



ASTRID JANE RAY

VIRTUE & VANITY

He will do anything to earn her forgiveness,
but some things might be unredeemable.

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**Edited by: Monique Fischer
(<http://moniquetheeditrix.weebly.com>)**

This book would not have been written without the help of musical inspiration. All of the songs and compositions that inspired my writing can be found [here](#).

WARNING: This is not your typical “hearts and flowers” romance story. It will contain strong language, disturbing situations and in some parts non – consensual sexual content. Please don't read this if you are under the age of 18, or find such things disturbing!

Excerpt

I winced from the sickening fear he evoked within me and I lost all of my control. He had won. Heavy tears spilled from my eyes and rolled onto my cheeks, forming a wet stream as I tried to breathe through the fierce sobs that emerged from the depths of my body. His gaze roamed along my probably red and puffed face, pausing at the edge of my eyelids. The longer he observed my tears, the more his face turned into an unreadable expression like he was taken aback by my undeniable display of weakness. Unexpectedly, the darkness in his eyes was replaced by a glimmer of light that was hanging on a thread. For a ridiculously short second it almost seemed like he wanted to tell me that there was no need to cry. His eyes lingered on my face, burning an impression that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Taking a deep breath, he parted his lips and just when he was about to speak, something within him shifted and he turned his head away from me. When his eyes focused on me again, his cruelty returned with a vengeance. The glimmer of light was dead and gone, the darkness ten times stronger than before.

“Do you remember what I told you about crying?”

I flinched when he spoke in a deep voice after the long break of silence. At that moment, I knew my tears meant nothing to him...

Chapter One

The light from the computer screen glowed on my tired eyes, but I was determined to keep on typing. The story I had replayed in my mind for months had to come to the surface, and I was so inspired that even after hours of writing, I still felt the drive that kept me going. My mother's words—that I was a foolish dreamer who needed to start living in the real world sprang to my mind and even though she had a point, nothing seemed to be able to dampen my motivation. I was so wrapped up in reading books and writing my own stories that I'd sort of become oblivious to the world around me. But that was alright, because the reality that surrounded me wasn't even a bit alluring, so it felt good to escape into the exciting world I'd created in my imagination.

I had lived in Rosemont my entire life. It was a small, rural town in the middle of nowhere. Come to think of it, I wasn't quite sure that one could even locate it on the map; it was that irrelevant and tiny. If one wanted to get out of Rosemont and achieve something, it was anything but easy. But staying wasn't all that great either. With few job opportunities and even less chance of getting a decent education, people were stuck in one place, waiting for something to change. Needless to say, I hated living there, and all I wanted was to leave and make something of myself. I had just finished high school and I was looking forward to starting a new exciting life, but things hadn't gone as smoothly as I planned. I had a dream of studying literature and becoming a famous writer. Of course, nobody in Rosemont understood my *unusual* ambitions, least of all my mother.

To the outside world, she tried to come across as a caring and sacrificing single mother who would do whatever it took to stand by her three daughters, but the truth was quite different, because she had been anything but supportive when

it came to our dreams. To expect a glimpse of love and affection from her was like asking for rain in the hot desert. I tried my best, but I couldn't get past her cold walls. Before my father died from liver cirrhosis, she had been somewhat more affectionate and caring towards us, but it was only because appearances meant everything to her. Back then, she thought that her reputation as a loving mother could make up for my father's embarrassing conduct in public. But even then I knew he wasn't as bad of a person as my mother portrayed him to be. It was more that living with her had been so challenging for him, that he sought comfort in the vice of alcohol and it had completely destroyed him. In time, things had only taken a turn for the worse. Memories of when we were children and he would play with us and make us laugh would always return to my mind, and I couldn't accept the fact that it had been the same man who would come home drunk and aggressively attack us. I guess I held a little resentment towards him, to say the least. Because of his weakness, I'd lost him when I was only ten years old. Not to mention that he was the sole reason I hated alcohol, and because of him I had almost no friends. One could say that my father's behavior turned us into outcasts in an already isolated town.

Ever since he died, my mother's frantic obsession to make the small community of Rosemont forget her late husband was a failure and an alcoholic had spiraled out of control. Sometimes people would share different kinds of embarrassing stories about my father's behavior in town of when he would make a fool out of himself and it had only contributed to her constant need to impose her feeling of self-worth to everybody around her—and we were no exception. Somehow, she believed that because we were her daughters, she owned us, and she would always make decisions which regarded our lives without even trying to get our consent. Standing up to her wasn't an option. Either we obliged or we would be manipulated into doing what she wanted. Later I would find out that it was a trait I should have feared a lot more than I had.

Since we had a lot of financial issues, her secret dream was to get rich and show off her lavishness in front of

everybody. We thought that her ridiculous attempts to get her hands on large amounts of cash were simply ridiculous. My younger sister Ashley and I often observed her excitement right after she played the lottery, because every time she was convinced it was her lucky ticket out of Rosemont. It had been both sad and fun to watch her write all of her plans on a piece of paper in case she won a lot of money. Her dreams of luxury would probably never come true, but she dreamed nonetheless. We were kind of similar in that, because I also had dreams of my own and I wanted to fulfill them so eagerly.

I returned to the love story I was writing and started a whole new exciting chapter. The story was a complete cliché, but being a hopelessly romantic soul, I didn't care about that. It was the kind of story where a knight in shining armor saves his damsel in distress and they live happily ever after. Although it wasn't the type of story that would turn into the greatest literary success, I thought it was cute and it held a lot of sentimental value for me. The muse in my head warned me to stop writing when I heard someone walking in the hallway. The light brightened the room and hurt my exhausted eyes.

“Isabelle, what on earth are you still doing here?” I heard my mother's upset voice.

“Mother, I was just writing something,” I said defensively.

She sighed and shook her head in disapproval. I didn't understand why she was annoyed or why she'd come to the living room in the middle of the night in the first place. She never did that. Given her status of a deeply religious and humble woman—which was nothing but yet another ridiculous pretense that helped her build her false persona—she preached how she hated the computer and everything that went along with it. Sometimes, in front of the church community, she would call it the devil's tool which would destroy us, and I was amazed that all those people failed to see through her shallow act of deceit. But all that resulted in was us having only one computer, which was in the living room, and access to the Internet was strictly limited. Mother was the only one

who knew the password that could grant us the luxury of being in touch with the outer world. We weren't allowed to have access to any social media sites and ever since Ashley had tried to trick her by making a *Facebook* account, Mother blocked those sites and only allowed us to use the Internet for school purposes. Her biggest worry was that we might get in touch with boys; and dating was strictly against the rules. She often told us that she would only allow us to date once we found someone who was serious enough to marry us, because as she would interestingly put it, nobody wanted to buy damaged goods. Even a fool could understand that she was protecting herself from the possibility of yet another public humiliation, so she wanted us to gain the status of moral saints in the Rosemont community.

“Go to sleep. I need to use the computer for a while.” She arched her eyebrows, a sign that she was waiting for me to comply.

Surprised by her unusual request to use the computer in the middle of the night, I noticed she looked away from me and I knew there would be hell to pay if I didn't disappear into my room immediately. I hurried out to the hallway because I didn't want to anger her, and I went up the stairs, but once I reached the door to my room, the curiosity to find out what she was doing took hold of me. I decided to risk my mother's outburst and I tiptoed back down the stairs, making sure that I didn't make a single sound. When I came to the door of the living room, I noticed that the light was out again and the room was illuminated only by the computer screen's light.

I leaned around the door and saw my mother typing an email to someone. I didn't even know she had an email account. But what actually caught me by surprise was seeing her chat with somebody on *Facebook*. I moved my foot, accidentally causing the wooden floor to creek underneath me, and it caught my mother's attention. She looked around her and I held my breath next to the door, hoping she wouldn't discover that I was spying on her. Luckily, she got a reply on her email, and she focused all of her attention on the computer screen again. Relief washed over me as I realized that I would be able to walk back to my room without her noticing me.

That night, I lay awake for hours, thinking about knights in shining armor, damsels in distress and Mother's motives to use the Internet in the dead of the night.

Chapter Two

Only a few days after I had caught her chatting with someone in the middle of the night, Mother was frantic about making everything in the house look perfect. For a moment, I thought that maybe she had met a man, but that thought quickly left my mind, because I knew her character all too well. A cold and calculated person like her would only pay that much attention to something when it meant that it could result in some personal gain. I didn't know what the big fuss was about when I walked into the living room looking for the book I'd left lying around, until she addressed me with a very serious tone that could only mean one thing—something was very wrong.

“Isabelle, it's so nice that you're here. I was just about to go look for you. Please, sit down, honey. We have to talk,” she said with a fake smile on her face.

Her words and demeanor screamed that I should run away from her because she obviously had something terribly sinister on her mind. If I'd learned one thing about my mother over the years, it was that she was never nice and she never displayed any sign of love to her children. I was nineteen, and she had never once called me ‘honey’ or told me how nice it was to see me. Also, if there weren't any personal interests involved for her, she wouldn't want us to talk to her at all. So it was understandable that I was more than wary to accept her feigned sign of kindness.

“What do you want to talk about, Mother?” I asked with suspicion visible on my face.

“Sit down, Isabelle. What I'm about to tell you is very important.” She made a brief pause, not knowing how to continue. Then she smiled and took one of my hands between her palms. “A woman contacted me a few days ago. She works

for the Everett's. They are a rich family from New York, you see," she spoke matter-of-factly and her tone of voice raised every alarm in my body, but I knew I had to remain calm.

"Yes, and?" I asked with dread in my voice as if I knew that nothing in my life would ever be the same again.

Obviously, I'd observed her while she was e-mailing with that mysterious woman.

"She sent me a photograph." She was stalling, which wasn't a good sign.

"A photograph?" I asked, confused.

"They have a son, you see." She paused again.

"Okay?" I said insecurely, because I didn't know where our conversation was going.

"Yes, like I've said. They have a son—a young heir. His name is Sebastian and he needs to get married. They are looking for a girl from Rosemont," she said calmly, in the same tone she would use to tell us what's for dinner—like it was normal for a rich guy from New York to look for a wife in Rosemont.

"Why would they look for a girl in Rosemont?" I was beyond curious.

The fact that a rich heir from New York would come to Rosemont to look for a wife didn't make any sense at all. Even residents of Rosemont didn't want to marry one of their townspeople. Some of them would say they had a good reason, since incest wasn't exactly unheard of around there, but still.

"What difference does it make? Does it really matter why?" She started scowling at me.

I didn't reply, instead I simply gazed at her in disbelief. Of course it mattered why. If a rich, young man had to come to Rosemont to find a wife, something had to be seriously wrong with him. He was probably fat, ugly, and completely crazy if he would settle for a Rosemont girl.

"Honey you should be counting your blessings instead of analyzing why God has given you this wonderful

opportunity.” Those words were my sentence.

“Why should I count my blessings? What does any of this have to do with me?”

At last, she continued and put the final nail in my coffin. “Why, you are the first candidate for his new wife. Isn’t that great Isabelle?” She burst with excitement.

I didn’t even get a moment to process the information she had given me. I started shaking in shock because I knew when she got that excited about something, she wouldn’t let go until she got what her mind was set on. Still, I refused to give in without a fight.

“Mother, you can’t be serious. You can’t expect me to marry a man I have never even met. For all I know, he could be some demented serial killer. I will not go through with this. I just... I won’t!” I raised my voice at her which was something my mother wouldn’t tolerate.

“Now young lady, you listen to me and you listen well. You will not ruin this chance for us because of your selfishness.” Her voice was steady, but it was obvious that she was very annoyed.

“My selfishness?” I yelled. “You’re calling me selfish because I won’t accept your diabolical plan to sell me to this man? Because that’s exactly what you would be doing—selling me to the highest bidder.”

“How dare you?” The outrage was visible on her face. “How dare you accuse me of something like that? I have given my life to raise you girls and all I want is to secure a good life for you and your sisters. And as for me, don’t you think you owe me something in return for all the sacrifices I’ve made for you?” She was furious because I wasn’t cooperating.

“Of course—money,” I said as anger seeped through me. “That’s all you ever think about. You don’t care about how I feel or what will happen to me.” My voice rang with fury and desperation as I hoped to get to her at some level.

“This is so typical of you. You would have more than any other girl could ever wish for. Do you know how many

girls fantasize about marrying the gorgeous Sebastian Everett? Your dreams would come true. But no, that's not good enough for you," she said mockingly and the attribute about him being gorgeous didn't escape me.

"You are not a little girl anymore, Isabelle. You have to wake up from your dream world of fairytales and realize what this opportunity means for your family. You are my eldest daughter. Ashley and Jane are too young to be married. You are not. Please, be reasonable." She would try anything to convince me to go along with this awful plan.

"Mother, I am nineteen!" I stressed the words as much as I could, to make her realize what she was doing to me. "And you don't know anything about my dreams. I want to go to school, find a job, enjoy my life and *not get married*. I don't care that he's rich. And why on earth would he want to marry me? Why can't you see that—?"

"This discussion is over. You are getting married to this man, even if it's the last thing I do in my life."

"I won't." I shook my head. "If you think I will go along with this, you're crazy. I won't. I won't, do you hear me?!" I screamed from the top of my lungs and headed for my room.

Both Ashley and Jane were alarmed enough by the noise to leave their room and come after me. I punched the pillow in frustration before burying my head in it, because I knew that even though I'd stood up to my mother for the first time in my life, I still had no chance in winning this fight. Ashley was the middle sister and she was the one who was closest to me. She immediately hugged me and asked what was wrong, whereas Jane, who was a true copy of my mother's character, giggled secretly because I'd made Mother furious and she knew she was about to witness a show.

"Isabelle, what's wrong? Why are you so upset? Calm down, whatever it is, she will forget all about it in no time." Ashley tried to comfort me.

I raised my head and flinched at the sound of the creaking stairs. It wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. Nobody

fought Elisa Walsh and came out a winner, not even her own daughter. Elisa Walsh would always get exactly what she wanted. Her blonde hair, blue eyes and fair complexion, complemented by her thin waist, would make you believe that she's as good as an angel and that she never meant any harm. But I knew better than to expect compassion from my own mother. She would crush me without thinking, only to set her plan in motion. Her steps were slow and determined and as she approached my room. I could feel my heart pounding and I could smell her brutal determination. She opened the door and I buried my head back in the pillow. Ashley wanted to say something, but my mother cut her off.

“Girls, go to your room. Isabelle and I have to finish our conversation.” Her voice was made of steel.

Ashley gave me a gentle hug and followed Jane out of the room. I had no intention to face my mother. For a few short moments, she stood there observing me, and then she finally spoke.

“I don't care if you're listening or not. But if I were you, I would listen carefully because I will say this only once. I have no power in making you come to your senses and accept this wonderful opportunity,” she said and I raised my head to meet her gaze. I sensed there was a 'but' coming. Of course, I was right.

“But I do have the power to renounce you as my daughter and make you leave my house and everything in it. You will be homeless, Isabelle. As for your sister, if you decline this offer, you will rob her of an education and a future. I will be forced to forbid her from attending school, because this family cannot afford that expense anymore. Do you want that on your conscience, Isabelle?” She knew she had won this battle, because she exited my room self-assured and gloating.

I knew she meant every single word of what she had said. She wouldn't hesitate to throw me out if I disobeyed her. What option did I have? I had no one to turn to and no one who could help me. My mother had managed to isolate us from everybody. I had no friends or family who would come

to my aid. She knew I would be forced to accept her crazy demand, because being homeless in Rosemont was far worse than being thrown into a forest filled with wild wolves ready to tear you apart. And she knew that Ashley was my weak spot. I couldn't allow Mother to do that to her. Of course, she'd left Jane out of her threats because she was her favorite. Jane was Mother's carbon copy and would probably be thrilled to be married off to a rich stranger if she got the chance to do so. Since I was the epitome of my father's looks—and as Mother often said, character—I could count on her despising me. A part of me wished he was still alive to protect me from Mother's delirium. Even though I didn't remember much of my father, I knew he would have never allowed her to marry me off like that. He had been an alcoholic and those times when he came home drunk and took his rage out on us or Mother were burned in my memory, but he'd had strong moral values when it came to his daughters. Yet he wasn't there to protect me; he was dead because of alcohol. The day he died, I swore to myself that I would never take a sip of it, even though, in the situation I was facing at the moment, having a strong drink sounded quite appealing.

After staying in my room for a long time, I went downstairs to face my tormentor. She was reading a magazine with her legs crossed and swinging. Putting her magazine down, she turned to me with a sly smile on her face.

“Well, did you come to tell me you've finally come to your senses, Isabelle?”

She anticipated my answer and pure desperation covered every part of my being as I nodded in response to my mother's question. It was my white flag, my surrender. It meant that my life was over.

“I knew you were a smart girl, darling. Now, all we have to do is get you ready for our guest!” She didn't wait for my reply but continued talking excitedly. “We have so many things to do. We have to get you dressed properly, fix your hair, put the best makeup on and rehearse everything you are going to say when Mrs. Moran arrives. You have to be very presentable for your picture. I am so excited. I can't even

imagine how happy you must be.” She was on cloud nine and I could see the dollar signs were already forming in her eyes.

Chapter Three

For the first time in my life, Mother had spent a fortune on me. Only the best dress and the most expensive shoes would do. She paid for the most expensive hairdresser in town to make my hair look perfect. She also treated me with a visit to the makeup salon. Even though the makeup artists tried to convince her that less was more, she acted like a crazed woman, demanding that they put more powder on my face and to accentuate my eyes or cheekbones more. The real surprise was yet to follow, because after the salon treat, she took me to the electronics store and bought me a cell phone. It was surreal, because apparently she would do anything to cheer me up so I would be in a good mood when the people who needed to seal my fate arrived. When we returned home, she seemed more than happy with the result. Looking at myself in the mirror, I thought I looked pretentious, and way older than I actually was. I looked artificial. I looked like something I was not—I looked like a piece of meat wrapped up in a nice package that was about to be sold.

Mother had instructed me to go to my room and wait there until the woman who worked for the Everett's arrived. I wasn't allowed to leave my room until she called for me. It felt like I was sitting on my bed for hours, not having the will to do anything with myself, when Jane opened the door, smiled at me cynically, and said that Mother wanted me to come downstairs. Suddenly, I felt very nervous and I tried to take a deep breath to calm myself down, but it didn't help. I could hear Mother's high-pitched voice, trying to woo whoever she conversed with. I entered the room awkwardly and everything went silent. All eyes were on me. There was my mother, a man in a suit, and a woman with a briefcase on her lap. Our eyes met for a moment, but there was something absolutely

terrifying about that woman and I could feel her glancing down at me from head to toe. I blushed and looked away.

“This is Isabelle, my eldest daughter, the one I was telling you about,” Mother was saying in a cheerful tone, but the man and the woman remained serious.

“I see...” The woman glanced at me again with what seemed to be a critical look on her face. “You are the one who’s been eager to marry Sebastian? Your mother has told us everything about your secret crush on him.”

My secret crush on a man I hadn’t even seen or heard about until two days ago? Clearly, Mother was a master of deception. Obviously worried that the confused look on my face might give us away, she interfered.

“Don’t be shy darling. What about all those times I caught you looking at his pictures on the Internet?” Mother winked at me and I was more furious than ever.

How dare she lie like that?! We were almost never allowed to use the damned computer unless it was for school, and only then under her supervision. I felt like smacking her right then and there. But the look in her eyes told me everything—*remember what happens if you mess up*. I smiled shyly and offered a nod as a response. The whole situation was ridiculous. Everybody was talking about the rich heir getting married to a poor girl from Rosemont, like it was a perfectly normal thing. After looking at me for a short while, the woman had a confused look on her face.

“Isabelle, how old are you?” She looked suspicious.

“Nineteen,” I replied simply.

“Almost twenty,” Mother jumped in.

“That makes you seven years younger than Sebastian. I hope that won’t be an inconvenience for you.” She looked my mother’s way like she was the one who had to marry that man and not me.

“Not at all. If anything, I think it’s great that he’s a few years older than my Isabelle,” she stated and turned to me with one of her fake smiles. “Right, honey?”

I took a deep breath instead of replying.

The serious lady took it as an affirmative reply and continued.

“Well, then. I will have to take a photograph of you and email it to Sebastian’s father to see if they think you are —” she inspected my whole length again as if to suggest she thought otherwise than what she was about to say, “— appropriate.”

She stood up and started taking several photographs of me from different positions. I had to pucker up, smile and lift my head up, all the while being cheered by my mother’s mimicking, which were suggesting what I should do with my hands, lips or my hair. When the ‘photo shoot’ ended, the lady immediately returned to her seat and emailed the photographs to somebody who I supposed was the father of my husband-to-be. I could finally take a seat as well.

“Now, before we move on... Richard, would you be so kind and prepare the documents?” She glanced at the man who hadn’t spoken yet.

The man took the documents out of the briefcase and carefully laid them on the table without so much as saying a single word. The woman was obviously the one in charge, because she took it upon herself to explain what the documents meant.

“This is a non-disclosure agreement. If you sign this, it means that anything that was discussed in this room about the Everett family cannot be shared with anyone else. Please sign the document so that we can continue.”

Mother was more than eager to sign the papers and she urged me to do the same, without even giving me the chance to read what I was signing. The woman was apparently very pleased with our cooperation, because her cold mask of a face had produced a dry smile.

“Now that this is settled, we can proceed. My name is Rosario Moran and I am one of the lawyers who work for the

Everett family. This is Dr. Richard Mayhem.” The mysterious man who turned out to be a doctor, nodded in response.

Instantly a red flag raised in my mind. *Why on earth was there a doctor here?* Mrs. Moran was happy to enlighten us.

“The Everett family has only two conditions when it comes to choosing a wife for an heir of their wealth. She has to come from Rosemont, and she has to be a virgin.”

The color suddenly drained from my face and then returned as fire burning through my cheeks. As if she could sense my terror, Mrs. Moran continued explaining what I already knew.

“Dr. Mayhem is here to ensure us that all of the conditions are met, before we decide whether or not you will be presented to the family, or better said, your future husband.”

I felt my body jerk for a moment and I thought I was going to pass out. *Would I actually have to go through such embarrassment?* I closed my eyes to absorb the anticipating moments of silence, and prayed for a miracle that would make all of this go away. Some distant part of me hoped that Mother would stop this madness and prevent my further humiliation, but there was no such luck.

“Of course, it is understandable that the Everett’s want to make sure my daughter makes a suitable match for their son. Isabelle, dear, please wait for us in your room.” She gripped my hand, warning me it was in my best interest to listen to her.

I stood up and started walking. On my way, I looked at the front door and thought about running away, but it was not an option. I couldn’t sacrifice Ashley’s happiness and besides, there was nowhere for me to go. So, like an obedient dog, I moved up the stairs and into my room. I tried to be calm, but nothing could lessen my panic. *What on earth were they going to do to me?* Mother followed shortly after and entered the room before the doctor. She was carrying a blue hospital dress

which made it clear she wanted to prepare me for the ‘check-up’. I sat numbly on my bed.

“Isabelle,” she spoke to me softly.

I looked into her eyes in desperation and whispered in a broken voice.

“Please, don’t let them do this to me.” I searched for my mother’s protection and comfort, but that was something she wasn’t willing to give.

“It will only take a moment. Just relax and let the doctor examine you. Two minutes of discomfort traded for a life of pleasure. It’s a fair trade, don’t you think?”

Only I didn’t want any of this. Didn’t it matter to her? She handed me the dress and told me to put it on and lie on my back. I had five minutes of privacy to comply with her demand. I was lying on my bed, when I heard the door open and I flinched when the doctor entered the room. Again, he didn’t say a word. He was busy with taking various objects out of his bag. It was clear he could sense my discomfort and panic, but he had no interest in easing my mind before examining me. Instead, he started giving me a number of orders while putting on a pair of white gloves. He told me to spread my legs apart and I complied without hesitation, but my discomfort didn’t escape him.

“You know, you don’t have to do this. There are plenty of other girls who would be more than happy to take your place.” He was annoyed, even though I tried to be as steady as possible. I didn’t even dare to breathe.

He had a flashlight and he was shamelessly observing the most private part of my body. I stiffened when I heard him take something from the metal plate and I tried to be still as his hand approached the area between my legs. No matter how hard I tried to suppress my fears and discomfort, I couldn’t help myself and I jerked violently when the cold metal object touched my skin.

“Jesus Christ girl, if you don’t want to get yourself injured, be still!”

His cruelty made my humiliation even worse, and I closed my eyes in an attempt to stop the tears from coming, but I wasn't strong enough to fight it. I didn't make a sound, but trying not to cry was a losing battle. He was rough and when he finished, he gave me a disgusted, quizzical look.

"There, that wasn't so difficult, was it?" I didn't dignify him with a response and I kept my eyes closed while he exited the room and told me I can put my clothes back on.

I started gasping for air and crying uncontrollably. *Not so difficult?* I'd never felt so humiliated and degraded in my life. I was about to be sold like a piece of cattle to a man I had never even met. I had to stop crying, because I knew Mother would flip if those people saw me in this awful condition.

Once I made my way downstairs, I knew Mrs. Moran stared at me suspiciously because it was clear that I had been crying. My face was a mess with swollen eyes, puffed cheeks and ruined makeup. I had seen how terrible I looked in the mirror, but had no will or power to do anything about it. I couldn't even spare a glimpse at the obnoxious Dr. Mayhem without compromising my barely existing peace. Mrs. Moran finally took her eyes off me and focused on my mother instead.

"We are pleased to inform you that your daughter meets all of the required conditions for the possible future arrangement with Mr. Sebastian Everett." She looked at me in search of a reaction but I remained as still as a wall.

"I knew my Isabelle would be perfect the moment I heard Mr. Everett was getting married." Mother stepped in as usual.

"Then my further announcements will be even more pleasing to you," Mrs. Moran said cynically, as if she wanted to make my mother aware of the fact that she was too upfront about being a shameless gold-digger. "Mr. Everett Senior has already replied to my email, and the Everetts want to meet Isabelle as soon as next week."

"That is wonderful." Mother was beside herself.

“Of course, Isabelle will have to join us on our trip to New York tomorrow, in order to go through further preparations.”

“What kind of preparations?” I couldn’t help but intervene.

“Well, to answer your question. To proceed with this arrangement we have to establish that you are perfectly healthy. That means you will be tested to see if you have any serious diseases, especially the ones that could compromise your ability to have children.” I tensed at her words.

“I see.” It was all I managed to say.

“I’m glad you understand. Now, if you will excuse us, we have to get going. Isabelle...” Mrs. Moran lifted her eyebrows and glanced at me with a warning. “Make sure you are ready by ten tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. She will be ready on time,” Mother happily replied on my behalf, and escorted Rosario and the doctor out of our house.

Chapter Four

The following few days were a roller coaster. For the first time in my life I was leaving the boring stillness of Rosemont, and though it had been something I'd dreamt about my entire life, I wasn't as nearly excited as I thought I would have been. Somehow, I always thought that leaving Rosemont would feel empowering and liberating. That was not the case. I felt like I was yet to be imprisoned and not liberated.

I had flown in a plane for the first time in my life and although it was quite nerve-wracking, it had been far better than the rest of the experiences that followed my visit to New York. All of the examinations and doctor appointments made me feel like I was some sort of a thing, and not a person. Not to mention how much I hated being subjected to an army of stylists whose facial expressions screamed how inappropriate my country-style look was. I was scheduled to meet the famous Everett family, and my future husband Sebastian, at the end of the week. Questions kept forming in my mind but I had no one to answer them. *Why would a rich guy from New York want to marry me when he didn't even know me?* Why did that crazy condition which made Everett heirs marry girls from Rosemont, exist to begin with?

I walked up to the window and took in the beautiful sight of the magnificent city at night. Everybody was rushing and going somewhere, whereas I felt like I was stuck in time—frozen and desperately alone. I didn't have anyone to talk to, and it was painfully clear that I didn't fit in. Suddenly, my thoughts wandered off into the future and thoughts about what it would feel like to be married to this mysterious man I had yet to meet, and to live in the huge city that must have been about a million times bigger than Rosemont, filled my mind. I remembered Ashley's comforting words before I had left home. She'd told me that maybe everything would turn out

better than I expected. My silly sister had tried to convince me that maybe I'd like him, or even come to love him after some time. I was a dreamer but I knew better than to fool myself with such childish dreams. I would hope for the best, and that best was that somehow I wouldn't have to get married after all. I hoped that the results of the examination would be my ticket out of the mess my mother had put me in.

A few days later I found out that I was perfectly healthy and all my hopes of getting out of this situation were crushed. This meant that the day to meet the famous Everett family had arrived. It seemed as though the preparations to make me pretty enough to woo the young Everett bachelor lasted forever. At this point, I was already passive and ready to accept whatever my fate turned out to be. Marrying a stranger was something I definitely didn't want, but I had accepted that there was no way out from the situation I was trapped in.

There was a limousine waiting for me in front of the hotel. The driver had complimented me on my looks and opened the door for me. That was the first time I was riding in a limo and its luxurious leather seats and expensive screens made me panic all over again. *How was I supposed to meet these people?* They had money, class, style and they could afford the most expensive things one could imagine, whereas I was merely a poor girl from Rosemont. I had no money, no rank and no expensive things. Ironically, I didn't even have a good education, despite the fact that I'd always dreamed of being a literature teacher and a writer. It felt like I was headed for a suicide mission.

As the car pulled up into the huge driveway, I tensed, because I knew that nothing would ever be the same again. There was a huge garden and a mansion that was bigger than any other building I had ever seen. I stayed in the car, paralyzed and unwilling to move. Sudden fear crept into my bones and I couldn't help but wonder what I was doing there. A man in a suit was waiting in front of the door. I was curious if it was Sebastian's father, but then it occurred to me that it must be someone from the help, because these people would

probably never personally welcome any of their guests—let alone a penniless girl from Rosemont. When the driver opened the door for me again, I exited the car and barely caught my balance with my shaky legs. The man in the suit addressed me.

“Good afternoon, Miss Walsh. It is nice to meet you. Follow me, everybody’s waiting for you,” he said in a very official tone and gestured me towards the huge door.

As I followed the man in the suit who hadn’t even bothered to introduce himself, I was struck by the luxurious surroundings of this incredibly huge house. Marble floors, expensive furniture, paintings that must have been worth a fortune each, wide windows spreading down the lengthy hallway and chandeliers that looked like they were made of gold, all screamed money and even more frighteningly—power. The feeling of not belonging in this place poisoned my mind and sent my body into a state of fear, because I had no idea what to expect or how to behave.

Finally, we stopped by a door at the end of the hallway and the suited man opened it, raising his palm as a signal that I should wait until he invited me to come.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Isabelle Walsh has arrived.” That was my cue to walk in.

I was in the middle of the room filled with people I didn’t know—rich, powerful, and famous people. The room looked like a living space, only it was much bigger than all the rooms in my house combined together. In the middle of it, there was a group of people whose sole focus of attention was me. I could feel them measuring me up with their eyes and staring at me like they were wondering how long I would last before running away. My palms started sweating as I fought to breathe evenly. The situation was entirely awkward, because I didn’t know if I should introduce myself first, or wait for them to open the conversation. It looked as if they were all waiting for me to do something, but I didn’t know what. Every second felt like an eternity of torture and I prayed for them to make a move already. At last, the older man, who was probably in his late fifties, spoke to me.

“Welcome, Miss Walsh.” His eyes pierced straight through me and I felt this was a man in charge, a man whose orders must always be obeyed.

“T-thank you,” I said in a shaky voice and bowed slightly, which made the slim brunette who was sitting next to a young man, glance at him then back at me, before she chuckled mockingly. I felt like a complete idiot.

After a few moments of silence, which felt like an eternal torture, the older man finally introduced himself.

“I am Theodore Everett, Sebastian’s father. This is my wife Catherine.” He gestured at the lady sitting across from him.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, but all she offered was a small nod in response.

“My younger daughter, Helen.” The redheaded girl who was sitting next to Catherine smiled at me and all I could do was return the favor.

“And at last, my daughter Dianne, and her husband, Caleb.” He motioned towards the girl who had mocked me earlier.

“It... It’s a pleasure,” I stuttered and while her husband sighed and looked away to show how uninterested he was, Dianne was determined to prolong my torture.

“Oh no, Miss Walsh,” she chuckled again, “the pleasure is all ours,” she said sarcastically and I had to look away in an attempt to chase away the stress, but the loud breath I couldn’t stop myself from taking, revealed just how nervous I was.

“You look awfully pale.” Dianne tried to show her concern but was doing a very poor job at it. “Are you sure you’re alright?” This woman would definitely be no friend of mine—that much was clear.

“I am fine, thank you. Only a bit tired,” I barely responded.

“Make yourself comfortable, Isabelle.” Catherine invited me to sit down and I quickly glanced through the room, nervously searching for an appropriate place to sit.

“You can sit next to me.” Helen smiled warmly.

She was the only one who had been nice to me so far, and there was something about her that made me think she was sincere, something that radiated kindness and compassion.

When I sat down and took in my surroundings one more time I started wondering why Sebastian wasn't there. Didn't he want to see his future wife? I certainly wasn't interested in marrying him all that much, but at least I wanted to see him. Was that going to be taken away from me as well? For a brief moment, I considered asking about him but I didn't dare to speak. Only five minutes with that family had made me realize that things were going to be much more difficult than I had imagined, and there had been some pretty horrific things running through my mind.

“Sebastian will join us for dinner. He is a very busy man, you see. But he's very excited to meet you,” Theodore answered my question as if he was reading my mind. That scared me.

“Thank you.” It was all I managed to reply.

After that, a brief inquisition with the main goal of putting me in my place had followed. They asked about my education, my family, whether I'd traveled a lot before, my favorite food, and so on. Dianne was the leader, coming up with so many questions and mean comments, openly taking pleasure from my inexperience and ignorance, which brought me to the verge of tears, but I'd sworn to myself I would not cry and give her the satisfaction. It was the last shred of dignity I had in front of these people and I was going to keep it. After what felt like eternity, Theodore announced that he had a meeting to attend and Catherine informed us that dinner would be served within an hour and that I should rest a bit. Sudden discomfort overtook me for a moment, because being alone in that huge mansion full of strangers was scarier than being subjected to this snobbish family's inquiring attention.

Thankfully, Helen took my hand and offered to spend some time with me, which I gladly accepted. She suggested we should take a short walk outside so that I could relax a little, and she was right, because walking through the wonderfully decorated garden helped me feel at ease. For a while, we walked without saying a word.

“I must apologize for Dianne,” Helen started the conversation. “She can be a little...” It looked like she was lacking the word to describe her sister.

I shrugged. “It’s alright.”

“I know you must be nervous about everything.” She smiled at me.

“I really am...nervous. Especially because I...” I trailed off.

“Because you haven’t met Sebastian yet?” she concluded.

I nodded and blushed like a little girl. *What on earth was wrong with me?* I needed to pull myself together, and fast, but the chances of that happening were almost nonexistent. The truth was that I wasn’t nervous about meeting him, I was absolutely terrified. If he was anything like the rest of his family, I was doomed.

“He’s not that bad, you know. He’s just a bit rough around the edges. You’ll have to work hard if you want to earn his trust and make him care about you.” She paused and looked at me as if she wanted to make me realize the importance of what she was telling me. “He takes great care only of things he cherishes. So make him cherish you. It’s the only way you’ll survive in our world.”

I gasped because of what she had said and couldn’t think of anything to offer as a reply.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.” She smiled softly. “It’s just a piece of advice. We should hurry back, it’s almost dinner time.”

“Thank you,” I whispered and attempted to fake a smile, but I wasn’t very successful at it.

“It’s alright. You’ll be fine,” she reassured me as we headed back towards the house.

The tension in the dining room was growing with each passing moment. Everybody but Helen—who glanced at me with the intent to ease my nervousness—was quiet and looked generally bored. After what seemed like a torturously long while, the massive door opened and everybody’s attention turned to the suited man again.

“Mr. Everett has arrived. He stopped by the office to rid himself of some documents and he’ll be joining you in a minute.”

“Thank you, Frederick. Please inform Alice that she can start serving dinner,” Theodore addressed the suited man and I finally learned his name.

Soon, I heard footsteps approaching the dining room again and I knew it was *him*. My palms started sweating and I was shaking slightly. *Dear God, was this the way I was going to meet my future husband?* Dianne’s eyes were shooting fire at me, and I couldn’t do anything but lower my gaze at the table. The door swung open, startling me, so I looked up and met his gaze for a moment, and then lowered my head back immediately. A pair of piercing green eyes sent shivers down my spine in only a split second. Beautiful. They were absolutely freezing cold, and beautiful.

“It’s nice that you decided to join us, son. We were starting to worry.” Theodore’s sarcastic words clearly meant he was scowling at his son for being late.

“I had some business I needed to take care of at the company. No need to worry, Father.” His voice was cold, determined, and it scared me.

Theodore laughed and motioned his hand towards me. I still couldn’t make myself look at Sebastian, but I felt he was watching me.

“This is Isabelle.” Theodore gave me a sign to stand up.

I stood up but my gaze was still directed at the floor. Sebastian made a few steps in my direction, and then stared at me intently, without any indication that he would say or do anything. Apparently, I was the one who needed to break the ice. I bit my lower lip, took a shallow breath and made myself face him. Then I offered him my hand. He took it without hesitation and squeezed it in real businessman style as if he was letting me know that that was all this would be—business. Goose bumps rose from the core of my body, sending a tingling sensation all over my skin. Such was his immediate effect on me, and I didn't know if I would be able to tell him my name without making a complete fool of myself.

“Isabelle,” I said and instantly got distracted by those green eyes. They were magnificently beautiful and scary at the same time. I blushed because of the sole fact that I was gracing this man's presence. “I'm Isabelle.”

I almost added ‘your highness’ because he exuded an air of royalty. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find a single flaw in his appearance. He was suited, tall, handsome—and terrifyingly beautiful. His face seemed to be a work of art. His brown, satin skin, flawless facial contours that appeared to be boyish and rough at the same time, as well as his short, black hair which was simple, yet perfectly styled, made him look like a model from the cover of a magazine. *Why on earth would he want to marry a girl like me?* I glanced at him with a huge question mark rising above my head, and my confusion grew as I was subjected to the meticulous inspection of his bright, scrutinizing eyes. His composure radiated an unmistakably unyielding attitude. This man bowed to no one, that much was clear. And his coldness served him well as a weapon of intimidation.

“Sebastian,” he said in a voice that was stripped of any emotion.

Almost instantly after introducing himself, he let go of my hand as if I disgusted him and sat across from me at the table. I returned to my seat, feeling uncomfortable and not knowing on what to focus my gaze to escape his interrogating eyes, so I directed it at the floor again.

“She’s quite a catch, brother. Don’t you think?” Dianne continued with her earlier tormenting. Sebastian’s eyes focused on me for a moment, and then glanced at Dianne.

“Not quite the catch as your husband is, sister,” he replied in a cold tone and it was clear he aimed to hit Dianne where it hurt. She exhaled angrily, rolled her eyes and looked away.

Nobody was saying anything and if something didn’t happen soon, my nervousness would become unbearable. At last, a group of maids walked in and started serving dinner. One of them announced that we were having a mushroom truffle soup which would be followed by an exquisite salmon stuffed with *fromage frais* and the desert would be *crème brûlée*. I didn’t understand what half of it meant and hadn’t ever eaten anything from the announced menu. It was yet another bitter reminder that I didn’t belong there, and probably never would. But how could I make my mother understand that I could never be happy with those people? She wouldn’t listen anyway, since the only thing she ever cared about was money.

