

*the*  
*Suntress*  
ELIZABETH DAVIS

## THE HUNTRESS

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Editor Nicole Leigh

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### Adult Reading Material

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# Chapter 1

*Miami, Florida*

She stood there, the woman of his dreams barely covered by a transparent slip dress that clung to her lovely curves in all the right places. Surprise registered on Marcelo Alesi's face at the sight of her. Her perfect full-rounded breasts, constricted by lace, stirred erotic thoughts that he knew he shouldn't indulge. *Kaitlin Hawthorne, turning up out of the blue, soaked by the late night rain, who'd have thought?*

His silver fox eyes dropped lower, following the contour of her hips. The flare of her beige dress smoothed against her thighs and outlined the dip beneath the fabric at her center. He wanted to slide his hands up those long silky legs of hers, strip away her panties and bury himself deep inside her. Lose himself in her.

*God... already sprung.* He needed to find out why she was there and stop thinking about the warmth of her skin, his erection sliding into her body, filling her, his tongue thrusting deep into her tender mouth. *Damn.*

"Kaitlin, what are you doing here?" He tried to sound casual, but felt his temperature rising as he struggled to suppress

his growing enthusiasm. It had been over a year since she'd last dropped by his penthouse.

"I—" With tangled nerves, she tried to speak, pushing an errant strand of hair behind her ear. But words wouldn't form on her lips as she devoured his attractive form clad in loose silk pants, his solid chest exposed.

She tried not to focus on the bulge in his pants or imagine herself pressed against his taut abdominal muscles that flexed with each breath he took. Nor her fingertips splayed across the indentation at his collarbone while being embraced by his powerful arms, her head against his shoulder... *Don't think about it*, she silently chided herself.

She raised her cerulean eyes to his symmetrical flawless face and the thumping of her heart reached into her ears.

Marcelo's shoulders and neck stiffened as built-up tension made its way up his spine into every muscle in his body. Like no other woman, she could instantly affect him. *God, he hated that about her.*

"Are you crying?" His jaw contracted.

Her beauty hadn't diminished, and now she was made lovelier by the pools in her eyes threatening to spill onto her cheeks, joining rivulets of water shimmering on her skin. Her flaxen, typically salon-styled hair lay drenched beyond her shoulders a few inches above her rear.

She crossed her arms in a tight hug as if trying to contain the emotions threatening to overtake her. As she swiped her hand at her cheek, he realized he'd rarely witnessed her in such a fragile state. He had never liked seeing her tears, and she'd always loathed letting him see them.

"Come inside and let's get you warm," he said, able to keep his tone even as he stepped back to make an opening for her to enter.

Kaitlin caught a hint of hesitancy in his soothing baritone voice. She glimpsed past his wide muscled shoulders, spotting honey and brunette beauties. The statuesque brunette looked

quite at home in Marcelo's shirt, pouring a strawberry-colored wine at his mini bar. As did her blonde counterpart, sprawled across his leather chaise lounge in her Victoria's Secret's finest. Probably models, she thought caustically. Miami was littered with them.

"I've come at a bad time," Kaitlin clipped as she turned her prying eyes to Marcelo. She winced, suddenly feeling foolish for dropping by unannounced, expecting him to be alone. She'd chosen to trust her instincts so it would do her no good to second-guess herself now.

Besides, her cab had already departed, and she wasn't likely to get another one until the rumbling storm died down.

"Kaitlin, you're here now. Please don't go," he cajoled, clasping her shaking hands in his. Sensing her diminishing resolve, he turned his attention to his buxom houseguests, giving them one of his dazzling smiles.

"*Ladies*, I hope you don't mind waiting for me in the other room. I need a few minutes here."

Kaitlin caught the glint of sterling in his eyes before his grin faded as he turned his full attention back to her.

She snuck a peek at the women and bristled when one of them glared her way with a twisted smirk, tossed her shiny locks, and sauntered into his bedroom.

Kaitlin knew why the women were put off by her arrival. Marcelo, a charismatic playboy with mixed Italian blood and sexy dark features, probably hadn't needed to use his considerable persuasive powers to charm them out of their panties. Now, when the promise of an unforgettable night was about to come to fruition, she'd arrived like a wet blanket to ruin it.

