"This isn't your world anymore," Julian said, his voice a murmur under the soft music and murmur of the crowd. He didn't look at Weston as he said it—just watched the glass in his hand, watched the ice slowly melt.

"No," Weston replied, his gaze steady, unwavering. "It's yours."

And there it was—the truth that neither of them could deny, even if they wanted to. Weston had stepped out of this world, left it behind in his own way. But Julian? Julian had stepped into it with both feet, his presence no longer an afterthought.

It was his now. Weston was just an echo.

They moved away from the bar, retreating to a corner of the terrace where the crowd was thinned, where they could speak freely without the eyes of the world on them. Here, the distance between them wasn't measured by the space between their bodies, but by everything they carried within them.

They spoke plainly now. No riddles. No games. Just words.

Weston admitted he had thought about coming earlier. The words hung between them for a moment, and Julian felt something stir inside him—something unfamiliar, something raw.

"Why didn't you?" Julian asked, his voice low, more curious than anything else.

Weston's expression softened, just barely. "Didn't want to play games anymore."

Julian's gaze never wavered. "Then don't."

There was a sharpness to the words, an edge that hadn't been there before. The air around them felt taut, like the final moment before a storm broke. Neither of them moved, standing there with the weight of their conversation settling into the space between them.

No one else could hear it, but they both knew: this wasn't about business, or power, or anything else that had defined their previous encounters. This was something else entirely. A new kind of understanding, a new deal brokered.

Weston didn't break the silence. He didn't need to.

The conversation shifted again, as it always seemed to. Weston's eyes met Julian's, unwavering, and for a moment, there was something in the look he gave—something bare.

"What do you want now?" His voice was softer now, but no less direct.

Julian paused, letting the question settle in the air.

The city stretched out before them, a blur of lights and sounds that seemed distant now. It was like they were standing on the edge of something, on the cusp of a new world. Something bigger than the deal they'd struck, bigger than the names and the power they had traded.

Julian let the words fall slowly, as if they had been waiting in him for a long time, ready to be spoken. "Something worth losing for."

The silence that followed didn't hurt. It didn't ache. It was quiet, almost peaceful, like a breath held between two people who had finally come to an understanding.

Weston looked at him, and for the first time in what felt like forever, he offered his hand. It wasn't an offer of dominance. It wasn't an invitation to anything but the space between them. It was presence. It was the kind of gesture that said: *this is real*.

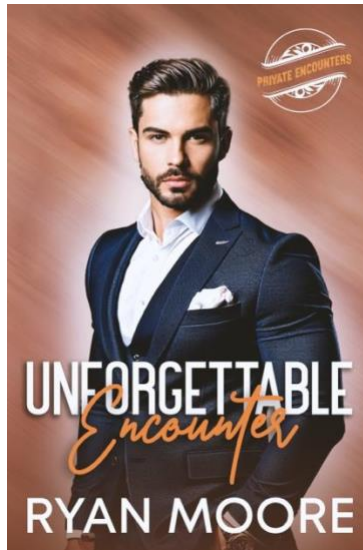
Julian looked at his hand, then back at Weston, and in the clarity of the moment, he knew. This wasn't about playing games anymore. It was something else entirely. Something worth losing.

"This time, let's play for keeps."

# Free Gift!

Thank you for buying this Private Encounters story. As a token of appreciation, I have a special gift for you. By joining my mailing list, you'll receive a complimentary copy of "Unforgettable Encounter" along with exclusive back stories featuring the characters from this story and others. Stay in the loop with the latest releases, giveaways, contests, cover reveals, and much more.

Rest assured, your privacy is paramount to me. Your details will not be shared or sold to any third parties, and you'll only receive book-related content.



## **One night. One dance. One unforgettable encounter.**

Grayson Hart wasn't supposed to be at the Westwood masquerade. Crashing an elite gala was a risk, but he never expected Logan Westwood—a powerful billionaire who sees right through him.

A stolen moment turns into a night of passion, but by morning, Grayson is gone. Logan never lets anything slip through his fingers—and this time, he's not letting Grayson go.