“Isabelle, right?” His voice startled me from my thoughts. It was commanding and it meant that I had to look at him, and I honestly didn’t know if I could at that moment. But I lifted up my head, met his mysterious gaze and nodded in response.

“How was your trip to New York?”

Normally it would be a question one would ask to show courtesy or interest in another person, but there was something in his tone of voice that made me think he had no genuine interest in me whatsoever.

“It was okay. Everything went according to plan.” I bit my lower lip again to hide my discomfort, but I felt I couldn’t hide from him.

“Have you ever flown in a plane before?” he asked as if he knew the answer to his question.

“No...” I didn’t know how to address him; he was still nothing but a terrifying stranger. “No, Sir, I haven’t. That was my first time.”

I blushed because calling my future husband Sir seemed like such a ridiculous idea, but I didn’t feel comfortable enough around him to call him anything else, and he obviously wasn’t about to correct me.

“First time...” There was something in his voice that accentuated an inappropriate undertone of his words. “What a surprise,” he said ironically and looked away from me.

Everybody started eating their soup but to my dread there was a bunch of cutlery surrounding my plate, and I had no idea which spoon to use. I looked at Helen to see which spoon she was using, and somehow managed to recognize the right one in the pile around the plate.

“Do you like truffle soup, Isabelle?” Helen intended to ease my nerves but her attempt only led to yet another admission of my inexperience.

I smiled shyly. “I don’t know, I’ve never eaten truffles before. I’m looking forward to trying it though.”

“I think you will like it. Well, maybe not at first.” She smiled back. “It takes some time to like truffles. Well, generally, everything that has anything to do with liking or loving takes some time.” She nudged Sebastian, who was sitting next to her, but he only glanced at me shortly and showed no intention of responding to Helen’s comment.

As we moved on to the rest of the meal, I had a lot of trouble finding the right cutlery for the salmon dish. It was so obvious that I had no idea how to eat my meal, I earned another mean chuckle from Dianne, and Sebastian was also thoroughly observing my every move. The frustrating fight between me and the salmon resulted in my shaky hands cutting the damned fish with a knife that had obviously been wrong, and intended for something else entirely.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Sebastian turned towards his father and his words cut deep into my heart—a

simple, cold message that meant I disgusted him.

My face reddened in shame and I dropped the knife and the fork from my hands, deciding that I was done with eating for the evening. Helen looked at me apologetically and tried to mend the damage her brother's words had caused.

"It's alright Isabelle. Sometimes even I have difficulty with eating properly. Use whatever you want. I will explain it to you later." Her warmth was the only thing keeping my sanity.

"Thank you. I hope I'll get the hang of it," I replied in a small, humble voice. I just wanted to get out of there.

"Haven't you used spoons or knives in Rosemont before?" Sebastian's impatient and insulting cold voice startled me and for some reason it hurt so much to be mocked by him again.

"Of course, it's just that... I still don't know the purpose of everything." I managed to reply through my shaky breath.

"Well, that means you've come unprepared!" His eyes glared at me.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered, because I was at the verge of crying and he looked like he was completely annoyed by my meek presence.

"Remorse is not a quality I value in people, Isabelle. You should refrain from making mistakes instead of leaning towards apologizing for them. What if I took you on one of the business dinners with me and you embarrassed me like you've embarrassed yourself tonight? I do hope that reason will prevail in this family for once and that we'll stop marrying gold-diggers from that redneck town." He glanced at his father and rolled his eyes at him.

"Sebastian, that's enough," Catherine interrupted him, clearly feeling offended herself, because if Theodore was an Everett heir, she had to have come from Rosemont as well.

There was a moment of silence but it was too late for me to compose myself. I had lost the battle and fat tears started

running down my cheeks.

“Crying,” he raised his voice and started scowling me again, “is another trait that won’t get you far with me. Childish and completely without manners—exactly what I expected!” He shook his head at his father and effortlessly said those cruel things about me.

It seemed as though that man had no ability for compassion. I guess he had a cold pit where his heart should have been. He and his family were obviously accustomed to walking all over other people. Everybody was staring at me by that point, and no matter how hard I was trying, I couldn’t stop crying. For the first time in my life, I felt so ashamed for simply being me. I felt angry with myself because I was so inadequate and so worthless, compared to this beautiful, cruel man sitting across me. Every tear I shed emphasized my pain and instead of washing away my embarrassment, it had only prolonged it. Helen looked at me with empathy gleaming from her stare.

“Stop.” She formed the word with her lips, but never uttered it. “Be strong.” It was another silent plea from her lips.

At last, I stopped crying and I prayed for that dinner to be over. I begged whichever force on earth there was for the Everetts to finally send me away—away to my heartless mother who would lash out at me because I’d ruined her plans of getting rich. Still, I felt relieved after what had occurred that evening, because I knew that chances of Sebastian marrying me after the dinner fiasco were equal to zero.

Chapter Five

Coming back to Rosemont turned out to be more difficult than I thought. Mother was intent on getting every single detail from me, but I felt so shattered and desperately ashamed after everything I'd been through in New York, that I informed her there would be no marriage. She was furious, telling me I was selfish and that she'd known I would deliberately ruin everything. But how could I make her see that I was at the mercy of a man who was way out of my league? I was simply beneath him. How could I convince Mother that nobody had ever shamed me like Sebastian Everett had? He'd called me a gold digger and I had nothing to say in my defense. The reason I had been sitting at his dinner table was marriage and I was driven by anything but love, so that's precisely what I was—a shameless gold digger. That was exactly what my mother had made me out to be.

Despite Mother's intolerable fury towards me, after some time, my life slowly settled into a dazing everydayness. I'd blocked out everything that had happened in New York and had decided to try and convince Mother to allow me to attend the local college. It took me days to collect the courage to talk to her. One day, she seemed to be in a relatively good mood so I decided to tell her about my intentions. I approached her while she was in the kitchen.

“Mother.”

“Yes?” she asked indifferently.

“There's something I want to talk to you about.” I had no idea how to ask her to support my plans.

“Oh, is that so?” It was like a dark cloud covered her ray of sunshine, and she wasn't in a good mood anymore. “Go ahead.”

“Well, I... I was thinking and... I wanted to ask you if maybe we can talk about... about—” I was stuck, too afraid that the slightest hope I had would be shattered to pieces.

“About what, Isabelle? Spit it out already. I haven’t got all day to waste.” She was getting agitated and that wasn’t a good sign.

“Mother, you know how I’ve always loved literature, and that my dream was to study...”

“Wait!” she interrupted me and went towards the kitchen window. The most important sentence I had uttered in my entire life was left hanging in the air.

There was an expensive car parked in our driveway and Rosario Moran was getting out of it. Seeing her again sent shivers down my spine. *What on earth was she doing there?* Whatever it was, I knew it must have something to do with the Everett’s prolonging my humiliation somehow. My mother ran to the door ecstatically and opened it before anyone even bothered to ring the doorbell. I listened to their conversation from the kitchen.

Mrs. Moran greeted Mother and explained why she came to visit us.

“I apologize for coming unannounced, but my only intention is to inform you that the Everett family has approved of Isabelle’s marriage to Sebastian and that we should take care of the necessary paperwork as soon as possible.”

“What great news! Please, would you like to come in? We can take care of everything now if you wish.”

Mother’s enthusiasm to marry me off seemed to have surprised even Rosario, who was accustomed to these kinds of arrangements.

“No, I’m sorry, I am in a bit of a hurry. I still have to prepare everything. Are you free tomorrow? We could take care of everything in the afternoon, if you don’t have any other plans,” Mrs. Moran offered.

“Of course,” Mother said in a cheerful voice. “Tomorrow afternoon sounds perfect. We’ll be waiting for

you.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” Mrs. Moran responded without returning her smiles.

“Until tomorrow then, it was great to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Mrs. Moran said before she left.

My heart sank and I had to lean against the wall not to collapse. *What kind of cruel games was God playing with my life?* The moment I decided to try and make a difference for myself, my worst nightmare comes knocking on my door. Sebastian had made it clear that he despised me, and it was beyond me to find any reason for him to marry me. This had to be some kind of a sick joke. Tears streamed down my face and I began drowning in despair. I was so scared of what the future held for me.

“Isabelle, you will not believe...” Mother entered the kitchen ready to share her joy with me, but stopped when she saw how upset I was. “Isabelle?”

“Please, for the love of God, ask anything—anything you want, but please don’t ask me to marry him,” I begged her with everything I had.

“Isabelle, sweetheart,” she hadn’t called me that since the last time Mrs. Moran came to visit, “I understand you might feel a little scared about everything that is happening to you lately, but soon you will be thankful I persuaded you into this marriage. Trust me.”

“Persuaded me? You are making me do this against my will. Please, just leave me alone.” I yelled.

“Isabelle, I am much older and wiser than you are. Let’s not play these childish games anymore. Just accept this wonderful opportunity life has offered you.” Her voice was filled with menace.

“But you don’t know what he’s like. He—he doesn’t even like me. He can’t stand me!” I desperately tried to make her understand.

“Don’t be a fool Isabelle. A man’s affection has to be earned.”

It stung like fire to hear her say that, because I had nothing to offer to that man to make him love me, or even cherish me like Helen had said.

“I see nothing I do or say will make you change your mind, Mother. So, I give up. You have won. You have condemned me to a life of misery.” I wiped my tears and started walking away.

“Isabelle...” Mother grabbed my wrist to stop me. “What did you want to talk about earlier?”

Why didn’t she just put a dagger through my heart? I started laughing because the irony wasn’t lost on me. Then I swallowed a big lump that was forming in my throat. There was no point in discussing my wishes anymore.

“Nothing, Mother. That is, nothing that’s important anymore,” I said vaguely and headed towards my room.

Stuck with my loneliness, I didn’t have enough strength to do something about my situation. Lying in my bed, I let my heart sink. Not having to feel was all I wanted in that moment. It felt like I had no one in the world. Even Ashley, my dearest sister, had become a stranger in the last weeks. Honestly, I didn’t want to blame her, because she wasn’t guilty of anything, but my bitterness ran deep. Ashley would get everything I had ever wanted. She would be educated and she would get an opportunity to make a life for herself, while I would be paying for it. My mind didn’t dare to think about what my marriage to Sebastian Everett would be like. Instead, it felt better to lie awake, staring at the ceiling and counting stars until sleep claimed me.

When I joined Mrs. Moran and Mother the next day, they were already discussing the terms of the prenuptial agreement which had to be signed before the wedding.

Since we weren’t in a position to demand anything or to make any changes in the contract, Mother urged me to sign

everything without reading it first. Appalled by her demand, I tried to protest, demanding to read the contract that would seal my miserable fate, but one threatening glance from my mother was enough to make me comply without any resistance. In reality, I objected out of sheer necessity to spite her, and not because I wanted to study the contents of the arrangement. As a matter of fact, I couldn't have cared less what that contract required me to do. All I knew was that I was always going to be owned by someone—a slave being passed from one master to another. Going through slow motions, I signed my name on each and every page on that lengthy document, while my mother's eyes burned on my hand. After having made sure I signed all the papers, Mrs. Moran reached into her briefcase and laid a small jewelry box on the table.

“Open it,” she urged me.

I reached for the box and opened it. Inside of it was a huge, shiny ring. The kind of ring you noticed in the shop window but knew you would never be able to afford it. The kind of ring you dream your Prince Charming will put on your finger one day to claim you as his own. I felt something heavy in my heart, but once again swallowed my pain and smiled.

“This is your engagement ring,” she clarified. “You are required to wear it at all times from now on. Alright?”

“Yes, I understand,” I said quietly.

“Oh, this is so exciting,” Mother said with happy tears in her eyes. “Congratulations, honey.”

She pulled me into a hug and I could have sworn that Mrs. Moran noticed how stressed out I was at that moment.

“The only other thing I have to inform you about is the date of the wedding. It will take place in New York on Theodore's sixtieth birthday, that is, in exactly three and a half weeks from now.”

“Three and a half weeks?” I was shocked it was happening that soon.

“You are not expected to take any part in preparations for the wedding. Your only obligation will be the dress fitting.

As for your other duties, you are required to fly to New York as soon as possible. Mr. Everett has appointed a number of private tutors who will help you transform into an accomplished businessman's wife."

I knew exactly what that meant—lessons about cutlery usage so I wouldn't embarrass him when we attended his precious business dinners. Mrs. Moran gestured at me to put on the ring. The heavy ring on my finger meant that I was officially engaged, and that my life as I knew, or imagined it, was definitely over. The Everetts expected me to pack my bags and move to New York in two days. Mother and my sisters, together with the rest of the family, would join me three days before the wedding.

My days in New York went by in painful slowness and I couldn't focus on anything that would get my mind off the wedding. At night, I would lay awake, wondering if something could have been different and I felt sorry for myself, because a bride wasn't supposed to be dreading her own wedding. Helen was the only one who sometimes kept me company and I liked spending time with her. A small part of me hoped that Sebastian would come to visit me or at least give me some sign that he didn't completely hate me, but I quickly realized that I might not see him until the day of the wedding. To say that I felt trapped was an understatement. Since the Everett family didn't want to create any media frenzy over our wedding, I was expected to stay away from the public as much as possible, which meant that I was confined to the solitude of my hotel room for the most of my stay.

The tutors hired by Sebastian made my life a living hell. I had to learn how to walk, talk, eat, dance and use appropriate gestures for different opportunities. Almost a week before the wedding, one of the tutors I hated, Mr. Andre—the annoying Frenchman who taught me how to use the cutlery and walk properly—announced that he would be videotaping me that day because Sebastian wanted to see how I progressed. My cheeks immediately turned red and I wasn't sure whether

it was from shame or fury. So he was set on humiliating me again. This time, I swore I wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

A plate with some kind of a fancy meal was served to me and Mr. Andre sat across from me to see if I would use the proper cutlery. At first, I hesitated because I couldn't believe that he was actually making me do that, but his impatience was growing with each passing second.

"Today, Isabelle! I haven't got the time to waste," he said in his ridiculous French accent.

For a moment, I thought about defying Sebastian's wishes, but after realizing it would only make matters worse, I complied and showed him I could use the damned cutlery and act like a freaking lady, just like he wanted me to. However, he noticed the rebellion that was building up inside me, because I rolled my eyes at him more than once.

"Respect, Isabelle, is the only thing that's expected from you in this marriage. You seem to have a lot of difficulty learning that," Mr. Andre spat out.

"Maybe it's the same thing I expect from everyone else. Maybe it wouldn't be so difficult to respect my future husband if he decided to treat me like a human being and not a dog he needs to train." My voice was quiet and insecure but I was glad I had stood up for myself.

"As Confucius said—respect yourself and others will respect you. The question is, *ma chérie*, will you ever be able to extort such respect, knowing that you're selling yourself in exchange for a lavish life of luxury? I think you know what that's called," he said in a teasing voice.

I looked away. He was right. I was a coward and I had a feeling that the man I was going to marry would never let me forget that.

Chapter Six

The wedding day I had been dreading arrived, and all I wanted was to hide somewhere no one could find me. An army of makeup artists and stylists marched into my room to transform me into a gorgeous bride. For the first time in my life, I felt beautiful. My blonde hair was loose and curled, with a beautiful tiara that pulled it up. The brown depths of my eyes were accentuated with a river of mascara and it seemed that my cheeks, which were usually as pale as snow, now had a healthy shade of pink. But some crucial part was missing, because everything felt wrong and I thought I was a fraud. Tears were forming in my eyes but I bit down on my lips and decided that not crying would be the one thing I could control. No matter how pitiful my marriage would probably turn out to be, I swore I wouldn't shed a tear at my own wedding. When I was ready at last, I heard a knock on the door and it flew open before I could invite in whoever was on the other side. Naturally, it was none other than my mother. She probably came to check if I was still in the submissive mode she so desperately wanted to keep me in. She approached me with a wide smile on her face.

“My, oh my, Isabelle. Look at you. You look absolutely gorgeous. Stunning. Sebastian won't know what hit him when he sees you.” She walked around me and admired my looks.

“I'm sure he won't, Mother,” I said sarcastically and managed to produce a fake smile, but as always, Mother didn't take my anxiety seriously at all.

“Oh, you poor thing. You must be afraid of what's going to happen tonight.” I gasped at her words and blushed, because sadly, I would have preferred to discuss sex with anyone except my mother.

She took my hand and gave me a warm serpent-like smile. No matter how supporting she wanted to come across, she couldn't hide her true colors.

“There's no need to be afraid. You see...” It was apparent she was trying to prepare me for the wedding night, but it was the last thing on my mind. I was pretty sure that Sebastian wasn't interested in me in that way at all. I imagined different scenarios for the night, but us sleeping together definitely wasn't one of them.

“Mother, I don't think we have to—” I tried my best to reassure her.

“It's perfectly normal Isabelle, and you don't have to feel ashamed. It may be a little uncomfortable but it gets better in time. You just need to relax and follow your husband's lead.” She looked like she was already priding herself with the fact that her daughter's virginity would be taken by a rich Everett heir that night.

“I understand. Please, let's not talk about it anymore.” I just wanted to be away from her.

For a moment, we stood there like two strangers, not a mother and a daughter. I had nothing to say to her anymore and she seemed to be bouncing on her own nerves too, probably anguished with the fear that I wouldn't play my part right. The unpleasant circle of silence was interrupted by another knock on the door and I was informed that there were two cars waiting in front of the hotel. One of the cars was for me, and the other one for my mother and sisters. I felt relieved that I would get a few moments all to myself to collect my thoughts and to calm down.

Once in the car, my mind started processing Mother's words about the wedding night. I was so anxious and distracted by other things, that it had never occurred to me Sebastian might want to consummate our marriage that evening. My conscience was screaming, telling me that a man would never want to sleep with a woman he despised, but the little voice in the back of my mind told me that if he decided to do so, there was nothing I could do to stop him.

Recollections of my short, but bitterly memorable, encounter with him appeared before my eyes and I was sure I didn't want to be intimate with that man, because no matter how gorgeous and beautiful he was, he terrified the hell out of me. I tried to make myself believe that nothing would happen that night. It was the only way I could ease my mind.

As the car pulled up in front of the church, I clenched my fists together, in a desperate attempt to summon all of my strength to the surface. The door opened and I felt a thousand eyes giving me their full attention. There were photographers taking pictures, as well as people who were just curious to see me. The family's bodyguard warned me to be calm when he guided me through the crowd to the front of the church. One of my uncles waited to walk me down the aisle. I took his hand and leaned on him, because suddenly my legs were shaking and I felt dizzy. I closed my eyes, imagining what it would be like if my father was alive and if he was the one walking me to the altar. And I so wished I was walking to a man I loved and who loved me back, but that was nothing but empty dreams. Absolute, deadly silence ruled inside the church. The only noise was the sound of my heavy shoes touching the floor. As I was walking, Chopin's *Marche Funebre* played in my mind, because it felt like I was attending my own funeral instead of a wedding. The closer I got to the altar, the louder the whispers of the Everett's family side became. Clearly, they commented on my looks, my composure, or maybe how inadequate I was for the part that had been given to me.

Sebastian was already standing at the end of the aisle. They say there's a light at the end of the tunnel, but I felt like he was the dark at the end of my light. As expected, his posture was steady and unmistakably dominant. He offered me his hand and I took it warily, not daring to look up at him. Everybody was staring at us and I just wanted the whole charade to end, since I truly wasn't sure how much more I could take. Somehow, he could feel my distress and he leaned towards me, whispering so quietly in my ear to make sure I was the only one who could hear him.

"You don't have to do this, Isabelle. Just say the word and you will walk out free. It's not too late," he said it in a

tone that meant he didn't really care what my decision would be, but I knew there was no point of retreat. Not with my whole family witnessing my demise.

His suggestion had evoked such a strong emotion within me and I started trembling. I had to tighten my grip on his hand to keep myself from falling to the ground. The pastor approached the altar and the wedding ceremony officially began. After reading our names and asking if we were there of our own free will, he continued preaching about the meaning of love and marriage. My heart tightened into a miserable ball of regret and I was very grateful for the veil that covered my face so that he wouldn't see just how desperate I was. Unfortunately, I could still see him perfectly and he glanced at me with a revolted look on his face. Again, I felt ridiculously unworthy of him. When the time for reading the vows and uttering 'I do's' came, Sebastian was the first one to say it. When it was my turn to seal the deal, I froze.

"I..." I hesitated for a moment, but then I finally managed to say it. "I do." I looked down to avoid his eyes.

"If anyone has a reason for these two not to wed, speak now or forever hold your peace," the pastor spoke to the crowd.

I remember quietly praying for somebody to say something, because it was my last chance for salvation, but the room remained silent.

"You may kiss the bride." The words startled me.

Sebastian removed my veil and my heart started pounding like it would jump out of my chest. Heat crept up my face and burned my cheeks when our eyes met for a split second. Then, my just-husband who had caused me nothing but pain in the short time I knew him, touched me for the first time ever. He lifted up my chin and I felt an electric shiver traveling through my body from the contact. His gaze remained focused on my face for a while. I closed my eyes when he leaned over to me. My trembling lips awaited the kiss that would be the seal of my fate. His lips were only inches from mine and his breath lingered on my skin. Every hair on

the back of my neck stood up when the minty breeze mixed with the fumes of expensive cologne took over my senses. The short anticipation was suddenly broken when he moved away from my lips and gave me a cold kiss on the cheek. The flusters in the crowd became louder. Everybody seemed shocked by Sebastian's action. When I finally dared to open my eyes again he was staring at me contently, mocking me with his penetrating gaze and showing me once more that I was beneath him.

Chapter Seven

A kiss on the cheek. Burn. I had to have been the first bride who was kissed on the cheek by the groom.

“Our couple seems to be a little shy.” The pastor tried to remedy the situation. “Let’s give a big applause for Mr. and Mrs. Everett.”

The words echoed in my mind—Mrs. Everett. The reality suddenly struck in as the crowd started clapping madly. In a matter of seconds, I went from being a nineteen-year-old girl with plans and dreams, to practically becoming the property of the arrogant Sebastian Everett. People began rounding up to congratulate us and wish us a successful marriage. Mother impatiently pushed her way through the crowd to get to me as soon as possible. When she reached me, she pulled me close, hugging me tighter than ever.

“Smile, Mrs. Everett.” Hearing her say that made me step away from her. “I am so proud of you, honey. Remember what I’ve told you.” She winked at me and I frantically shook my head at her, not caring if anyone would notice how upset I was.

Ashley was standing next to her and she knew how miserable I was.

“I’m sorry, Isa. Hang in there. Maybe it won’t be that bad,” she muttered.

The congratulations that followed were mostly from the part of the Everett family and a few of Sebastian’s friends who didn’t even bother to introduce themselves. I felt like everybody knew how much he despised me.

“What a wonderful ceremony.” Dianne spat her venom again. “Welcome to the family,” she said and moved along before I could even thank her for her insincerity.

Helen was next in line and she squeezed my hands, congratulated me and rewarded me with one of her soothing smiles. She was the only member of the Everetts who displayed emotions that made her human. The rest of them were driven by something entirely different.

When the congratulations ended, we were invited to enter a limousine as a married couple. Sebastian held my hand and displayed fake closeness for the photographers. He even smiled for the cameras to create the image of a perfectly happy groom. I, on the other hand, was not the master of deception and could not bring myself to smile and act out the marital bliss I was supposed to be feeling. Once in the car, his face transformed back into a cold mask and he looked out of the window the whole time, pretending like I wasn't there while we were, ironically, heading to our wedding reception.

The location was fairytale beautiful and it would take any girl's breath away, but I would have traded it for my freedom in a heartbeat. Sebastian held my hand again for our grand entrance, which was accompanied by loud clapping one more time. The toasts were next on the schedule. Jared, who was Sebastian's best man and, I supposed, a close friend, wished his friend and his beautiful bride to spend a happy life filled with love together. Theodore's toast was far less flattering as he accentuated that the Everett tradition had once again been continued by the next generation and that he was proud of Sebastian for fulfilling his duty. The weight of my head became heavy on my shoulders and I just wanted to get away from all the curious eyes staring at me intently. God knows what all the people had to have been thinking about me. To my horror, my humiliation didn't end there. Embarrassment washed over me when I saw my mother was about to give her own little speech. In a fit of enthusiastic madness, she started talking about her hardships of being a single mother of three daughters, accentuating that I had turned out to be a decent young lady, thanks to everything she had invested in me. My cheeks burned as she assured everyone that I would make a perfect wife for Sebastian, because that's what she raised me to be—a perfect wife and a mother. My heart raced as I prayed for her to end the torture she was putting me through. To my

relief, she finally raised her glass and congratulated us and her speech was rewarded by a few claps in the crowd.

Dinner was the best part of the whole celebration, because everybody was focused on the food more than on the newlywed couple. Shortly after dinner, the first dance and the cutting of the cake followed. Sebastian didn't speak a word to me and he ignored me for most of the evening. Instead of dancing, talking to people, and generally having fun at my own wedding, I remained seated next to my distant husband who seemed like he would rather be anywhere else than next to me. The charade that was our wedding continued for a while longer, until Mother approached our table. She had visibly had one drink too many, because she dared to hang herself around Sebastian's neck and praise him for being the perfect son-in-law. The look on his face reflected the dose of disgust that he was probably feeling. When she finally let go of him, she caught both of our hands and tried to encourage us to enter the dance floor.

"Come on, you lovebirds." Her lack of perception that we were anything but in love escalated to the point where it became ridiculous. "You don't want to sit through your whole wedding. It's time you have some fun."

I glared at her disapprovingly, raising my eyebrows as a warning for her to stop. She started mimicking dance moves and then she moved back towards the dance floor. While I sank further into misery, she was having the time of her life.

"I'm waiting for you to join me. Don't let me down," she said before leaving us alone.

Sebastian nervously tapped his fingers on the table, then got up and walked to the band. He said something to the band leader before returning to me. The band continued playing but stopped after about ten minutes to make an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our beautiful couple will now retreat to continue celebrating their special day in a more private atmosphere." Sebastian took hold of my hand and pulled me up with him as we stood up. "Let's make sure that

we see them out properly.” The band leader started playing cheerful notes on his guitar while the rest of the band joined him. The guests stood up and started clapping in the rhythm of the music.

My eyes searched for Ashley and when I found her, she waved at me with a worried look on her face. Mother and Jane were standing next to her, also waving at me. Mother was glowing from happiness, clapping and enjoying the charade that was about to take place.

Sebastian courteously smiled to the crowd and then walked me out of the hall and into the parking lot.

It dawned on me that I was alone with him for the first time and the revelation made me truly nervous. While we were walking in the dark, my heart started racing. On the other hand, he seemed to be completely composed and didn't utter as much as a single word to acknowledge my presence.

“Get in!” he said in a distant, commanding voice when we reached his car.

I opened the door and clumsily gripped my dress in an awkward attempt to sit down. It took me a while and Sebastian was getting upset.

“Will you stop fumbling with that damned dress and sit in the car already?”

His eyes sent me a clear message—obey! Without thinking, I immediately sat on the passenger seat, ripping the bottom of my dress with my high heels in the process. The car engine started the very second I entered the car. Sebastian reversed the car so suddenly that my whole body swung forward, and I screamed because I thought I would hit my head. He glanced at me for a moment, smirked and stepped on the gas. The tires squeaked under the impact of the speed we were reaching. My head was spinning and I closed my eyes, praying to survive this crazy trip. I didn't even know where we were going but I couldn't wait to get there. Even though I hadn't been keen on life in those past few days, dying in a car accident was definitely not my choice for leaving the world.

But the most peculiar thing was that, even when driving like a madman, Sebastian seemed to be fully in control.

The song playing on the radio became louder and when I glanced at him, I noticed his cold eyes were wide open and focused on nothing but the road. He had a haunted look on his face. The lyrics of the song broke my heart. *'Cause it's a bittersweet symphony, this life.'* I reached towards the player because I couldn't take it anymore, but Sebastian's hand stopped me.

"Don't touch the radio!" he uttered a warning, then abruptly let go of my hand and started driving even faster.

My eyes focused on the images of the city passing before my eyes, and I dreamt of a different life that could have been, but never would be. The voice from the radio continued to taunt me. *'Well I've never prayed, but tonight I'm on my knees. I need to hear some sounds that recognize the pain in me.'* I clenched my fists so hard that it hurt when the song ended. Suddenly, we were surrounded by the threatening silence which continued until we reached our destination. From what I gathered, we were in front of a luxurious hotel. Sebastian handed the keys of his expensive BMW to the valet, gave him a generous tip and warned him to be extremely cautious with the car.

All of the staff seemed to be alert when they noticed who graced their precious hotel. Sebastian moved straight to the reception and I remained at a safe distance, feeling so small because everybody was looking my way, throwing silent comments at me.

"Mr. and Mrs. Everett?" The receptionist already knew who we were.

"That's right," Sebastian said in a very serious tone, not even trying to act like the idea of being married to me didn't repel him.

"Congratulations and enjoy your stay," the receptionist said before handing him the key, but he didn't bother

answering.

Instead, he walked back to me and ordered me to move towards the elevator. As soon as the elevator door opened, he practically shoved me inside. My palms started sweating and I looked down at once. Being alone with him in such a tight space was absolutely intimidating. His gaze remained on me shortly, before impatiently traveling around the interior of the elevator.

“Walk,” he instructed when the door opened again.

I followed his rapid pace across the hall, trying to restrain myself from having a panic attack. A powerful fury radiated beneath his calm and cold posture, and it made me fear him more than anyone or anything in my life. I knew what was expected of me on our wedding night, but I was sure that he wouldn't touch me since the fact that he despised me was more than crystal clear. *For heaven's sake, he didn't even kiss me at the altar.* When we reached the door to our room, he unlocked it and gestured that I should go in first.

I walked inside and was greeted with a breathtaking interior. It was a huge space filled with sheer luxury. When I heard his steps behind me, the irony of everything sunk in. It was my wedding night and I was standing in the middle of an astonishing suite, surrounded by the general splendor and accompanied by a breathtakingly beautiful man who happened to be my husband. It kind of felt like I was trapped in a nightmare with perfect fairytale accessories. Everything seemed so beautiful on the surface it made the bitter truth even more horrifying. The beautiful piano next to the terrace door, as well as many priceless-looking paintings caught my attention. There was a table with two baroque chairs in the middle of the room, looking out to the beautiful wide windows graced with golden-beige curtains. I turned my head, looked at the king-sized chesterfield bed and swallowed a lump of fear. I stepped away from the bed and my back ended up leaning against Sebastian's chest. I jumped, swiftly turned around and stepped back. I hadn't even realized he was standing that close to me. His cold emerald eyes sent shivers down my spine. The

voice in my head was screaming ‘*Get away from him!*’ and it was driving me insane.

Overwhelmed by everything, I decided to go to the bathroom to gather my thoughts and process everything that had happened. I walked past him and headed towards the bathroom, but he caught me by my elbow and stopped my movement. Moments ago I had been scared, but now I was absolutely terrified. My gaze remained frozen on my elbow and he sneered when his hand reached for my face and I flinched. I wasn’t so sure that he wouldn’t want to touch me anymore.

“You have five minutes.” He let go of my elbow and gave me the permission to go to the bathroom. *What the hell?*

I stumbled across the marble tiles and landed in front of a huge bathroom mirror. As my miserable reflection stared back at me, I knelt on the cold floor and tried to talk myself into calming down because I was about to freak out. Ten was the number of deep breaths I had to take to gather courage to return to the room. I got up, clenched my fists together and left the bathroom.

Sebastian was sitting on one of the baroque chairs with a glass of alcohol in his hand, and by the looks of it, he had already drunk more than a fair share. There was a half empty bottle of liquor and another glass on the table. His jacket was on the bed and his tie was loose. Not daring to move, I just stood next to the bathroom door while he observed me.

“Come here.” He calmly invited me to join him and after I hesitated, he repeated his invitation. “Come.” He slightly raised his voice.

Slowly, I moved towards the table and sat across from him. He handed me the empty glass and then filled it with a generous amount of whiskey.

“It’s time we celebrate properly, don’t you think? Congratulations, Mrs. Everett,” he said with a sarcastic grin and raised his glass in an attempt to make a toast.

I raised mine as well to respond, but instantly put it down. "I... I don't drink alcohol," I offered an explanation.

"Oh, I see. It probably goes against your *high moral values*." He smirked and then his face turned dead serious. "You don't have to put on a show for me. I have already married you, haven't I?"

Not replying to his insult seemed to be the best choice, but it didn't help.

"Drink," he said in a flat tone.

Images of my father's drunken violent episodes flashed before my eyes. My oath of never tasting a single sip of that deadly liquid echoed in my mind. No matter how much I didn't want to make him angry, I couldn't get myself to raise the damned glass.

"Drink!" I flinched when he raised his voice.

This was a game of power and I was about to lose. He observed as I raised the glass, struggling with myself. My eyes filled with tears when I brought it to my shaky lips and took a sip of its content. The burning sensation in my throat was too strong so I didn't dare drink anymore.

"More," he said as if he could read my mind.

Gasping for air, I swallowed some more and looked at him with my teary eyes. *Don't cry. Don't let him see the tears.*

"All of it." Amusement rang in his voice. He was enjoying this.

I decided to end the torture by gulping the entire content of the glass but it was too much and I ended up dropping it and spitting everything on the floor. I stood up to clean the mess that I had made, but he got up as well and approached me. He was so close, too close. Suddenly his hand touched my chin, tilted it up and confronted me with his cruel, green eyes. I turned into a pillar of salt as he gazed at me for a while, like he was about to maul me, and a cynical smile curved his lips when he noticed how much distress his touch had caused me.

“Are you afraid?” he asked me in a steely voice.

As I nodded, my body started shivering in response to his threatening presence. Awaiting his reply in genuine fear, I controlled the urge to cry. I didn't want him to see me broken. I didn't want him to have that kind of power over me again.

“Good. You should fear me,” he answered calmly, still glaring at me.

And just like that, it was over.

Chapter Eight

I winced from the sickening fear he evoked within me and I lost all of my control. He had won. Heavy tears spilled from my eyes and rolled onto my cheeks, forming a wet stream as I tried to breathe through the fierce sobs that emerged from the depths of my body. His gaze roamed along my probably red and puffed face, pausing at the edge of my eyelids. The longer he observed my tears, the more his face turned into an unreadable expression like he was taken aback by my undeniable display of weakness. Unexpectedly, the darkness in his eyes was replaced by a glimmer of light that was hanging on a thread. For a ridiculously short second it almost seemed like he wanted to tell me that there was no need to cry. His eyes lingered on my face, burning an impression that would haunt me for the rest of my life. Taking a deep breath, he parted his lips and just when he was about to speak, something within him shifted and he turned his head away from me. When his eyes focused on me again, his cruelty returned with a vengeance. The glimmer of light was dead and gone, the darkness ten times stronger than before.

“Do you remember what I told you about crying?”

I flinched when he spoke in a deep voice after the long break of silence. At that moment, I knew my tears meant nothing to him. I nodded because that was all I could do. I closed my eyes and willed myself to stop crying, but the sobs escaping my throat were unstoppable. It was beyond my control. When I opened my eyes, I met his cold, decisive gaze again. He leaned so close to me that I could smell his breath and I braced myself for whatever awaited me. For a moment, I thought he wanted to kiss me, but instead I heard him say the words I was dreading.

“Take off your dress,” he said in a low voice and the tears that were extremely annoying to him, refilled my eyes.

“Stop crying. You’re acting like a child.”

His voice was composed and cold, but his eyes gleamed with menace. Trying to even out my breath, I finally brought my tears to a halt. The sudden heat ran through my body and I wanted to get away from that scary situation, but I knew I couldn’t escape, so I decided to reason with him.

“P-Please...” My voice shook uncontrollably. “Please, don’t do this.” I looked at him with a glimpse of hope—the hope he crushed the very moment he noticed it was there.

“Why not? Isn’t that what you were raised to do? To be a perfect wife? I’m sure you know what a wife’s duty is on her wedding night!”

He was approaching closer, and I stepped backwards until he pinned me against the wall with his strong body. I swallowed a lump of fear.

“I don’t know how to be a w-wife.”

“Well, it’s time you learn then.” He smiled sardonically. “Take. Off. The. Dress. Don’t make me say it again.” His voice bordered with evil and it chased away all of my sanity.

“I can’t.” I looked up at him with sheer desperation. “Sir, I can’t,” I whispered.

“You can’t?” He raised his eyebrows and looked at me incredulously. “Isabelle, it’s simple. I am your husband. That means I have rights.” My eyes widened. “Starting tonight, you have obligations as my wife, and nothing in this universe will save you from fulfilling them. Do I make myself clear?”

Completely terrified, I was trying to grasp the fact that his threats were real and that nothing would persuade him to change his mind. It was crystal clear that patience wasn’t one of his virtues, because in a matter of seconds he repeated his question.

“Do I make myself clear?” He raised his voice just above a whisper and abruptly leaned even closer to me.

I flinched because I thought he would hit me, but I managed to whisper my answer to him.

“Y-yes,” I stuttered, my eyes silently begging him to stop.

“Good. So you understand that if I tell you to take off the dress, you take off the fucking dress,” he said with a black expression on his face.

Suddenly I felt sick and lightheaded. I didn't want this to happen, but I knew I had no other choice. Against my better judgment, I started taking off my wedding dress. As the white, silk fabric of the dress slowly fell down to the floor, I silently prayed for something to happen and save me, but my prayers went unanswered. Shame washed over me, and I didn't dare look at him. Instead, I fixed my eyes on the floor and stared at my gown. He remained calm, just glaring at me for a few moments. Then he approached me and undid the hook on my bra. A shiver of fear ran through me from the contact and his cold gaze warned that I shouldn't fight him. Like a coward of the worst kind, I observed as he slid the white straps of my bra down my arms until it ended up on the floor next to my gown. My breasts were exposed to him now and I instinctively covered them with my hands. He shook his head in disapproval, looked down at the only remaining item of clothing on my body and then returned his gaze on my face. Green eyes on fire pierced right into my soul.

His jaw clenched and he whispered my final condemnation. “Take it off.”

I couldn't handle it anymore. I couldn't bring myself to do it. After moments went by, he took matters into his own hands and in mere seconds I was completely naked in front of him. I wrapped my hands around myself in an attempt to cover my body as much as I could, but he wouldn't allow it.

“Stop acting ridiculous. Put your hands down,” he protested.

I slowly put both of my hands down, displaying my nakedness for him and it felt like he was inspecting every inch of it with his gaze. Trapped in despair, I surrendered to the

moment of truth that was guided by the cruel blackness in his eyes. Heaving, my chest rose up and down as his eyes roamed the length of my exposed body.

“What a hot little thing you are,” he said in a gruff voice and his eyes lit up with something I’d never seen in a man’s gaze before. “Such a pity you have yet to learn that men like me are not to be trifled with.”

I gasped in fright as his eyes locked with mine and he started unbuttoning his shirt. He took it off slowly, all the while observing my reaction.

“Look at me,” he whispered.

I brought my swollen eyes to his muscled chest. The toned muscles made him look so strong and powerful, whereas I must have looked weak and helpless like an animal trapped in a cage. With a smirk on his face, he leaned towards me and I inhaled the fumes of his expensive cologne, the scent that marked the man who wanted to hurt me. I could feel his sharp breath grazing the nape of my neck and I knew he was about to say something awfully humiliating, but nothing could prepare me for the horrific promise that escaped his taunting lips.

“It’s time to make this fucking charade of a wedding officially complete.”

I winced and tears formed in my eyes, blurring my vision. One of them escaped and I felt its burning saltiness rolling down my delicate skin. Sebastian focused his eyes on mine and raised his hand towards my face. I cowered away, thinking that he would strike me, but instead his knuckles slowly traced and wiped away the wetness on my face. His touch left me completely paralyzed as he stared at my collarbones before leveling his gaze back with mine.