With the duo departed, Marcelo gently tugged on Kaitlin's trembling hand and she staggered forward. As soon as she entered, he shut the door before she could dart.

His stimulating scent of patchouli and fir balsam musk filled her nostrils as he guided her to the sofa. She let her

handbag slide from her arm, past her chilled fingertips to the floor. Happy for the warmth that the room provided, she glanced at its furniture of deep, solid and earthy colors—all unmistakably masculine.

Marcelo reached for a lightweight throw hanging over a wing chair. He wanted to wrap it around her, but fearing that he might not break his embrace, he sensibly handed it to her, settling for a brush of her fingertips in the exchange.

As he suspected, even the simplest of touches left him wanting more. He couldn't think clearly with a hard-on, and she was no longer his to take.

"You need to get warm, or you'll catch a cold," he said, his voice laced with concern.

"I'm sorry—I've inconvenienced you." She spared a glimpse in the direction of his bedroom before looking at him again. Kaitlin enfolded herself in the cotton spread, embracing its comforting protection as she sank deep into the sofa.

"You're celebrating your job promotion, aren't you?" she asked.

Marcelo didn't answer. Partying in mixed company indeed trumped celebrating alone, he thought, but anything that he had been doing before Kaitlin's arrival no longer held his interest.

Even in her disheveled state, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, further stoking his unsatisfied lust. He needed a minute away from her to gain his bearings before she realized her effect on him.

"I'll make you some hot chocolate," he said, his voice trailing off as he made his way into the kitchen.

Kaitlin released a stifled breath. Whenever she was near Marcelo, she felt her insecurities afflict her. She vacillated between feeling as if she knew him better than anyone, and feeling as if he were a complete stranger.

She wasn't sure of him and ultimately she had pushed him away. If he rejected her now, as she had rejected him in the past,



she'd fall apart. She couldn't survive another day without him in her life in some way.

When he returned sporting a crisp white T-shirt that hugged his biceps and chest, she inwardly smiled, pleased that he was more drawn to her than the other women.

She gratefully reached for the steaming mug, enclosing her hands around it, and took a slow whiff of the sweet chocolaty scent before sampling its delicious, creamy flavor.

“You didn't forget to add marshmallows,” she said quietly.

As the velvety liquid flowed down her throat and warmed her from the inside out, she decided it was good that Marcelo had covered up. She needed to stay focused and articulate why she was there.

No, she thought. That wasn't quite right. She wanted him; needed him. And she was scared she wouldn't be able to express that need.

Marcelo cautiously eased into the sofa beside her. The storm clouds in her eyes made him uneasy, made him crave to be alone with her despite the two bikini-models waiting for him in the other room.

His cock in protest, he ruthlessly subdued his insatiable appetite to take Kaitlin then and there and gently asked her, “What can I do for you?”

Her eyes flashed her determined spirit. “I know that I have no right to ask you. You've dedicated so much of your life to Hawthorne Industries and to my father. But I've always been able to turn to you when I've felt hopeless and out of sync with the world... Will you come away with me?” Kaitlin's breath caught the steam dancing upwards from her mug.

She watched the defined muscles in his upper-arm contract as he sighed and raked one hand into his dusky hair to the nape of his neck.

“What in God's name am I asking you?” Kaitlin uttered, aghast at how selfish her request rang to her own ears. “I know

that this must sound crazy. And just so we're clear I'm not talking about a quick jet-away on some business trip," she added.

"I know," he said matching the seriousness of her tone. He narrowed his gaze on her. He unnerved her; he could tell by how she fidgeted and quickly looked away from him. And he marveled at how much courage it must have taken her to come to him making such an outrageous request.

Mortified by his scrutiny and his ensuing silence, Kaitlin could only stupidly stare into her half-empty mug.

When she summoned the courage to meet his eyes, she found them less than reassuring.

"I know that it's a lot to ask," she stammered.

His stare became curious as if she'd been hiding some secret from him. "Where to?" he questioned.