Unforgettable Encounter is a seductive MM romance packed with sizzling chemistry, high-stakes tension, and a love that refuses to be forgotten

**SIGN UP TO RECEIVE YOUR  
FREE COPY NOW!**

## **Other Books by Ryan Moore:**

[\*Unforgettable Encounter\*](#) –a free gift when you sign up for my [\*newsletter\*](#).

[\*Hidden Desires: Unspoken Lust\*](#)

[\*Public Connections: Unexpected Sparks\*](#)

[\*Bought for Pleasure: Price of Desire\*](#)

[\*Power and Possession: The Billionaire's Game\*](#)

[\*Hidden Desires: Silent Cravings\*](#)

[\*Love-Hate Connection: Friction and Fire\*](#)

[\*Public Connections: Express Heat\*](#)

[\*Power and Possession: A Taste of Forever\*](#)

[\*Beach Secrets: Coastal Heat\*](#)

[\*International Heat: Heat Beyond Borders\*](#)

[\*Power and Possession: Before the Game\*](#)

[\*Beach Secrets: Hidden Currents\*](#)

[\*Power and Possession: After the Fall\*](#)

[\*Beach Secrets: Heatstroke\*](#)

[\*Bought for Pleasure: Bound by Him\*](#)

[\*Hidden Desires: Before the Walls\*](#)

[\*Beach Secrets: Tropical Vice\*](#)

[\*Hidden Desires: Unspoken Truth\*](#)

[\*Beach Secrets: Island Fever\*](#)

[\*Hidden Desires: Unspoken Hearts\*](#)

[\*Love-Hate Connection: Burning Boundaries\*](#)

[\*International Heat: Lost in Translation\*](#)

[\*Power and Possession: Invisible Foundations\*](#)

***Hidden Desires: Touch of Temptation***

***Public Connections: Chance Encounter***

***Power and Possession: Gilded Inheritance***

***Bought for Pleasure: A Dance of Shadows***

***International Heat: Foreign Affair***

***Love-Hate Connection: Heated Rivalry***

***Power and Possession: Fortune's Edge***

***Season's Heat: The Soldier's Secret***

***Hidden Desires: Beneath His Shadow***

***Season's Heat: Homecoming Heat***

***Public Connections: Late Night Confessions***

***Season's Heat: Saving Christmas Eve***

***Bought for Pleasure: His to Keep***

***Season's Heat: Christmas Tide***

***Season's Heat: Midnight Rescue***

***Love-Hate Connection: Irresistible Tension***

***International Heat: Passport to Passion***

***Power and Possession: Ruthless Arrangement***

***Hidden Desires: Forbidden Devotion***

***Public Connections: In the Spotlight***

***Love-Hate Connection: Hostile Attraction***

***Bought for Pleasure: Owed & Owned***

***International Heat: Dust and Desire***

***Power and Possession: Private Terms***

**Coming soon:**

***Fault Lines: After the Protest***

## About the Author:



Ryan Moore is an emerging voice in M/M erotic romance, known for crafting steamy, emotionally charged stories that explore the complexities of desire and connection. A native of the Pacific Northwest, Ryan grew up with a love for storytelling, finding inspiration in the region's brooding landscapes and vibrant, diverse communities. With a background in literature and a passion for exploring unconventional romances, Ryan has developed a unique style that blends heartfelt emotion with irresistible heat.

When he's not writing, he loves spending time outdoors — kayaking in Seattle's waters, hiking through national parks, and camping under the stars. At home, he enjoys cooking and entertaining friends, drawing inspiration from both his travels and his everyday surroundings to infuse a fresh perspective into the world of M/M romance.

In his new series, *Private Encounters*, Ryan invites readers to lose themselves in a world of hidden desires, intense passions, and the thrilling journey to love. He currently resides in Seattle with his golden retriever, Alex, a well-worn notebook, and an endless coffee supply, ever ready to capture the next story waiting to be told.



You can find me on social media at:



[Ryan Moore - Author](#)



[ryanmooreauthor](#)

or follow the series at:



[Private Encounters](#)

## **Please do me one last favor - review this book!**

P.S. It means the world to me that you read my book. Writing is my passion, and I look forward to your feedback. |

So, if you liked this book, I'd like to ask for a HUGE favor. Would you be so kind as to leave a review on Amazon? It'd be very much appreciated!

*Ryan Moore*

[Click Here To Leave A Review.](#)