“No more tears, Isabelle. It’s too late for that.” Determination loomed behind his hoarse voice.

I was so horrified that I couldn’t even bring myself to beg him for mercy anymore. I had realized that he had an enormous advantage over me. He was a man. He was a cruel,

ruthless, beautiful and experienced man. And I—I was just a girl, a child compared to him, and I didn't stand a chance against this coldblooded stranger. Then it hit me.

“I... I don't even know you,” I spat out and looked at him miserably.

He smirked. “So? That didn't seem to bother you when you said *I do*. Besides, you knew what we would have to do tonight in order to make this marriage serve its purpose, so stop trying my patience because I don't have much left.”

I wasn't sure what he was talking about but I took his threats seriously. I knew he spoke the truth. He wasn't a patient man and I certainly didn't want to provoke him to hurt me even more than he had already intended.

I heard him pull the zipper on his pants and even though I wanted to run with everything in me, I didn't. Instead, I stood there, paralyzed, as he took off his clothes, and suddenly we were standing in front of each other, naked. Embarrassed, I looked away, but he placed his index finger on my cheek and made me face him again. I kept my eyes sharply focused on his face because I had never seen a naked man before, and the very thought of seeing him without clothes would send me over the edge. His finger started moving from my cheek all the way down my body, and his eyes followed its movement until he reached the skin on my lower belly and I winced and trembled violently. He sneered; amused by the fact that he had increased the level of my fear and shame. When he looked at me again, I realized that apart from contempt, there was also pure, animalistic lust gleaming from his eyes. He stared me down like he wanted to consume me and take it all, body and soul. I didn't even want to think about all of the sick things he could do to me. Embarrassment crept up my cheeks, and he noticed as they were burned the darkest shade of red. I looked away, breaking the gaze between us and that was when he growled and leaned over me, scaring me with his undeniable dominance. I gasped in shock as his lips brushed against my ear.

“I want to see where else I can make you blush. Now be a good girl and lay down on the bed.”

I whimpered quietly and heavy tears invaded my swollen eyes, but I held them back. There was no point in crying because Sebastian had no compassion. I looked at him fearfully and with a defiant dose of hesitation, but as soon as he raised his eyebrows I did what I had been told to do. I went to the bed and lay down on my back.

“No. Turn around,” he said.

I let out a frightened gasp and once again obeyed him. The vibrations of my trembling body spread through the mattress. Soft linen sheets absorbed my hidden tears as I shivered from his touch. My conscience screamed at me to do something, but I ignored my own cry for help. I felt so guilty for being submissive, but I was too afraid to fight back. His hands traveled along my back, leaving me desperately ashamed because my naked body was displayed for him, and he took his time touching me. I was vigilant the entire time, wondering what his next move would be. I couldn't stop trembling while awaiting and fearing his actions. His hand got lower and I tensed as he slipped it between my thighs. One of his hands continued caressing my back while the other one started circling around the area where I'd never been touched before; evoking the strangest feeling of warmth I hadn't even known existed. As much as I tried to hate what he was doing to me, I couldn't fight the sensation that started taking hold of my body. It was almost relaxing, and I started thinking that maybe it wouldn't be that bad after all, but I was wrong, because the next moment I felt his finger inside me and I cried out from the pain that rose all the way to my head. I winced because of the pain, but that didn't stop him. I stilled and let him do what he wanted. I had to. The feeling wasn't even a bit pleasant; it was entirely humiliating.

He wanted to degrade me, and as humiliation replaced the pain, I felt the last traces of my dignity fade away with it. I wanted the ground to open and swallow me up. Anything would be better than the feeling of disgrace that attacked my weak mind. With everything in me, I wanted him to stop and I wondered how I was supposed to survive having sex with a man who could remain so cold while I was falling apart.

When he removed his finger, he took something from his jacket and climbed onto the bed. I heard the tearing sound of the foil and I realized he was putting on a condom. As his body covered mine, I felt the weight of a man on top of me for the first time in my life. A frightening awareness took hold of me when his weight pressed my feeble body roughly into the mattress and as I fought to recover from instant shock, he remained cold and emotionally detached. Filled with nothing but sheer terror, my body stiffened under his hard muscles. Cringing in anticipation, I couldn't help but think about the fantasy I used to have about losing my virginity. I'd dreamt of gentle hands caressing me, and I could almost feel soft lips kissing me, whispering that it would be alright. I told myself that if I tried hard enough, maybe my mind could escape into that place, even if my body was condemned to endure the unexplainable cruelty of this cold man. That soothing place—the safe haven I longed for—was almost within my reach, but when he shifted his weight on top of me, I snapped out of my thoughts and returned to the horrifying reality. When he tried to pry my legs open, I panicked and attempted to fight back by clenching my legs together, even though I knew I was too weak to defend myself.

“Spread your legs and let me fuck you already.”

His horrifying words made me realize I couldn't win this fight and that I was only prolonging my torture. I gave up and slowly started to spread my legs. I felt his erection and panic overwhelmed me. I tried to get away from his grip, but he held me too firmly.

“I... I can't,” I said almost inaudibly.

I could smell the soft breeze of mint mixed with the scent of alcohol and his expensive cologne when he whispered in my ear. “You can and you will. What did you think? That you could play wife to me? This is what you signed up for, *baby girl*.”

Baby girl? The way he said it made my blood freeze because he was being deliberately obscure, stomping all over my battered pride. And then...

Without a warning, he took my virginity in one sudden, rough move and I screamed from the pain of the intrusion. A shockwave ran through my body and my back arched from the sharp ache that tore up my insides. He stilled for a moment and I froze. There was no tenderness, no mercy, and no reassurance. Slowly, he pulled out from me and panic gripped me when the next thrust was more painful than the first. It felt like I was being cut open, but he wasn't paying attention to my display of pain. I muffled my heavy sobs and allowed a silent stream of tears to fall down my face. I was crying more than I had ever cried in my life but it wasn't doing me any good, because he couldn't have cared less about my tears. I opened my eyes and stared out the window at the night sky, blocking the terrible ordeal Sebastian was putting me through. Looking at the dark, starless night skyline, I let my thoughts sink into its blackness. As I drifted away, he leaned closer and my skin was grazed by his breath. The scent of his cologne engraved itself in my fragile mind.

His movements became more rapid, until he finally collapsed on top of me, panting loudly. His weight pressed on my lungs and I couldn't breathe. He had stopped moving, but he was still inside me, prolonging my embarrassing discomfort and the unbearable pain. His loud breathing echoed across the room until there was nothing left—nothing but the excruciating silence. Tears kept falling down my numb face but I didn't make a single sound. Deep down I knew, in all sincerity, that I would never heal from what had just happened to me. Slowly, his breathing returned to normal and he pulled out in one swift move, causing my head to lift up in a sob that was filled with sheer panic and painful agony. Without a word, he got up and went to the bathroom.

In complete shock, I feared that he would return any moment to hurt me again. My violated body was too weak to move and all I could do was silently cry and bite the fabric of the silk sheets. Cold. I was so cold, like I had been left to die in the middle of the blizzard. I wanted to die, and a heroic part of me hoped that he would kill me, because the excruciating pain and humiliation was too much to bear. I cringed when I heard him come out of the bathroom, and I trembled in fear

while he calmly put on his clothes. On the verge of a panic attack, I winced and started breathing heavily when I heard him move towards the bed. More tears surfaced in my eyes because I knew he was staring at my wretched body. The fear that he might want to torture me more, made me black out, and as I was losing consciousness, I heard the sound of the door closing behind him.

Chapter Nine

After what may have been minutes or hours, I woke up in a daze. At first, I didn't realize where I was, but when I tried to move and felt the burning pain, the terrifying reality sunk in. I had cried my eyes dry, but my inner sadness was still immense. As I tried to get out of the bed, I noticed the sheets were smeared with blood. I felt dirty and was appalled by the gruesome sight in front of me. Bile rose from my stomach and I had to hurry to the bathroom if I didn't want to suffer through yet another humiliation and throw up all over the bed. But it was easier said than done. The moment my feet touched the floor, I collapsed from the pain and weakness. I felt my stomach spasm and I knew I couldn't give up, so I crawled to the bathroom, using all of the remaining strength in my broken body. My breathing started getting heavier and I was sweating as I fought the urge to throw up. Determined to reach the bathroom door, I moved inch by inch, tearing my knees on the hard carpet. Unfortunately, when I reached my target, it was too late for me to get to the toilet and I vomited all over the bathroom floor. Empty and broken beyond repair, I leaned on the tub wall and just sat there while the time stood still. All my internal clocks had stopped ticking. The only emotion I had left was shame. All I wanted was to clean myself up and never have his hands touch me again. I shuddered at the thought of him hurting me another time and shook my head with my hands on my ears to make the images disappear from my mind. Frantically, I turned on the faucet and somehow managed to get into the tub. I closed my tired eyes and let my thoughts sink into the pool of warm water. Immediate temporary release drifted over my body and mind. Sadly, it was short-lived. Violent shivers took hold of me again and I couldn't stop myself from sobbing. What a pathetic apparition I must have been.

When the water covered my body, I turned off the faucet and realized that Sebastian was right there, leaning against the bathroom door and staring at me intently. His eyes darted towards the vomit on the floor and then he looked back at me with an unfathomable look on his face. Traitorous tears ran down my cheeks yet again and restless waves—caused by my uncontrollable shaking—started forming in the water. Terrified that he would punish me because I had vomited all over the floor, I curled into a ball and rested my head on my knees. I had no intention to move from that position. He exhaled deeply and I heard him approach me. The loud pounding of my heart punctuated each step he made as I repeated the mantra in my head. *Please no. Please no.* He knelt next to the bathtub, and having him only inches away from me made the already overwhelming panic even more unbearable. His breath sent shivers down my spine as it lingered on my skin. My own breathing became rapid and I panted nervously; I had no idea what he intended to do to me. As his hand cupped my face, I jerked under his touch and my muscles convulsed when he lifted up my chin and made me look at him. Too ashamed to return his gaze, I tried to look away, but his grip tightened and he succeeded at fixating my eyes on his.

“D-don’t. P-Please don’t. I-I’m sorry,” I shouted in desperation, choking on my tears and begging him not to do whatever he was intent on doing.

“I won’t,” he said in a cold voice.

“I’m s-sorry,” I kept stuttering.

“Stop apologizing.” His ruthless voice warned me that it would be in my best interest to shut up.

Moments of deadly silence passed by with neither of us doing or saying anything. With an empty mind, I just stared at the restless water, silently humming a lullaby my father used to sing to us when we were children. My mind tried to escape into a happy place—back when I was ignorant of all the wickedness that ruled the world. Back to the time before my father became a nasty alcoholic, when I was protected and innocent. I tried to think about anything else but Sebastian’s

threatening closeness. At that moment, I would have rather been in the ninth circle of hell than trapped in that bathroom with him. I would have rather been tortured by the devil than by Sebastian's cruel gaze.

"Why didn't you tell me you were a virgin?" His unexpected question broke the silence.

I shivered and swallowed hard with the emergence of a fresh memory. It didn't make any sense. Why would I tell him something he already knew? He couldn't have possibly been that ignorant. I wanted to say something but the words were stuck in my throat.

"Are you sick?" he asserted after I didn't answer his first question.

Anger surged through his face and I could tell he was annoyed by my unremitting silence.

"Answer me, Isabelle. Don't make me force it out of you."

Excruciating dread emerged within me at the sound of the threat uttered by his upset voice.

"N-No, please. I... I thought you knew." I trailed off.

"And what made you think that? It wasn't exactly written on your face." He wasn't even remotely touched by my distress.

I was absolutely sure he was toying with me, but even though he tried to hide his inner turmoil with his cold and dominant demeanor, his eyes gave it away.

Through tears, I whispered the only words I could tell him. "T-the examination... b-before the wedding."

He gazed at me without saying anything, his eyes cold and distant. A curse filled with emotion crossed his lips before he ordered me to get out of the tub and make myself ready, because he had some important business meeting he had to attend. Suddenly, the bitter realization that I had no clothes to wear hit me. I lowered my gaze and addressed him.

"Sir..." My voice cracked.

“What?” he snapped.

“I d-don’t have anything to w-wear,” I barely stuttered the words through my sobs.

He rolled his eyes, preparing to spill his venomous words again.

“And what do you want me to do about it? You have your wedding gown, don’t you? I’m sure you’ll enjoy putting it on one more time.” He mocked me.

“P-Please, I c-can’t.” I couldn’t stop stuttering and I dreaded the mere thought of wearing the dress that represented all of my misery.

“I don’t have time for this nonsense. It’s already well past noon and I have things to do.” He arched his eyebrows and took a sharp breath, revealing presence of agitation that seethed through his impatient voice. “There’s nothing else to wear so get out of that tub and get dressed.”

I knew it was in my best interest to obey him, but the thought of him seeing me naked again troubled me deeply. His menacing gaze was more than I could handle at that moment so I hugged my knees even tighter and remained in the bathtub.

“Isabelle,” he warned me.

He cursed once more and then shook his head at me. “Do you want me to leave?” He’d read my mind and I nodded, hoping he would grant my wish.

“A husband and wife don’t hide from each other. You better get used to being naked around me because it will be happening. A lot.”

A small part of me hoped he would grant me that small shred of dignity, but even after what he had done to me, I still naively underestimated the depth of his hatred. It seemed as though he enjoyed humiliating me, and nothing I did or said could evoke even a bit of compassion in him. I closed my eyes and tried to collect some of the near non-existing courage within me to stand up. I tried to be brave. I swear I tried, but too many bad things had happened to me in a matter of a few

hours and instead of getting out of that bathtub, I broke down whimpering in front of him again. He made me look into his murky eyes and I expected him to force me to stand up, but he didn't. For a while, I felt I was being studiously inspected by his dark gaze and my teeth began to chatter when I saw he was about to speak.

“You have exactly fifteen minutes to get ready while I go down to reception and talk to them about the little accident that happened here.” He glanced at the dirty bathroom floor and I looked away in shame. “Think of it as a favor that will be repaid later.”

I found myself thanking him when I really wasn't supposed to be grateful. After all, he did tell me that I would have to pay for his small gesture of mercy and I was sure I had just made a deal with the devil. When he left, I got up fast, fighting the pain in the process. The adrenaline rushed through me and all I could think about was that I had to get dressed as quickly as possible. When I returned to the room, I noticed that the blood-stained sheets had been thrown on the floor and a heavy stone of shame settled in my chest. I knew he had been the one who removed them. The urge to throw up returned to my stomach, but I fought it with all my will, because I knew I was running out of time. I turned towards the white pile of my wedding clothes—which was still lying on the floor in the exact same spot where I had been humiliated by him—and I jerked as a scary flashback returned to haunt me. I took a deep breath and decided that I had to pull myself together. I quickly managed to put on my underwear, but putting on that dress turned out to be much more difficult. When I managed to put it on, I thought I was going to pass out. I was sore all over as it was, and the corset of the dress was pressing on my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

I walked up to the balcony door and observed the city panorama. My fingers ran along the white dress and images of the wedding preparations the day before flashed before my eyes. There was no point in analyzing what had transpired, but I couldn't help it. The questions kept coming to my mind. *Why was I so weak? Why had I let my mother control me? Why hadn't I run away? What could have been different?* There

were thousands of questions and not one single answer that made sense. The physical and emotional pain was growing and despite having taken a bath, I still felt dirty. I needed to get away from that room because everything reminded me of what I so badly wanted to forget.

The door squealed signaling Sebastian's return and the moment I heard it, my arms were protectively wrapped around my middle.

"I hope you're ready." I turned around when I heard his voice. "We're going home."

The realization that this 'home' was now my home, hit me. I wondered where that home was and though I didn't want to go with him, I knew I had no choice, because he was my husband. I nodded and marched toward the door. Walking was a big struggle and once we were in the elevator, a wave of dizziness hit me. The walls seemed to be closing in on me and a claustrophobic feeling clawed at me. Sebastian kept looking at me, watchfully following my every move and it made my uneasiness even more obvious to him.

"Are you hurting?" he asked with a cold, serious expression on his face, but his voice was softer this time.

My cheeks turned red as I bit my lower lip and chose not to answer his question, focusing on my dizziness instead. He seemed upset by my reaction, but didn't respond on it. Once the elevator door opened, I tripped on my way out and ended up kneeling on the floor, completely disoriented. Sebastian was helping me up when the security guard approached us.

"Can I help you with anything, Sir? Is the lady alright?" The man was curious.

"I'm fine," I said when I was back on my feet at last. "J-Just a bit dizzy," I mumbled.

The man's curious eyes wouldn't look away from me. Then I noticed that all of the few people in the lobby stared at me with suspicious expressions on their faces. My eyes were focused on the floor when Sebastian grabbed my elbow and

walked me out of the hotel. It seemed that I would feel eternally embarrassed. I was sure everyone in that lobby knew what he had done to me the previous night. Tears of shame burned my eyes even though I was so tired of crying.

He helped me into his car and didn't talk to me for the most of the ride. I looked outside while tears blurred my vision and I tried to pretend that nothing around me was real.

"Pull yourself together. We're in public and I don't want a picture of my upset wife in the newspapers tomorrow. You can cry all you like when we get home." He was agitated.

He'd said it again. *Home*. Wherever it was that he was taking me, I knew it would never feel like home. I tried my best to muffle my sobs and stop the tears that annoyed him so much. I noticed he was upset because he started speeding way above the limit again. The tremendous speed made me feel even more uncomfortable, but I didn't dare to ask him to slow down. Instead, I clenched my hands around myself, fighting the numb pain. After a long time that stretched in frigid stillness, we passed the very outskirts of the city and reached the remote area of the fancy neighborhood where, by the looks of it, only tremendously rich people lived. He pulled up into one of the driveways and used his cell phone to open the gates. I was awestruck by the beautiful lawn, huge garden and the mansion that was apparently going to be my golden cage. I knew I wouldn't fit in there as a maid—let alone as his wife.

"This is it," he informed me when we pulled up in front of the mansion.

He got out of the car without saying anything else and I followed him to the door. I stood by the entrance, not knowing whether I should go after him or wait for someone else. To my surprise, everything inside seemed to be even more luxurious than what I'd seen at his parent's house. He stopped by the stairs and turned to me with an irritated look on his face.

"Come. Quickly."

He started climbing the stairs and I followed him to the first floor and through the hallway, until he led me to the one of the many doors.

“This is one of the guest rooms.” He opened the door and we walked in. “All of your things are already here.” He motioned towards the small pile of bags and boxes. “One of the maids will show you around later.”

As an uncomfortable silence embraced the space between us, he remained, staring at me for a while, seemingly lost in thought. He looked like he desperately wanted to say something else but after a few moments, he turned around and left the room.

Chapter Ten

I was alone in the middle of a spacious, lavishly decorated room. Every detail fit in perfectly, creating an astonishing whole. The only thing that stood out was the pile of my bags, filled with clothes that definitely didn't seem appropriate for that place. When I looked around, absorbing the surroundings, the first thing that caught my attention was the huge king-sized bed. The fact that I was a married woman made me dread I would have to share that bed with Sebastian. An image of the hotel room bed sprang to my mind and I shuddered. I opened the walk-in closet but it was empty. In fact, nothing in that room implied that he slept there. After all, he did accentuate that I was occupying one of the guest rooms, which probably meant he didn't want us to share a bed together. Still, I couldn't fight back my fears.

Despite the fact that I had taken a long bath in the hotel, the thought of taking a shower wouldn't leave my mind. When I entered the adjoining bathroom, my reflection in the huge mirror shocked me. My entire face was puffy. My eyes swollen from crying and ringed with dark circles and bags, showing I'd had almost no sleep in the past twenty-four hours. Ragged loose hair fell over the wrinkled white dress and only contributed to making me look terrible. I looked exactly the way I felt—destroyed. As I let the white gown fall on the floor, another image of the prior night came back to haunt me. My tortured spirit traveled back to that room where I'd stood in front of him in nothing but my underwear. Pure, animalistic rage emerged from me and I started ripping my wedding dress apart. I yelled, wept and sobbed while shredding the shiny, smooth fabric to pieces. When I finally lost the last of my strength, I turned on the shower and sat under the water flow, sinking into numbness. It was done. Irreparable. Irrevocable.

Only when my skin started to wrinkle and I trembled from the cold, did I turn off the shower. Apart from the fact that I was an emotional wreck, I still had to deal with the pain and the thumping headache that wouldn't go away. When I returned to the room with nothing but a towel wrapped around my body, I quickly took a few clothing items from one of the bags and hurried into the bathroom to get dressed. When I came back, I noticed that there were two pills and a glass of water on the nightstand. The edge of a small piece of paper was visible under the glass. I raised the glass and read the content of the note. "*For pain.*" Given the fact that I still didn't know anyone there and Sebastian was generally unconcerned about my well-being, I was more than curious about where the painkillers had come from. I remembered how he'd asked me if I was hurting in the elevator, but didn't press the issue afterwards. I wondered if it was possible that he felt bad because I was in pain, but then I recalled how annoyed he'd been when I was crying in the car and I realized that he didn't give a damn if I was hurting or not. Against my better judgment, since I wasn't sure what the pills on the table were, I swallowed both of them at once and drank the water from the glass. Exhausted, I collapsed on the bed, still obsessing that he would join me. But I was so tired that even fear couldn't keep me awake. My eyelids became heavy almost instantly and sleep claimed me.

Air! I needed air. I was suffocating. I felt his weight on top of me again and I couldn't breathe. There was a knock on the door in the background. *Please, someone help me.* My lips formed the words to tell him that I couldn't breathe, but no sound came out. I couldn't speak. All I could do was push the dry air out of my lungs. The knocking continued, but my throat remained dry and as much as I urged myself to speak, I couldn't. I was sure I was dying. Suddenly, I heard a woman's voice.

My eyes flew open as I jerked up, gasping for air. For a moment, I didn't know where I was or what had happened to me, but I remembered everything when I looked around the room. My eyes inspected the bed and I noticed that the other

side of it was untouched, which, to my relief, meant he hadn't slept next to me. It had just been a horrible nightmare.

"Madam? Are you alright, madam?"

As I gradually came to my senses, I saw that there was a woman standing next to the bed. She must have been the one who woke me up. She came closer and put her palm on my forehead to check if I had a fever.

"I'm fine." I moved away. "I just had a bad dream," I said and she frowned like she wasn't convinced. "Who... Who are you?" I finally asked.

"I'm Anne. I've worked for the Everett family for years, so you can trust me." It must have been obvious that I was suspicious of her.

"I'm Isabelle." I felt awkward.

"I know, Mr. Everett asked me to show you around and get you anything you need, madam," she explained.

I still didn't feel at ease around that woman but letting her call me madam seemed ridiculous.

"Please, call me Isabelle," I offered and she smiled at me. "If it's not a problem," I started, "I need ten minutes in the bathroom to get dressed and brush my teeth."

"Of course it's not a problem. Take your time. I'll be waiting right here. But please, eat first."

She motioned towards the tray of food that was standing on my nightstand and then she sat on the chair next to the vanity.

"Thank you but—" I was about to say that I wasn't hungry when the smell of food made my stomach rumble, so I tried one of the small sandwiches from the plate and realized that I was starving. "It's delicious. Would you like to join me?" I felt obliged to ask that.

"No, thank you. I've already eaten," she replied warmly.

After finishing breakfast, I reached for my clothes in one of the bags and Anne stood up, wanting to help me.

“Should I help you unpack, Isabelle?”

“No, that’s alright. I will unpack everything later,” I replied and went into the bathroom.

That day I felt slightly better than the day before and it seemed that those pills I took did the magical work of taking away the physical pain. Still, I wasn’t in the mood for anybody’s company because my emotional state was getting worse by the second. The fact that Sebastian hadn’t slept in the same room with me gave me little relief since I was still frightened to death. I honestly didn’t want to have a tour around the house right then because I was afraid I might meet him. My decision had been to avoid him whenever I could and at all costs. But what choice did I have? Apparently he had ordered Anne to show me around, and if I was smart, I would stay away from unnecessary confrontations with him. At least she seemed to be nice. I wondered if she had been the one who left those pills for me on the night table. After getting dressed and fixing my hair in a ponytail, I returned to the room. Anne observed me with a puzzled look on her face.

“Is something wrong?” I was surprised by her reaction.

“No, no... It’s just that...” She seemed uneasy about continuing the conversation. “Well, never mind. Should we go?” It sounded like she was in a desperate need to change the subject.

I looked down and suddenly it hit me. My poor-looking, shabby clothes must have shocked her. That was definitely not the way the wife of Sebastian Everett should have dressed, but I had nothing else to wear so I couldn’t do anything to rectify the matter.

The beginning of the house tour was pretty awkward. Anne explained that the rooms next to mine were all guest rooms and the big door at the end of the hallway led to the master bedroom, which was occupied by Sebastian. I desperately wanted to ask if he slept there, but instead I bit my lower lip and swallowed the urge to know. It seemed that Anne

herself seemed keen on asking something but didn't dare to do it. I wasn't concerned about that. It was only natural that we didn't trust each other that much. I guess both of us were afraid that we would blab everything to Sebastian. During the tour, I found out that there was a beautiful living area on each floor of the mansion, as well as two game rooms, both of which contained one huge pool-table right in the middle. Anne also walked me through the conference room where Sebastian would sometimes have meetings if his office was too small for the number of people attending. She unlocked the door to the media room where one could watch movies and get a real cinema feel. That was the only door that was locked and Anne explained the reason for such caution was that Sebastian kept many personal items such as photo albums and family tapes there. She sounded quite worried about the possibility that those things might end up in the wrong hands. I looked around that room for a moment, thinking how the whole tour turned out to be nice after all. But despite Anne's hospitality, I just couldn't relax. Sebastian kept creeping back into my mind and every time we would leave a certain room I feared I'd see him next. I was too vigilant, flinching on every sound and I could tell that Anne started getting suspicious of my behavior.

“Shall we continue?” She summoned me back from my thoughts.

“Yes. Everything is nice and tastefully decorated.” I had to say something, so I stupidly praised the house that was to be my prison.

“I'm glad you like it. I'm sure Mr. Everett will be pleased as well,” she said contently.

Somehow, I managed to smile even though I was sure she noticed the sadness that emerged from the depths of my eyes.

“Come,” she invited me in a cheerful voice. “Let me show you the ground floor.”

She led me through the vestibule and into the capacious dining room that could accommodate as much as sixteen people.

“This is where all of the meals are served,” she explained the obvious. “You can choose to have your meals brought to your room occasionally, but it is preferred that you eat here,” she told me and I nodded.

Next, we stopped by the massive door and I wondered what was hidden behind it.

“This is Sebastian’s office,” Anne informed me. “He usually stays here if he works from home but today he’s spending the entire day at the company.” Her words meant that I could finally relax a little, knowing that he wouldn’t be lurking around. “I would show you in, but he is very strict about people being there when he’s absent.”

“That’s alright.” I wasn’t that keen on seeing Sebastian’s private space either.

To my astonishment, next to his office was the most beautiful library I had ever beheld, and I knew this was where I would be spending most of my time during what would surely be days filled with loneliness. It appeared to be equipped with every relevant book that had ever been written and I immediately noticed a couple of titles I wanted to read.

“Well, if you like the library, you will love the patio,” Anne teased and I was happy to follow her lead.

The patio was astonishing. Surrounded by nothing but windows, overlooking the pool and breathtakingly beautiful garden, it was a cozy place where one could completely relax.

“The weather is beautiful today. Could we take a short walk through the garden?” I asked, knowing that a bit of fresh air would make me feel better, as well as help me get some things out of my mind for a while.

“Oh, I’m sorry, but I have some other things I have to take care of after I show you the kitchen and introduce you to the rest of the staff,” she clarified and after seeing I was slightly disappointed, she gave me a warm smile and continued, “If you want, you could take a nice walk in the garden this afternoon. Why let my lack of time ruin the fun?”

She made a joke and I gave a short, but sincere laugh. It was something I hadn't done in a long time.

"I would like that. Thanks for the tip." I smiled.

As we walked towards the kitchen, I already noticed the shiny marble counter on the impressive country-style white cabinets. Of course, the kitchen was just as imposing as the rest of the ridiculously big mansion.

The two women who were busy there stopped what they were doing and focused their attention on me. One of them was older like Anne, whereas the other one was maybe a few years my senior, by the looks of it. The younger girl was studying every inch of me and she looked extremely confused, whereas the older lady seemed uninterested because she immediately returned to her chore.

"This is Isabelle, Mister Everett's wife." Anne's introduction drew the older lady's interest at once.

"That's her?" The young girl exhaled in surprise and then turned to Anne whispering loud enough for me to hear. "Really?"

"Teresa!" The older woman nudged her and murmured a warning through her teeth.

The girl, who was obviously called Teresa, inspected my scruffy appearance one more time before bursting into slight laughter. She was mocking me. With a sour look on her face, Anne tried to mend the damage by starting a conversation.

"This is Norma." She gestured at the older woman who finally offered her hand to me. "She is the main cook."

"Nice to meet you," I said quietly and accepted her hand.

"This is Teresa." Anne looked towards the girl who wasn't at all interested in hand shaking, "Norma's right hand." She bowed and smiled with a mean grin.

"Nice to meet you too," I replied and then looked at Anne with what must have been a plea to leave written on my

face.

“Well, we better get going, so much more left to see,” Anne lied.

When we walked out of the kitchen, she felt obliged to make amends for Teresa’s behavior.

“Isabelle, I apologize because of Teresa. She is very young and... Well, sometimes she says things without thinking them through.”

I wasn’t a fool. That girl was simply displaying what everyone, including myself, was thinking. I looked away and then returned my eyes to Anne.

“You don’t have to apologize. Only a fool wouldn’t notice how much I stand out in this place. I will never fit in here.” I looked away again.

“Don’t talk like that, Isabelle. Of course you’ll fit in. Just give yourself a little time to learn. I’m sure Sebastian will help you a lot as well,” she comforted me.

“Yes.” I sighed and laughed bitterly. “I’m sure he’ll help me.” My voice was sprinkled with sarcasm.

Anne gazed at me with a baffled look on her face like she didn’t know what to say. I wasn’t in the mood for talking either.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized and tried not to look upset. “I’m just tired. Everything’s been quite overwhelming lately. I think I might go for that walk outside to clear my mind.”

“That’s a great idea,” she encouraged me. “Don’t worry too much. Everything will be fine, you’ll see.” But she didn’t know that nothing could ever be fine again.

Walking through the beautiful garden had been good for me. I truly enjoyed all the colors and scents of spring that overwhelmed my senses. I discovered one part that was almost hidden in the shadow of the trees, sprinkled with the greenest grass and roses of all shapes, colors and sizes. Roses were my favorite flowers and the ones that were the color of blood

amazed me with their mysterious allure. There was something about roses—their thorns shielded the vulnerable petals and the beauty could only be admired from afar. I sat on a swing chair nearby and admired that newfound piece of heaven. It was like I'd found a hidden sanctuary where everything bad seemed to be far away—I didn't have a mother who cared only about money, I wasn't married to the man who terrified me, I wasn't living in the house where even the help made fun of me. I escaped into the world where there was nothing but heavenly peace and harmony. Foolishly, I stole a moment in which I believed that nobody could hurt me or force me to do anything I didn't want to do. The calmness of that place was so appealing that even my drive for writing returned. Weeks had gone by without a single thought about the story I wrote crossing my mind. I was hit by the realization that I wasn't innocent enough to believe in happy endings anymore. There would never be a happily ever after, at least not for me. An incredulous smile curved my lips when I became aware that I had completely lost my way and sense of being. After sitting there for a long time, I knew my moments of serenity had come to an end and I had to head back.

Once I reached the mansion, Anne was already waiting for me.

She greeted me with a sign of relief written on her face. "Oh, thank God you're back. I was worried you'd miss dinner."

"It was really nice in the garden, so I kind of lost track of time."

"I can imagine. I knew you would like it. Sebastian hasn't arrived yet. He's working late, as usual. If you want, you can eat in your room," she suggested.

"That won't be necessary. I'll eat in the dining room." I didn't want to do something that wasn't preferable on my first day there.

After dinner I went straight to my bedroom. Having a Sebastian-free day had been wonderful, but I knew he had to

come home sooner or later. I had an awful feeling that he would seek me out that evening. The moment I entered the room, the heavy stone of anxiety settled back on my chest. I took a long shower and went to bed, but sleep didn't come easy. The smallest sounds alarmed me and I feared he was coming my way. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't close my eyes and go to sleep because I was afraid of what would happen when I woke up. I twisted and turned in my bed, until my tiredness overpowered me and I gradually fell asleep.

The parquet floor squealed under the heavy steps that progressed towards me. My breath froze; my heartbeat raced as I awaited something bad to happen. I could feel him above me, but I couldn't see him. His hand touched me possessively and I winced, my body jerking in an attempt to get away from him. I willed myself to open my eyes and scream, but my body and my voice betrayed me. I was blind, mute, paralyzed—completely at his mercy. The bed creaked as he climbed on it and terror gripped every cell of my body. It was happening again and I was useless. I couldn't defend myself. I didn't want to be hurt again. I didn't want—

Just as he was about to touch me again, a scream tore from my throat and my eyes flew open, only to witness the empty room that surrounded me. My whole body was covered in sweat and my breathing was rapid. I realized I'd had another terrible nightmare. Sebastian hadn't visited me that night either, but the dream still felt very real.

It took me a while to relax and calm down. I decided to unpack, get dressed and head for the dining room. When I walked in, Sebastian was already there, obviously just starting with his breakfast because all of the food in front of him had been untouched. It was stupid of me, but I didn't expect to see him and I couldn't hide the shock on my face. Luckily, he didn't spare me as much as a glance because he was focused on his newspaper.

“Good morning.” I felt obliged to greet him in some way.

Even though it took a lot of effort to address him, I wasn't rewarded with a reply. He was too busy reading some

kind of long article. Despite being tempted to run away, I knew that leaving was not an option. I sat as far away from him as I could and tried to make myself as small as possible. Theresa was serving me breakfast when he got up abruptly, told her he wasn't hungry anymore and left. She glowered over my humiliation, but she didn't know that I was happy as long as he was away from me.

“I must tell you that this is very strange, madam.” She stressed the last word. “That was the first time Mr. Everett left his food untouched.” She tried to sound concerned and I just shrugged, pretending her comment didn't faze me.

“He must have lost his appetite.” Apparently she wasn't going to let it go. “Hmm, I wonder why?” she said and hurried back into the kitchen with a smirk on her face.

Suddenly I lost my appetite as well, and left before that mean girl got a chance to come back and play with my patience some more.

The following three weeks went by in the same pattern. The nightmares caused by the fear of Sebastian wanting to consummate our marriage again, came back every night. I would always wake up terrified, screaming and panting for air. Still, despite my horrible fears, he never once came to my room. Though my nightmares wouldn't go away, I gradually lulled myself into a feeling of safety, thinking he didn't want to sleep with me again. When I would eat in the dining room, he was also never there. In the short time I'd lived in his house, I learned that he was a workaholic to the core—he would always be working late in the company or be away on one of his many business trips. If he wasn't home, which was almost all the time, I would spend some time in the library searching for an interesting book to read. When I would find the right book, I often went to that secluded rose garden and read for a while. Then I would write, sometimes for hours on end. I had a pen and a little notebook in which I confided my thoughts while working on a story that was, for the first time,

marked with agony, instead of love. The heroine thought she had found her Prince Charming, but she realized she'd been fooled when she learned his true colors. The plot that was supposed to be so simple and innocent, had taken a very different turn and I wondered if I would ever be able to finish it. I tried to come up with a twist in which the hero wanted to redeem himself, but that proved to be very difficult and I had major writers' block. After a while, I stopped writing altogether, because I realized that the magic I used to feel when I worked on the story was entirely gone. Still, I enjoyed reading and whenever I could, I would sit on the swing chair and allow imagination to take me away from the harsh reality of what my life had become.

Chapter Eleven

One day when I was convinced that Sebastian wasn't home, I decided to spend some time in the beautiful library and inspect all of its contents. The sun glared through numerous windows, bathing the spacious room with the golden light while I curiously observed countless shelves, noticing a great number of intriguing titles. Most of the books belonged to the genre of philosophy, psychology or politics, but there was one shelf marked as "Classic Romance." Since I was helplessly in love with books like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Gone with the Wind*, I felt like I'd discovered a chest full of hidden treasure. I noticed the book I'd wanted to read for a long time but never got a chance to—*The Age of Innocence* by *Edith Wharton*. I had scanned that shelf before, but that precious work of art had never caught my eye, until now. The movie adaptation had been interesting, but I was quite curious about the book. Now when I had it in front of me at last, I reached for it excitedly, ignoring the fact that it was too high and almost out of range. My fingers barely touched the cover and I stretched so I could pull the book from the shelf—which turned out to be a big mistake, because the entire shelf started falling down. With the book in my hand I screamed loudly, realizing I'd managed to get away from the falling shelf at the last moment. I just stood there, having no idea how I was supposed to clean up the mess that I'd made.

"Having fun?" I froze when I heard the voice that sent chills down my spine.

It was him—the man from my nightmares. I was scared out of my mind, but I knew I had no other choice than to face him. *Why did he have to be home?* When I turned around, I noticed his eyes were sending a message that there would be hell to pay.

“I-I just wanted... wanted to get the book,” I spoke inarticulately and gestured to the book in my hands.

He stood there motionless, and yet I was intimidated by him. Eventually, he walked up to me and I cowered away as fear coursed through me. His eyes warned me not to argue when he ripped the book from my trembling hands. After he scanned its covers his eyes locked with mine again.

“I have to say, I’m not at all impressed by your choice of reading,” he taunted.

That man had to shame me for everything. In a desperate attempt to avoid his knowing eyes, I nervously looked around for a while. As I tried to mentally prepare for his fire of hatred, tears pricked my eyes. With all my will, I struggled to hold them back.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” I managed to say with my dignity still intact.

“Next time when you decide to tear down shelves to get to ridiculous books, you might want to consider the fact that all of the luxury that surrounds you didn’t fall from the sky. Believe it or not, someone has to work for it. That someone is me and I don’t like to be interrupted while I’m working.” His voice was calm, but his eyes sent a message of fury.

I looked down and whispered. “I understand.”

He lifted up my chin and my mind flashed back to when I was crying in the bathtub after our wedding night—he’d done the same then. I couldn’t move.

“Don’t look away from me,” his quiet voice warned.

The rhythm of my breathing increased as he let his hand fall down to my breast and abdomen. His grip tightened around my hip as the shivering vibrations ran through my body. He leaned really close, never moving his gaze from mine. Without a doubt, he could see the traces of unshed tears in my eyes and he looked like he was fighting something. My lips trembled as his were only an inch away. If it wasn’t for his tight grip, I was sure I would pass out from fear. The scent of

his cologne lurked in the air and the moment I smelled it, scary images flashed in my mind. The pounding of my heart rose up to my ears and I couldn't handle his closeness anymore. Tears inched their way out, betraying me once again. He immediately stepped back and released me.

“Relax. I'm not going to fuck you,” he scoffed at me and left.

His words instilled paralyzing terror in me again, leaving me numb with fear of what would come. I'd made myself believe he didn't want any physical contact with me anymore, but he'd proved me wrong. Furious with myself for knocking over the damn shelf the very day he was home, I started picking up books that were lying around, and stacked them together.

Anne found me fighting with a pile of books only minutes after the incident with Sebastian. He had to have told her to come to me. I tried to hide how shaken I was, but given the worried look on her face, it was clear that I was very bad at it.

“What happened here, dear?” she asked curiously.