"Anywhere, but here. Come and see the world with me."

Marcelo's mouth curved into a cynical smile. Faint laughter echoed somewhere deep in his mind. Had he heard her correctly? He shifted uneasily, wondering if this was her attempt to make a fool out of him.

His jaw set in hard skepticism. "What happened between you and Nathaniel?" He swallowed back the hard lump of enmity stuck in his throat at the mention of Nathaniel Blackwell.

Marcelo had recognized the man as a threat from the moment he'd appeared in Kaitlin's life. Nathaniel was polished, above reproach and likeable. It was easy to see what Kaitlin saw in him, and in the end, Nathaniel had been the one to give her purpose.

"Nathaniel and I are over." Kaitlin briefly shut her eyes against her tears and Marcelo's disbelieving stare. She had always maintained the appearance that she and Nathaniel were rock-solid.

“Please don’t make me spell out everything that happened. I can’t talk about him right now. Just come away with me.”

Her heartfelt plea hit a soft spot in Marcelo that set him on edge. She was asking out of heartbreak; she couldn’t possibly know what she was saying. He exhaled deeply, raising his head toward the recessed lighting as if searching for an appropriate response.

“You’re not yourself. You’re hurting. You can’t be sure about anything that you want right now.” He tried to suppress his impulsive nature and focus on what made sense.

Hardly a day had gone by that he hadn’t thought of what he would say to her if she came to him, offering herself. Now that she had, his longing was mixed with sour memories of how she’d hurt him in the past and how her rejection had led him down a destructive path.

In time, he realized the blame wasn’t hers alone. He hadn’t made it easy for her to love him and ultimately he’d driven a wedge between them that had left an opening for Blackwell to fill.

Kaitlin studied him, steeling herself against what he might say. Unable to bear another minute of silence she blurted out, “I need to experience my life differently.”

“*Differently?* Is this about Nathaniel or is there something else going on?” he probed. He knew she cared deeply for Nathaniel, but she was too levelheaded to go running for the hills over a love affair gone wrong.

“You know what it’s been like for me,” she said evasively.

“Not lately,” he muttered, half-disturbed and wholly regretful. “Kaitlin... I recognize the mistakes I’ve made with us. I was stubborn and overconfident, but even so, it took a great deal of hard work, and long nights of soul-searching to reach this place in my life.”

“I know.” She almost flinched under his crushing gaze. “I know better than anyone what you’ve given up to become so successful, but I can’t help myself. I had to ask you... you’ve

also had other dreams—once our dreams were the same. *Remember?* You promised that one day we'd see the world together."

"I was too damn young when I made you that promise," he said more sternly than he'd intended. "Look, I know that your life isn't picture perfect, but there are people out there who would kill for it. Be grateful."

It wasn't easy for Marcelo to sit so close to her when every inch of him yearned to touch her, hold her, cover her lips with his own.

He couldn't withstand the temptation any longer. His fingertips slowly traced the line of her jaw in a soft caress. "You're smart, young, wealthy and beautiful." A surge of heat washed through his body.

The rosy color in her cheeks peaked as his forefinger grazed her plump bottom lip. Her heart rapidly accelerated; her skin slightly dampened.

She wanted to ease further into his hot touch that blazed a path along her cheek to her ear and left her skin tingling. Instead, she lightly urged his hand away, trying to regain control over her senses and deflect the power of his caresses.

He probably wasn't trying to make her breathing choppy or her body oversensitive, she reasoned, but he was doing so all the same.

"Marcelo, you have company..."

On a pained sigh, he asked, "Does Astor know that you're planning to leave?"

"Why are you bringing him up?" she griped. "We both know that he couldn't care less about what I think, say or do."

"That's not true and you know it. Hear me out," he cut in before she could launch into a tirade about her father. "I'm only defending him because you've closed your heart against him. You've never tried to understand his side of things. You haven't..." He softened his tone as he continued, "You haven't tried to get to know him."

“But *you* know him?” She rolled her eyes, placed her cup down with a thump on the glass top coffee table, and abruptly scooted to the other end of the sofa. She angled her body away from his.

Things weren’t going according to plan. She knew Marcelo might turn down her request to go away with her, but the last thing she expected was for him to feel sorry for her.

“Kaitlin...” Marcelo pleaded, closing the space between them. He stopped himself from doing anything more than draping one arm over her shoulders, and pressing her rigid body into his side.

Her arousing flowery-scent overloaded his senses, once more clouding his judgment, jumbling his mind. If he were crazy enough to agree to go with her, he’d need to have his head checked.

“Does Astor know of your plans?” he pressed again.

“I told my father—in so many words,” she uttered. Marcelo’s body was slowly transforming her into someone mellower, something his mollifying strength had always been able to do. She steadied her breathing and leaned further into his chest.

“And your mother?” Marcelo asked, knowing that Rhea Hawthorne had always been an important part of Kaitlin’s life.

“She knows that I need to do this. I’ll keep in touch with her.” Kaitlin set her feelings for her mother aside; deep down a part of her had never forgiven Rhea for allowing Astor to put his business ahead of his family.

“Come with me,” Kaitlin pleaded, her words sounding like a prayer on Marcelo’s shoulder. “I don’t want to do this alone, but I will if I have to.”

Marcelo squeezed her tighter, wishing that he could keep her there beside him forever and make her forget running away from her problems.

Her closeness had an unsettling effect on him. For a long time, she’d been his only way to salvation. Somehow in the

past, she was able to ease his restlessness. But without her, moments of thoughtlessness, excessive partying, hopelessly intoxicated nights, and too many women had found their way into his life.

It was Kaitlin's father who'd set him straight—a man's character was what other people thought of him, and in Marcelo's line of work, reputation made or broke a man.

After Astor's intervention, Marcelo had accepted that Kaitlin was no longer a part of his life. He'd let his aspirations become his anchor, although it meant living a lie for almost two years, telling himself that Kaitlin hadn't meant a damn thing to him.

He'd cleaned up his act and significantly curtailed his self-indulgent practices. He had changed. He wanted Kaitlin to know it, but tonight he had been celebrating his success. He mentally laughed. *Bad fucking timing.*

Maybe the tide had turned in his favor, but he wouldn't rule out that Kaitlin might come to her senses by morning. She was impulsive. Coming to him in the throes of her grief, rebounding. But the thought of going away with her still stopped his heart a beat.

He knew he'd do almost anything for her.

"You've been silent for too long. Please talk to me," Kaitlin uttered, barely audible into his chest.

"I need a night to think it over," he managed to say. "It's late. You're welcome to sleep in the guestroom."

"No—I can't stay here tonight," Kaitlin stressed. Not even if the downpour outside kept a cab from reaching her, would she stay with Marcelo and two sultry women across the hall aiming to please him.

Sure, she was certain that they meant nothing to him—they never did. His work with her father didn't allow him time for a meaningful relationship.

Regardless, she felt out of place. She leaned forward, reaching for her cell phone in her bag.

Marcelo's firm grip caught her wrist before she could dial any number. "Please stay. The girls live in the building. I'll see them home and be back in less than fifteen minutes. Just... be here when I return."

Marcelo's deep-set eyes implored her as he gently let go of her wrist. He stood, striding his way out of the room. He'd have to trust that Kaitlin would be there when he returned. He willed it to the universe that she'd wait for him.

From a room away, Marcelo's apologetic voice toward the women rang sharply in Kaitlin's ears. She grimaced. She could only imagine the women's perfectly pouting lips and sulking rejected faces. She realized that she must become stronger if she expected things to work out with Marcelo.

Whether he knew it or not, she'd placed all her bets on him, on them. And she had to make him want her in the worst way and put her before all else.

Her head throbbed as thoughts of Nathaniel came crashing back in. She had to let go of him. Let go of the past two years she'd spent with him. She couldn't afford even the slightest contact with Nathaniel, and she had to ban him from her thoughts as well. It was the only way she'd stand any chance with Marcelo.

Profusely rubbing her temples, she closed her eyes to mute the lights illuminating the room and took several deep breaths.