“My stupidity. That's what happened,” I scowled at myself. “I wanted to reach a book and wound up crushing the entire shelf.” My voice cracked as I tried to clarify what took place in the library.

“Don't worry about it. These things happen. The repairman will fix everything. Don't waste your energy on it,” she soothed.

I nodded with appreciation, but I couldn't relax after what had happened. Panic took hold of me and wouldn't let go. Anne took my hand and helped me stand up. She gave me a tight hug, and I broke down. After everything that had happened, I never once had any source of comfort apart from that kind gesture. I sobbed on her shoulder, accepting her warm solace.

“It’s alright,” she said as she stroked my hair. “Let it out, whatever it is, just let it out.”

And I did, until I had no more tears to cry. A bond that would never be broken was created between us. When I managed to get a hold of myself, we just sat next to each other without uttering as much as a single word.

“I’m so afraid of him. Of what he’ll do to me,” I mumbled after a long break of silence.

“Sebastian?” she asked cautiously and I nodded.

“I can’t sleep at night. It’s always on my mind.” My cheeks reddened as I confessed that I was terrified of my husband.

She observed my sad face for a while, wiped away one of my fresh tears and tentatively brushed her hand over my shoulder.

“I’ve known him since he was a child Isabelle, and, in a way, he’s like a son to me. Sometimes he can be harsh or seem cruel, but there is a very noble and good man behind that mask. You have to give yourself and him some time.” She hoped her words would comfort me.

“You don’t know what he’s done.” I couldn’t look her in the eyes when I said that. I couldn’t think about it without feeling desperately ashamed.

For a while neither of us spoke. Honestly, I didn’t blame her, because it was obvious her words wouldn’t help me at that moment. I was drained and in desperate need of some peace and quiet.

“Thank you, Anne. You don’t know how grateful I am.” I hugged her.

She squeezed my hand. “I’m here for you. Anytime you need to talk to somebody.”

I thanked her one more time and looked at her wanly before heading off to my room.

After a few hours of restless sleep, I woke up with a light headache. The tension wouldn’t leave my system and I

spent most of the time tossing and turning in my bed instead of sleeping, because I didn't want to go through another nightmare. It was dinner time, and I felt relieved because I knew Sebastian wouldn't be there. I took a short shower in the bathroom, fixed my hair and opened the closet to find some decent clothes to wear. The only problem was that, as I had already perceived earlier, even my best clothing items seemed inappropriate for that place. When I managed to find a pair of jeans and a shirt that didn't look like it had been washed a hundred times, I glanced at my reflection in the mirror and once again became aware that I still didn't look decent enough. After deciding I was too hungry to continue digging through the closet, I accepted the fact that I was a walking fashion disaster and headed downstairs.

When I entered the dining room, I was in complete shock by what I found there. Sebastian sat at the table, glaring at me. His eyes traveled over my body, making my cheeks burn because I felt terribly exposed. I could tell he questioned my choice of clothing because he sighed in disappointment after taking his eyes off me. Visibly shaken, I took a seat across from him. I fumbled with the table cloth, keeping my gaze focused on it the entire time. He cleared his throat seemingly seeking my attention. I moistened my lips, let out a sigh and then looked up at him for a split second. He wouldn't take his eyes off me and an immense rush of insecurity washed over me. Theresa walked in with a tray of food and kept that annoying smirk on her face the whole time.

“Thank you, Theresa,” Sebastian said after she was done serving us dinner.

Instead of thanking her as well, I flashed a courteous smile and looked away from her malicious gaze. My ice cold, unpredictable husband and I were alone again. It was absurd that I felt threatened by him even in ridiculous situations such as eating dinner. Convinced that he was inspecting my every move, I was very meticulous about my choice of cutlery. It must have been extremely amusing watching me sweat over knives and forks. He actually smiled when he noticed my uneasiness, but that smile had been replaced with his cold mask within seconds.

“I see you’ve got the hang of it,” he commented on the fact that I’d managed to eat properly in front of him.

“I’ve been practicing,” I replied quietly.

“I know.” His eyes sparkled with amusement and it was obvious that he was referring to the tape that Mr. Andre made for him.

Imagining him watch that tape made me feel uneasy, and I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. The rest of our meal went by in a quiet, tensed atmosphere. Having dinner together felt unnatural and I just couldn’t wait to get out of there. His demeanor was intense and unfathomable. More than anything, I wanted to know exactly what his intentions were, because my mind was coming up with some pretty dreadful ideas. As his eyes glared at me with their green mysterious depths, I became more restless. If he was playing some kind of game with me, which was probably the case, I had to get out of there. I got up without thinking and found myself in a very weird situation because I didn’t know what to say to him.

“I,” I said in a whisper and he raised his eyebrows as a sign that he was listening to me. “I am,” I had no idea what to say, “...a little tired.” That wasn’t completely untrue.

He mumbled something under his breath and then spoke with condescending clarity.

“You’re free to go.” He smirked. “I’m not holding you hostage here, am I?”

The blush caused by his comment heated up my cheeks and I almost ran out of the dining room. I couldn’t walk fast enough to get away from him. Once in the room, I closed the door and leaned on it, gasping for air. The events of the day troubled me. First the library disaster and then he showed up for dinner. It was a lot more Sebastian in one day than I could possibly handle.

The ringing of my cell phone summoned me back to reality. I picked it up and Mother’s controlling, high-pitched, honeyed voice greeted me from the other side. I opened the balcony door right away because I needed some fresh air.

“Hi honey. It’s Mom,” she said in a lively voice.

“Hi, Mother.” I was less excited about hearing her.

“How’s the married life?” She practically sang the words.

“Fine.” I decided that I wouldn’t share any details with her.

“Oh, I have so much to tell you. I went to church yesterday and everybody’s been asking about your wedding. Why, it’s the event of the year here in Rosemont,” she teased in her deep southern accent.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying the attention.” I didn’t even try to make it sound like I meant it in a nice way.

“Well, it has been a bit overwhelming I have to say. It’s not easy to play the role of your mother right now. You should see all the jealous looks I get from the other women,” she complained.

Only she would think that the other women were jealous of her. They were probably shocked by the way I’d gotten married—but then again, the people in Rosemont were so unpredictable, that nothing would come to me as a surprise.

“I know it hasn’t been easy for you,” I said, without hiding the irony in my voice.

She sighed. “Well, honey, there is nothing that a mother wouldn’t do for her daughter.”

Was she for real? I was so angry with her that I couldn’t even reply. She must have gotten the message because she didn’t say anything else either. After moments of silence she said that Ashley was impatient to talk to me, so she would hand her the phone. I felt relieved, excited and sad at the same time, because I had missed Ashley so much in the past weeks.

“Isa?” The sound of her voice brought an immediate smile to my face.

“Ashley. I can’t believe it’s you. I’ve missed you so much. How are you?” Excitement coated my voice.

“I’m fine. I would be great if you were here. Jane is really nagging me. I wish you were here to set her straight.”

“Nobody can set that girl straight.” We started laughing at the same time.

“How are you doing?” she asked an innocent question that wiped away the smile from my face.

“I’ve had better days.” Sadness radiated from my voice and I felt guilty for sharing it with Ashley. I could lie to Mother, but not to her.

“Isa, the school-break starts in two weeks. Maybe I can visit you and cheer you up? What do you say?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I tried to maintain an even breath. “I’m sorry.”

She had already planned everything, but I couldn’t let her come and witness my misery. I knew she was disappointed, but I couldn’t let her visit me and see the bad situation I was trapped in.

“Well, another time then. Please, at least tell me it’s not boring and that you’re having fun.” She wanted to cheer me up.

I was about to reply when the sound of the turning doorknob startled me. Suddenly, the door opened wide and those cold green eyes were glaring at me.

“Isa... are you alright?” Ashley was getting worried when I gasped in the phone. “Isa what’s going on?” She tried to get me to talk to her, but I was so anxious that I couldn’t get a hold of myself.

“A-Ashley, sorry. I have to go. I-I’ll call you back,” I managed to get the words out before hanging up the phone.

I didn’t know what to do. What I had feared for days was actually happening. Sebastian was in my room and my intuition warned me that all of my nightmares were going to come true.

Chapter Twelve

I went from shocked to miserable and frightened in a matter of seconds. That awful incident in the library seemed to have opened Pandora's Box, and it couldn't be closed again. Afraid to do anything, I remained standing, frozen on the exact same spot, waiting for his next move. I hugged my waist, panting for air and anticipating the worst. He appeared to be completely in control, amused by the tension.

"I thought you were tired." He looked at me, his eyes accusing.

I was cornered, like a criminal about to be punished. He seemed to be too curious about what I would say in my defense, but he didn't push me to answer. Instead he just stood there, patiently waiting for my justification like he had all the time in the world, which was unusual behavior for him. Still, even though I knew that much, I was stuck in a very sticky situation, because I didn't know where his strange demeanor would lead to.

"I was... I mean, I am tired. It's just that my mother called me just as I was about to lie down," I finally mumbled.

When I finished, he didn't say anything. His gaze remained on my face for a while and then, to my surprise, he walked calmly towards the closet, opened it and started going through my clothes. I observed in shame as he pulled everything out of the wardrobe. Radiating an aura of apparent disbelief, he was stretching my shirts, trousers and blouses, before throwing them on the floor. At times he would take a piece of clothing in his hands, then look at me with an expression of disapproval on his face. I blushed and didn't make a sound while he took the liberty of tainting my personal space in such a humiliating manner. Every clothing item I possessed wound up on the floor after Sebastian's inspection. I

didn't know why he was doing it. *Maybe he was throwing me out?*

"Is that everything you have to wear?" He gaped at the pile of clothes and then turned towards me.

"Yes, Sir," I said quietly.

"Stop with the *Sir* bullshit. It's ridiculous. I am your husband for heaven's sake!" He was definitely annoyed.

"What should I call you then?" I barely dared to ask.

"You should call me by my name. I do hope you know it." His voice was venomous.

"Yes, Si... I mean..." I pushed myself to say it. "Sebastian." The sound of his name rolling off my lips sounded so unreal, so unnatural.

He let out a breath I imagined to be sprinkled with icy coldness and for a fraction of a second it seemed like he stood dead in tracks, taken aback by the remaining echo of my voice, whispering his sophisticated name. He sneered as I looked down; avoiding his inquiring stare and the sight of his threatening, firm posture.

"My pretty *wife*," he muttered in a familiar tone that was hurtful, but also accentuated by a rare presence of raw, instinctive emotion, "dressed in rags?" More than a statement, it was a question, asked in such a puzzling manner, like he was bothered by the sight of my shabby-looking wardrobe on a level that reflected more than sole demands of his vain pride. "I don't *ever* want to see you wear any of these things again." I winced at the unexpected sound of his deep, patronizing voice and he stopped, disrupted by my fretful reaction.

The stretching silence made the anticipation all the more unbearable and I looked back into those cold eyes, expecting a strong, verbal blow, but what I got was a rephrased and diplomatic reprimand instead.

"You should know that you're expected to dress *differently* at this place. Besides, I'm sure you're aware this marriage made it possible for you to afford things that match your *new* lifestyle. I advise you to take advantage of that."

I swallowed and then spoke in a small, frightful voice that was burdened by a dangerous trait of remaining pride. “I’d prefer not to.”

Those contradicting words seemed to have locked out a stormy reaction within him, causing his already murky gaze to darken and imprison me under its refined superiority. There was no side road I could take to escape the suppressed undertone of boiling detest that seethed from those eyes. The earnestness with which he stared at me, made him look tortured and seemingly weak for only a second, but the very moment he realized I might be getting closer to deciphering a small part of the labyrinth that represented his complicated conduct, he looked away and that fragile thread of humanity had evaporated from his face.

“This is neither a matter of preference, nor the time for false pretences. Helen will go shopping with you tomorrow morning. I want to see you dressed *appropriately*,” he emphasized the last word and then lowered his voice. “Understood?”

“Yes. Understood,” I complied, but my act of pathetic submission didn’t help matters.

“That pile over there,” he referred to my old clothes, “will be given to charity tomorrow. I can’t believe they’ve let you walk around dressed like that for the past few weeks,” he said and his eyes darted towards the last separate closet compartment.

My heart raced as he opened it and pulled out the shredded remains of what used to be my wedding gown. He took the longest time to take his eyes off of it, but when he did, they darted right towards mine and they were once again furious. However, it was fury that his voice wouldn’t show.

“The one decent piece of clothing you have in your closet, and look what you’ve done to it. What is the meaning of this?”

As I expected, he was playing another one of his mind games, keeping up the composed act while his entire expression screamed murder. The fact that he was angry while

we were alone in a room with a king-sized bed terrorized me, and seeing that dress again made me completely frantic, because it reminded me what he was capable of doing. I didn't want to draw his attention, but I couldn't stop the tremor. Fear was a mighty enemy and I was losing the battle. As soon as the destroyed wedding dress ended up on the top of the pile, he made a move towards me and I immediately flinched. And there was that dark smirk on his face again. After studying me from the distance, he decided to come closer. Like always, my hysteria grew as his presence closed up on me. For a while, he observed as I struggled to remain calm and then he leaned over to me and whispered in my ear.

“Is there a reason for you to be so skittish?”

“N-no... I... I don't know,” I blurted out, wondering which answer he wanted to hear.

“Maybe I should give you a reason. That's what you're obsessing about, isn't it? You're wondering when we're going to put our little arrangement into motion again.” He paused for a moment. “Why delay the inevitable?” His green eyes locked on mine right after he said it.

A suppressed memory of the wedding night returned. “*Spread your legs and let me fuck you already.*” The words rang in my head and I winced in fear.

“Not now,” I pleaded. “Don't.”

“Why not? Now is as good time as any.” He shrugged. “It makes no difference.”

“You... you said. You said you wouldn't.”

“I said I wouldn't when we were in the library.” He looked around the room. “This isn't the library,” he said smartly and raised his hand in an attempt to touch me, but I flinched and jumped back, protectively wrapping my arms around my middle.

“I don't... I don't want to,” I said almost inaudibly.

“What makes you think that I care about what you want?”

He said it so calmly, so carelessly that it broke my heart. I knew he hated me. I knew he didn't care. Still, it hurt because I had no idea why he despised me with so much passion.

"Why are you so cruel?" I asked in a tremulous voice.

He snickered. "I'm hardly cruel. All I expect from you is to fulfill your duty and I have given you enough time to get used to the idea of being my wife."

"You didn't give me time," I said in disbelief and then, a dangerous sentence spilled out of me. "You hurt me."

He raised his eyebrows and then narrowed them at me. "Are you referring to our wedding night?"

I winced and shivered from terror as the flashbacks of that night settled in my mind.

"It's a yes or no question. Not that difficult," he said impatiently.

A tear slid down my cheek. "Yes," I said and my shoulders dropped in defeat.

He stepped closer, possessing my personal space and I shivered from discomfort when he took a strain of my hair in his hand. He aimed the green fury of his eyes right into my soul.

"What exactly did you expect? You were a virgin, but were you honestly unaware of what happens between a man and a woman when they get married?" His eyes gleamed at me, waiting for a response. "Answer me."

I closed my eyes trying to cover up my shame. "I wasn't unaware."

"Then you knew what you signed up for when you married me. If you expected hearts and flowers, I'm sorry to break the news and disappoint you, but that's not what this marriage is about. The sooner you come to terms with that, the better. Next time, I hope you won't forget I'm your husband and try to deny my touch," he said with genuine threat hanging from his voice.

I stiffened when he said those words. He thought it was his right to do what he had done. I was so frightened of him that I couldn't stop the tremors that gripped my body, but my mind pushed me to say something.

“No!” I said in a defiant whisper.

“No?” He asked with amusement.

“N-not after what you've done to me. I w-won't let you touch me again.” I fought to keep my voice steady, but it was a losing battle.

“You won't let me? Do you really think I need your permission?”

He leaned closer and I raised my arms, trying to defend myself in panic. He looked at me in the same horrifying way he did that night—with threatening desire in his eyes. Terror ran through my veins because the awareness that I was completely at his mercy took hold of me. The look on his face told me he knew that he was in control and he savored that moment. He started circling around me while my eyes frantically followed him, wondering what he would do next. When his hands touched my shoulders, I jerked so hard that he had to tighten his grip on me to stop me from falling to my knees. He was standing behind me, like a monster lurking from the dark and the fact that I couldn't see him, but only feel him, scared me to death.

I shuddered as his hands slowly moved down my arms, finding their way to my waist. He pulled me so close against him that I could feel his erection touching my lower back. My heart was thumping out of my chest as I felt one of his hands lowering down.

“If you're buying time as my wife by denying my basic marital right, you'll be sorely disappointed,” he whispered with contempt lurking from his voice.

His words made absolutely no sense but I couldn't be bothered about that because I was too shaken by what he was doing to me. I gasped in a panicked attempt to bear his presence without completely crumbling down in front of him.

His lips traveled down my neck, laying soft kisses on their way to my collarbone, where he paused and deeply inhaled the scent of my skin, intensifying his touch on my thigh. Unusual warmth rushed through my body, and my humiliation became complete as I started getting aroused by the touch of the man who terrified me—a touch that was sensual yet possessive, trapping my body in the strangest mixture of fear and desire.

“You seem to be enjoying this a little too much for someone who doesn’t want to be touched,” he breathed on my neck and I became paralyzed from the fear and embarrassment. “You know that it doesn’t have to be that difficult. We’re both stuck in this situation so we might as well take the easy way out.”

His hot breath burned my skin as I once again tried to decipher the meaning behind his mysterious words but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t make sense of them. The sound of his voice echoed in my mind. *Was he right? Was I that depraved to want him after what he had done to me? A flashback of an embarrassing, heart-wrenching memory tore through me and a spasm of pain rushed into my chest. No! Not again, not like this.* He loosened his grip on my arm and I sensed I had a chance to escape. Determined to get away from him, I gathered all of my courage and broke free from his grip, but he grabbed my hip possessively to stop me from running away. I slapped him as hard as I could, without thinking about the consequences. He removed his hand from my body and rubbed it against his slightly red cheek. Those emerald eyes gleamed with madness and I knew there was a harsh retaliation coming my way. I started stepping away from him and he just stared at me. I took a step back as he came one step closer. We were playing the game of cat and mouse—the one he seemed to enjoy so much.

“I’m sorry.” My voice was filled with trepidation. I knew those three words wouldn’t stop him from hurting me.

A grin curved his lips. “Oh, you will be once I’m finished with you.”

Adrenaline pumped in my blood as I ran towards the bathroom and before I knew it, he was coming after me. I

turned the knob, managing to lock the door at the very last moment. Complete desperation took hold of me when I realized what I had done. *I hit him!* My hands landed on my ears because I wanted to block the sound of his violent knocks.

“Isabelle, open the door. I’m warning you. Don’t make me come and get you!”

I didn’t reply, just cried silently, ashamed that I was aroused by his touch. While my mind was disgusted by him, my body had betrayed me. Another frightening series of thumps on the door had followed. He was furious. *Oh my God, what had I done?*

“I’m not leaving until you open the fucking door, Isabelle. Do you hear me?” he yelled.

Great, I had managed to get myself into an even bigger trouble. What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t stay in the bathroom forever. The longer I stayed locked in, the angrier he would get. Then again, if I dared to go out, God only knew what kind of painful and perverted things he would do to me.

“Goddamn it, Isabelle!” He kicked the door so hard, for a moment I thought he would break it and get inside.

I hugged my knees, rocking back and forth, crazy with fear and I realized the locked bathroom door wasn’t protecting me, because he was about to tear it down. No matter how scary the experience awaiting me would have been, I knew I couldn’t avoid it. I got up on my weak legs and unlocked the door. Sebastian was leaning on the doorframe, watching me with the scariest look ever. Raw strength radiated from his body as his heavy breathing and heaving shoulders threatened my entire existence. Then his hand flew to my right cheek and he slapped me so hard, I hit the cold floor. But it didn’t end there. As I was weeping in shock, he grabbed me by my elbow and ordered me to stand up. I allowed his strength to pull me back on my feet. I feared the worst with every fiber of my being when he let go of me and stepped aside. My weak knees were barely keeping me upright. He had a haunted look on his face while he shook his head at me as I gaped at him with fear.

“Hit me or disrespect me again, and I swear there will be a much harder retaliation coming your way,” he threatened, and when he moved towards me I stumbled back, fearing he would hit me again.

He stopped his movement as our eyes locked together, and after we stared at each other for what felt like eternity, he said something that rocked the very foundation of my core.

“Don’t look at me like that. You may be a pathetic excuse for a wife, but you signed that deal and don’t think there’ll be an easy way out of it. You will comply!”

I stared at him in confusion. What was this deal he was talking about? For a brief moment, I thought about asking him but I discarded that idea. I felt the throbbing on my face and I lightly touched the bruise with my hand and something flickered in Sebastian’s eyes. He quickly looked away from me and then, without sparing me another glance, he left, slamming the door behind him.

The agony that took hold of me didn’t subside even after he was gone. A small sigh of relief that he hadn’t forced me to sleep with him, released from my tired body. But he was absolutely right. What difference did it make if it happened that night or any other? It couldn’t be avoided and the anticipation only made it worse. I wondered how many nights I would spend fearing his touch would wake me up. Even worse, my reaction to him that day made me desperate, because I couldn’t bear the thought of being excited by the touch that was driven by hatred and contempt. I had always fantasized of finding true love. Just like fairytale heroines, I’d childishly imagined that my Prince Charming would come and save me from my evil mother one day. He would help me heal and encourage me to fight for my dreams. His touch would be governed by affection—not disdain. Sebastian had taken that away from me, leaving me completely broken and convinced that nobody could mend my shattered pieces back together. The illusions I’d once had about my wedding night came back to my mind, reminding me how cruelly the fates had toyed with me.

The urge to wash away my shame and sadness wouldn't leave me alone, so I spent an eternity under the shower, replaying the memory of everything that had happened. His warning left me confused and wondering about that deal. He mentioned that I was buying time as his wife and that didn't make any sense to me. I was sure he was referring to something I didn't know about. Whatever it was, I decided that I didn't want to know.

When I turned off the faucet and the water stopped running, I heard the phone and decided to ignore it because I truly wasn't in the mood to talk to anybody. As I was putting on my clothes, waiting for the annoying noise to stop, I was surprised that it just kept ringing. I hurried to the room and the first thing that struck me was a bag of ice, laying on the nightstand. I brushed my hand along my left cheek, which was painful to touch. Sebastian had hit me pretty hard but I was so concentrated on my emotions, that the swollen cheek hadn't bothered me until now. The puzzling thought about the person who had brought the ice was quickly interrupted by the repeated, consistent ringing of the phone. Somebody was eager to get through to me, so I had to pick it up.

"Hello," I said in a cold, distant voice as I pressed the bag of ice to my cheek.

I winced from the touch of coldness against my hot pulsating skin.

"Isa, I have been worried sick about you. I thought you said you would call back. Why did you hang up? What happened?" Ashley was frantic.

"Nothing happened. Don't worry." I tried to appear calm, but my voice cracked, revealing my true state of mind.

"Don't lie to me Isa. You're not okay," she accused me.

"No, really, I... I'm fine." A choked sob escaped my throat.

"Isa?" I didn't dare to say anything, because I was at the verge of crying. "Isa, please say something," she kept insisting and another sob escaped me.

The gate that I couldn't close had opened and muttered sounds of fighting tears traveled to my sister through the phone.

"Isa, what's going on? What did he do to you?" she kept asking as the tears followed by more muffled sobs started falling.

"Mother, something's wrong. She's crying. We have to help her." Ashley tried to alarm my mother, but when she took over the phone she was calm.

"Isabelle, it's Mom. Tell me what's wrong," she insisted.

"Everything." I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"What happened? Did you have a fight with Sebastian?" It sounded like she was accusing me of something.

"No. We didn't have a fight," I said through tears. *Our problems were much bigger.*

"Then what happened? Did he hurt you?" She wasn't even mildly upset by that possibility.

"Yes," I said through sobs.

"When did he hurt you?" she asked but I wasn't sure if I should tell her. "When Isabelle?" She was persistent.

"On... on our wedding night." I cried from the embarrassment.

"I see. Wait a second while I talk to Ashley, honey." I heard her drop the phone. "Ashley, go to your room. I have to talk to your sister."

Ashley protested for a while, but then obeyed mother's order.

"Has he consummated the marriage? Is that what you're referring to?" She was back on the line.

"Yes." I cried inconsolably like an infant.

“Isabelle,” she used her famous reassuring voice. “I thought we talked about it on your wedding day. It was normal honey. It’ll get better in time, I promise.” She even chuckled on the phone.

“Mother, I-I didn’t want it and he... he didn’t care,” I barely pronounced the words through tears.

“Isabelle what do you mean you didn’t want it? Sebastian is your husband. I don’t know what to say. I understand you feel a bit uneasy, but these things are completely normal in a marriage. You should be flattered to have a husband like him, instead of crying about something that is perfectly natural,” she spoke, like she was shocked by my behavior.

“Mother?!” I shrieked because I couldn’t believe what she was telling me. “You don’t know... you don’t know what it was like.” I tried to make her understand how much I was suffering.

“Next time try to be more relaxed and it will feel much better,” she talked smoothly, ignoring my anxiety.

I knew she wouldn’t understand and for that reason, I didn’t want to talk to her anymore.

“I’m really tired.” I wiped my tears and greeted her. “It was nice to hear from you. I have to go now.”

I was getting ready to hang up the phone when she interrupted me.

“Isabelle, you better be wise and play your cards right. If I were you, I wouldn’t deny my husband. Don’t forget what happens if your marriage fails,” she threatened.

“How could I forget?” I said bitterly and hung up the phone.

That night, I fell asleep with a powerful knot of anxiety twisting my stomach. Although I didn’t expect any kind of support from my mother, her view of the matter still bothered me. I was furious at myself for even telling her anything, but I couldn’t help the need to unload the burden of fear that troubled me. The thought of him coming back that night and

completing my humiliation lingered in my mind, but I was too tired to be afraid. Entirely drained out, I closed my eyes, hoping that when I opened them again I would be far away from that place.

Chapter Thirteen

The serenity of the rose garden invaded my senses as I enjoyed one of my books on the swinging chair. The chirping of the birds invited me to close my eyes and focus on the soothing sounds of their symphony. I took a deep breath, inhaling the mild summer breeze and let it travel through me. The sun bathed my face and that brief moment of happiness was so precious that I wanted to keep it forever. Slowly, the heavenly peace and immense harmony embedded in my surroundings lulled me to sleep.

That feeling lasted until I felt a painful grip on my shoulders. I tried to free myself, but the harder I tried, the stronger the grip became. An angry voice was calling my name from the distance and even though I wasn't moving, the noise became louder. I gasped for breath, close to suffocating, as I felt the grip spreading through my body and possess it completely.

"Open your eyes!" The voice was so near, whispering its threat.

Although my intuition somehow warned me that I should obey it, I was too afraid to see where I was, sensing that the serenity from just a few moments ago was far away at that moment.

"No more tears, Isabelle. It's too late for that."

It was his voice uttering the scary threat that instantly made me open my eyes. To my horror, I was trapped in that hotel room and he was hurting me again. Air! I needed air! I couldn't breathe while he was on top of me. I tried to utter a plea for him to let me go but my voice was completely gone. Only tortured shrieks managed to escape my throat. My heart pounded loudly as I tried to break free.

“Sebastian is your husband!” I heard my mother’s appalled voice.

Just when I thought nothing would set me free from the hell I was trapped in, someone stroked my hair and talked to me with the voice of an angel.

“Wake up Isabelle. It’s just a dream sweetheart.” The voice of heaven called me.

I woke up sweaty, flustered and hyperventilating. Anne glanced at me while stroking my hair.

“It was just a dream, Isabelle. It’s alright,” she comforted me.

I looked at her in desperation, wondering if I would ever be normal again. She removed her hands from my hair and I sat upright, trying to breathe evenly.

“What happened dear?” Anne looked at me with concern when she noticed my bruised cheek.

Her panicked reaction startled me because I had yet to see the damage on my face, but I had to remain calm or Anne would be treated to another one of my breakdowns.

“It’s okay.” I tried to reassure her.

Her facial expression made it clear that she knew it wasn’t okay, but she would drop the subject anyway.

“Isabelle, Miss Everett is waiting for you downstairs to take you shopping,” she said with a smile on her face.

“Oh my God, I forgot about that.” I started panicking at the thought of Sebastian scowling at me again.

“Don’t worry. She’s downstairs having breakfast with Sebastian. Take your time. But don’t make it too long.”

After I thanked her and assured her I didn’t need any help, she left me alone with a pile of clothes on the floor. I still needed to choose something from that pile and wear it in front of Sebastian for the last time. After everything that had happened the day before, I felt anxious about being in the same house with him, let alone letting him see me in

my *rags* again. Resigned, I chose something to wear and hurried to the bathroom. The reflection of the girl with a bruised face startled me, and I doubted that makeup could cover it up. I took a quick shower, put on my clothes and spent minutes trying to mask the throbbing bruise on my face. When I finally accepted that makeup could only do so much, I tried to pull my hair over the blemish as much as possible, but I still couldn't camouflage it completely. Realizing there was nothing else I could do about it I gave up and headed downstairs to meet Helen.

The anguish of seeing Sebastian increased as I got closer to the dining room. I could have sworn I heard laughter. The moment I entered the room, the noise subsided and it was replaced by the unpleasant silence. Sebastian sat at the head of the table, his features cold and disturbing as usual. Helen gave us a puzzled look before greeting me.

"Isabelle, I'm so excited to see you again. I can't wait for us to hit the city." She hugged me and my long hair got moved from my face in the process.

"I'm happy to see you too. It will be a lot of fun shopping with you," I said nervously because I was self-conscious about the bruise.

A part of me hoped she wouldn't notice, but the look on her face told me otherwise. My face turned scarlet as she inspected it before glancing questioningly at her brother.

"Isabelle, what happened?" Helen asked me, worried.

Sebastian gaped at me with an expression I couldn't decipher. I quickly had to think of something that made sense.

"It was an accident," I said the only thing that came to my mind.

Helen arched her eyebrows. "An accident?"

"One of the maids accidentally slammed the door against my face when I tried to leave the room while she was walking in," I offered the stupid explanation and looked at Sebastian briefly, but his eyes were far away and focused on his plate.

“Ouch, it looks painful.” She pitied me.

“It will heal,” I answered in a quiet voice.

“You should be more careful next time and avoid incidents like those,” Sebastian said coldly, then got up and left.

“What’s his problem?” Helen was surprised by her brother’s behavior.

Since I didn’t have a valid answer to her question, I chose not to reply. She understood and changed the topic.

“Should we go? We have a lot of stores to visit—or do you want to eat first?” She used the excited girly voice which got me in the mood for shopping as well.

“No, I’m not that hungry. We can eat something in the city.” I was eager to leave the mansion for a few hours.

“Great, let’s go then.” Helen left the room and I followed her to the car.

Once we got to the city we spent hours shopping. Helen made me change into the first outfit we bought. I didn’t protest because I knew I would stand out too much if I kept my old clothes on. As we continued our shopping spree, I started feeling uneasy about the prices, but Helen assured me that Sebastian wouldn’t notice that money was missing from his bank account even if we went shopping like that every day. *Just how much money did he have if spending a fortune on a few clothing items was completely irrelevant to him?*

When walking through yet another store where even the discount price tags alarmed me, Helen noticed a beautiful black dress displayed on a mannequin in the middle of the store.

“Oh my God, that one is perfect. Come quickly.” She hurried to see the dress and I joined her.

She rolled her eyes at me when she saw that I was looking at the price tag again. The shock must have been

visible on my face because she shook her head and burst into laughter.

“Let’s find your size so you can try it on.” She encouraged me, but I didn’t like the idea.

“Helen, that dress costs \$2700,” I whispered, putting the stress on the amount of money she wanted to spend so carelessly.

“So? I told you not to worry about it. It’s okay, just try it on.”

“I don’t think I should,” I replied humbly.

“Why?” She didn’t seem to understand.

There were several things that kept me from buying that dress. First, I was pretty sure that Sebastian wouldn’t have approved of it, because the dress cost a fortune. What’s more, I was convinced he wouldn’t want to spend that kind of money on me since he hated my guts. But the strongest reason for not buying the dress was that I knew he thought I was a shameless gold digger and I didn’t want him to have one more argument in his favor. Of course, I couldn’t be honest to Helen about my motives for declining the dress, so I just gaped at her, without saying a single word.

“You see, you can’t come up with anything. It will fit you perfectly. Besides, you need something to wear to the family dinner in two weeks,” she informed me casually.

“Family dinner?” I was surprised.

“My silly brother didn’t tell you, did he?” She smiled.

“No. I’m not even sure we are going,” I replied, confused.

“Of course you are; it is mom and dad’s thirtieth wedding anniversary. The whole family will be there. Sebastian probably forgot to tell you. He did warn me this morning to help you find something nice for that occasion and that dress is perfect. So please, try it on already,” she reassured me and insisted on the dress.

“Oh. Okay, I guess I’ll try it on.” I just wanted to get it over with.

Once in the fitting room, I had some trouble putting the dress on because I was so worried about ripping something. The moment I saw myself in the mirror, I couldn’t believe it was me. That dress was truly a magical piece of fabric, altering my look into one of a sophisticated high-class society woman. It was a knee-length, V-neck dress with lacy long sleeves that went just a bit past my elbows. Its slim silhouette complemented my figure and I liked the beaded lace on the bodice.

“Are you ready? I already found the matching shoes. I hope they fit.” I heard Helen’s impatient voice.

“Wow, Isabelle, you look stunning.” Helen looked at me in surprise when I left the fitting room.

“You don’t think it’s too...” I still wasn’t sure about the dress.

“Of course not, it’s just right. Sexy, yet demure.” She complimented my looks.

“Well, thank you.”

“Oh, right, the shoes. Try them on.” She handed me a pair of the most beautiful black stiletto shoes I’d ever seen. “And don’t look at the price,” she warned me with a wink.

When I put on the shoes, the transformation was complete and, for a moment, I felt like Cinderella. Helen continued praising the dream combination—as she had put it—and hurried to the till so that she could pay for everything before I got the chance to protest.

After the exhausting shopping experience, we decided to rest on a terrace of a small lunch bar because I was starving. As we sipped our drinks, waiting for our food to arrive, Helen couldn’t stop talking about how astonishing I looked in that dress. Although I insisted to know the price of the shoes, she wouldn’t reveal it to me. Helen was genuinely fun to be around. She was a kind and warm person who could bring sunshine to anybody’s gloomy day.

“You know, sometimes I think you seem to be the only one lacking the evil gene in the Everett family.” I couldn’t believe I had actually said that.

My cheek reddened and I bit my lip in frustration for blurting out something like that.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean... I shouldn’t have said it.” I couldn’t stop apologizing.

“It’s okay,” she spoke at last and then dropped a bombshell after a period of silence. “Funny you should say that though, because I was adopted.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was sure she was joking. I stared at her for a while before replying.

“You were adopted?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, so you see I don’t have any Everett genes to begin with.” She joked about it, but I still felt uncomfortable.

“Do you know anything about your biological parents?” I probably shouldn’t have asked that, but the curiosity got the best of me.

“They were workers at The Goliath,” she started.

“The Goliath?” I had no idea what that was.

“It’s the company owned by the Everetts,” she clarified. “Anyway, my parents died as a result of the poor safety awareness policy of the company. The public was furious so the Everetts made a gesture by adopting me to get on the good side of the press again,” she said with a longing look on her face. “I was almost nine.” She sighed. “Old enough to remember—not that they ever made me forget. They gave me their name, money, status and education; but they never quite accepted me as one of their own.”

We were interrupted by the waiter who served us food, but I wanted to know more about the venomous family I now belonged to. There seemed to be so many secrets hidden in plain sight. When I reflected on what Helen had told me, it made perfect sense, because it was obvious she couldn’t have been related to those people.

“What about Catherine? I expected her to be more compassionate than the rest of them. I mean she must have gone through the same thing like me, coming from Rosemont, yet she seems so cold.” I raised the issue that was bothering me for a while.

“Catherine was chosen for Theodore a long time before they were supposed to get married. As a matter of fact, she was still a little girl. She came from a wealthy family herself and she was trained properly for the role of Theodore’s wife. That’s mostly the way the marriage of the Everett heirs is handled,” she explained as I listened carefully.

“How come Sebastian didn’t go through the same procedure?” I asked because something clearly didn’t add up.

Helen became quiet and it seemed she was calculating whether to share a certain piece of information with me or not.

“Helen?” I urged her to say something.

“Sebastian had gone through the same procedure with a girl named Cora. Her family lives in New York. Both of her parents descend from Rosemont and they are prominent members of New York upper-class society,” Helen said warily.

“So then, why? Didn’t Sebastian want to marry her?” I was astonished by Helen’s story.

“He did, very much. But it turned out that she...” Helen trailed off and she suddenly seemed sad. “Anyway, their marriage was out of the question.”

“So that means that I—” I couldn’t even finish the sentence as I realized what it meant.

“Isabelle, don’t think about that. You are his wife now and Sebastian is a very responsible person. He will take care of you.”

A heavy lump of anxiety started forming in my throat, so I quickly changed the topic and tried to find out about this family’s strange ways.

“Why is it so important that the bride comes from Rosemont?”

“It was the wish of Collin Everett—Sebastian’s great-grandfather. He and his wife came from Rosemont with nothing and created The Everett Empire. He wanted to keep the family ties to Rosemont because he was very fond of his hometown. His intention had been to put a clause in his will which would oblige every Everett heir to marry a girl from Rosemont in order to create a new heir of Rosemont descent,” Helen told an incredible story.

“But what would be the purpose of that?” I still couldn’t understand.

“The purpose would be for the Everett family to keep their ties to Rosemont and help it develop into a prosperous town.” She tried to clarify, but it still didn’t make any sense.

“But Rosemont is still a primitive dump without industry, jobs or any sort of prosperity.” I tried to wrap my mind around that crazy story Helen was telling me.

“Right, because the Everetts found a way around it. As long as they marry the girls from Rosemont and give small amounts of money to Rosemont charity they fulfill the terms of Collin’s will, without actually respecting his true wishes,” Helen said, smiling ironically.

“What if they declined to marry a girl from Rosemont?” I was curious.

“Then all of the wealth goes to the city of Rosemont. Collin made at least that part of his will indisputable.”

“I don’t even know what to say. It must have been horrible for you to grow up surrounded by those people.” I felt bad for her.

“It wasn’t all that bad. Theodore and Catherine weren’t exactly the loving parents, but they provided me with everything I have today.” She sounded very grateful.

“Still, that’s so sad,” I said, before the irony hit me because my mother wasn’t exactly the loving type either.

“Well, come to think of it, they weren’t all that gentle to any of their children. That’s why I don’t blame Dianne for being the way she is. It surely wasn’t easy for her. It still

isn't," she said mysteriously. "She used to make my life a living hell, but Sebastian would always save me from her evil plans."

I couldn't believe what she was saying. Sebastian, my conceited husband, was kind to her, knowing she wasn't a true Everett. I definitely didn't see that one coming.

"Sebastian?" I asked with a dose of skepticism.

"Yes. He immediately accepted me as his sister without a question, whereas Dianne never thought of me as her equal. To her I was some orphan girl they took pity upon. Sebastian—he was always like my true big brother. As a matter of fact, he's still very protective of me." Her eyes glazed like diamonds when she talked about Sebastian, expressing how deeply she loved her brother.

I tried to make a connection between the Sebastian I'd met during my wedding night and the Sebastian Helen spoke of, but I couldn't grasp the fact that the two men were the same person. I had absolutely no comment on anything she had told me about him. That definitely wasn't the Sebastian I knew.