She smoothed her hair from her face and glanced at the wall clock. It was already after midnight, and all that she wanted to do was to stand under a hot shower and sink into a warm bed. Hugely relieved for Marcelo's invitation, she rose and wandered toward the guestroom because in all-truth she didn't want to be anywhere else, but there.

# Chapter 2

Marcelo barged into Astor Hawthorne's dimly lit office. It wasn't the kind of entrance that he typically made or the time of day that he made it. It was *too damn early* on a Monday morning.

The spacious office was quiet and empty except for Astor, who as usual, was already sitting behind his black and chrome desk engrossed in work while most everyone else battled Miami's grueling traffic.

"What in the hell is going on between you and Kaitlin?" Marcelo demanded leaning forward. His fist made contact with the expansive desk.

The thudding sound ricocheted off the glass crescent shaped walls of Astor's 'shark tank' office, as employees notoriously called it. A befitting reference to its dweller, an attractive, middle-aged man with a reputation for outmaneuvering his adversaries and going in for the kill at the first sign of weakness.

Astor continued to pour over the documents before him, unfazed by Marcelo, who anxiously awaited his response.

"Kaitlin and I had a dispute last week over the patents. Things escalated and she threatened to leave the company."



Astor finally looked up from his papers, shrewd intelligence behind his vivid blue eyes.

“The patents again? You two have been at it for months.” Marcelo briefly raised his palm to the back of his neck attempting to rub out stiffness while reassessing his tactic.

“Her point has no merit. She thinks I’m unethical and cheating employees out of their inventions. She damn well knows that according to the terms of their contracts, which none of them were forced to sign I might add, entitle me to their intellectual property,” Astor made clear.

“She’s not arguing legalities. She’s talking about your moral obligation to the people who made this company so great,” Marcelo argued.

“I made Hawthorne Industries what it is today,” Astor corrected.

Marcelo sighed hard. “Even I know that Hawthorne Industries has trumped its share of small businesses, acquiring their patents and forcing their demise. We have virtually no competitors and a monopoly on the world’s robotic future. Many in the industry find your tactics *questionable*.”

“I don’t give a shit about their views on my morality. We control the market. This is business,” Astor asserted unapologetically.

Marcelo shrugged, realizing he wasn’t getting anywhere.

“I know that you can appreciate my way of thinking.” Astor studied him.

“I’m not here to choose a side,” Marcelo grated. “Kaitlin wasn’t making a threat. She’s dead serious and *will* skip town.”

“She won’t go through with it. She doesn’t have what it takes to set out on her own. Now, if you would please, I have work to do,” Astor clipped, tilting his head in the direction of the door.

“Will you take her seriously for once? She called it quits with Nathaniel.” Marcelo’s words dropped like a sledgehammer.

Astor’s icy blue glare bored into Marcelo’s steely gray orbs. He remained silent for a moment, his mind apparently working. “I see. You must be pleased.”

“If you think this is about me, it’s not,” Marcelo snapped.

Astor leaned back in his leather chair, resting his forearms on its handles. Marcelo’s face registered roused, palpable determination.

“You believe that she’s really going to do it?”

“Yes,” Marcelo ground out through clenched teeth. “There’s no doubt in my mind.”

Astor’s gaze darkened. “It’s not like Kaitlin to go to such lengths to wash her hands of me. She’s not a risk taker. It’s part of the reason that I question her suitability as my successor. But she is my daughter and her place is by my side at this company.”

“Let her go,” Marcelo demanded on a hard breath, knowing that Astor wouldn’t easily relinquish his rigid control over Kaitlin’s life.

“Why?” Astor’s nostrils flared. “It’s obvious that it’s an emotional and reckless decision. And you’re defending her. I expect more from you, but Kaitlin...”

Broad lines grooved Astor’s forehead. He was disappointed, but he wasn’t surprised that his daughter refused to see reason and would choose to leave rather than sensibly discuss her life decisions with him.

“I know better than anyone how much you want for Kaitlin, but she needs to decide for herself what kind of woman she is. If you keep interfering with her choices, you’ll eventually lose her,” Marcelo warned.

Astor’s frustration increased, thickening the air between them. He didn’t care for the severity of Marcelo’s warning. And

he sure as hell didn't like the disrespectful tone or the forward manner in which his protégé had addressed him.

"This isn't like you. You're keeping something from me. What else is there?" Astor demanded.

"I think... she needs me." Marcelo pushed off the edge of the desk, for a minute unable to meet the gaze of the man he admired most.

Astor sounded low, sarcastic laughter. "I should have seen this coming." He shook his head in disbelief, his humor quickly dissipating. "We're finally getting at the truth. You're asking me if you can go with her."

"I'm not asking." Marcelo's chest rose and fell on a sharp breath.

Astor's hard features cracked, revealing his sudden lack of composure. Everything that he'd done throughout his career, hell, throughout his life was for the prosperity of his family. Marcelo was family, the son he never had.

His daughter, on the other hand, was impossible to work with, rarely supportive in business matters, never agreeing with him. But Marcelo was devoted, offering the kind of loyalty that was hard to come by.

At fifteen years old, Marcelo had come to live on Astor's estate. He was a smart-ass kid, a tech prodigy, rebelling against convention, tradition, and getting into trouble with authority figures of every kind.

Under Astor's tutelage, Marcelo had learned to transform his tech genius into profitable business ventures. What Marcelo couldn't buy with his growing bank account, he finagled by turning on the charm or playing up his sterling business reputation. It was a powerful arsenal that he used to indulge in the chaotic ways of his heart.

Now, after twelve years, Marcelo had exceeded Astor's hopes for him, becoming a true visionary with the necessary passion for thriving and solidifying Hawthorne Industries' spot at the top.

“You’re too valuable to the company. I won’t allow it. You’re needed here. Investors in the *Chronos Regenerative Project* expect its completion within a year.”

“I’ll finish it while I’m away with Kaitlin,” Marcelo retorted.

“Just what do you expect to accomplish by leaving with my daughter?” Astor lashed out, jutting to the edge of his seat. “You can’t possibly think I’d agree to this?”

“I’ll take care of her. I’ll watch over Kaitlin, protect her,” Marcelo said despite Astor’s cutting antagonism.

For the past two days, Marcelo had been with Kaitlin, keeping her calm while she frantically made her plans, their plans. Whatever had happened to her, she was trying hard to make herself forget. She was running at full speed ahead, but Marcelo knew that it would take her time to find her footing.

“I’ve made life too comfortable for Kaitlin. To a fault, I’ve raised an inexperienced daughter... I know that you mean well, but it’s not enough to become her champion. Kaitlin is terrified of trusting her own instincts. Desperation brought her to you and as long as she’s afraid to take a blind leap of faith, you’ll never get what you need from her.”

Astor rose to his feet, taking a few paces toward the tall windows. He stared over the waking city, one hand holding the other behind his back. “She’d never leave without you.”

“She said that she would.” Uncertainty crept into Marcelo’s heart and mind.

“You don’t really believe that. She’s bluffing.”

“I’ve made my decision.” Marcelo glared at Astor’s back.

Silence, save for the slightest whirr of a laptop fan, filled a long minute.

“So you have. Now, I’ll make mine.” Astor pivoted around. With a razor-sharp focus, he became the tactician often seen in the boardroom, approaching the game ten steps ahead of everyone.

“While you’re away, *you will* complete Chronos and regularly report your progress to me. *You will* also ensure Kaitlin’s return in exactly one year.”

“I don’t agree to this. Whenever we return, it will be her—our decision.”

“I find it amusing that you think you have a choice,” Astor said brusquely.

Marcelo knew that he didn’t. Astor could make things happen; get what he wanted. An alpha male with billions at his disposal had that power.

Marcelo’s mind instantly flashed through any number of things that Astor could set in motion, making Kaitlin’s privileged lifestyle, and his hard-earned one, a living hell.

“There is no one else out there who will touch this controversial project of yours with a ten-foot pole. I’ve drummed up the few investors that you have by using my name to back you. Your potential for failure is too high.” Astor paused to let his words sink in.