"Isabelle?" A grimace of worry settled on her face. "Did Sebastian hit you?"

She seemed to be distressed by the very mention of it. The throbbing bruise on my face taunted me to tell her the truth, but I didn't have the heart to stain her good opinion of him.

I tried to sound as convincing as I could. "No, he didn't. It was my fault."

"You're not lying to me, are you?" Helen was suspicious.

"No. Like I've said, it was an accident." I smiled lightly to reassure her.

Neither of us had that much left to say so we just continued eating in silence. After finishing our meals, we went

back to the mansion where Helen helped me carry all the bags to my bedroom. It was already late and it seemed like no one was in the house. Once we entered the room, I noticed that the pile of my old clothes was already gone.

It felt so nice to be away for a few hours, but the moment I was back, all of my gloomy thoughts set right back in. Helen noticed my mood went down and tried to cheer me up.

“Why don’t you try on some of the things we bought today?”

“I’m exhausted. Maybe some other time.” I forced a smile.

“Come on, it will be fun. Think of it as a little runway experience.” She laughed as she tried to persuade me.

“I don’t know, Helen,” I said with a sour look on my face.

“But I’m dying to see you in that dress again. You don’t have to try anything else, just that one. What do you say? Pretty please?” She smiled because she knew she’d convinced me.

Shaking my head at her, I took the bag with the dress and shoes and went to the bathroom to change. I closed the door and instinctively reached for the lock and noticed it wasn’t there anymore. Frantic, I tried to grasp how that was possible, but then I noticed that the entire door handle had been replaced. Sebastian apparently wouldn’t give me the chance to seek refuge by locking myself in the bathroom the next time. Terror washed over me as the thought of his plans for the evening found its way into my mind. It definitely wasn’t over. He’d said I would have to comply and he had certainly meant it. Although I was aware that fearing what he would do to me was pointless, I still couldn’t help it. I hated how the very thought of that man made me cower in dreadful anticipation. Somehow, putting on that stunning dress made me reflect on the beautiful day I’d spent with Helen and finally, I managed to calm down a little. I put on the black stilettos and tried to walk to the room steadily.

“Yes, we hit the bingo with that one. You look so beautiful it makes me want to cry.” She exaggerated.

“Oh come on, Helen!” I chuckled.

“Honestly, I’m telling you. You’re spectacular.”

“Thank you.” I blushed, because her compliments made me feel a bit uncomfortable.

She hugged me. “Oh, Isabelle I’ve had such a nice time with you today.”

“We should do it again soon.” I hugged her as well.

We enjoyed each other’s solace for a moment when a knock on the door drew our attention.

“Come in,” Helen invited the person on the other side.

The door opened and the last person I wanted to see walked into the room. I was so confused by his gesture of knocking. The previous day he had simply walked in with an attitude that was saying he felt it was his right to do so. Uneasiness washed over me as the scent of his cologne spread around, claiming the space around me. It was still a trigger that made every hair on the back of my neck stand up.

“Well, you made it in time, brother. Isabelle just tried on her magnificent combination for the dinner, which, by the way, I can’t believe you haven’t told her about yet. Well, what do you think?” She was dying to hear his opinion. I, on the other hand, didn’t want to know what he thought.

His eyes momentarily remained glued on my dress before he turned back to Helen.

“There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“Oh, come on! Are you blind?” Helen was infuriated by his remark.

“No. When one is fishing for compliments, I choose not to give them. Simple as that.”

He looked at me again with his accusing eyes, even though I wasn’t the one who wanted to hear his comment about the dress.

“What’s wrong with you today? You’re grumpy all the time,” she teased him with a dose of accusation in her voice.

I desperately wanted Helen to stop irking him about the stupid dress, because I sensed he was about to lose his nerves and I would be the one to pay. On top of everything, the price of the entire combination still bothered me and I didn’t want him to know how much we’d spent on clothes that day.

“I’ve been working all day and I still have a late meeting to attend. I’m exhausted, so please, bear with me Helen.” He tried to appear calm, but Helen was still quite upset with him and I could tell that it annoyed him. “I need to talk to you about something, so come to my office when you’re ready. I’ll be waiting,” he asked Helen to join him and glanced at me shortly before leaving the room without a word.

Helen and I remained alone again, and I needed a few moments to regain my composure. She narrowed her eyes at me, hinting that she was thinking about something that baffled her.

“What is going on between the two of you?” She finally raised the burning question.

“I... I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I gulped for air because her question caught me off guard.

“I’m talking about how your demeanor changed when he entered the room, how in a second you stopped smiling and turned dead serious.” She looked at me suspiciously. “What has he done to you, Isabelle?” She frowned and said it like she was certain he had hurt me somehow.

I started breathing nervously, not sure about what I should tell her.

“He didn’t do anything. We just don’t know each other well... that’s all.” I couldn’t—I just couldn’t tell her. I couldn’t tell anyone ever again.

“I don’t believe you,” she whispered, never taking her eyes off mine.

“Please, believe me,” I muttered.

Helen gave me a warm look and a strong hug before we parted. I wished our beautiful day had ended in a happier tone.

“Take care, Isabelle. Call me whenever you need something. Anything, even the smallest thing, I really mean it,” she offered.

“Thank you. I will.” I was grateful.

“See you soon, sweetie,” she greeted me and went to see Sebastian.

I let the feeling of alleviation wash over me when Helen chose to drop the difficult subject. She knew a different kind of Sebastian, and I couldn't get her involved and let her fight my battles. If my own mother didn't understand, I couldn't expect Helen to choose my side over her brother's. I got out of that ridiculously expensive dress and shoes because I was too afraid I would ruin them somehow. Then I opened the wardrobe and carefully put away all of the expensive clothing items we bought that day. The entire time, I thought about how wearing those clothes would feel wrong.

After removing thick layers of makeup, I noticed my bruise in the mirror. It had subsided slightly, but it was still there. It was a reminder that the next time he decided to touch me, I shouldn't fight him. At least that night I felt a bit better because he'd said he had a late meeting. Still, it was difficult to fall asleep, because I was thinking about everything Helen told me during the lunch. The reasons why the Everett heirs married girls from Rosemont were simply bizarre. But then again, I wasn't surprised that none of them were willing to give up their wealth that easily.

It was getting late, and I started dozing off to sleep when I heard the door screech as someone opened it slowly. I knew it was him and I stilled my breathing when he closed the door with caution, as if he didn't want to wake me up. I kept my eyes shut because I expected him to turn on the lights, but he didn't. Instead, he walked to the bed in the dark and terror gripped me the moment I felt him stand above me. Pretending to sleep, I mentally prepared myself for his touch. To my

surprise, moments went by, but he didn't do anything, so I tried to relax and think about anything else than the danger that lurked from the darkness. A hand reached towards my face and lingered on my bruised cheek. I fought with everything in me to remain calm, but it wasn't easy, because apprehension got the best of me and I winced. The loud pounding of my heart warned me it was over because he knew I was awake. My body stiffened, waiting for the attack that never came. He exhaled loudly and left. When I opened my eyes, I wasn't sure if he had actually been there moments ago, or if it had been another scary nightmare. But I smelled the lingering residue of that cologne and I knew right away that the embodiment of my fear had really come to visit me.

Chapter Fourteen

I got up earlier than usual because I couldn't sleep. The consequences of insomnia were visible on my face and I tried to make myself look somewhat presentable. At least the choice of clothes wasn't so difficult anymore. I opted for a pair of black trousers combined with a white velour blouse, and hurried to the dining room because I was starving. I knew I risked an encounter with Sebastian that early in the morning, but I took my chances hoping he would work in the company that day.

The sight of the empty dining room meant I would have a good start of the day. Like a child, I was looking forward to savoring the delicious breakfast which would be a nice prelude to the beautiful morning I planned to spend in the garden. Teresa served my food in a bad mood as usual, but I decided I wouldn't let that upset me. Instead, I enjoyed my hot cup of coffee and pancakes that calmed the rumbling in my stomach. When I finished, I decided to clear the table and take the dishes back to the kitchen. Teresa came back when I was almost done with clearing up the table.

"Madam, what are you doing?" She looked at me wryly.

"I thought I could help." I smiled and headed towards the door, carrying a load of dishes on a tray.

However, she wouldn't let me pass. She was determined to take the tray from my hands, but I wouldn't give in.

"Madam, you don't need to do my job. From what I hear there are plenty of other marital duties you should be focusing on right now." She arched her eyebrows and produced a sly smile.

“What are you talking about?” I wasn’t stupid, but I couldn’t believe she would dare to say what she had just said.

“The news travels fast around here. And the walls in this house are very thin. I don’t think that carrying trays was what Mr. Everett had in mind when he told you to comply.” She narrowed her eyes and gloated as I handed her the tray.

I hurried outside in shock, drowning in the all too familiar sentiment of humiliation. I wasn’t paying attention to anything at that moment and I ended up bumping into Sebastian who was already at the door, and I bounced off his chest so hard he had to hold me by my elbows to keep me from falling. It almost felt like he was trying to be gentle but when he raised my chin and made me look up at him, there was anger written all over his face. Tears were forming in my eyes, but I didn’t allow myself to shed a single one in front of him and Teresa. As he scanned my face with intensity, I looked down again and he sighed in frustration, stepping away from me. The moment he let go of me, I quickly left the room and ran towards the garden.

The fact that Teresa had heard us that night wouldn’t leave me alone. I was completely embarrassed and I could only imagine what Sebastian would say to me later. I doubted he’d heard any of the things she had told me, but my reckless exodus would surely have to be discussed. While I was pruning the roses to ease my nervousness, I couldn’t see how I was ever supposed to go back to that house. It seemed that everybody knew what had happened that night. Anne must have known it as well, even though she acted like she didn’t realize where my bruise had come from. My misery got the best of me and I managed to cut myself on one of the many thorns—which meant I would have to return to that damned house.

On my way to the mansion, I was afraid of running into anyone. Fortunately, it was quiet and everyone was out of sight, so I managed to attend to my small injury without alarming anybody. As I walked towards my room, I heard voices. The closer I got to the guest room hall, the louder they became. I distinctively heard two women conversing. One of

them was crying and the other one tried to comfort her. At last, I discovered the source of the noise when I walked by the door that was slightly opened. I couldn't help my curiosity, so I leaned towards the door and listened in on their conversation.

"I hate her," said the girl who was crying and I recognized it was Teresa.

"Why are you so obsessed with that girl?" I heard Norma's voice.

"Because she has everything I want and she doesn't deserve any of it," Teresa was raging.

I wondered who they were talking about.

"Teresa, you are the one who messed up. Now you have to accept the consequences,"

"Accept the consequences? That redneck bitch doesn't even love him. Sebastian deserved so much better," she continued ranting.

The realization hit me—they were talking about me. Teresa thought I had everything she wanted? That meant that she was the one who wanted to marry Sebastian. What I heard next proved that I was right.

"Teresa, it's not up to you to judge."

"I could have given him everything. I love him and he would have loved me back. I just know that he would." There was so much bitterness in her voice.

"Teresa," Norma said compassionately.

"I had so much hope when I heard things didn't work out between him and Cora. He even started paying attention to me. You know, the kind of attention I longed for," Teresa said in a soft voice. "Then, she had to come in the picture and ruin everything. I will never understand why she was good enough and I wasn't." She wept.

I desperately wanted to hear the rest of their conversation, but the heavy steps on the marble floor echoed through the hall, so I continued walking to my room in a rapid pace. Once in my room, I reflected on what I had heard. I

realized I felt sorry for Teresa. Even though she had never treated me with kindness or showed me any sign of respect, I couldn't imagine how much she must have been suffering in silence. She obviously wasn't aware of the rule that Sebastian's bride had to come from Rosemont, so she didn't know that he could have never married her. I laughed bitterly when I remembered how she wondered why Sebastian thought I was better than her. That poor girl didn't know how much he despised me. She foolishly thought that coincidence—instead of a hundred-year-old will—had brought us together. Another thing she never realized was that men like Sebastian Everett never married women like us, that is, unless they were forced to do it. That fact was crystal clear to me.

In the light of recent events, I chose to stay in my room for the rest of the day and asked Anne to bring my dinner there as well. I was in a desperate need for a distraction from my harsh everydayness, so I stayed up late that night, giving myself the chance to read the novel that caused me to make a mess in the library and get in trouble with Sebastian. Sadly, I quickly realized that I didn't enjoy the book as much as I thought I would have. My belief in eternal love, as well as in happily ever after, was gone forever and I had become the very epitome of what I used to hate. Just as I was reading the part about the arrival of Countess Ellen Olenska, I heard a familiar muffled piano melody that spread across the hall. I recognized it the moment someone started playing, even though it was played in a much slower tempo. It was *Beethoven's Für Elise* and someone played it beautifully. I used to have a music box with a spinning ballerina and it would play that same melody. It was originally a thoughtful gift my mother got from my father, because her name was Elisa. Since she wasn't too happy about it, she agreed to give in to my pleading and let me have it instead. I cherished it as my most valued possession, until she got fed up with the melody and took it away from me.

I closed my book and followed the sound of the captivating music through the hallway. I felt stupid because I was walking through the house with my braided hair, wearing

nothing but the long, white satin nightgown and a book in my hands. My mother's voice was already ringing in my head, telling me to go back to my room because I would catch a cold. The feeling of excitement, like I was breaking some strict rule, motivated me to continue searching for the source of the fascinating melody. Once I approached the stairway, the music became a bit louder and I realized the sound was coming from the ground floor. Against my better judgment, I walked down the stairs and continued searching for the familiar melody that was calling me. As I was getting closer, I felt the emotion emerging from the piano strings, like its heavenly sound was meant only for me. Carefully and on my toes, I walked in the huge living space on the ground floor. Just as I entered, the player was playing the grandiose ending. Then he removed his fingers from the keys and confronted me with his gaze. I was prepared to meet any set of eyes except those ice cold green jewels. Desperation took hold of me when I realized whom I had willingly sought out. How could Sebastian, the man who didn't have one gentle bone in him, play that heartbreaking composition with so much emotion? It was beyond me.

"I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to interrupt you." I produced an apologetic look on my face.

He stood up and walked to the front of the piano. His white shirt had a few undone buttons and that was the first time I'd seen him without a tie. Usually, he was always suited up, whereas now he had an almost casual look. He raised the glass of wine that stood next to the bottle on the piano and took a sip.

"You didn't interrupt me. Come here," he demanded and I obeyed. "I would have offered you wine, but unfortunately I have only one glass."

"That's okay. I - I don't..."

"I remember. You don't drink alcohol." His voice was cold, distant, alarming.

The flashbacks of our wedding night kept creeping into my mind when he approached me. I noticed he moved his

hand and it made me cower because I thought he would hit me again. He had that dark smirk on his face, but he didn't touch me in any way. He just took the book I was holding in my hands.

“The Age of Innocence?” He seemed to be surprised.

I nodded in response, expecting him to make rude remarks about my choice of reading again, but he just placed the book on the piano without a single comment. At first, I thought I could handle his closeness, but very soon I started trembling. I wrapped my arms around my waist because I was cold, feeling completely exposed and threatened by him. His eyes studied me with intensity. Then he came one step closer, and I squeezed my arms around my body even tighter. He trailed off for a while like he was thinking about something that bothered him because he had that haunted look on his face. Then that haunted look turned into something darker.

“You look like one of the virginal heroines from your books. So vulnerable, innocent and untouched,” he whispered and my cheeks burned from embarrassment because we both knew I wasn't any of those things anymore, especially untouched.

“But you know what they say... All things truly wicked start from innocence,” he quoted one of my favorite authors.

“Hemingway,” I whispered to myself, wondering why he had said it.

“I'm impressed.” He had heard me.

“I didn't think I could impress you,” I said quietly and looked down.

I couldn't believe I had said that to him. My hysteria grew as he paid more attention to me. Then he came really close, but he still didn't touch me. He just gazed at me like he wanted to know what I was thinking. He folded his hands into a fist and I jerked when he moved closer.

“No,” he growled when I stepped away from him. “Don't. I'm not going to hit you.”

He looked at me with the look I knew all too well. I recognized it and swallowed a lump of genuine fear. *Please don't touch me. Please don't hurt me.* I started shaking uncontrollably. He wouldn't remove his eyes from my nightgown which moved in restless waves along my trembling body.

"I-I'm cold." I tried to justify my shaking.

I closed my eyes and made a silent promise that if I managed to leave the room unscathed, I would never follow the deceiving sound of that piano again. Every moment that passed by made the tension between us more unbearable. He took in my entire appearance from head to toe while I wondered what he intended to do to me. Adrenaline rushed through me as I felt his hand approach me. He was so close, his body radiating something I didn't understand. Then, just when he was about to touch me, he suddenly stopped and took a step back. His breath was heavy, his eyes marking me with ownership.

"Go to sleep, Isabelle." I gaped at him and for some reason was unable to move. "Go. To. Sleep." He repeated the words in a blunt command and I knew this was my last chance to escape, so I snapped out of my trance and hurried back to my room.

Chapter Fifteen

I had a lot of difficulty falling asleep that night. The melody of the piano still echoed in my mind and I was astonished that Sebastian had been the one playing it. Even though he'd deliberately intimidated me, I couldn't stop thinking about the fingers that pressed the piano keys. In the morning, I slept in because I was exhausted. Even after I woke up and noticed how late it was I waited before going downstairs to get something to eat, because I didn't want to meet him after what had happened. I had no such luck, because he was busy reading the newspaper when I entered the dining room. He didn't even glance at me, let alone greet me when I took my seat. His cold and distant demeanor was completely opposite from the way he'd treated me the night before. Now he was back to ignoring me and I didn't mind it, because his attention scared me. When Anne came to serve us breakfast, she didn't miss the surprised look on my face. In the short time I had been living in the mansion, Teresa was always the one who served my meals.

"Good morning, madam," she greeted me in a strange way.

I didn't understand why she didn't call me by my name like she always had. I wanted to correct her, but she shook her head to stop me. I was absolutely confused by her demeanor.

"Where is Teresa?" I asked curiously.

"Teresa doesn't work for us anymore," Sebastian informed me without taking his eyes off the newspaper.

"Why?"

He reluctantly put down the newspaper and looked up. His eyes were the strangest icy shade of green.

“I think you know why Isabelle. I thought you’d be pleased,” he said and returned to reading his article.

So Sebastian had heard her after all, and it had obviously meant something to him because he fired her. I remembered the conversation I’d overheard between Norma and Teresa and I felt bad. I thought she deserved some kind of punishment, but letting her go seemed too harsh.

“I don’t want her to get fired because of me.”

“It has nothing to do with you,” he replied harshly.

“But still, I feel bad...”

“Well, you shouldn’t. Don’t worry about her anymore. There is something else I want to discuss.”

“But isn’t there a way...”

“Drop it, Isabelle!” He dismissed me but I wasn’t ready to let it go.

“Please give Teresa her job back,” I said in a mild voice, trying to convince him one last time.

He started laughing and I could tell that it was anger, not humor hiding behind his laughter. I had managed to upset him. “You’re not the one pulling strings around here. If I decide to fire somebody, you don’t get to second guess me. And why would you stand up for somebody who treated you that bad in the first place?”

I stared at him for a while and then offered a simple answer to his question. “Because I believe that everyone deserves a second chance.”

Some kind of a strange tension started lurking in the air we shared. I looked up at him and the extent of meaning behind that simple sentence settled in my mind, forming the inevitable question. Had he, of all people, also deserved a second chance? And if he asked me for it would I, no, could I give it to him? It was a silly thought, because I couldn’t have imagined that he would ever ask for my forgiveness or admit that what he had done to me was wrong. But when my eyes met the green storm of his stare, I could have sworn that he

was thinking the same. It lasted for only a split second, because he snapped out it quickly, but it was there.

“Teresa will not work here again,” he said firmly and continued before I even got a chance to say something. “That’s the end of it. And you should choose your battles more carefully, unless you want me to turn your life into a living hell.”

Every word he said was emphasized by his threatening voice and I stilled at once. I felt the sting caused by what was his promise—not a threat, because I knew he meant every single word of it. Naively, I used to think my life already had been hell on earth, but suddenly I became aware of the fact that he could do much worse, so much worse to enhance my pain. Only moments ago, I had been starving, but now my appetite was lost and all I wanted to do was get away from him.

I stood up ready to leave when Anne appeared with my food. “I’m sorry Anne, but I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Sit down! We’re not done here.” Sebastian crumpled the newspaper and I jerked from the magnitude of his voice, obeying him instantly. “Put that tray on the table and leave us,” he commanded to Anne.

A few moments of anticipating silence went by as Anne served my breakfast. She looked at me with a glimpse of pity in her eyes and I silently begged her to stay, but I knew she had no choice in the matter.

“I’m really not hungry.” I tried to defend myself when Anne left us alone.

“I don’t care if you’re hungry or not,” he raised his voice. “I told you there is something I want to talk to you about.”

“What... what do you want to talk about?”

“The terms of our arrangement.” Sudden fear rushed through me when I heard him say that. “You do know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” he asked when he noticed I looked at him in confusion.

I knew what he was talking about, but I had no idea what was written in that document because Mother hadn't allowed me to read it. Nevertheless, I did sign it, so there was only one possible answer to his question.

“Yes.”

“Good, because given the nature of that contract, you should know that certain things between us are going to change,” he warned me.

“What things?” I asked in a small voice, fearing his answer.

There was only a slight trace of hesitation in his expression, but it was gone almost as soon as it had appeared. “I want us to start living as a married couple—in the full sense of the word.”

I was paralyzed. The moment I heard what he said, I wanted to react, but I was simply frozen, fighting the shock that reigned my system.

“I will be more specific. We will sleep in the same room.” He continued and then paused, watching as the color drained from my face. “As far as the... other things are concerned, I am willing to give you some time to get used to the idea, but you should know that I won't wait forever.”

A shiver driven by pure terror ran through my body and my throat was squeezed by an unsettling tension that ruled my mind. As I tried to catch my breath, the sudden realization filled with shame washed over me. I couldn't help but wonder if I had brought this upon myself.

“Why are you doing this? Is it... is it because of last night? I'm s-sorry. It won't happen again,” I mumbled my apology.

His hand twitched on the table and I knew he was upset by my question, but he managed to keep his cold expression intact as he answered me in a composed, emotionless voice.

“Isabelle, don't test my patience because you know very well why I'm doing this. We both know why you married me and I won't lie to you and say that I wasn't disgusted with

the things you were willing to accept to secure your position as my wife; but if you thought that you could seal the deal, and then play games, you were very wrong my dear, because I'm not some ignorant redneck hobo from your godforsaken town. I *will* make you abide by the contract you've signed."

My only response was silently gleaming from my eyes, sending a message of humiliation and agony. He exhaled, shaking his head at me. Then he stood up and swiftly left the room. After everything I had heard in the past few minutes, I remained frozen for a while, feeling utterly confused and wondering how I was going to save myself from this fresh hell he had planned. I kept thinking about that contract and suddenly I was obsessed with the need to study its contents. Something was in there, something that made him despise me and hurt me. The only way for me to find out was to read it. I knew that Sebastian's office was the only place where I could find that document, but I didn't feel even remotely brave enough to go and ask him about it. I had to come up with a way to get my hands on it, without him ever finding out.

As if God himself knew that I needed comfort at that moment of despair, I was greeted by Anne's warm face when I opened the door to my room. My relief was short-lived because although kindness as well as compassion emanated from her calming blue eyes, her demeanor towards me was still quite official. Something very unusual was going on. It had occurred to me that maybe she was upset because I got Teresa fired, but she had to have known that hadn't been my intention.

"Anne, please tell me what is happening. Are you angry with me?" I asked fearfully, because she was my only friend in that house and I didn't want to lose her.

Her face changed in a moment and I could see that she felt for me.

"No, madam. I could never be angry with you."

"Then why are you acting so strange and calling me madam?" I still didn't understand.

“Mr. Everett was upset with Teresa yesterday, because she offended you,” she started talking and I felt guilty again.

“I didn’t want her to get fired.”

“I know. You don’t need to feel guilty. It was her own fault. He was so furious that she was lucky firing her was all he did.” Her expression was very serious.

“Is this why your behavior towards me changed? Please don’t treat me any different than before. I will go crazy in this house if I lose your friendship,” I begged her.

“I have to be professional with you, especially in front of Mr. Everett. Those were his strict orders yesterday. We are not allowed to interfere in your private life.”

Bitterness took hold of me as I thought about the extent of that man’s cruelty. The episode with Teresa went perfectly to his advantage, because it enabled him to isolate me from anybody who could help me or protect me from him. But I wasn’t ready to lose Anne. She was the only thing keeping me sane in that house.

“Anne, I understand if you have to be cold and official when Sebastian’s around. But please, don’t let anything change between us when we’re alone. I need you,” I whispered and gave her a desperate, pleading look.

After observing me for a while, she nodded and gave me a hug that was both loving and protective at the same time. I dove into the security of her embrace and held onto her like I would never let go.

“You’re not alone,” she said in a soothing, tender voice.

The immense gratitude I felt towards that woman could not be put into words, but a broken whisper escaped my lips and I uttered the only two words that came to my tired mind. “Thank you.”

She smiled, nodded, and gazed at me compassionately. Then she returned to her chores and I walked towards the window and numbly gaped at the outside world. I thought about everything Sebastian had told me and nothing made

sense. I knew I had to get my hands on that contract, but I didn't know how. A surge of adrenaline rushed through me when I saw Sebastian's car drive away from the estate. This was my opportunity and I didn't want to waste it. I turned towards Anne, wondering if she would be willing to give me the key to his office. I remembered she had told me that Sebastian didn't want anyone going there when he wasn't home, but maybe I could make her understand and she would help me. She smiled at me again and the moment her honest, glaring blue eyes looked up at me, it was clear that she was loyal to Sebastian and that she wouldn't betray his wishes. I had to get her to indirectly tell me where I could find that key.

"Anne, I was wondering," I got her attention and then took a deep breath to weigh my following words, "if you could tell me where I could find keys to the rooms of the house if I need them."

"Oh, don't worry about that, dear. I will unlock it for you. And if I'm not available, there is always somebody around. Why do you want to know? Do you want to go somewhere now? I can help you right away," she said and took a bundle of keys out of her pocket.

I gasped in frustration at the sight of those keys. I had to get my hands on them. "No, I... I mean yes. I thought I could maybe go see a movie in the media room and it's locked. So, if you could just give me the keys..." I reached for them, but she wouldn't hand them over to me.

"It's okay. Come; let's unlock that door so you can have some fun," she offered happily.

It turned out that getting those keys would be a lot more difficult than I thought. "No," I said firmly and then softened my voice. "I don't want to bother you, you're busy. Maybe..."

"Oh, don't be silly. It's not a problem at all. Let's go."

She was already walking towards the door and I had no other choice but to follow her. When she unlocked the door to the cinema room I knew that I was stuck, because asking her for keys wouldn't make any sense anymore. After she

explained how the system works, she helped me choose a movie and I knew she would be walking out with those keys in a few moments, but I didn't know how to ask her about them without making her suspicious.

"Enjoy your movie, dear. I would like to join you, but unfortunately I have a lot of work to do." She started walking out and the feeling of genuine frustration streamed through me, but then she stopped and turned around. "There is only one thing." She frowned.

"Yes?" I tried to sound as calm as possible, but my mind screamed at her to give me the bundle she held in her hands.

"The door should be locked when you're done watching the movie and I have to go to the city in an hour."

The hope resurfaced in me and I tried to convince her to give me the keys without letting her know how much it meant to me. "Can I lock it and leave the keys with Norma?" I asked innocently.

Anne seemed to be thinking about my proposal for a while and I wanted to die from the pressure of anticipation. "Well, why not? I trust you. After all, you are the mistress of this house." A warm smile graced her lips as she handed me that bundle that held the truth of my destiny.

"Thank you, Anne."

"Just don't lose them." She winked at me.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure I don't," I said as I watched her leave and I felt a little guilty because I knew I was about to betray her trust.

I waited for about an hour, because I knew that Anne would be gone and then I set my plan into motion. I locked the media room and hurried towards Sebastian's office. My heart started pounding loudly as I approached the door. In a frenzy, I looked for the right key in the pile of many and my palms started sweating because I had tried almost every single one, but none of them would fit in that damn key hole. When I got

to the last key, I closed my eyes, praying for it to be the one. And to my surprise, it fit perfectly. In an ironic twist, I finally managed to unlock the door, but I froze as anxiety washed over me. Still, there was only one way to find out what was in that contract, so I gathered all my courage and entered his precious office, closing the massive door behind me.

The office was luxuriously decorated with tasteful dark brown colonial furniture and the first thing that struck me was the sheer perfectionism that ruled that entire space. Everything was symmetrical, stripped of any warmth and yet strikingly beautiful on the surface. It was the very reflection of Sebastian's character. Nervousness ruled my system because I was surrounded by his personal space and I struggled to stay focused on my goal. I quickly locked the door because I didn't want anyone barging in, and then I looked around, trying to figure out where he would keep the document that I was looking for. My eyes traveled around the room, scanning the shelves filled with different kinds of files, and I realized that I might as well be looking for a needle in a haystack. I almost decided to leave, when I noticed a pile of neatly folded documents that were just lying on the edge of the table. At that point I had nothing to lose, so I looked through that pile and that was when I found it. I'd finally found the prenuptial agreement that would hopefully shed some light of the truth into the darkness I was trapped in.

I started reading through the passages and the closer I got to the crushing truth, the more I felt like the ground beneath me trembled. Sudden shock took over me and I thought that what I had just read had to have been some kind of a sick joke. My knees went weak and just when I thought that things couldn't get any worse, I heard the door unlocking. Before I knew what hit me, Sebastian stormed inside and I nearly screamed when he looked at me in instant fury. He didn't say anything because he was in the middle of a conversation. That cell phone in his hands was my lifeline. When he told the person on the phone that he would call them later, that lifeline was cut and I was on my own, face to face with my executioner.

He focused all his attention on me and I could see every muscle in his body tensing.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” His voice was frighteningly calm.

I wasn’t about to wait for him to hurt me, so I ran towards the door, still holding that document in my hands. He stood in front of the door, blocking my way out and shaking his head at me.

“No, no, no... You’re not going anywhere.” He took the contract from me in one swift move.

“W-what is this?” I asked in disbelief before he got a chance to scowl at me.

“You know what this is. Your signature is on it.”

He turned the page I read only moments ago towards me and I lowered my eyes to the place on the paper where my signature was placed.

“I d-didn’t know.” My voice was quavering.

He looked at me with a quizzical look on his face. “You must think I’m a fool if you expect me to believe that.”

“I... I had to sign.”

“Had to?” He waited for my reply shortly, but then cut me off when I tried to say something. “It doesn’t matter. When you signed it, you confirmed that you knew what is expected of you. You have agreed to provide me with a son, whose birth would mean an immediate termination of our marriage.” Hearing him say out loud what I had just read was like a dagger being pushed into my heart.

“Y-You don’t expect me to actually go through with that?”

I was in absolute shock. The thought of having a baby with Sebastian had never occurred to me. I knew it was stupid, because I went through all of the examinations, but after our wedding night, I couldn’t have imagined having a child with that man. The mere thought of him touching me terrified the life out of me.

“Of course I do, *baby girl*. Those are the terms of the agreement. The only way out of this marriage is that you provide me with a son and I want out of this marriage, badly!”

His words and the tone of his voice summoned an unwanted memory right back into my mind. ‘*This is what you signed up for, baby girl.*’ I shook myself to make the terrorizing remembrance go away.

“I’m not your baby girl!” I spat out venomously, fighting the threat of having a complete mental breakdown.

As if I’d told him the funniest joke ever, he laughed and savored my discomfort before spitting out his own dose of venom, which was about a million times stronger than mine.

“This marriage...” I started, but didn’t get a chance to finish.

“This marriage was never meant to last. It was only a way for me to get a legitimate heir.” He paused and observed me while I was fighting to breathe. “Actually, it wasn’t my choice of doing things, but my family together with you and your mother didn’t seem to mind, so it’s too late to play the victim now.” He simply laid out the situation, without any sign of compassion.

The whole world came crashing down on me. He had mentioned my mother. Had she known about this all along? Was she aware that he would divorce me the moment I gave him a son? She had done some horrible things in her time, but I couldn’t believe she would actually trick me into this. As desperation, mixed with suspicion and insecurity rushed through me, I felt like I was about to pass out.

“No, no...” I closed my eyes and repeated in a frantic mantra. “I didn’t know. I can’t do this.” I looked at him desperately, pleading for reason to prevail.

“It is too late to reverse things. Even though you claim you didn’t know about the real nature of this marriage, you still married me for reasons that were everything but honorable. Please, correct me if I’m wrong.” He cornered me with the undeniable truth.

I was so humiliated and helpless. Panic raised in my blood as the uncertainty of my future crashed down on me.

“But why... Why would you want to have a baby with me? You don't love me! You can't stand me,” I cried out.

“This has nothing to do with love. I never let my feelings interfere with business,” he spoke in a harsh tone.

I stood there numbly, wondering how he can be so cold to think that having a baby was the same as closing some kind of a business deal. The fact that he wasn't even remotely touched by my apparent distress only proved that his heart was made of stone.

“I hate you,” I said quietly.

“Luckily for me, I don't give a fuck about that.”

“Well you should. Because hell will freeze over before I let you touch me and make me pregnant with your child.”

When I saw the look on his face, I immediately regretted what I said but it was too late to take it back. He started approaching me and I was scared out of my mind, but I didn't dare to move. Before I knew it, he was standing behind me. His hands landed on my shoulders and he roughly pushed me on the desk. Then he lowered his torso on my back and lingered over my hair only to make me more nervous by delaying the torture. I hated how much he enjoyed scaring me. Instinctively, I tried to free myself from his grip, but he warned me to stay still. When I attempted to get away from him one more time, he tightened his hold on me, making it difficult to breathe. When he parted his lips, I felt his breath on my neck and I choked from fear.

In a light touch, he brushed his knuckles against my bruised cheek and it made me shiver. “Do I need to remind you what happens when you push me over the edge?”

“N-No. Let go of me.” I was losing my breath.

“Don't mistake my kindness for weakness. Just because I said that I would give you time doesn't mean I can't change my mind.”

I winced when his hand started traveling from my shoulder down to my collarbone. His lips brushed against my ear and I yelped when the scent of his cologne traveled to me. “Mark my words. Keep playing with my patience and hell may freeze over a lot sooner than you think.” His hot whisper burned my skin and I started panting for air when his hand traveled even lower.

I burned from the embarrassment and complete panic took hold of me when I felt his erection through the fabric of our clothes. I closed my eyes, waiting for his next move, and I tensed up when one last pleading whisper left my body. “P-Please don’t hurt me.”

He exhaled and I felt a light breeze grazing my skin. I was hoping like hell that he was considering my plea. It felt like something exploded within him and he got off of me abruptly. I was still taken aback by his attack, but I didn’t waste any time and instantly moved as far away from him as I could. His dark eyes were boring into me and I felt attacked by his unnerving stare. In a pathetic attempt to protect myself, I crossed my arms over my chest and my hands gripped my heaving shoulders. Struck by everything I had found out, I was fighting the threat of an anxiety attack. He still carried that lustful expression on his face as he took one step towards me and I stumbled back, flinching away in panic. His face wore a mask of heavy frustration and I could have sworn that he was trying to keep his demons at bay.

“Get the fuck out!” he yelled and looked at me with disgust displayed all over his face as I tried to stumble out as fast as I could.

Once I was out of his office, I thought I was going to throw up. As bitterness consumed my mind, I remembered how my mother had tricked me into marrying him by saying I was his first choice. She talked about a lifetime of happiness that awaited me, but I was only meant to be used as a whore who would provide him with a son and would be tossed aside like a broken toy nobody wanted to play with anymore. Everybody got something out of the deal. Sebastian would get a son, the Everett family would get an heir and my mother

would get her money. I, on the other hand, would get absolutely nothing. Except a ruined life. I had to think of something, and I had to do it fast because I couldn't let him make me pregnant with his child. The last thing I needed was the final proof of his detest and hatred growing inside me.

Chapter Sixteen

“What do you mean he went on a business trip?” I asked Anne in confusion when she served my breakfast the next day.

“Didn’t he tell you? He will be gone the entire weekend. He’s coming home on Monday morning.” She was surprised.

“No, he didn’t tell me. I guess he forgot,” My voice was dripping with sarcasm.

I was furious. He didn’t have enough courtesy to inform me that he would be gone for the weekend. I bet he savored the fact that I was panicking about that contract and his intentions to sleep with me, while he was miles away. Even after everything that he had put me through, it was still unbelievable that he enjoyed torturing me that much. I was done eating. I needed some time alone with my thoughts. I needed out, so I rushed into the garden while Anne looked at me with a puzzled look on her face. I was grateful she didn’t ask me anything about the keys because I sure as hell couldn’t handle that too at the time. Maybe, if I was lucky enough, Sebastian wouldn’t ask any questions about how I’d ended up locking myself in his office, but the chances of that were very slim.

During the weekend, I had a lot of time to reflect on everything, and torture myself in the process. Although I should have felt at ease because I knew Sebastian was away, I couldn’t stop thinking about that damned contract and his cruel expectations. Deep down, I hoped he would prolong his trip and even worse, I found myself wishing he had an accident so that he could never come home again. I felt like I was the worst person in the world for thinking about that, but I

couldn't help it, because I felt good when he wasn't around. Still, even though he wasn't near, the memory of his cruelty never left me, and I would wake up in sweat and fear every night, anticipating the day when he would come back. The time of tranquility went by too quickly, and before I could get used to it, it was Sunday evening.

No matter how hard I tried to focus, sleep wouldn't come that night. I'd enjoyed the last few days without him so much and I knew that he would be back the next day which meant that the shackles that restrained me would return as well. When I managed to drowse and fall into a deeper sleep, the tension trapped inside me worked its way out and it resulted in another scary nightmare. I woke up yelping, trying to breathe in as much air as possible. My throat was dry and raspy from the suffocating in my dream and I couldn't utter as much as a single sound. I tried to ignore the thirst, but I desperately needed to drink something. Having learned from the night when I followed the sound of Sebastian's piano, I knew walking through the house in my nightwear wasn't a good idea, but at least I was sure that he was away, and that was the only danger that could faze me. I put on a silk robe over my nightgown and tried to find my way through the dark hallways of the mansion. When I turned off the light in the kitchen and closed the refrigerator, all of the noise subsided and, eventually I heard quiet voices, emerging from the darkness that surrounded me. At first, I thought my mind played tricks on me, because apart from Anne, Norma and me, there was nobody else in the house. Standing in the hallway, I was scared to move forward because the noises wouldn't disappear. With my heart pumping out of my chest, I slowly moved through the hallway, expecting to be attacked by something. As I tiptoed towards the room, I noticed a dim light, coming from the patio, so I decided to check who was there. The voices I heard while approaching the patio were those of a man and a woman. They were so quiet, loving and gentle. I wondered if Norma had snuck somebody into the house and shortly laughed at the idea. When I leaned against the opened door and peeked inside, I froze because I witnessed something I hadn't expected.

A young woman was sitting on the sofa with her head leaned against Sebastian's chest. My heart sank as I watched him hold her in his arms. He was so tender, stroking her hair and caressing her face. Then he laid a gentle kiss on her forehead while whispering softly to her.

"Don't ever forget how much I care. I will always be there for you." He treated her with such delicacy, like she was made of glass.

"I know, Sebastian." She looked up at him and answered quietly.

The grief and pain I felt at that moment surpassed the voice of reason warning me that I should get away from there. Memories of his cruelty towards me emerged from the box I so badly wanted to keep locked in the back of my mind. I watched as the man who mercilessly broke me, the man who'd caused me so much pain and brought immense shame upon me, was being so extremely tentative to that other woman sitting next to him. Somehow, it would have been much easier to think he was a monster who had hurt me because he liked hurting people. The heartbreaking truth that I was the only woman he despised and wanted to hurt was too much for me to bear. My thoughts were consumed by his mocking explanation that our marriage wasn't about love and affection. Hearts and flowers were obviously reserved for the woman in his arms and I could get the rest of him—the worst of him. As I watched him lean over to her, I remembered how I was waiting for him to kiss me on our wedding night. But instead of kissing me, he had shamed me and ordered me to take off my dress so that he could fuck me. I let out shallow breaths, wondering what he would say to her, but he never uttered a word. He just lowered his lips on hers and kissed her lovingly. Without realizing, I moved a few steps forward and I was standing in the room as he kissed her, but both of them were so focused on each other, that they didn't notice me.

"You mean so much to me." He pulled her even closer and whispered in her ear quietly, but loud enough for me to hear.

As a consequence of everything I'd seen, I knew I had to get out of there immediately if I didn't want to start hyperventilating. But, of course, I had to be humiliated again. I turned around in an attempt to run, and crushed the lamp that stood on the commode next to me. Sebastian's eyes instantly turned to me and I noticed his shocked gaze before I started running as far away from that patio as I could.

I didn't think about my own safety, I just didn't want him to find me. His revenge for ruining his loving encounter with that woman would surely be awful, so I couldn't go back to my room. Neglecting the fact that I was barefoot, I went straight towards the front door and ran into the garden. I was running so fast, feeling the cold ground, grass and stones on my bare feet. Without catching my breath, I ran until I reached the secluded garden with the swing chair and the beautiful roses. Then I stopped, sat on the chair, hugged my knees and rested my head on them. I began reliving everything that had happened to me—my mother's threats, Dianne's comments, Sebastian's humiliations before our wedding, the night when he brutalized me, my nightmares, his constant intimidations, the stupid agreement I signed without thinking and that last thing I'd seen him do—managed to come together into a ball of firing steel that crushed me with its overwhelming weight. Tears evoked by the ache of my broken heart started streaming down my face. I cried for the girl who didn't seem to deserve to be loved by anyone. I cried for the girl who was betrayed by her own mother. I cried for the girl who was trapped in a loveless marriage with a man who only wanted to see her suffer. I cried for the girl who had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. I cried for the girl who merely existed while she was dead inside. I clenched my fists so hard that my nails dug into my skin, but the desolation I felt wouldn't recede.

“Isabelle.” Terror gripped me when I heard his deep voice.

How on earth did he find me? Wasn't there a single place where I could hide from him? I wondered about the girl he had kissed. *Why would he leave her to go after me?* He knelt to my level, waiting for me to acknowledge him. I didn't want him to see how lame and miserable I was, so I swore to

myself that I wouldn't lift up my head until I managed to make the tears go away. I felt the cold wind lifting my light hair and I focused on the sounds of the restless summer night.

"Look at me!" the warning he uttered was all too familiar.

After scarcely putting myself together, I finally faced him. He looked tired, pale and his green eyes were showing how upset he was, but there was also another wild emotion glaring from his eyes and it was impossible to read his thoughts.

"You've created a habit of sneaking around the house in the middle of the night, haven't you?"

"You weren't supposed to be home," I answered indifferently.

"Get back into the house, you'll catch a cold out here," he practically ordered me, but I had no intention to obey him.

The fact that he pretended that my well-being suddenly meant something to him, would have been ridiculous had it not been tragic. Moments went by and I could tell his patience was growing thin. I didn't care. For the first time in my life I cared about myself more than others. I was sick and tired of being everybody's doormat.

"I want a divorce." The words spilled out of me like I had no control over them.

I surprised myself because I hadn't planned on asking for a divorce, but I was glad I did. I didn't care if I ended up being homeless on the street as long as I was away from him. But although I looked at him with sheer sincerity, he didn't take me seriously. He laughed and shook his head, which was a clear sign that he was mocking my request.

"Oh, do you now?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Yes. I don't want to be married to you anymore! And I don't care about the stupid agreement," I said fiercely, feeling proud of myself because I had finally stood up to him.

He looked at me like I meant nothing to him, cursing me with the green windows of his dark soul.

“I’ve already told you that playing games won’t get you anywhere. You know as well as I do that there will be no divorce until the terms of that *stupid* agreement are fulfilled, and that day seems to be a long way off,” he said without a trace of compassion in his voice.

“I’m not playing games! I’m telling you that I don’t want this. I have never wanted this. Please, let me go. I don’t want to have a child with you,” I begged him.

“But you wanted to marry me, didn’t you? You know what motivated you to say *I do* in that church and it was you who said it, nobody else, Isabelle. And you knew very well what your duties as my wife would be, with or without that clause in the agreement!” He stood his ground.

“What do you want me to say? I was a coward. I was scared,” I tried to admit bravely as I was reasoning with him. “Please, I want to make things right.” I looked up at his eyes before uttering my plea in all sincerity. “Give me a divorce,” I whispered through chattering teeth because I was freezing.

“Too little, too late, Isabelle,” he dismissed me.

I didn’t understand. He obviously had someone whom he loved and who loved him back. He had shown me time and again that he hated me with so much passion that would drive many stronger people insane, and yet he wanted to have a child with me. I was aware about the Rosemont rule, but there were other girls in Rosemont he could marry. There were many other ones that would suit him much better than me.

“Why would you want a child with me? What about your lover? Why... Why doesn’t she provide you with an heir?” I raised the obvious question.

“Cora cannot have children and she isn’t my lover. She’s just a friend,” he stated.

So that woman whom he was treating with so much warmth and attention was Cora, his former betrothed, the woman he cared about so much.

“You kissed her.” I wouldn’t let him fool me. I might have been naive, but I wasn’t stupid and I was sure of one thing. “Friends don’t kiss like that.”

“My, my... Are you jealous?” His voice was strange. *Almost... playful?*

Whatever was on his mind, this wasn’t the Sebastian I knew. Maybe I was jealous when I saw him being so gentle with her. It made me reflect on his behavior towards me and it had only deepened my wounds. *Maybe I was losing my mind.*

“I’m not jealous. I just don’t think there is a reason for us to stay married, especially after what happened tonight.”

“I beg to differ. Our arrangement has nothing to do with what happened tonight.” He was dead serious, traces of humor from moments ago completely gone.

“I promise I won’t ask for anything,” I stressed the words. “Think about it, let’s get a divorce and I will just leave. You will never have to see me again. I will find a job and take care of myself, I swear.”

I thought that would make him feel different. For a while, he just glared at me like he didn’t believe what I had just said. The wind started blowing harder and it looked like it might start raining any given second.

“You bear the last name Everett. Nobody will employ you knowing whose wife you are.” He dismissed my proposition.

“But, I wouldn’t be your wife anymore. I wouldn’t have your last name.” I was desperate.

“Spare yourself the trouble, Isabelle,” he said flatly.

“Please, I have suffered enough. I’m begging you...” I broke down, whispering the words.

Again, there was no answer, just the annoying silence. He deliberately tried to make me wait. The longer I waited, the more I hoped he would agree with me. The first raindrops were already mixing with the light wind, finding their way to

my freezing body and I knew the time was ticking away. He sighed, and my heart started pounding in anticipation.

“Isabelle, I cannot let you go,” he said with what looked like an expression of remorse on his face, but it quickly disappeared as he regained his composure.

“And I...I cannot give you a son.” I returned my head to my knees feeling helpless, not caring that it was raining and that I was getting wet.

“You should have thought about that sooner. There will be no more talk of the divorce. Not until you fulfill your duty. It’s raining. We’re going back into the house.” His voice was determined and scary.

When he mentioned I needed to fulfill my duty, I knew exactly what he meant and all of the sudden, I wasn’t that brave anymore. I knew that the real drama would start the moment we entered the house and I panicked.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” I asserted firmly but inside I was scared.

“Get up. I’m not asking you. I’m telling you.” His voice was relentless.

“No.” I was determined. “I’m not going. You... you’ll hurt me.”

“Isabelle, I swear to God, if you don’t start walking right now, I will carry you into the house and then I’ll fuck you into obedience. The choice is yours entirely!” he threatened in a low, steady voice.

I lowered my head, quivering from the coldness of the rainy summer night as well as the coldness of his heart. He stood up and I cringed because his threats rang in my head. His arms were already reaching towards me in fury when I got up and started running. He ran after me, but I was incredibly fast, even though I had no idea where I was going. I just wanted to get away. Away from my mother, from him, from that house and especially from that contract that was binding me to do something awful. I was completely wet and my feet were cold and muddy, but I didn’t care about any of that. The

only thing I focused on was extending the distance between us. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep up with the fast running pace and pay attention to the slick ground I was stepping on, so I slipped and fell on the cold, muddy ground. My white nightgown was damp and covered in dirt. I tried to get back on my feet, but he caught up with me before I could recover. He was soaking wet, with beads of water dripping from his face and hair. His breathing was harsh and his nostrils were flaring, showing me how enraged he was. Then he noticed I wasn't wearing any shoes.

“You're barefoot?” he yelled at me in disbelief.

I didn't have any time to reply or fight him when he cursed and lifted me in his arms.

“Don't. Put me down.” I was alarmed and I tried to get away but he tightened his grip around me.

“Shut up and stop squirming if you don't want me to drop you. You have your own stupidity to thank for this!”

Being trapped in his arms made me desperately afraid. My body shook against his chest while my head rested on his shoulder. It was raining heavily and the ground was soaked with water, just as we were, but he carried me without any difficulty, like I was light as a feather. When we entered the house, I saw it was dark in the patio, which meant that Cora had already left. I expected him to put me down, but he walked towards the stairway and I tensed up when I became aware that he was taking me to the master bedroom. Desperation took hold of me when he opened the door of his room and I remembered the threat he made in the garden.

Chapter Seventeen

I winced when he lowered me to the floor. We were soaking wet, standing only inches away from each other. I squeezed my hands around my wet nightgown because now it was see-through and glued to my naked skin. Not taking my guard off, I was alerted about every move he made. At first, he was just watching me in a strange way, like he never had before and then, to my absolute dread, he started removing his clothes. As he took off his tie and his shirt, I couldn't hide the traces of horror on my face. Terrifying thoughts consumed my mind and I was at the verge of crying. *He was going to hurt me. I made him angry and now he was going to make good on his threat.* I cringed when I heard him remove his belt and the scary flashbacks were interchanging before my eyes.

“W-What are you doing?” I didn't dare to look at him.

“What does it look like I'm doing?” He cocked his head, waiting for my reply.

“P-Please d-don...” If he didn't stop me, I would have started hyperventilating.

“I'm taking off my wet clothes. You should do the same unless you want to catch a cold,” he said nonchalantly and I tightened the grip of my hands around myself.

He sighed when he noticed how deeply my need for self-preservation went. In a matter of seconds, he approached me, grabbed my wrists and gazed at my dirty nightgown. He smirked when he noticed my deep blush caused by his intimidating attention.

“Take it off. It doesn't leave anything to imagination anyway,” he said slowly and I shuddered while his eyes continued roaming the length of my body.

After staring at me for several long moments, he disappeared into the huge walk-in closet and returned with a navy blue T-shirt in his hands. Handing me the shirt, he told me once again to take off my nightgown and put the shirt on, because he didn't want me to get sick. I was in a state of a mental frenzy, afraid that he would make me undress in front of him. Fortunately, instead of waiting for me to do as I was told, he disappeared into the bathroom. I heard him run the shower which gave me time to take off my dirty nightgown, dry my wet body and change into his shirt. It covered almost every single inch of my upper body, leaving my legs completely bare. Sebastian gaped at me in surprise when he came back into the room, wearing nothing but his briefs. His eyes were fixed on my legs and they were filled with the dangerous expression of lust, like he wanted to eat me for dinner. Standing so close to his muscled, exposed body alarmed me, so I decided to disappear into the bathroom before he could confront me with one of his cruel comments. Taking a shower was something I desperately wanted to do, but I was too scared that he would barge into the bathroom at any given moment because, of course, I couldn't lock the door. Since I was afraid to take my clothes off and take a shower, I decided to only wash my face and my dirty feet. The fear of going back to that room wouldn't leave my mind, but I was exhausted and tired of running.

When I opened the door, I saw him lying on the bed. His eyes were closed, his breathing steady, so I assumed he was sleeping. His threat that we would share the bed like a real married couple rang in my mind. He hadn't explicitly told me that I needed to sleep in the master bedroom, but what other reason could he have for bringing me there? It had occurred to me that I could sneak out and sleep in my own room. I waited for a few minutes to make sure he was sound asleep and then I made a move towards the door.

“Don't even think about it. Get in the bed.” I barely managed to make a few steps when I heard his low voice. “You don't want to piss me off, Isabelle!” he threatened and pulled the blanket on my side of the bed after I didn't obey him the first time.

I had no other choice but to crawl into the bed beside him. I tried to make myself as small as possible, not wanting to touch him in any way. When I was finally under the blankets, I moved all the way to the edge of the mattress, holding on to the side of the bed to stop myself from falling off. I heard him sigh and laugh mockingly. He must have thought I was being ridiculous. I was grateful when he turned out the light, leaving us in dark.

In the darkness, I was overwhelmed by the familiar scent that dominated the room. The bed, the sheets, the pillow, the shirt he'd made me wear—everything reeked of him. It was the scent that evoked the twisting pain in my very core. Terror gripped me when I noticed he was still almost naked, wearing nothing but his briefs. I was completely rigid, afraid to move or breathe. He was inches away from me and I expected to be attacked at any moment. Violent shivers emerged from the depths of my frightened body, making the entire mattress shake. I waited for him to touch me. I waited for him to hurt me. I didn't want to draw his attention, but I simply couldn't calm down.

“Stop shaking like a goddamned leaf and go to sleep already, or I'll give you a real reason to be afraid.” His voice startled me from the dark.

I knew I had to regain my composure, but it was easier said than done and his threat had only made it worse. The bitter memories emerged to the surface and I wondered how much longer I could survive without getting a break from the constant fear and worry that was eating me alive. As I felt the light tears falling down my cheeks, I bit my lip because I didn't want to make a sound. I was so angry with myself for crying and for being weak, but tears were the only defense mechanism I had; the only thing that helped me to cope with the pain. Even though I fought to keep my breathing steady, after a while I had to draw in a shaky breath because I was starting to feel lightheaded. The very moment he heard it, the light on the nightstand went on and before I knew it, he was staring at my tear-stained face. I wanted to close my eyes and look away, but I was trapped under the power of his scrutinizing gaze. It seemed as though he was staring at me for

an eternity and the longer his eyes lingered on my face, the worse my state of mind was getting.

“I have no intention to fuck you, if that’s what has you so worried,” he whispered in a low voice like he wanted me to believe him, but those words definitely weren’t enough to reassure me.

He was noticeably annoyed when my tears kept flowing even after what he had told me. A sob escaped my throat and when he sighed I knew I had only made him more upset. He cupped my face and got closer to me. I was shivering as his sharp breath grazed the damp skin on my face and those green eyes that were usually stripped of any emotion looked at me with intensity. “Stop. Crying. I said I would give you time, so calm down and go to sleep,” he said in a firm voice, then swiftly moved away from me and turned out the light.

It took all of my self-control to still my body and stop crying, but my emotional dread remained very real. I closed my eyes and tried to still myself, but to no avail. Thinking and dreaming about it had been scary, but lying so close within his reach was a whole new level of horror. I tried to fall asleep, but it was an impossible mission. The hurricane of unsettling thoughts kept assaulting my mind and torturing my soul. I didn’t know how long I had stayed awake, but eventually the worry that he would touch me was so strong, it drained all of my energy and my eyes were closing against my will. At last, I fell asleep.

I could feel him coming closer, and I knew I shouldn’t have let my guard down. He pulled me towards him, holding me tight within his strong grip. Convulsing in his arms, I took deep breaths and tried to set myself free. He touched me possessively, whispering horrifying things to me.

“Spread your legs and let me fuck you already,” he repeated the phrase that was engraved in my mind.

I closed my eyes and I was so scared of having sex with him again, because I knew it would hurt. His hands strongly gripped my waist so he could turn me on my belly and settle

his weight on top of me. The air I tried to breathe in so badly was gone and I started panicking.

“Isabelle! Isabelle!” I heard his voice calling me, but it didn’t make any sense, because he was the one crushing me with his weight.

After moments of trying, I managed to take in a chunk of air and I opened my eyes, only to see Sebastian shaking me and calling my name. I was flabbergasted because the face from my nightmare came back to haunt me in real life. Still fearing his attack from the dream, I raised my hands to defend myself when he reached towards my face, convinced he wanted to strike me.

“Don’t, Se-ba-stian,” I muttered in shock, panting for air and I started whimpering from despair.

“Jesus Christ... Isabelle.” He closed his eyes as he intensified his grip on my shoulder and tried to pull me towards him, but I jerked and flinched away from him.

His eyes snapped open and confronted me with their unnerving stare that scared the life out of me.

“P-please,” I whispered through the choking lump of fear.

Slowly, he removed his hands from my shoulders and stared at me, his face aghast.

Shame washed over me because I became aware that he knew what I had dreamt about. He knew what he had done to me and it made me feel dirty. I was scared of him, but also immensely disgusted with myself. He moved to the edge of the bed and looked at me with transparent intent, like he was dying to ask me something. Seeing him almost naked, sitting only inches away from me was entirely too much. Being within his reach made me feel vulnerable and I sensed that I had to get away from him if I didn’t want to endure another panic attack. I got on my shaky legs and started moving towards the bathroom. He didn’t stop me like I expected he would, he just remained sitting on the bed without making a single sound. I dragged myself to the bathtub, turned on the

water and let his shirt slip from my body. The need to wash myself was stronger than fear. I entered the cleansing paradise for my body and soul and, after a particular recollection came back to me, I broke down, fearing that I would witness the blood going down the drain again. I hugged my knees and started crying without making a sound. *Why did he have to hurt me so badly that I could never heal again?*

For a long time, I stayed in that bathtub, curved into a ball of misery and torturing my mind with everything that terrified me. I snapped back from my thoughts when I heard him open the door and enter the bathroom. *The devil had come to collect his due.* He approached me with a big towel in his hands and knelt to my level. I wouldn't look at him. I couldn't let him humiliate me again. The darkness lurking around him scared me to death and I knew he was intent on doing something to me. He tried to touch me but I winced every time he wanted to come closer.

“Get up, you cannot stay in that bathtub forever,” he said in his usual cold voice, but strangely, he was calm.

My body was trembling, afraid of the consequences if I didn't listen to him, but my mind was set on disobeying him.

“The water is getting cold and I'm not leaving until you get out.” He repeated his request, only this time his voice was different; silent and patient.

Betraying myself again, I started getting out of the tub, shivering from coldness and clenching my arms around my naked body. He got up as well, and although his voice sounded calm moments ago, his eyes were still filled with darkness that terrified me.

“I'm s-scared of you. Please don't h-hurt me.”

I was completely sincere, standing bare in front of him; literary and figuratively. He made me meet his gaze and I looked at him with the eyes of a frightened doe that was about to be slaughtered. Suddenly, his darkness subsided and transformed into something else entirely. Something I had never seen. He didn't say anything. With relentless persistence glowing from his eyes, he simply ran his thumb over my

trembling lip and kept staring at me. Then, he wiped away one of my fresh tears with that same thumb, never breaking the gaze between us. Still fearing his attack, I allowed myself to breathe only shallow breaths. We remained frozen like that for a few moments until he tried to remove my arms from my body so he could wrap the towel around me. I flinched and tried to sit back into the bathtub, but he held me by the elbows to stop me.

He brushed his thumb over my lips again and he was staring at them almost as if they fascinated him. Still holding my right elbow, he pulled me closer to him and the paralyzing fear crept up my bones. I expected him to humiliate me by saying something hateful. I braced myself for his harshness but his voice came out in a whisper that was almost soothing. “Relax. Don’t be afraid.”

Taken aback by his words and fighting my panic in the process, I allowed him to do what he wanted. My entire face reddened with shame as I removed my arms, leaving my body exposed for his gaze. To my complete astonishment, he wrapped the towel around me without taking his eyes off mine, so he didn’t even glance at my nakedness. That was the first time he had shown me a glimpse of compassion and I didn’t know whether I could trust it. Then he tried to lift me in his arms and I instinctively attempted to get away from his grip. Breathing like a wounded dove, I felt cornered when he approached me. His demeanor confused me because there was nothing angry or threatening about it, and he radiated some kind of unknown calmness which terrified me even more than his rage. That was why I cowered away and pushed myself against the wall the moment he tried to touch me again. I couldn’t stop quivering and clenching onto the towel, which was my only source of protection at that moment. I was governed by the absolute terror as he laid his hands on my shoulders and leaned closer to me.

“Shh,” there was that light voice again, “don’t fear me. I won’t.” His green eyes gleamed at me. “I won’t hurt you. I promise.” His words disarmed me and I collapsed into his arms, letting him lift me up gently and the last thing I

remember before blackness appeared before my eyes was wondering where he was taking me.

Chapter Eighteen

I opened my eyes, not sure where I was or what had happened. My eyelids closed at once because I was blinded by the golden sunlight that filled the room. My face was burning and I had a thumping headache. I felt the pressure on my lungs which extended every time I would take a breath. After being conscious for a short time, I couldn't fight the exhaustion anymore and I drifted back to sleep.

I didn't know how long I had slept, but the next thing I remember is hearing voices around me. Somebody removed a lock of hair which was glued to my sweaty face and rested a cold palm against my hot forehead.

"She is burning up. Maybe I should call a doctor." I recognized Sebastian's gruff voice and I was sure I was hallucinating.

"We need to cool her down. I'll give her a Tylenol to reduce the fever." I heard Anne and I wanted to tell her I'm awake, but my eyes were too heavy to open them.

As I drifted in and out of consciousness, I kept hearing voices and movements around me. A wet towel absorbed the warmth from my brow and Anne asked me to open my mouth so I could take the pill which would help me. I don't remember if I did as she told me, because everything went black again.

I woke up to the sound of the dripping water. Somebody removed the wet, hot towel from my forehead and soon I felt the coolness of the cloth against my skin again. Eventually, I managed to open my tired eyes for only a moment, and I was surprised to see Sebastian sitting on the bed, staring at me. I noticed that I was wearing a nightgown and I had no recollection of putting it on. The last thing I

remembered was being carried in Sebastian's arms with nothing but a towel wrapped around my naked body. *Why couldn't I remember anything?* My mind was playing tricks on me, I was sure of it. I wanted to open my eyes, but instead I fell asleep again.

When I regained consciousness, everything around me was dark and I heard somebody breathing next to me. I smelled that cologne, the scent that frightened me, but I was too weak to worry about it. I heard myself moan because I couldn't handle the throbbing pain in my head. The blankets moved and it startled me, so I was completely awake when the light filled the room and those emerald eyes confronted me with their gaze. My initial reaction to seeing him, half naked and terrifyingly close to me, could only be described as a genuine consternation which caused me to flinch and move away directly. After that, I remained still because I knew that even if I managed to get out of the bed, I wouldn't have gotten very far, considering how poorly I was feeling. Sebastian rolled his eyes and sighed, a clear sign of irritation. He reached for me and pulled me closer to the center of the bed, because I was hanging onto the edge, like it was my only salvation. The moment I felt his arms around me, every hair at the back of my neck stood up and I shuddered. He loosened his grip, but he still wouldn't let go of me. I tried to get away when he pressed his palm against my forehead, but he held me tightly, making it impossible for me to run. My weary heart beat loudly while I struggled to stay calm in his arms. In a lingering pace, his hand slid from my forehead to one of my burning cheeks and, at that moment, I knew I hadn't hallucinated when I'd heard his voice and felt his palm on my face before. When he finally removed his hand from my burning skin, I let out a small gasp of relief. I was reluctant to let down my guard, fearing that he wanted to fool me with his patient composure.

"Don't worry." His voice startled me. "Isabelle, you're not feeling well. I won't... I wouldn't touch you while you're sick." He tried to reassure me, but it wasn't even remotely enough to make me trust him.

His voice was calm, just like the night before when he'd tried to soothe me in the bathroom and it only added to

my confusion. I sensed that he expected some kind of a reply from me, but I didn't know what to say. He had already hurt me so much that I couldn't be grateful for that small sign of kindness he'd suddenly decided to show me. For a second, I hesitantly glanced at him and noticed he was focused on something that was hidden in the depths of his distant mind. He had that haunted look in his eyes, but his face was still a cold mask, hiding his true intentions. When he moved his hand which rested on my hip and I twitched, he closed his eyes and exhaled deeply like he tried to control his suppressed anger and it scared me.

“How are you feeling?” His voice was distant again.

“I have a bad headache,” I whispered, surprised by his question.

He got up without a word, put on his pants and left the room. His worry for my condition had been strange and unexpected. No matter how hard I tried to realize what made him change his demeanor, I couldn't put a finger on anything that made sense. Even though he was still ice cold and reserved, somehow I sensed that he would be less cruel to me in the future. However, I was aware that that wasn't a guarantee he wouldn't harm me. I watched as the door opened and he entered the room with a package of pills and a glass of water in his hands. He approached me, popped two of the pills in my hand and handed me the water.

“For your headache,” he said with an agitated look on his face when he noticed I was reluctant to take the pills.

“Thank you,” I said quietly, letting his green eyes pierce into me.

His actions continued to confuse me, because his few kind gestures were shadowed by the darkness which escaped his cold gaze, reminding me that I should always be wary of him. For some reason, my hand shook as I took the pills and drank the water. I wasn't afraid, not really, but I felt self-conscious about everything I did while he stared at me intently. He took the glass from my weak hand and placed it onto the nightstand. As he returned his gaze at me, a silent

moment in which our worlds collided passed between us. He removed a strand of my hair which was stuck to my face and I cowered away from him, realizing that what I felt wasn't fear, but shame. He had always been cruel towards me and because of that I didn't know how a loving touch of a man should feel like, but his gesture evoked an emotion I knew he didn't mean to cause. A single tear escaped my eye and he wiped it away with his thumb, just like he had the night before. An image of that moment flashed before my eyes, making me aware that he was the one who held all the power. He was the only man who'd ever touched me. He was the only one who'd consumed my body and soul, shattering both of them to pieces. He was my first and he would be my last, because no one could ever mend the damage he had caused, not even him—especially him.

He stared at me like he could reach into my mind and read my thoughts, like he knew. And the scariest part was that, for the first time, he looked at me like it meant something to him.

“You need to go to sleep. The pills will help you with the fever.” His soft voice brought me back to reality.

He moved away from me, but he was still close, his eyes locked on mine. We remained in that position until the first rays of sun found their way into the room, and my eyes started getting heavy. Although I fought to stay awake, my mind drifted away, replacing the light of the dawn with the darkness of my dreams. Before my eyes shut to greet the darkness, I heard him getting dressed, unaware of the moment he got off of the bed. He snuck out of the room while I traveled into the scary world of nightmares.

Later that morning, as I was waking up, I sensed the pain in my head had subsided and I was only dealing with a light headache. My forehead and cheeks were quite warm, but they weren't burning like the day before. I was sensitive to the light, so it took me a while to open my eyes. The recollections of the past two days lingered in my mind, leaving me confused and wondering if everything had been just a dream. I turned

my head towards the other side of the bed and noticed the wrinkled white sheet, which was the proof that Sebastian had spent the night with me. The package of the pills he had brought was also still standing on the nightstand. With itching curiosity, I reached for it to check if I knew the brand of the pills. I popped one of them into my hand and studied its shape. An unexplained sensation of shame washed over me as I recognized the pill in my hand. It was exactly the same like the ones someone left for me on my first day in the house, when I was hurting after what had happened on that dreadful night with Sebastian. I gasped as the thought that he was probably the one who wanted to ease my pain that day crossed my mind. The realization that he cared about the physical pain he had inflicted upon me was in complete opposition to his behavior, because he continued intimidating me and showing me how much he hated me every single time I was near him.

When I heard the squeaking sound of the door, I cringed and quickly threw away the pill, fearing Sebastian would enter the room. To my great pleasure, it was only Anne, carrying the tray with my breakfast. She put it in front of me and checked if my forehead was still burning. She had a worried look on her face, but managed to produce a smile.

“How are you, dear? Do you feel any better?” It felt good to hear her warm voice.

“I do. I don’t remember much of what happened yesterday though,” I confessed.

“No wonder you don’t remember anything, you were burning with fever. Sebastian was so worried that he didn’t want to leave you out of his sight. He kept checking on you the entire day,” she said calmly.

That piece of information left me in absolute shock. I wasn’t sure if she was lying, because I couldn’t imagine what could have possibly driven Sebastian to care for me. I chose not to comment on Anne’s words, so I started eating my breakfast without saying anything.

“You should take a bath. It will help with the fever,” Anne advised me.

“I know. I think I really need one, but I am still very weak,” I said softly.

“Don’t worry, I will help you.” She smiled.

“Where is Sebastian?” I remembered he could come in any moment.

“He had to go to the company. He missed out on a lot of work yesterday.” She gave me the good news.

When I finished eating, Anne ran a warm bath and helped me walk into the bathroom. After she left, I took off my clothes and sank into the water. Anne’s words about Sebastian’s behavior when I was burning with fever ran through my mind. Everything he was doing lately had been overwhelming and it didn’t make any sense. I couldn’t imagine what his motives were. Then I remembered that crazy condition in the contract and everything fell into place. He was obviously playing a game, knowing that approaching me with anger would only make things harder for him. It was obvious that he was suppressing his annoyance when I would cower away from his touch. And even though he tried to treat me in a different, more humane way, I was still frightened of him, because I knew he would hurt me the first time he got the chance. He made it clear that he wanted a divorce, and making me pregnant was the only way he would get it. Anguish possessed me, because I didn’t want him to try to consummate our marriage again, although I knew it was inevitable.

After I took a bath, the idea of going back to bed seemed appalling, so I decided to go down to the library and maybe walk to the garden after I found something nice to read. When I left the room, I realized how weak I was actually feeling. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t give up. I walked in a slow pace, holding on to the staircase banister and leaning against the wall until I managed to get to the library. The immense sunlight that spread around the room hurt my eyes, but I was still happy to be there. As I walked past the shelves looking for a nice book to read, I started feeling dizzy. I fought the weakness, telling myself that I needed to stay strong, but

eventually I collapsed on the floor. It became clear that the visit to the library had been a terrible idea. My eyelids became heavy and I had no control over my tired body. While my consciousness fought to keep me awake, my exhausted body couldn't follow the command and darkness claimed me right there on the library floor.

In a while, I started sweating and feeling hot again. I couldn't open my eyes, but I knew that the sunlight didn't fill the room anymore. I was alone, drifting away in the darkness. Then I felt I was being carried away. I focused on the rhythm of the steps and that cologne penetrated my senses again. I knew it was a prelude to another nightmare, but I couldn't fight it. My body was laid on the bed and covered with a blanket. After minutes of fighting, my eyes agreed to partially open and I saw a silhouette of a man in the dark, staring back at me. The man got up and I jerked when he took his belt off. When his pants and shirt came off too, I stiffened from fear, waiting for him to attack me. My mind was telling me that I was trapped in another scary nightmare, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't wake up. When he made the first step towards me, hysteria kicked in.

Suddenly I was back in the hotel room and I had no idea how I got there. I was completely naked, lying on my belly and trembling in fear of something. I struggled to remember what I feared, but I was burning up and my mind wouldn't cooperate with me. Then, the moment those hands touched my trembling skin, everything came back to me and I knew exactly what would happen. I was already panting for air, trying to avoid the horrible experience.

“Please stop.” I was crying.

Even though I was sure the man who was caressing my back wouldn't pay attention to me, he spoke before lowering his hand.

“Stop what?” he asked me in a puzzled voice and I was confused more than him.

“Don't touch me. Please don't touch me,” I begged and then gasped from pain when I felt his rough touch.

“Isabelle,” he called me calmly.

“Please, stop. It hurts.” I was sobbing and trying to get away from his grip when he hit me.

Then he crushed me with his weight and I felt his erection. Every fiber of my being was nothing but panic and fear. I started moving away from him, but he held me firmly against his body.

“N-No. Not again. Don’t.” I started screaming.

“Isabelle, open your eyes.” The voice rang with worry instead of rage like I remembered.

“I won’t. I-I know who you are. I can s-smell your cologne,” I said in between my sobs.

“My cologne scares you?” he asked in a surprised voice.

“You s-scare me. I don’t want you to do this to me,” I muttered in fear.

“I won’t do anything to you. Open your eyes.” His voice was soothing.

“You’re lying. You hate me. Y-You want to hurt me.” I felt his hand on my hot forehead.

“Shh, you’re burning up. You have to open your eyes. Nothing bad will happen to you, I promise,” he whispered to reassure me, but I still felt his weight pressing onto me. “Open your eyes, Isabelle,” he continued with the encouragement.

I opened my eyes, only to feel him take my virginity again. I froze and screamed from the top of my lungs because the pain was unbearable. Then, I felt a shiver run through me like I was falling between the worlds of dreams and reality, not sure which one I ended up in. Suddenly, I was convulsing in Sebastian’s arms as he tried to soothe me. I was gulping for air and fighting his strength in the process, because he wouldn’t let go of me. The sticky sweat from my burning body dripped onto his muscled chest, but he still held me close. It was dark and strangely, I still felt the pain he had caused although I had replayed everything in my memory.

“P-Please let go of me. I’m sick and it hurts a lot,” my voice cracked.

He stilled for a moment while my body quivered from fear and fever in his arms. When he moved to turn on the lamp on the nightstand, I tried to get away from him, but he instantly stopped me. He pulled me so close that I could feel the radiating warmth of his muscles and I was scared out of my mind. I was letting out shallow breaths when his hand landed on my chest to feel my racing heart. I was aware of his every move, and I lost my breath when his hand slid towards my face, confronting me with those beautiful green eyes from my nightmares. He stared at me for a long time. My eyes were filled with unshed tears as I still observed him in trepidation. Then he did the last thing I expected. He slowly lowered his hand on my head and began caressing my face and my hair.

“No. Look at me,” he said in a soft voice when I looked away, and my eyes returned to him at once.

After a few moments of silence, he leaned his forehead on mine and I felt his breath on my skin. Even though he hadn’t done anything that should alarm me yet, I couldn’t help being afraid of him. I flinched when he moved his leg.

“Don’t.” He brushed his knuckles against my cheek. “It was just a bad dream. I know you’re sick. Nothing will happen tonight,” he whispered. “We have to take care of your fever,” he said as he pressed his palm against my brow.

All of my shame and suffering came together and my eyes closed as the tears spilled on my burning cheeks. Sebastian wiped every single one of them, causing me to gasp from the pain that was embedded deep inside. For the first time, he was being gentle with me, and as much as I tried to tell myself that he was only trying to trick me into fulfilling the terms of the agreement, I couldn’t deny that my body hungered for his kindness—even if it wasn’t real. Only when he was convinced I’d stopped crying, did he get up and disappear out of the room.

I remained on the bed, burning from the fever and frozen from the shock at the same time, while waiting for his

return. If I had any common sense left, I wouldn't have accepted his caresses. But knowing what his rage could produce, I would have chosen his fake kindness over it any day. His gentle touch was almost calming, and it shamed me to think about it, but I liked the way he touched me. There was nothing sexual or possessive about it. It felt like the only purpose of his attention was to heal my broken soul and I knew it was dangerous to believe that he truly cared, because it would feel even worse when he decided to hurt me again.

I glanced towards the door when I heard him enter the room. Again, he had a glass of water and he gave me one of those pills that would help reduce my fever. After handing me the water and the pill—the same pill I took after our wedding night—he disappeared into the bathroom. Shortly after, he came back, carrying a bowl of cold water and a towel. There was something incredible about seeing him like that, tentative and caring. I wanted to ask him about the pill. I wanted to know so badly if he had been the one who showed me that glimpse of mercy after all the hell he had put me through, but I wasn't brave enough to ask. Talking about that night was something I couldn't do with anyone, let alone him. He sat next to me and put the cold, wet towel on my forehead. I stared at him in disbelief and I obviously wasn't at all discreet about it, because he looked confused.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, nothing,” I answered in haste. “It's just that... I never thought you would take care of me when I would be sick.” I stupidly spilled the beans.

And there it was, that infamous cold mask of his that crept right back on his face and gave me the chills. His lips settled into a brief smirk and I knew that being honest with him hadn't been a good idea. It wasn't smart to tell him how I truly felt about his actions, but I guess I was just too naive and I never learned my lesson.

“What did you expect from me then?”

He confronted me with his cold gaze and I looked at him in desperation. I didn't know how to reply. What was I

supposed to tell him? I couldn't say that I expected him to hurt me while I was burning with fever. It would have been the truth, but I couldn't say it.

"I... I didn't expect anything," I mumbled awkwardly.

"I think I know exactly what you expected. You think I'm a monster, don't you?" he asked in a low voice.

My eyes locked with his and I saw a glimpse of sadness in them. I tried to come up with something to say. Just something—anything—that would disapprove his statement. But I couldn't look him in the eyes and lie to him. He would know. He always knew. He read me like an opened book.

"No." I looked away. "I don't think you're a monster," I tried to say in a convincing voice.

He leaned closer and caressed my cheek with his index finger before making me face him. I swallowed hard when I felt the mint breeze traveling to my neck.

"Don't lie to me. I can handle the truth," he whispered.

I couldn't do anything else, except stare back at him and wonder what he wanted me to say.

"You're looking at me like I'm holding a gun to your head and not a wet towel to help your fever. But you don't think I'm a monster." He arched his eyebrows like he was asking a question and not making a statement.

"I'm sorry." I didn't know what else to say.

He sighed and didn't say anything. Instead, he just returned to his side of the bed and turned out the lights. I stayed awake long after he fell asleep, thinking about everything that happened in the past few days. No matter how hard I tried to stay unaffected, his actions still had an unwanted and strong impact on me.

"You're not a monster." My whisper echoed in the darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

The following few days went by in an unusual routine. I would feel better in the mornings, but after I had passed out in the library, Sebastian didn't allow me to leave the room until I got well. Anne brought all of my meals and checked on me every hour or so. All of my clothes and cosmetics had been transferred into the master bedroom which was the official sign that we shared it. Contradictory to Anne's claims that he had spent the entire day next to me when I woke up in fever the first day, he didn't come to see me at all during the past few days I'd been sick. He slept next to me every night, but he was always gone by the time I would wake up. We were still like strangers and the situation between us was very awkward. When he crept into the room late, he would take off his clothes in the dark, courteously ask me how I was feeling and then he would go to sleep. His demeanor remained cold, but he didn't try to touch me, or force himself on me. Still, my nightmares wouldn't cease and it surprised me that he continued comforting me when I woke up in a fever, screaming and panting for air. He never asked me, but I was sure he knew what I dreamt about. Tears would always spring to my eyes when he whispered to me, caressing my hair. He endlessly repeated that everything would be okay, although we both knew it wouldn't. It couldn't be okay. Not with me, not with us, not with that contract that was hanging above our fates like a stormy cloud. Nevertheless, I wanted to believe that illusion so badly. I became addicted to his false reassurance, longing for it like it was the very air I breathed. Those moments were like magic, a short-lived glimpse of hope I held onto until it was shattered by the light of the new day, when everything would go back to the way it was. He would regain his cold composure and I would return to my despair.