“But we both know that I *won’t* fail,” Marcelo retorted.

“We also both know that you need funding to continue developing Chronos,” Astor countered. “If you agree to my terms, I’ll give you and Kaitlin one year, unhindered.”

Marcelo grimaced. God only knew that he loathed being backed into a corner, but he had poured his heart and soul into Chronos over the past two years. And *when* he succeeded, his breakthrough in nanotech engineering was going to revolutionize the industry.

This was his chance to make his mark on the world. He couldn’t sacrifice his life’s work, not even for Kaitlin.

“Agreed.” Marcelo reluctantly nodded.

“Then I suppose we are finished here.” Astor strode back to his chair.

“We are,” Marcelo said, pausing on his exit. “Kaitlin and I are leaving immediately.”

For a second, Marcelo thought Astor would stop him. Tell him that the deal was off, but ‘Godspeed,’ were the last words that Astor said.

Marcelo headed to the lab making a quick stop to fill his briefcase with everything that mattered. Next up was Kaitlin’s office to back up her computer before wiping the system in order to protect sensitive company data.

He forwarded her email to another account that she could access if needed. He would restore everything on a laptop later, but right now, he wanted to get in and out as quickly as possible.

Arriving at the elevator, he pressed the down button, cursing under his breath, impatiently waiting.

He glanced at his watch. *Shit*. It was late. Nathaniel would be waltzing into the office any minute now hell-bent on finding Kaitlin.

She had avoided Nathaniel’s calls, texts and emails all weekend. If Nathaniel suspected Kaitlin was taking off, he’d do everything in his power to stop her. Marcelo wouldn’t let that happen. He’d meet Kaitlin at Miami International Airport without interference.

Finally reaching the ground floor, Marcelo dashed out before the door fully opened, pacing in long strides through the lobby.

He hurriedly swiped his identity card on the security gate panel, raising the eyebrows of security guards. A few more feet and he’d be out of there.

*Fuck*. Nathaniel was heading straight for the gates toward him.

Their eyes locked with cold calculation as they stared each other down.

Marcelo struggled to get his pulse under control, clenching his fist tightly around his briefcase handle. God he hated Nathaniel for being in Kaitlin’s life.

Tension intensified in his limbs with every step that brought him closer to Nathaniel. Their silent exchange swept a hushing dark chill into the air as they wordlessly brushed past each other.

Marcelo didn't give a rat's ass that Nathaniel looked like shit. Whatever it was that had happened between Kaitlin and Nathaniel had given Marcelo the opening that he needed to be with the woman he'd always wanted. He wasn't about to lose Kaitlin twice.

The minute Nathaniel stepped into the elevator, and its sliding doors closed, realization struck him hard in the chest. Kaitlin wasn't in the building. She was with Marcelo.

The elevator walls suddenly felt as though they were crushing Nathaniel on all sides. Desperately assaulting elevator buttons, his heart nearly exploded as he waited for the doors to open again.

He sprinted down the hall in hot pursuit, descended two flights of stairs, and made his way into the lobby. *Goddamnit!* He was too late. Marcelo had vanished.

# Chapter 3

*Port of Rio de Janeiro, fifteen months later*

Kaitlin pressed her finger to the touch screen, her morning interval program complete. Her workout had been far too strenuous. It was becoming something of a bad habit, losing her mind to nerve-racking thoughts of Marcelo while pounding away on the treadmill in her bedroom suite. She'd suffer for it when aching joints and muscles left her stiff the next day.

For God's sake, it had been over a year, and she still hadn't gotten it right with Marcelo. She didn't even know what *right* was. Not even her new life, her new role, had given her the finesse to handle him.

Exhausted from her thoughts even more than from her routine, she lifted a bottled water off the console and guzzled, making her way past her immaculate bed.

Her contemporary room, soft with cream and violet colors, provided her the comfort that she needed. She entered the black and white ensuite bathroom, which lit up at her voice command, '*Lights*'.

She stripped away a sweaty Nike sports bra and leggings, and pushed past the glass shower door.