After spending the whole week in bed, I felt better and I could finally go outside and get some fresh air. Going to the dining room to have breakfast, also brought an immense sense of delight. Anne informed me that Sebastian went to the company early in the morning, which meant that I would have the house to myself. I was focused on my food when I heard a knock on the door.

“Found you, fever girl,” Helen greeted me with a broad smile.

I was so excited to see her. I stood up to give her a tight hug and she hugged me back with the same enthusiasm.

“Sebastian told me you were sick. I’m sorry I didn’t come to visit earlier, but he ordered me not to bother you.” She had an apologetic look on her face and I pretended that her explanation didn’t affect me.” I heard you felt better so I thought you might want to join me for a ride to the city,” she offered, like she knew I was desperate to leave the house for a while.

“I think that’s a great idea. I’ll just need to tell Anne that I’ll be gone. Be back in a moment,” I said as I was leaving the room.

It felt immensely good to be outside again. We were rewarded by a magnificent summer day and I could relax a bit after a long time of tension. We were going through the shops, laughing and trying on different combinations. She tried to persuade me to buy another expensive dress, but this time I wouldn’t give in. When we got tired of window shopping, we bought some ice cream and sat down in the park. For a long time, we remained quiet, enjoying the summer magic which unfolded before our eyes. Helen looked at me and smiled like she wanted to ask me something, but didn’t know how.

“How are you?” It was an innocent question, but I suspected she hadn’t asked it out of courtesy. Something was bothering her.

“I’m okay. Everything’s fine.” I looked away.

“You know,” she paused, “I’ve been worried about you lately.”

“Why?” I asked, even though her comment from the last time still lingered on my mind. She had noticed how Sebastian treated me.

“I noticed you were under a lot of stress the last time I saw you. There is something you’re not telling me. You know you can trust me, right?” She squeezed my hand.

She had no idea how much I wanted to talk to someone who would help me and understand what I was going through, but I couldn’t share my problems with her. It shamed me to talk about the contract and my obligations towards her brother. I couldn’t discuss the circumstances that frightened me to the very core of my being.

“I needed some time to adjust. I’m all better now.” I managed to produce a smile.

Helen stared at me for a while, her eyes wide open, her head slightly shaking. I knew she wouldn’t let it go. I sensed she wanted to dig deep until she found the source of my misery. I had to put up my walls and defend my secret.

“You don’t look better. Please, tell me my brother isn’t hurting you.” She frowned from worry.

“No, he isn’t hurting me, Helen.” It was the truth. He hadn’t done anything hurtful to me in a while. “Don’t worry.” I forced a smile again.

“I’m sorry, Isabelle. It’s just that there is so much sadness in your eyes and I don’t want you to be sad.” A tender light reflected in her eyes.

I stared at her with a blank expression, feeling heartbroken. Her words were about to draw tears to my eyes, but I couldn’t allow myself to crumble in front of her. My secret had to stay safe with me, so I squeezed my eyes shut and suppressed the urge to cry. I looked away and focused on children playing in the park just to keep my mind away from my gloomy thoughts. Then, as I watched those children play with their parents standing around, my heart sunk into depths

of the darkest despair. Sebastian expected me to give him a son, to give birth to a child I would have to abandon because all he wanted to do was divorce me and send me back to my mother with a pile of his dirty money. I took a deep breath and tried not to let panic consume me. Helen squeezed my hand another time and smiled shortly, to let me know she wouldn't push the matter any further.

"I know what will cheer you up. How about we go to the movies?" she suggested excitedly.

"Come on. It will be fun. I haven't been in ages," she continued encouraging me when she noticed I hesitated. "What do you say? I'll even let you choose the movie." She laughed.

"Well, that's an offer I can't refuse," I replied, smiling.

I was glad I didn't refuse Helen's offer to go to the cinema, because we ended up watching the newest comedy with Eddie Murphy, and I laughed my eyes out. When the movie ended, it was late and we had to head back to the mansion. Since it was already dark, Helen dropped me off and went back to her parent's house without greeting Sebastian.

"See you in two days." She smiled and then frowned when she noticed I didn't know what she was referring to. "It's our parent's anniversary, remember?"

"Oh, I completely forgot about that. I'm glad I'll see you soon then." I tried to sound happy even though I was terribly nervous about it.

The light mood Helen managed to put me in, disappeared the moment I set foot into the house. The dark aura of negativity settled in my heart, causing the growing feeling of detest towards that place. *This wasn't my home, this was my prison.* With lingering reluctance, I climbed the stairs, deliberately postponing my encounter with Sebastian for as long as I could. Once I was on the first floor, my eyes darted towards my old room and I paused by the door, pulled by an incredible desire to walk in. However, I quickly brushed away

the thought, knowing that he would come and make me sleep in the master bedroom anyway. As I approached that room, my palms started sweating and I was getting nervous. For some reason, I didn't want to go there, because I could almost breathe in the danger seething from that space, but I didn't have any choice but to go inside.

The first thing I saw when I entered the bedroom proved that my intuition had been right on spot. Sebastian was standing in the middle of the room, *naked!* He looked like he'd just got out of the shower and he was using a towel to dry his hair. When he noticed me, there was a clear sign of surprise on his face, but he wasn't even a bit shy and he had no intention of covering himself. My heart started pounding in a crazy rhythm as I gasped in shock and turned around to leave the moment I saw him.

"Isabelle, don't!" he warned me as my hand grabbed the handle. "Turn around," he said in a soft voice, but it still felt like an order I had to obey.

I clenched my fists, turned around and looked at the floor, blushing because there was a naked man standing in front of me. And not just any naked man; the man who horrified me with his clothes on, was now exposed in all of his naked glory. I was visibly shaken and he noticed, because he smirked as he wrapped a towel around himself.

"It's okay. You can look now," he said reassuringly.

Then he approached me and I started moving away from him until my back hit the door. He shook his head in disapproval and raised my chin to level my eyes with his. I started panting for air, trying to look away from him, but he wouldn't let me divert my gaze. His eyes were glowing as he observed my discomfort and a contour of a smile appeared on his lips. He leaned his head towards me, making my body vibrate from the unpleasant feeling his closeness evoked in me. I felt his breath on my neck and for a moment our breathing synchronized as we gaped at each other. It felt like he was the hunter, and I was the prey who'd walked right into his trap. I stilled and after a while, I was startled by his low voice.

“You are scared.” It wasn’t a question, but I nodded anyway. “What are you afraid of?”

I gasped and tried to move away when he asked me that question, but he wouldn’t let me. He held me in a tight embrace and possessively pulled me even closer to him. As I was trembling in his arms, the images of what he would do to me tortured my mind.

“You,” I finally said in a voice that uncovered how much his presence troubled me.

Something flickered in his eyes and suddenly they were filled with a mysterious emotion. I waited for him to tell me that I should fear him just like he had told me on our wedding night, but he didn’t. He just wrapped a lock of my hair between his fingers and gazed at me. My eyes widened from fear and I was fully prepared to endure his rage, only it never came. Instead, his stare became more restless, until he diverted his eyes from mine and stepped away from me like he was tortured by something.

The moment he created some space between us, I practically ran into the bathroom like a frightened kitten running from a big bad wolf. The last few nights he’d assured me he wouldn’t touch me while I was sick, but now that I felt better, things had definitely changed. The fact that I couldn’t lock the door and that he could come in any moment drove me crazy. After removing my makeup, brushing my teeth and putting on my nightgown, I hesitated to go back to him. When I gathered enough courage, I took a deep breath and opened the door. Sebastian observed me from the bed. He turned off the chandelier lamp, and the only source of light in the room was the lamp on the nightstand. I wrapped my arms around myself and slowly walked to my side of the bed. As I walked awkwardly, I noticed his eyes were boring into me, following my every frightened move. He lifted up the sheets on my side and waited for me to lie down. As I lowered my body to the bed, I couldn’t stop shaking, and I flinched when he covered me with the sheets he was holding. He touched my shoulder and I almost jumped off of the bed in my attempt to escape, but his hands held me still.

“Isabelle,” he called, but I had no courage to answer.

After moments of silence, he pulled me closer and laid a hand on my stomach to turn me around. My abdomen started moving up and down as I breathed rapidly, allowing him to move my body. When my troubled gaze met his cruel green eyes, I stopped breathing altogether and swallowed loudly. I clenched my teeth to stop my nervous gasps, but I wasn't successful at it. I cringed when he removed the hair from my face and kept his hand on my chin. He scanned my face for a few moments and then said the last thing I expected to hear.

“I don't want you to be afraid.” He paused for a moment.

The words echoed in my mind, evoking the conflicting memories brought about by the man who stared at me with what felt like sincerity.

Slowly, his fingers trailed down my cheek, traveling along my neck and marking the path all the way down to my abdomen. His touch was intimate, and though he wasn't rough at all, I couldn't stop trembling from the sheer terror that followed the trace of his fingers. When he rested his hand on my hip, I froze. He stilled and confronted me with his eyes. He wasn't annoyed or angry. The expression on his face was different; mysterious and unfathomable. With surprising tenderness, he lowered the strap of my nightgown and caressed my naked shoulder. I flinched when his hand made contact with my skin, but he held me so firmly that I had nowhere to go. His gaze remained locked on mine and I saw fire in his usually ice cold green eyes.

He broke the stare between us as he lowered his head to my exposed shoulder and kissed it gently. Then he looked up at me and I was absolutely taken aback by the unexpected intimacy we shared. Our eyes were at the same level again and we communicated without making a sound. My gaze was begging him to stop, whereas his sent out a message that I shouldn't fight him on this. As he leaned above me, propping on his elbow, his hand went through my hair until it slid to my cheek.

“You don’t need to be worried. I only want to touch. Nothing else,” he spoke softly.

“O-only touch?” I asked with fear and mistrust.

My face reddened when his fingers lightly grazed it and there was a glimpse of something that resembled a smile on his face.

“Only touch,” he whispered reassuringly. “I want to show you that being touched by me isn’t the scariest thing in the world.” *But it is. Nothing scares me more than you!*

With extreme caution, as if sensing my wariness, he leaned even closer. He was completely in my personal space, wrapped around me like we were a single unit and it gave me goose bumps. His eyes remained locked on mine as he parted his lips and I let out a gasp, remembering how gently he had kissed Cora in the patio that night. His nose snuggled against mine as his lips came so close to my mouth, almost brushing against it. My lips started trembling in anticipation because I had never been kissed before. The kiss every girl dreams about was denied to me on my wedding, as well as on the wedding night. Strangely, although I was wondering how it would feel if our lips collided in a gentle touch, I didn’t want him to give me my first kiss. It was the only pure part of me I had left, the only thing I could keep for myself, and I wasn’t prepared to let him take that away from me. As if he was able to read my mind, instead of kissing my mouth, he lowered his lips to my chin and kissed it softly. Then, he pushed my chin up and started tracing my neck with soft, gentle kisses. I liked it, in fact, I enjoyed it and it made me feel ashamed, because I knew what cruel intentions drove him to kiss me like that.

The proof that I was right happened moments after, when he fixed his hand on my hip and started pulling my nightgown up, all the while kissing my neck. He looked up at me and brushed his thumb along my trembling face. A sob escaped my throat when he took me by surprise and slowly started climbing on top of me. My body stiffened under his weight and I winced in fear. It felt different that on our wedding night when he made me lie on my stomach. It felt more intimate. It felt safer. Still, it didn’t feel comfortable,

because nothing could ease the terror that became a part of my very core.

I didn't dare to utter a single word because I was scared I could provoke him to hurt me. He looked at me with a stare that reflected the certainty of desire in his eyes, and it was my undoing. The stream of heavy tears started spilling down my cheeks as I shivered from terror. He buried his nose in my hair and mildly moved it across my scalp. Then he gave me a soft kiss on the forehead and his lips travelled to my cheeks, kissing away my teardrops. He looked straight into my eyes with visible determination on his face.

"Don't," he whispered as he stroked my hair. "Don't cry. Don't be afraid." He brushed his knuckles along my temple.

Panic took over as he settled his weight on top of me and I shuddered violently, frozen from fear.

"Shh, nothing bad will happen." He tried to soothe me.

"P-Please," I muttered through a frightened gasp with tears dwelling in my eyes.

"Are you afraid of the pain?" He gave me a knowing look and all I could offer as a response was a barely noticeable nod.

"Nothing I do will hurt. I promise," he whispered reassurances as his hand traveled across my body and paused at my lower waist.

Feeling his touch there scared me out of my mind. I felt the building heat on my face and I knew I was blushing from the unbearable shame. He kissed my forehead again and started whispering softly.

"Relax. I want to make you feel good. I'm not going to hurt you. No pain," he said as he gently moved his fingers even lower.

I was shivering, overwhelmed with fear and something else that scared me even more than the possibility he might hurt me. All at once, I hated and loved what he was doing to me and I despised myself for getting excited by his touch. His

erection pulsed against my inner thigh, reminding me that he wanted to be inside me again. It was something I couldn't even think about—let alone experience—without blacking out from terror. A scary recollection of that dark night sprang to my mind and I winced in shock.

“Isabelle.” He lowered his face to mine again and whispered in my ear. “It’s alright. There is nothing to fear. No pain.” He caressed my flushed cheeks. “No shame.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to erase all those horrifying images from my memory. My mind tried to pretend we were trapped in a separate fragment of time which wasn't influenced by anything else and I imagined what it would feel like if that had been the very first time he had ever touched me. *What would it be like if there were no consequences or painful memories threatening this intimate moment between us?* In a play pretend world, everything would have been different. There wouldn't be any fear, pain or shame. But I wasn't in a play pretend world. I was still trapped in my real life nightmare with the man I was so guarded against—the man who was trying to break down my walls and leave me defenseless.

Confusion swept over me as I tried to grasp the meaning of the unfamiliar feelings he had evoked in me. *Was I that desperate for his gentle touch even if I knew it wasn't real, even if I knew he didn't give it sincerely? Would I honestly let him trick me into giving him a son?* I feared the answer that rang in my mind. Things were crystal clear since he had warned me about his expectations, given the nature of our marriage. He had told me that I could comply or I would be forced to do so, and right now he was giving me a chance to make that choice. Even though it felt a lot better than when he forced me with violence, I was too frightened to give myself to him willingly.

All kinds of thoughts were going through my head as his body stilled on top of mine and he didn't do anything except stare into my worried eyes with his palm frozen against my cheek. The expectation only made me more nervous, and I couldn't stop quivering beneath him. When he diverted his

eyes from mine, I swallowed a lump of fear as his gaze traveled to my almost entirely exposed breasts. I closed my eyes when he brushed his lips against my collarbone and continued marking a path to my chest. I was breathing rapidly, consumed by different kinds of good and bad emotions. It wasn't easy, but I willed my body to relax. I could still feel his erection, but he hadn't done anything yet, so I tried to calm myself down.

The moment my panic lessened, he sensed it and his hoarse voice rang in my ears once again.

“It can be different, Isabelle. I want to show you. Let me make it better,” he said in an aching whisper and my breathing quickened as his hand slowly slid down, until I felt it on the fabric of my panties.

My eyes opened wide and I shrieked from the shock when he touched me there, remembering his violent treatment on our wedding night. In a single moment, fear, shame, humiliation and panic, all combined into one scary sensation that landed on my chest like a heavy stone, cutting off my air supply in the process. I started trembling and fighting for air that wouldn't travel from my lungs. Sebastian had a confused look on his face and he immediately stopped touching me. He started shaking my shoulder to bring me back from the trance I was trapped in.

“Isabelle?” He was alarmed. “Look at me, Isabelle. Now!” he yelled and I inhaled deeply, turning my frightened gaze towards him.

His eyes examined my face as the darkness settled back in them. I couldn't bear seeing him look at me like that, not after all the gentle caresses and kisses he had laid on my body. As the reality sunk back in, together with the scary memories that were taunting me, I felt defiled by his touch and I wanted to scrub him off of me. He glared at me with a dark expression and lust written all over his face, but there was also something else; something that kept him distraught and distant. Then he swallowed loudly and I flinched when his hand moved towards my face in an attempt to touch me.

“You can’t make it better!” I whispered in a shaky voice and practically jumped off the bed, fearing his reaction.

Still breathing nervously, I ran into the bathroom.

“Fuck!” I heard him howl in an angry voice and punch the wall with his fist.

Fearing his retaliation, I escaped to the corner on the end of the bathroom and sat down on the cold floor. I hugged my knees and closed my eyes, thinking about how stupid I’d been to enjoy his faked tenderness. Instead of being extra cautious, I’d let him fool me into thinking there was a glimpse of light inside of him. His true nature was extremely dark, and it was something I had already found out the hard way. As the reminiscence of everything that had happened settled in my mind, the urge to wash every inch of my body wouldn’t leave me alone.

I sat under the shower, hoping the water would wash away all the bad memories that were stuck with me. When I heard the screech of the door, I froze and stopped breathing, knowing I would have to face him again. But moments went by and nothing happened until I heard the sound of the door closing, and I was finally able to draw in a breath. Confusion mixed with immense sadness attacked my already tortured soul as I thought about his determination to divorce me by getting me pregnant. I felt so broken that I couldn’t even cry. I stood up, emotionless, dried my body, put on my nightgown and returned to the room. It was dark and the room was empty. Instead of going after me, he had left when his anger took hold of him and I felt grateful for that. Lethargically, I got on the bed and closed my eyes. I was too tired to be hurt, too tired to be afraid, too tired to have any hope left.

Chapter Twenty

In the middle of the night, my eyes opened in the dark, summoned by the heavenly sound of the piano. *Moonlight sonata*. At first I thought I was dreaming, but as I gradually opened my eyes and regained consciousness I was sure I had heard that piano one more time. I looked around and noticed Sebastian wasn't sleeping beside me. The emotion of the music made me take a deep breath in the dark. I stood up, fighting the urge to seek the mysterious piano player again. I knew that his fingers were pressing the piano keys and creating the night magic that spread through the darkness. I walked up to the window where the light of the full moon radiated on me. While admiring the perfect view of the garden in the night, my eyes closed of their own accord. I wrapped my arms around my middle as the fresh memories of his caresses appeared in my mind. A strange interlude of images from our wedding night, and the ones I'd experienced when he was gentle, flashed before my eyes. There was so much darkness in him, darkness that would never cease to terrorize me. But then again, he was such a great master of deception, that at times he could hide that darkness and show me a different, brighter side of him. And that side scared me, because it could deceive me and make me think he cared in a way that would stop him from hurting me. I knew how dangerous it was to believe that, especially after what he had done to me. It was so confusing and thinking about it had drained all of my energy.

I went back to bed and shut my eyes tightly, letting the beautiful melody take me to my dreams, and, for the first time, I didn't wake up screaming and panting for air.

The creaking sound of the loud steps against the hardwood floor woke me up. I sat up and I saw Sebastian

walking in the room. We stared at each other for a moment without saying a single word. He was a mess. His shirt was wrinkled and, for the first time, it wasn't tucked in his pants. He looked exhausted, like he hadn't slept all night. I had never seen him like that because normally he would always have the picture perfect look. His cold expression made me wonder what was happening in his head, but I didn't dare to ask, fearing his answer. The feeling of uneasiness crept into me as he started unbuttoning his shirt. He noticed. I knew he noticed when he looked at me with his dark stare, but he ignored my fearful reaction and disappeared into the bathroom. I heard the water running and I thought he would return to the room naked after his shower, like he had done the previous evening. When the noise subsided and I heard he was coming back a few moments after, I quickly looked away from the bathroom door. He entered the room and I blushed because I could feel he was watching me. From the corner of my eye, I looked towards him and noticed he had a towel wrapped around his waist. That was when I dared to raise my eyes and return his gaze. He was back to being his perfect-looking gorgeous self, but the aura of cruel darkness still lurked around him. He parted his lips like he wanted to say something, but then he froze for a moment, looked away and headed towards the walk-in closet.

The situation was entirely awkward and I hoped he would go away soon. He came back all suited up and walked towards the dresser to take one of his expensive watches from the drawer. Then he walked out of the room, without so much as glancing at me. It was clear that he had regained his controlled and arrogant composure, which was a very bad omen.

I bent my knees and wrapped my arms around them as grief washed over me. I was in too deep, trapped in a world I didn't belong in, and I wanted out. I was too messed up to follow up on his mind games. The hope that I could get away from the mess I was in, without him damaging me further, started fading away. I couldn't stay, but I also couldn't go. I was stuck in the dark limbo, utterly broken and without any

options. My only way out of this hell meant I had to let him use me, humiliate me and then discard of me.

Defeated, I remained in the bed the entire morning. Like a prisoner in a golden cage, I was deeply depressed and unhappy with the way my life had been unfolding. Before marrying Sebastian, I'd had so many plans and dreams and it hurt to know that none of them would ever come true. Whether I liked it or not, I had to accept the fact that my happiness didn't matter to anyone. My life was just a means to an end, and the sooner I came to terms with that, the better. Still, coming to terms with something like that didn't make it any less painful.

Surrounded by the devastating silence, I closed my eyes and just sat there, barely breathing, letting the time pass by. I went downstairs only once—to get something to eat—and I returned to the room once I was done. For the first time in my life, I had spent an entire day in bed, watching television and thinking about trivial things that had nothing to do with my sad existence. I needed that distraction, because living in constant fear and dreading my own husband, was going to drive me crazy.

In the evening, I took a quick shower, turned off the lights and went to bed, determined not to be nervous about the moment he would enter the room, but to no avail, because sleep wouldn't come. He startled me when he opened the door and came inside. The look in his green eyes was menacing and his face held a hostile expression. That gentle side of him that he'd shown me the night before had completely vanished. He undid the buttons on the cuffs of his shirt and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows as he came closer. His demeanor was unyielding, with the presence of cruel dominance that sent chills down my spine. He knelt to my level and gazed at my eyes which were wide open and filled with terror. Moments passed by and he didn't do anything besides stare at me diligently. The expression on his face resembled a ticking time bomb which could explode at any given moment. When he

moved his hand slightly and I flinched, he exhaled in anger like it was the last straw that pushed him to act.

“Get up,” he said in a flat voice.

I looked up at him in confusion, but didn't move from the bed.

“I said. Get. Up.”

I hadn't heard that menacing voice since the night he had hurt me. I froze, but complied. Slowly, I removed the covers and started getting up until I stood right in front of him, quivering from the mortifying fear that took over me. I remembered how he'd told me he didn't want me to be afraid. Those were cruel lies. He wanted me to be terrified; otherwise he wouldn't have been so intimidating. My eyes were focused on the floor when he leaned closer to me and his lips brushed my ear.

“Stop trembling.”

He tried to make me look at him, but I was determined to avoid his eyes which were filled with an emotion I couldn't interpret.

“Look at me,” he said in a commanding voice. I jumped from fear, but I finally allowed him to raise my chin and make me look into his eyes. “I want you to calm down. I want you to stop avoiding my touch,” he whispered, taking my hand and practically pulled me towards him.

I felt I was about to hyperventilate and stumbled back, wanting to get as far away as possible, but Sebastian held me back and pulled me into a light embrace. To say that his behavior perplexed me would be an understatement. With unbelievable arrogance and conceit, he thought he could simply order me not to be afraid of him, but still, now he held me in his embrace even though he was upset by my fearful reaction. We were so close to each other and I just couldn't get a hold of myself. He stared at me, his eyes filled with revealing mysterious intent that uncovered a small fracture of his guarded state of mind.

“Stop running away from me. I’m not going to hurt you,” he said decisively.

You already have! My mind screamed at him, but I would never have dared to say those words aloud, fearing his retaliation.

“Don’t say that.” I didn’t want to believe in the promises he wouldn’t keep. I didn’t want to trust him.

“Why? Do you want me to hurt you? Is it easier for you that way?” he asked curiously.

“N-No.” I cowered away from him again and he looked at me with hostility, showing how much my fear annoyed him.

His eyes traveled through my body from head to toe. I looked down again, but he wanted me to look straight into his eyes so he lifted my face and as he did so, I stubbornly kept my eyes shut.

“I think that’s exactly what you want. Maybe I should grant your wish, huh? It would certainly liberate us from this hell we’re trapped in.” He gazed at me with annoyance as I shook my head, staring at the hardwood floor and then he continued speaking, almost like he tried to amend for his prior words. “It’s what you expect, isn’t it? Open your eyes,” he ordered in a cold voice.

I waited for a few seconds before uncovering my watering eyes that were filled with panic and sadness. The moment I looked at him, tears spilled down my cheeks and I couldn’t stop them from falling, even though I tried my best to stay calm. Shivers ran through me while his dark stare slowly fell from my eyelids all the way down to the edge of my face, following the path of my tears. Wanting to preserve the silence that ruled the space around us, I didn’t make a single sound. As he remained focused on the damp wetness that spread into a puddle on my cheeks, his face changed from being expressionless and dark into something different, something I didn’t understand.

He was absolutely right. I expected him to hurt me. I feared it for days and I was sick and tired of living a life filled with the constant tension and fear. I wanted it to stop. Feeling the surrender building in my system brought about the strange sense of peace. With trembling hands and blushing cheeks, I slowly untied the lace on my nightgown and lowered the straps on my shoulders, letting it fall to the ground. I noticed he was shocked by my action but he didn't react on it.

“Liberate me from this hell then. Do your worse.” My voice was shaky, but filled with defiant pride.

Contemplating on the fact that he had won, I waited for his reaction. I expected some kind of a display of emotion, but he remained cold. The intense crystal glow reflecting in his stare was the only thing that betrayed his emotions.

As I trembled and covered myself with my arms, I hesitated for a moment, wondering what on earth I was doing. His dark eyes were boring into me as I tried to fight the realization of what would happen. When I finally decided to ignore the screaming voice in my head, I turned towards the bed and lay down on my belly. Just like on our wedding night, I shook, like a pathetic, frightened doe. The flashbacks of his brutality returned and all of the courage drained out of me. I heard him move and my entire being went rigid. His steps echoed through the room and by the time I counted to three, he stood right above the bed. I expected him to take his clothes off, but instead of doing that, he knelt down to my level again. My head was buried in the pillow and I felt his stare lingering on my frightened body. I was in complete panic mode, shaking and weeping like he would kill me—not have sex with me. His hand landed on my back and I jerked so hard from the touch, that my body rose up from the bed as I screamed from the sickening fear.

“That's enough.” I heard his low voice and if I didn't know better I would have sworn it rang with worry.

At this point, I was inconsolable. I expected him to violate me but he had barely touched me and I was already a trembling mess of nerves. When his arms reached towards me, I stopped breathing and my body turned to stone. I heard the

buzzing in my ears and shock took hold of me as he pulled the blanket over my exposed body. Then he climbed onto the bed and picked me up into his arms with the sheet wrapped around me. I was convulsing against his chest, hysterically crying and waiting for him to do something, but he just calmly held me in his embrace.

“Please, just...” I whispered numbly, taunting the devil and fighting the urge to start screaming at him.

Something in him tensed up and he held me by my shoulders before abruptly pushing me away from him. Then he stared at me, almost pleading, like he needed something from me. And as I stared back at him, I could tell he was in pain—we both were.

“I won’t. Not against your will, Isabelle.” He was the one to look away this time. “I...” He swallowed hard as he spoke in a shaky voice, startling me with his bare honesty. “I can’t.”

A taunting memory came back to haunt me. *You can and you will.* Those were his exact words when I told him I couldn’t and begged him to stop that night.

“It’s too late to say you can’t w-when...” I shook my head as my voice choked on the heavy lump of sadness that formed in my throat. “You already took it all.”

The grip of his hands on my shoulders tightened and his eyes snapped open, driven by a forceful emotion I never thought he would let me see. Leaning closer to me, he claimed the space between us, breaking the barrier I’d wanted to keep. His fingers slid down my face before he pulled me back in his embrace and my entire being started shivering, rejecting his closeness.

“Be at ease,” he tried to soothe me, “I don’t want to cause you more harm,” he whispered, pressing me so close against his chest that I couldn’t move anywhere.

I tried to get away, but restraining my already weakened body against his strong, tense muscles wasn’t even mildly challenging for him, so eventually I gave up fighting. I

stilled and started crying on his tense chest. When he sensed my surrender, he pulled me even closer and then, to my absolute astonishment, he stroked my hair as if nothing had happened.

“What am I going to do with you, Isabelle?” he said in a voice so soft I barely heard him, and it made me cry even harder.

I sobbed in his embrace, letting the tears stream down my face and fall onto his chest. The fact that I accepted his solace like he was my friend and not my enemy frightened me to death. I felt his body slowly relax against mine. He didn’t make a sound. He just held me in his arms and kept stroking my hair while I continued crying until I had no more tears left. After neither of us moved for what seemed to be hours, he lifted up my chin and kissed my forehead. My eyes were closed and I was already half asleep, but I was still aware of his actions. Gently, he removed the strands of hair plastered to my temple and though I couldn’t see him, I felt his stare linger on me with intensity.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered and I tensed at his words, but didn’t open my eyes.

He lowered his head on the pillow, pulled my head back on his chest and continued caressing me for the rest of the night. His hand slid down my shoulder, all the way to my wrist and back. He repeated that movement hundreds of times during the night, never letting go of me. I heard his breathing deepen and I knew he was asleep, but he still didn’t stop touching me so softly, so tenderly that it made my heart ache. I felt like I was losing my mind because he had truly shown me both of his sides that night and I had learned the horrifying difference. *How could he be so intimidating one moment, and then so gentle the next? Why did I enjoy his comfort so much when he was the one who caused my pain?* I was exhausted but I didn’t want to fall asleep. I needed to process everything. I winced at the thought of what could have happened, and he tightened his grip around me.

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” he whispered in his soothing voice, the one he would use when I’d have nightmares.

I dozed off into the world of dreams, hoping I wouldn't wake up screaming in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-One

A sophisticated, aristocratic looking woman dressed in expensive branded clothes stared back at me from the mirror. It was surreal to observe that reflection of myself. I didn't feel comfortable with my appearance, but I was getting ready for the dinner at Sebastian parent's house, so that was exactly how I needed to look. As I was putting on my shoes, Sebastian entered the room and glanced at me. We didn't talk after the incident from the previous night, although I woke up in his embrace and not alone like usual. The tension between us was still very present and he was looking around the room like my presence disturbed him.

“Ready?”

He finally looked at me and I noticed his gaze trailed down my body before returning to my eyes. He gaped at me like he was lost in thoughts.

“Yes. I'm ready,” I replied quietly.

“Then we can go. Come,” he invited me to follow him.

The walk through the hallway was awkward, because we were walking next to each other like two strangers passing by on the street. And that wasn't far from the truth, because although we were married, we didn't know anything about each other. After our wedding, this was the first time we'd attend an event as a couple. When we reached the front door, he opened it and motioned that I should go out first. I noticed his head turning after me as I was walking out.

“You look beautiful,” he said coldly, like he said it just to say something.

“Thank you,” I answered in the same tone.

I almost told him he looked beautiful too, because his grey suit accentuated his green eyes making him look gorgeous, but I wasn't in the mood for small talk and I certainly didn't want him to believe that I liked anything about him. I sat in the car and remembered our trip from the hotel to his mansion when I was occupying the same space in my wedding gown. I closed my eyes to block the bad memories. Unlike the last time, when he'd driven way above the speed limit, now he was driving normally. The ride went by in complete silence and it seemed that we were both in our own worlds, miles away from each other. When we reached the Everett mansion, Sebastian parked the car and caught my wrist when I wanted to get out. I looked at him in confusion because he kept staring at me like he wanted to say something, but moments of silence went by without him uttering a single word.

"I just wanted to tell you," he said quietly, "that tonight you are expected to behave with manners which are appropriate for the occasion we're attending." He looked at me with a serious expression on his face.

I blushed for a moment, because I realized he was ashamed of me and he feared that I would embarrass him in front of his high-class milieu. I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded. *How could I guarantee that I wouldn't mess up and do something wrong?* The closer we approached the house, the more the nervousness caused by his warning rose into slight consternation. I was about to be confronted with the pack of wolves who couldn't wait to rip me apart and he would be watching my every move.

When we entered the house, the first person we saw was Frederick, who was walking around the vestibule nervously, and approached us the moment he noticed we were there.

"Sir, can I have a word with you?" He glanced at me to let me know he wanted to speak to Sebastian in private.

"Stay here," Sebastian instructed before walking away with Frederick to the other side of the room.

They were speaking quietly and Frederick sounded like he was very worried about something. I couldn't understand what they were talking about, although I was beyond intrigued. At some point, I was sure I had heard Helen's name come up in the conversation and I got worried too.

"Fuck." Sebastian ran his fingers through his hair and he was getting upset.

It was ironic how he warned me about behaving properly, but he didn't have any problem with swearing in the middle of the vestibule where the guests could have walked in at any moment. Obviously he had double standards when it came to the rules which applied to our behavior. He walked up to me in a quick pace and told me he had some things he needed to take care of and that I should follow Frederick. That was the last thing I expected to hear because I couldn't imagine going there all by myself.

"What's wrong? Is Helen alright?" I asked worriedly.

"Don't ask questions right now. Just do as you're told. I'll join you later," he demanded in a light voice, leaving me alone with Frederick.

"Please, follow me, madam." He gestured towards the long hallway I had walked through the last time I'd been there to meet the Everett family.

I waltzed into the huge dining room and the immediate feeling of uneasiness swept over me as I became aware that people were staring. Everybody seemed to be standing around; mingling, drinking champagne and eating the small appetizers the waiters carried around. My palms were sweating when I noticed Theodore and Catherine. I walked over to them and congratulated them on their thirtieth anniversary, but their reaction was very cold. They thanked me and then acted like I was invisible while I stood right there in front of them. The shame I felt made me wish for the ground to open and swallow me up. As I was blushing, feeling uneasy and scanning the room to find Helen, Dianne and another woman approached me.

“Well, if it isn’t the lovely Miss Walsh... Oh, how silly of me to say that. Pardon me, it slipped my mind that you are *Mrs. Everett* now. It’s nice to see you again.” She immediately started spilling her venom and I felt threatened by her unyielding attitude.

The woman standing next to Dianne seemed awfully familiar. I knew that face, but I just couldn’t put a name on it. She had black shoulder-length hair, piercing blue eyes and she was also breathtakingly beautiful with her long body and slim figure. I thought she looked amazing. Next to her beauty, her attitude radiated graceful elegance that she seemed to produce without any effort, like it came to her naturally.

“Oh, I am sorry, how rude of me. I should introduce the two of you.” Dianne smiled viciously before revealing the woman’s name. “Isabelle this is Cora, Cora this is Sebastian’s wife, Isabelle.”

My eyes widened in shock as I recognized her and my cheeks burned with shame when I remembered her little *rendezvous* with Sebastian. Cora smiled at me, her eyes giving away she noticed how uncomfortable I felt around her.

“Cora.” She offered her hand and I accepted it warily. “Nice to meet you,” she said softly.

“Isabelle, nice to meet you too,” I said as we shook hands.

Dianne seemed to be completely entertained with the compromising situation she had created and she sipped her second glass of champagne, glowing with the feeling of accomplishment. That woman was evil to the bone. I looked away in hopes to finally see Helen, but she was nowhere to be found and Sebastian also hadn’t shown up yet.

“Looking for someone?” Dianne asked in a mocking tone.

“No,” I replied calmly.

“Well,” she sighed, “I don’t think your little friend will be joining us tonight.” Her lips twisted in an evil smile when she hinted that Helen wouldn’t be coming at all.

“You have a beautiful dress.” Cora smiled and complimented me like she wanted to break the tension that was building between Dianne and me. If she wasn’t who she was, I could have liked her.

“It’s such a pity that a fancy piece of clothing cannot rub off some of its allure on the person wearing it.” Dianne’s atrocious comment made an already uncomfortable situation even more difficult.

Dianne’s rude comment left me flabbergasted and for a while I stood frozen in space and time. I knew she was an evil, conceited woman, but I hadn’t seen it coming. Her behavior towards me was bordering on harassment. After thinking about whether or not I should retaliate, I remembered Sebastian’s warning in the car and decided it would be best to get away from her as soon as possible.

“Excuse me.” I bit my tongue, smiling to Cora and passed by Dianne, ignoring her conniving smile.

I noticed a spot in the corner and hurried towards the unoccupied seat because I needed a moment to calm down. When I sat down and looked around, I became aware I was trapped in a room full of arrogant snobs. Silently, I prayed for everybody to leave me alone until that awful evening came to an end. As usual, my prayers went unanswered and I was confronted with none other than the infamous Theodore Everett. He sat next to me, wearing a self-assured smirk on his face. That man never ceased to intimidate me and I could see where Sebastian got his ruthlessness from. At first, he didn’t say anything. He just looked me straight into the eyes with an expression that made it obvious he was studying my posture. Needless to say, I felt completely exposed and threatened by him.

“So, my lovely daughter-in-law, how are you doing?” By the looks of it, he wanted to sound pleasant, but he did a very poor job at it.

“I am doing fine, thank you. I hope you are also doing well.” I tried my best to follow the etiquette.

He smirked and nodded a few times before answering. “Things are going good around here, I cannot complain.” He paused shortly and then continued his interrogation. “Is Sebastian treating you well?” He had a knowing look on his face.

“Yes, he is.” I blushed and looked at the floor.

Theodore apparently played some kind of mind game with me, and I couldn’t understand the purpose of our conversation. Despite my oath to never drink a drop of alcohol, I took a sip of wine since Theodore was making me terribly nervous.

“Sebastian tells me we might expect a new addition to our family soon.” He smirked as I abruptly spat out the sip of wine that lingered down my throat.

Heat crept up my cheeks and I felt assaulted by his comment. The fact that Sebastian had told his father he might expect us to have a baby soon sent chills down my spine. I took a deep breath and shyly looked up at Theodore. I had no idea what to say.

“I... I don’t know,” I mumbled, feeling distraught.

Theodore narrowed his eyes and I knew he was very suspicious of my reaction, but he seemed to restrain himself from any inappropriate comments.

“Well, there’s a time for everything, dear. But here’s a piece of advice. You shouldn’t postpone things that cannot be avoided. So the sooner you bless me with a grandson, the better. I think you know what I mean.” He smiled as he spoke calmly, referring to the contract which bound me to go through hell.

I was a mess and visibly shaken. Even Catherine observed us from afar with wariness written all over her face. If Theodore hadn’t left me alone that very second, I would have had a panic attack right then and there in front of a crowd of the most prominent people in New York. Luckily, he took my uneasiness seriously and decided to get away from me.

“Have a nice evening and think about what I’ve told you.” He smiled with courtesy and left.

I needed to get out of there. Fighting my conscience in the process, I took another sip of wine and stumbled across the room, frantically searching my way towards the exit. The very second I left that crowded, smothering space and ended up in an empty hallway, I felt slightly relieved. I leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath of fresh air. After scarcely putting myself together, I headed towards the lavatory to freshen up.

As I was rushing through the hallway, I was surprised by the sight of Sebastian and Cora talking to each other, bathed in the semi-darkness. Sebastian’s hand was on her shoulder and they seemed to be so attached to each other that it hurt to watch. I paused for a moment, unsure of how I felt about the sight in front of me. Sebastian’s eyes pierced into mine as we exchanged knowing looks. He remained calm and he wasn’t even a bit upset by the fact that I had caught them together. On the other hand, Cora seemed to feel uncomfortable because I had accidentally stumbled upon one of their encounters again, so she looked away from me. The situation I found myself in was overwhelming and I needed to escape because I couldn’t let him witness my pain. I sighed, produced a shy smile on my lips and disappeared into the lavatory before giving them a chance to say anything.

Once I made it to my destination, I locked the door and leaned against it. One tear escaped my eyes, but I wiped it away, decisively holding back the rest of them. My body slid down the door until I was sitting on the floor with my knees drawn to my chest. I covered my face with my palms as the wave of emotions swept over me. I was terrorized by Theodore’s statement that Sebastian had told him we were trying to have a baby together. The realization that he was in love with Cora but still wanted to hold me accountable for signing that crazy agreement, broke my already battered heart. His empty words from the night before echoed in my mind. *Be at ease, I don’t want to cause you more harm.* It hurt so much. It hurt to think I was nothing but a pawn in his cruel game. I didn’t even realize that I was in there way longer than I should have been, until I heard knocks on the door. The woman on the

other side asked if I were alright. I quickly got up from the floor and I started panicking when I saw my reflection in the mirror. The misery was completely visible on my tired, pale face. I washed my face and opened the door because the woman kept on knocking.

“Oh my goodness!” She gasped in shock when she saw me. “Are you alright? I almost called for help. I thought you were injured or trapped in there.” She sounded upset.

Her presumption that I might have been injured wasn't far-fetched at all, but of course I couldn't have told her that. I had to transform into an A-star actress and pull out the act of my life.

“No, nothing like that happened. I'm fine.” I tried to sound calm and surprised at the same time. “Sorry to keep you waiting,” I said and walked away from her.

“But you don't look fine,” I heard her mumble perplexed and she remained standing next to the door observing my every move as I walked back into the dining room.

The choking pressure returned to my chest the moment I went back into that crowded room. Sebastian had finally decided to join his parent's celebration and he seemed to be engaged in a serious conversation with a few other businessmen who were standing around him. He glanced at me with a strange look on his face and he observed as I walked back to my place in the corner. His eyes lingered on me, but I wouldn't return his gaze. I despised him at that moment. I hated everything he had done and would do to me. His posture radiated power and fierce coldness, letting me know he didn't care if I hated him or not. At last, he took his eyes off of me and focused on his wealthy entourage.

I was lost in gloomy thoughts when somebody approached me from behind and squeezed my shoulders.

“Relax beautiful, I didn't mean to scare you,” Helen told me when she noticed I was startled by her action.

“Helen.” I let out a gasp of relief. “I thought you wouldn’t come. I was worried about you,” I told her when she sat next to me.

“I’m so sorry, Isabelle. I know I promised I would be here. I hope my family didn’t give you a lot of trouble.” Her face turned serious as she apologized.

“Don’t worry about it. What happened?” I asked without realizing it might have been inappropriate of me to interfere in something that probably wasn’t my concern.

She hesitated for a moment, looking at me warily like she didn’t know if she could trust me, but then she looked up at me with confidence glaring from her eyes.

“It’s complicated.” She sighed. “To make the long story short, Dianne and I... Well we don’t get along, like at all. And today she did something awful and I’ve had enough. I thought I wouldn’t attend the dinner because of her but Sebastian convinced me to come because of you.” She smiled and then frowned when she looked at my face. “Is everything okay?” She caught me off guard.

My eyes flew to Sebastian who looked our way every now and then. I swallowed my sadness and faced Helen again.

“Please, don’t ask.” I gave her a pleading look.

She stared at me knowingly, and gave me a hug that was filled with heartbreaking compassion. I appreciated her for giving me space and not pushing me to tell her why I was sad. Her support made me stronger and I was grateful she’d decided to come after all. But still, the fact that Sebastian had been the one who asked her to join me left me confused. Why would he go to the lengths of convincing Helen to keep me company? It didn’t make any sense, especially after everything that had happened.

“Mind if I join you ladies?” Dianne’s pretentious voice interrupted us.

Helen looked away from her and rolled her eyes, giving away how annoyed she was. Dianne was already tipsy, but that didn’t stop her from drinking the wine from the glass

she held in her shaky hand. She stood next to us, hovering above me like a hawk waiting for his prey to surrender. Sebastian was still glancing at us and when he noticed Dianne had joined us, he seemed upset.

“The dinner was lovely. Still, it could have been even lovelier if certain people hadn’t decided to show up. But what can you do?!” She gawked at Helen and giggled wickedly.

“I think you had too much to drink and it’s messing with your head, Dianne,” Helen seethed.

“Oh honey, don’t you worry about my state of mind. Even drunk, I am still beyond you and this sham of a girl who suddenly seems to think she’s a lady. You’ll never be more than white trash to us darling, no matter how hard you try.” She looked at me with contempt in her eyes.

“You’ve completely lost your mind. Leave her out of this, Dianne,” Helen said in a threatening voice.

If I had dared to react on Dianne’s provocation, I knew it would have resulted in a scene. I also knew that was exactly what she wanted so I decided to be the smarter person and let her continue with her ranting until she felt satisfied. Unfortunately, I wasn’t prepared for what would happen next. Dianne wouldn’t stop looking at me and it made me more nervous with each passing second. She narrowed her eyes and twisted her lips in a diabolical smile. Then, she came one step closer and her gaze trailed down my body.

“Hmm.” She inhaled deeply. “That’s a nice dress indeed.”

She smiled and then spilled the entire glass of wine on my dress, pretending it was an accident. I stood up, completely soaked in wine and shocked by what she had done. The moment I got up from the chair, Sebastian looked at me and started walking towards our table. He was absolutely furious, I just didn’t know with whom. Helen took a napkin and started rubbing it over my dress, trying to fix the damage Dianne had caused. Dianne acted like she was surprised by what had happened. She kept gasping and saying she’d tripped over my chair.

“How dare you? What the hell is wrong with you?” Helen attacked her furiously.

“I’ll take care of this, Helen.” Sebastian approached us and I knew that voice. *There would be hell to pay.*

People around us began paying attention to the scene and I saw Sebastian had that look on his face like he wanted to scream, but he leaned towards Dianne and whispered to her. Since I was standing right next to them, I managed to hear everything he said.

“Are you that stupid to think that getting drunk and creating scenes will help you deal with your marriage problems and that pathetic excuse you have for a husband?” His voice was cruel and venomous and I almost felt sorry for Dianne.

For the first time, I witnessed her being speechless and she didn’t have any mean comment she could pull out of her sleeve to get back at Sebastian. She just winced at his words and I realized the vicious woman who’d spilled an entire glass of wine on me in front of a room full of people was not only mean-spirited, but also deeply unhappy.

“Now, you will apologize to *my wife* and the rest of the guests. Then you’ll excuse yourself and go to sleep. You’ve done enough damage for one night!” Sebastian moved away after having said that, waiting for her reaction.

Dianne looked around the room and nervously shook one of her legs. Apologizing to someone was obviously beneath her. But Sebastian wouldn’t let her get away with it. He nudged her shoulder, encouraging her to get on with it. While she stalled with her apology, I scanned the room and all of the people who were staring at us. I noticed that Dianne’s husband, Caleb, wasn’t there. I had forgotten all about him because we’d never exchanged a single word, but now when I heard Sebastian talking about their marriage problems, I curiously searched for his face, but he wasn’t present. I felt a bit bad for Dianne, because it shed a whole new light to her behavior, but I still didn’t think she had the right to do what she had done. I was completely humiliated, because my face

was a mess from crying in the lavatory and I now reeked of wine like I was the biggest drunk in the world. What a glorious way to end the evening.

“Everybody,” Dianne finally decided to speak, “I’m sorry for this little accident which probably interrupted you. Isabelle...” She bit her tongue before turning towards me with a serpent-like smile glued to her face, “I do apologize for ruining your dress. It wasn’t *intentional*.” Her smile widened because both of us, as well as the entire room, knew she did it on purpose.

Sebastian’s eyes held my own with intensity. I knew what was expected of me so I nodded to show I accepted Dianne’s apology.

“Mother, Father,” a cynical smile appeared on her lips and she raised her empty glass like she wanted to make a toast, “congratulations on your thirtieth wedding anniversary. I hope you remain happy and grow old together. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” She stumbled out of the room and slammed the door behind her.

The guests remained quiet for a moment and then the inaudible flusters got louder, eventually echoing through the room again. Catherine excused herself as well and hurried towards the door. It was apparent she was going after Dianne.

“I can’t believe her,” Helen said to Sebastian after everyone had stopped looking at us.

Sebastian didn’t reply. He sighed and shook his head. His fury seemed directed towards Helen as well. Then he took hold of my hand, entwining our fingers and squeezing it at the first contact, as if he savored the moment. A gasp escaped my throat and the grip of his touch gradually subsided as he started leading me towards the door.

“We’re leaving,” he said to Helen while we were already walking.

She didn’t have any time to protest and I managed to wave at her shortly before we left. Sebastian seemed to be so

eager to leave his parents' home that I barely managed to keep up with him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When we got to the car, Sebastian suddenly stopped and turned towards me. The tension radiating off of him scared me because I remembered the warning he gave me before we attended the party. With every fiber of my being, I feared that he would hold me accountable for the incident with Dianne, even though we both knew it wasn't my fault. As he stepped towards me, I took a step back and he closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath before looking at me again. Surprisingly, although it was obvious that he wanted to come closer, he kept his distance.

“Are you okay?” he asked in a soft voice, looking at me like he truly cared.

His ability to convince me of the honesty of his intentions verged on ridiculous. If I hadn't had that conversation with Theodore earlier, I probably would have believed him. Despite the fact that I was anything but okay, I nodded my head and then quickly looked away from him, afraid that he would see the truth that reflected in my eyes. After contemplating my answer for several moments, to my relief, he chose to let it go. He released a nervous sigh, then opened the door of the car and told me to get in. His gaze lingered on me as I was getting inside and I could perfectly understand the message that was sent out when he closed the door, but still kept his eyes on mine. *I know you're not okay.*

Although Sebastian kept his emotional distance when he entered the car and started driving, I couldn't achieve peace of mind. Theodore's words still haunted me and I felt like the whole family, including my mother, waited for me to fulfill 'my duty', so everybody could get on with their lives. After everything this awful dinner and the event that lead up to it, I was simply defeated. Looking out the window, I cried silent tears and hoped he wouldn't catch a glimpse of it. But I had no

such luck. He noticed and it seemed to make him even more upset.

“If you are okay, then why are you crying?”

I didn't dare answer his question because I knew I was so close to breaking point and he was still filled with rage. I didn't want to agitate him further. It turned out my silence irked him all the same and I felt defenseless. It seemed I just couldn't win with him.

“Do you really think that ignoring me is a way to go, Isabelle?” He raised his voice.

I still didn't say anything. Instead, I looked out the window and let the tears fall without making a sound. He cursed under his breath and punched the wheel in anger. It was a light punch, but loud enough to get my attention. Finally, I acknowledged his unnerving presence by looking into those glowing eyes and I felt guilty because, once again, I was giving him the privilege of seeing my tears. Without hiding his annoyance, he rolled his eyes and shook his head at me.

“Will you stop crying? I'll buy you a new fucking dress,” he said in frustration, convinced that I was shedding tears over the ruined piece of expensive fabric I was wearing. It was unfortunate it got damaged, but the dress was the last thing on my mind at that moment.

“I don't want a new dress,” I said in a resigned voice.

He braked heavily, pulled over to the curb and abruptly undid his seatbelt. I was surprised by his action, to say the least, so I turned my head and simply looked at the road in front of me, all the while trying to bring my tears to a halt and pretend he wasn't staring at me like he was about to explode.

“What do you want then?” His voice was calm, but I could tell he was restraining himself from losing his temper.

The anger, fear and sadness I'd kept locked inside me for the past few months boiled over and I had to speak up, even if it meant he would kill me.

“I want hope. I want my life back!” I turned to face him and his ice cold, infuriated eyes scared me for a moment,

but I couldn't bottle up my emotions anymore. "Please, let me go. Give me a divorce." I tried to appear calm, but inside me there was a storm building its way out.

He looked away like he couldn't believe what I had asked him. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel before returning his gaze to me. There was something in his eyes, I couldn't determine what, but something had changed.

"I cannot let you go, Isabelle. I'm truly sorry about your situation, but I cannot help you." He shrugged, sealing my fate.

I raised my voice in an attempt to reason with him. "I will never fit in your world. You saw what happened tonight. You *have* to let me go."

"You don't have to fit in." He smirked in disbelief. "And if you want a divorce, you know what you have to do first." He glared at my teary eyes for a while like he was speechless and then he continued to explain the reason behind his ruthlessness. "Those are the terms that bind us. I wish you hadn't been treated badly tonight, but there was nothing I could do about it," he spoke in that soft voice again and I just wanted to scream and run away from him.

"Of course there was nothing you could, do because you chose to spend the entire evening with your lover and leave me in your family's clutches!" The words spilled out without thinking and terror gripped me when I noticed I'd succeeded in provoking him again.

"You have no idea what you're talking about. But hypothetically, let's say that she is my lover. Would my infidelity really bother you that much, when by the looks of it, you would rather die than let me touch you?" He looked disturbed, but the tone of his voice hadn't changed—it was still light and composed.

I froze, crossed my arms and pressed them firmly against my chest. My head fell down while I focused on my breathing. The terror he had instilled in me would never subside. He was right. I would rather die than have sex with him again. He touched my shoulder and I let out a shaky

breath, his presence causing an unpleasant shiver to rush me. Slowly, but without hesitation, he turned my face towards him. His mouth partially opened and he gazed at me at a loss for words, consumed by some kind of inner torture.

“I shouldn’t have said that. You have every right to be afraid.” It sounded like he was reprimanding himself. I closed my eyes and swallowed the growing lump of sadness, wanting to keep my pain to myself, but still two tears escaped my eyes and slid down my cheeks.

“Please, don’t cry.” The pleading softness of his voice traveled to me, and though I didn’t want to take comfort from his words, somehow they still held power over me, keeping my unshed tears at bay. “Whatever was supposed to happen between Cora and me is long gone. She is not my lover. I haven’t been unfaithful, Isabelle.” He arched his eyebrows to accentuate his last statement.

Convincing me of the truth of his words held great importance to him. As if we were in a real marriage. As if the fact that he hadn’t slept with Cora would fix anything.

“What makes you think that I *believe* you? Or even *care*?” I asked bitterly.

At first, I didn’t get any answer from him, and all we did was let our thoughts sink into the darkness that was at times interrupted by the lights of the passing cars.

“I know you don’t believe me and... I don’t expect you to *care*,” he said in defeat and put his seat-belt back on.

After his admission, we didn’t speak and the ride home went by in complete silence. The tension between us rose and I sensed there were so many things we wanted to scream at each other, but instead we kept it inside and didn’t say anything. When he disappeared into the walk-in closet, I went to the bathroom and took off my ruined dress. My skin felt itchy from the dampness of the wine and I smelled like I’d taken a bath in a wine barrel. After a quick shower, I returned to the bedroom where Sebastian already lay in the bed. It was

dark and he was asleep. Carefully, I walked over to the bed and lay down. I was exhausted and before I got a chance to reflect on anything that had happened, my eyes closed under the pressure of fatigue. The nightmare I had that night was by far the worst one yet.

A voice was pleading with me to wake up. I finally did and realized I was lying in a hospital bed with doctors surrounding me. I was weak and exhausted and I had no idea what was happening. One of the doctors handed me a bundle of blankets and I was surprised to see a little baby in it.

“Whose baby is this?”

The doctors looked at each other incredulously, and finally one of them stepped forward to clarify the situation.

“Mrs. Everett, this is your son. You’re probably still tired from the delivery, so it’s understandable that you feel a bit lost.”

Son? Confused, I glanced down at the face of the child I held in my arms, and a warm feeling enveloped my heart. Minutes passed when I heard Sebastian’s voice, demanding to see his son and chills ran up my spine. I started crying when I saw him standing above me, trying to take the baby that rested on my chest. I fought as the doctors around me tried to restrain me, but since I was one person against many, Sebastian had no difficulty taking the baby away from me. I begged him, pleaded him, not to do it. But he got what he wanted and marched towards the door and disappeared. I wanted to run after him, but they were holding me back. All I could do was scream from the top of my lungs and cry because the unimaginable had happened. Eventually, everything started fading away and I was dizzy, but my cries for help didn’t subside, even though I wasn’t in that hospital anymore. I was somewhere else, floating on thin air with somebody who tried to hold me and offer me comfort.

“Isabelle...” I heard the familiar voice calling me.

I woke up in Sebastian’s arms, covered in sweat and screaming like I was still trapped in my dream. I noticed he was startled as well, but I didn’t wait for him to react.

Instinctively, I got the strength to free myself from his grip and ran across the room to the door and into the hallway. Adrenaline carried my body through the house faster than ever. I managed to descend the stairs and run outside, but I was still no match for Sebastian who was calling my name and running after me. Before I managed to take a few steps on the driveway, his hand landed on my shoulder and stopped me from running. When I tried to get loose, I ended up kneeling on the cold ground, tearing up my knees on the sharp gravel. He knelt down beside me and wrapped his arms around me. Then he told me to calm down, but I wasn't about to give in.

“Let go of me!” I screamed at him, trying to get away from his grip, but it was impossible. “No. I don't want to be here. Let me go!” I finally stopped fighting him when I realized it only encouraged him to hold me tighter.

I closed my eyes and kept begging him to let me go. He pressed my head against his chest and started his usual procedure when I would have a terrible nightmare. He stroked my hair, caressed my face and spoke softly to me. That managed to affect me every single time because, apart from the moments when he would comfort me at night, he was nothing but cold and cruel towards me. I looked at him in despair because I couldn't handle his kindness.

“Shh, it will pass. Everything will be okay.” His voice was so convincing, so soothing—*so deceiving*.

“Please, I just want to g-go,” I said weakly, exposing the sadness in my eyes.

Not a single word crossed his lips. He gently ran his palm along my face and looked at me with emptiness glaring from his deep emerald stare. No matter how hard I tried, I knew I would never understand the motives that drove him to act a particular way. He was fighting something inside him, I could tell, but he was a man with a will made of steel and there was no way to evoke the real compassion within him.

“I cannot give you what you want, Isabelle. You should stop asking.” His voice was relentless.

“No.” I refused to accept this damned fate. “There has to be a way. Please,” I begged him.

“There is only one way,” he muttered as he lifted me up in his arms.

My heart sunk as I was still taken aback by the terrible dream I’d had. I closed my eyes, surrendering my weak body to his strong arms and let him carry me back. When he lowered me on the bed, I started waking up from the fatigue that took hold of me. I gradually opened my eyes and realized that he had brought me to the patio and not the bedroom like I had expected. In slow motion, my gaze wandered around the dark room, taking in the features of the space that surrounded me. Frantically, I searched for Sebastian, but he wasn’t there. I was alone. Fighting the urge to run away again, I lay motionlessly in the dark until I heard the approaching steps and a bright light filled the room. Sebastian walked in, wearing only his pajama bottoms and I was doing my best not to stare at his exposed, bronze chest. *Why did the devil have to be so beautiful?* As he got closer, I realized that he had a cup of steaming, hot tea in his hands. Before I got the chance to process the sight in front of me, he was already standing above me, his shadow hovering over my body. I looked away towards the window and let my thoughts sink into the black night. The sound of the cup touching the glass table got my attention and when my eyes settled on his captivating face, I remembered that night when I found him there with Cora. As if sensing my discomfort, he knelt down to my level and observed me vigilantly. After staring at me for a while, he handed me the cup of tea and sighed when he noticed I gaped at him warily.

“It’s just chamomile tea. I’m not trying to drug you, I want you to relax,” he said in a quiet voice. His gaze was persistent until I gave in and took a few small sips of the tea, but it didn’t help because there wasn’t any magic potion that could get me to calm down at that moment.

His eyes followed my shaky hand as I placed the hot cup back onto the table.

“We need to talk.” He was calm, but his voice wasn’t soft anymore. It was firm and authoritative.

I didn’t move or make a sound. I stiffened in anticipation because I didn’t know what to expect from him. *Maybe he would admit that he’s doing all of this to trick me into giving him a son.* As I trembled all over, I closed my eyes and willed myself to think about anything else except my nightmare, which was bound to come true, but the heartbreaking sadness I felt in the dream still ruled my mind. I felt his eyes on me and I shuddered when he tried to touch me. My frightened gaze met his decisive one as I desperately wanted to get inside his mind and read his thoughts. Instead, he read mine.

“I would never do that to you, Isabelle. I wouldn’t keep you away from your child,” he said in a low voice and I looked at him, confused and stunned at the same time. I opened my mouth in wonder, unsure of the words I wanted to say, but he spoke again before I even got a chance to express my turmoil.

“You were talking in your sleep. You begged me not to take away your son and swore that you would do whatever it takes if I showed you some mercy.” His voice broke and he closed his eyes. “Isabelle, I know that I hurt you badly, but I would never—” He stopped talking, like it was painful for him to finish the sentence.

I gazed at him, untrusting. I was sure it was a trick and that danger lurked right around the corner. I wouldn’t let him fool me. He explained his heartless intentions that day when I found the contract in his office.

“You said that you would get your son and I—”

“I know what I’ve said. You don’t need to remind me,” he interrupted me in a determined voice. “Those were nothing but empty threats. You have no reason to live in fear that your dream will come true. Having a baby isn’t something I will expect of you in the near future anyway.”

Liar! Liar! A sarcastic smile escaped my lips as I looked at him incredulously. This man thought I was a fool. I

was sick and tired of his lies and deceit.

“Theodore told me you courteously informed him that he can expect a grandson so please, don’t mock my intelligence with your false display of kindness.”

“There is no false display of kindness; I want to be kind to you!” he said firmly.

“No, you don’t!” My voice was shaking. “All you want to do is play your mind games. If you wanted to be kind to me, you would have given me a divorce because that is the only humane thing to do.”

He flinched, like my words had struck him, but even before he said anything, I knew that his standpoint on that matter was more than crystal clear. *No son, no divorce.*

“Is that why you were having the nightmare? Because my father told you he expected a grandson?” he asked, without commenting on my repeated demand for a divorce.

I closed my eyes while the memories of pain and humiliation returned to torture me. Sebastian observed me as I tried to keep my sanity intact. Then he sat next to me on the sofa, leaning his back on the soft pillows. Surprisingly, instead of coming closer, he moved away from me, keeping the space that was building the wall between us.

“Isabelle, my family can’t know. My father especially...” I cautiously looked towards him, wondering what he was talking about. “He can’t know I’m sparing you the responsibility of fulfilling the terms of that contract.”

For a second, I was taken aback by what he had told me, but I knew I needed to stay guarded. I couldn’t let him manipulate me.

“So that’s why you told him that he can expect a grandson? You must think I’m a complete idiot.” I laughed sarcastically, avoiding the urge to cry.

“I had to tell him what he wanted to hear because that was the only way I could protect you,” he asserted in a firm voice, looking at me like he was expecting a sign that I trusted him.

But I didn't trust him. How could I? The only thing that preoccupied my mind was the bitter truth that I was trapped in the middle of a cruel game that was being maneuvered by rich and powerful people; people who couldn't have cared less about my well-being. And the worst of it was that I didn't stand a chance against them. Sebastian could have feigned his concern for me all he wanted, but I knew him better than he thought. He wouldn't go to great lengths to protect me from harm—not when his hard-earned inheritance was at stake.

“Sooner or later they'll turn up the heat and you'll give them what they want. It's what you want as well,” I said with resignation.

Suddenly he denied me the privilege of keeping his distance and he pulled me towards him, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“No! No matter what, I give you my word that I'll be patient with you. I'll wait. I won't touch you until you tell me to.”

Honey talk, empty words, lies and deceit... but still, that sweet nectar coming from his lips was a poisonous cure to my broken heart. *If only it was real...*

“You won't wait forever,” I whispered, focusing my eyes on the darkness outside once again and I could see his baffled expression reflecting on the window. “I know about you and Cora.” I turned to him again. “Maybe she's not your lover, but she's the woman you want to be with. I know that she is the one you were supposed to marry and I'm standing in the way of your happiness. This supposed feeling of guilt you feel towards me will soon be overpowered by your love for her.” I didn't even blink as I confronted him with the truth. Tears threatened to come out, but I didn't divert my gaze.

He removed his hands from me and covered them over his face while taking a deep breath. When his green eyes peeked to the surface again, it was clear that mentioning Cora did something to him, and that it would have been better if I hadn't brought up her name.

“For heaven’s sake, how many times do I have to tell you that Cora bears no significance in all of this?”

“How could she bear no significance to your decisions when you’re in love with her?” I paused, observing his attempt to fool me with his stunned expression. “I’ve seen you kiss her that night and I heard everything you said to her right here in this very room. I met her at your parent’s house tonight and everything was crystal clear to me. I mean, she suits you in every way possible. She has both style and manners. I’m sure she wouldn’t embarrass herself with the wrong choice of cutlery. She is well educated and...”

“Don’t,” he stopped me. “I’m not in love with her. She is just a friend who is going through a tough time and what you saw that night was just two friends consoling each other. That kiss was the last thing I could give her to make her feel better. It was our goodbye.” He took a long pause. “I would never hurt you because of her.”

“What does it matter if it’s because of her, your family or whatever the reason? You *will* hurt me again, Sebastian. You’re only trying to put a bandage on a deeply cut wound by denying it.”

“Isabelle...” My eyes blinked rapidly, caught in his mesmerizing stare. “I told you I don’t mean to cause anymore harm. What do I have to do to get you to believe me?”

“Nothing you say or do can change the way I feel,” I said in a detached, quiet voice, wrapping my mind into a web of disturbing thoughts. “Maybe you don’t mean to do it, but I’m afraid you’ll cause a lot more harm than you think.” My voice cracked and I bit my lower lip to stop myself from whimpering, but it didn’t help, because silent tears started streaming down my face like they would never come to an end.

“No, Isabelle!” he cursed and wiped away the evidence of my sadness. “No more pain,” he whispered, suddenly pulling me into a tight embrace.

At first I wanted to deny the solace he offered me, telling him harshly that I didn’t want him to touch me. But he

sensed that I ached for comfort, and he patiently waited for me to yield to him. I needed some kind of shelter, even if it meant I had to submit to the man who had destroyed me without a shred of mercy. He wrapped his arms around me and laid my tired head on his chest. I absorbed the warmth of his muscles as his tender touch traveled across my body, leaving a soothing trail which brought the strange feeling of sudden peace to my mind. He spread light kisses over my forehead and my temple, kissing away the tears that kept falling. The calmness he had provided me with had a temporary healing effect and though I wouldn't allow myself to believe a word he said, I melted when he whispered to me.

“Don't be afraid of me.” He tried to reassure me, like he knew I needed something to hold onto. “I'll give you time. All the time you need. Close your eyes and go back to sleep. It will get better, I promise. No more pain, Isabelle. I will never hurt you again.”

I gave in to the melancholy of the moment, thinking how ironic it was that it seemed he would have said anything except the words I needed to hear. The simple words I suddenly imagined him saying: *I'm sorry. Please, forgive me...* As I drifted to sleep, I realized that he would never swallow his pride. He was Sebastian Everett. He didn't believe in remorse. He would never look me in the eyes and simply admit the wrongness of his actions.

Chapter Twenty-Three

In the early morning, when the light breeze coming from the opened window invited my eyes to open in semi-darkness, I realized that I wasn't in the patio anymore. Somehow, I'd ended up back in the bedroom. The last thing I remembered was falling asleep in Sebastian's arms, but he wasn't beside me anymore. I looked around for a while, slowly realizing that I was alone. His promises, kind words of reassurance and the tenderness he treated me with came back to haunt me. *Maybe it had all been a dream?* Trying to shed some light onto the gap in my memory, I got up and walked to the window. It was still early and the sun wasn't up yet, so I could let my thoughts sink into the soothing tranquility brought about by the birth of a new day. I was tired, but I couldn't sleep anymore and sudden desire filled my heart as my eyes fell on the drawer I hadn't opened in a long time. My lips twisted in a smile when I pulled it out and looked at the notebook with my unfinished story. After a long time, I felt like I wanted to write again, even though I wasn't sure how the story would progress. All I knew was that I needed some kind of distraction from everything that had happened. I had to gather my thoughts and try to forget about Sebastian's comforting words. Deep down, I knew I had to find a way to keep my distance and stay guarded because trusting him was extremely dangerous.

I picked up a pen and the notebook, put on some clothes and decided to go out and enjoy the sunrise. Absolute silence ruled the house and I moved around as quietly as I could, trying not to make a sound. When I got to the patio, I was welcomed by the unexpected sight of Sebastian sleeping peacefully on the sofa. My gaze lingered on him for a short while and I couldn't help but think that he looked so innocent, so harmless like he wouldn't hurt a fly. The famous saying that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover sprang to my mind.

The beautiful features of his face caught my attention and I observed him studiously. He looked like the prince from a fairytale and even the charming heroes from my imagination weren't as handsome as the man in front of me. His beauty was surreal, but then again, so was the cruelty of his heart.

His body moved on the sofa, causing me to divert my gaze from him and focus on the glass coffee table instead. The cup of chamomile tea he had made for me was still there, a reminder that none of it had been a dream. He had actually held me in his arms, whispering reassurances and sweet nothings to me. He had actually made me question my sanity, pulling me way deeper than I was willing to go; asking much more than I was able to give.

The squeaky sound of the leather, caused by his twisting and turning, caught my attention and my eyes returned to him. As the sun started rising up, illuminating his face, I couldn't believe that someone could be so deceptively beautiful on the outside, yet so frighteningly dangerous on the inside.

Not wanting to wake him up, I walked on my toes and sneaked out into the garden, carefully closing the door behind me. The fresh air of the summer morning and the warm feeling of sun on my skin, made me feel at ease as I walked up to the swing chair. Instead of worrying my mind with troubling thoughts, I felt humbled and small before the power of the world that surrounded me, and it encouraged me to open my notebook and spread the inspiring words over its pages. I made my wounded heroine fight for herself and I gave her hope. Just like the character from my story, I had decided—even if it was only temporary—to return to the moment when I was a hopeless dreamer who believed in happy endings. I kept writing for a long time and I had no idea how late it was or if someone was looking for me. Strangely, I didn't care. I simply wanted to enjoy the moments of peace and find pleasure in doing what I loved to do. I was so focused on the progressive storyline I was creating, that I didn't pay any attention to my surroundings.

Suddenly, I heard a strange noise and my first thought was that Sebastian came to look for me, but when I looked around there was nothing there; only the sound of the summer breeze that flew through the numerous branches of the trees. Convinced that I must have imagined it, I confidently returned to my writing. And there it was again; that unusual sound that kept coming from somewhere behind me, but it wasn't the trees, nor the summer breeze. I turned around to determine the source of the noise, but again, there was nothing.

“You can pretend that you don't see me, but I'm right here, Mrs. Gold digger!” A familiar voice startled me and I broke out in a cold sweat when I connected that voice to a face.

With reluctance, I looked up and was astonished by what I saw. Teresa stood right in front of me, but she was a shadow of her former self. In the few weeks since she had been fired, she'd started resembling an apparition. Her skin was pale and her cheeks had sunk in so much that her cheekbones showed through her skin. When I looked at her thin waist, I gulped from the shock. It was obvious that she probably hadn't eaten for days.

“Teresa,” I whispered.

Her body was shaking and she looked distressed. She glared at me with a hostile expression on her face and I feared she wasn't in her right mind. I wondered why she had returned and how she managed to get past the security gate.

“What are you looking at?” she yelled at me, her voice giving away how unstable she was.

“Nothing, I... I was just wondering if you were alright. You look like you might need some rest.” I spoke in a calm voice, but I was shaken to my core

“What would I rest from? I don't work anymore, remember?” she spoke in an angry tone.

“I'm sorry about that, Teresa. I swear I didn't mean to get you fired. I tried to talk to Sebastian, but he—”

“He doesn’t love you, you know. He will never love you. But that doesn’t concern you at all, doesn’t it? Because all you want is his money. You mean nothing to him. Nothing!” She spat out her insults and laughed wickedly.

Despite the fact that I knew she wasn’t in her right mind, her words hit me right where it hurt because she made an excellent point. There wasn’t even a shred of love between Sebastian and me, and the soil it could have grown on had been destroyed right at the beginning of our marriage.

“Teresa, please,” I spoke softly. “I think you should leave.” I tried to reason with her.

“I’m not going anywhere. Not until you pay for what you’ve done to me!” She looked at me with her dark eyes.

“I didn’t mean to do anything to you. I told you I was sorry.” My voice wasn’t calm anymore.

She didn’t reply. Her hand slid in her pocket and she pulled out a knife with a long sharp blade. My eyes widened in horror. She had gone completely mad and I was trapped in the most remote part of the garden where no one would see me or hear my screams. I got up and started moving away from her, because I had no idea what she would do.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it. *You* got me fired. *You* took everything away from me and now I’m going to teach you a lesson and show you how much it hurts!” she said enraged, pointing the knife at me.

I didn’t know what to do. Fighting her wasn’t an option and I didn’t dare to run because I feared she would catch up with me and stab me in the back. I lifted up my hands in a pathetic attempt to defend myself against her attack.

“Teresa, please. You don’t have to do this. If you hurt me, they will know you were the one who did it. You will go to jail for a long time.” I fought to get her out of the delirium she was trapped in.

“Do you honestly think I care about that?” She laughed, showing me the enjoyment of terrorizing me overpowered her common sense.

“Please, just leave now. I won’t tell anybody. I promise.” My voice shook and I was fully prepared to fight her.

My heart pounded and terror twisted my stomach as I observed the sharp blade. She looked at me like I was her prey. Like she wanted to destroy me. Knowing she would swing that knife at me in a matter of moments, I decided to take my chances and started running away from her. She seemed to be all too pleased that I gave her a chance to chase me, and though I tried to run as fast as I could, her rage enabled her to catch me. A frightening scene straight out of a horror movie played out right in front of me as she sat on my stomach trying to aim the knife straight towards my heart. I firmly grabbed her hand and the only thing I could think about was that I couldn’t let go of it no matter what. I used all of my strength to finally get her off of me and I started running. She followed immediately and once again she had almost caught up with me, but in the last moment she slipped on the wet grass and fell to the ground. This was my one and only chance to escape from her. My whole body shook as I ran and screamed for help from the top of my lungs.

Just as the last traces of my energy were about to give way, I saw him in the distance and a strange feeling of safety streamed over my weak body, like he was my hero, and not a villain who had shattered my heart. For the first time ever, I was thrilled to see Sebastian and I ran straight towards him, almost passing out into his arms while seeking his protection.

“Easy, easy,” he whispered and held me by the shoulders to stop me from falling to the ground.

With surprising caution, he wrapped his arms around me and gazed at me confused, when he didn’t have to pull me into his embrace. For the first time, I was the one who came closer, craving his solace and protection. He seemed to be stunned by my reaction to him, but then again, so was I.

“Isabelle?” He tilted up my chin and looked at me in confusion. “What’s wrong? Why were you screaming?” He seemed worried, but I was still so shocked by my near death experience that I couldn’t say a word. I just looked at him, too

frightened to speak. “Isabelle!” He shook me to startle me from my trance. Then his eyes narrowed as he saw something that took him by surprise. “What the...” I heard him say in a rough voice and I turned around and noticed Teresa was limping towards us. The knife was still in her hand.

“Isabelle, look at me!” His assertive voice caught my attention and I gaped at him in wonder and fright. “You have to calm down. I won’t let anything happen to you. Breathe!” His eyes kept turning towards Teresa who was getting closer and closer and I could tell he was getting upset even though he tried to keep the impression of patience. His eyes widened while he spoke to me, still trying to get me to react. “Listen to me. You’ll be fine. Go inside and call the police. No matter what, *don’t* come back here. Do you understand?”

As he gazed at me expectantly, I could feel the pressure that rushed through him and the moment I nodded, he let go of me and started running towards Teresa. I wanted to run as well, but I was still paralyzed from fear and I needed a few seconds to calm down. Completely helpless, I watched as he approached her and tried to get her to give him the knife.

“Drop the knife!” I heard him yell at her authoritatively, but she wasn’t intimidated by him.

She started crying and I heard her whisper something to him, but I couldn’t understand what. Sebastian dismissed whatever she told him, called her crazy and grabbed her hand, ordering her once again to drop the knife. In a rush of adrenaline, I finally gained enough strength and ran towards the house.

“Anne! Anne!” I yelled her name when I noticed she was standing by the entrance.

“Isabelle, what happened? Why are you yelling?” She asked in surprise, but then lowered her voice. “Sebastian is working from home today. You should keep it down.” Apparently, I wasn’t the only person in that house who feared him.

“Anne, T-Teresa...” I tried to fight my panic and get the words out. “Teresa attack... attacked me with a knife.”

“What? Are you alright?” Her face went pale and she started breathing nervously. “We have to tell Sebastian.”

“No, Sebastian is with her in the garden. We have to call the police.”

Anne had already started walking, but stopped when she realized I still hadn't told her everything.

She was beside herself, looking around for a few seconds until she managed to calm down and look at me again. “Isabelle, go upstairs. It's not safe for you to be here.”

“But, I-I need to c-call...” I let out a gasp because it was getting harder and harder for me to speak.

“I'll call the police. You are in no state to talk to anybody.” Anne decided as she hurried to the phone and when she saw that I was still frozen in the same spot, she did what she had never done before. “Go!” She raised her voice at me and I finally did as I was told.

I went back to the room, feeling both exhausted and terrified after everything I went through that day. The first thing I did was walk to the window. Filled with anxiety, I waited to see what would happen. With everything in me, I feared that the police wouldn't arrive in time. The worry was eating me alive, but to my absolute relief, their car pulled up in the driveway shortly after. Two policemen ran towards the house and I remained waiting next to the window, but for so many long minutes nothing happened. Then, just as I was getting ready to dismiss Anne's warning and go back downstairs, I saw the police officers taking Teresa towards the car. Sebastian walked behind them and his rage was apparent as he threw insults at her. Teresa turned around and I could see she was handcuffed. Not a single word crossed her lips as she gazed at him with a sad, broken expression on her face. There were tears in her eyes and I couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Still, her actions were horrific and she deserved to be punished

for them. I watched as the police car sped off out of the driveway, but I wasn't rewarded with the feeling of relief. If anything, when the police left and Sebastian looked towards the window where I was standing, the suffocating feeling of worry rushed right back to me as our eyes met, because I had no idea what he was thinking or how he felt after what happened in the garden.

Instead of going downstairs, like they probably expected me to, I headed for the shower because I wanted nothing more than to wash away the dirt that had clung onto my body when I was fighting Teresa, and forget about the fact that I could have been killed. However, forgetting something like that was anything but easy. As I showered, I couldn't stop glancing towards the door. I still felt threatened by her and I kept thinking that she might come back.

Still in a daze, I left the bathroom with nothing but a towel wrapped around me and when I saw Sebastian standing in the room, I froze, realizing what a terrible idea it had been. Instinctively, I pressed the towel against my body as hard as I could and his lips curved into a light smile when he saw me do that. I'd felt protected in his arms after Teresa had attacked me. There was no fear, only the warmth and the solace of his embrace. Now that we were alone in the room, I was vulnerable again. His eyes roamed the length of my body, making me feel terribly nervous and exposed. I realized that the reaction I had when I saw him in the garden didn't change anything. The attention he paid to me was still very unwanted, still unpleasant. I just wanted him to look away and... *he did*.

"Teresa is gone." He looked down and then said softly. "I'm sorry about what happened."

Stunned by his unexpected words, I finally managed to say something. "It... It wasn't your fault," I whispered.

He came closer and I flinched away from him. I knew he wouldn't hurt me, not after what had just happened, but subconsciously I was still frightened of what he might do to me—and knowing that the only barrier that kept him from

seeing me naked was a towel enhanced my fear. He seemed to be surprised by my reaction, like he hadn't expected me to be afraid of him. Reluctantly, he stepped away from me and his eyes closed for a moment as if he wanted to hide whatever bothered him.

When he opened them again, they looked straight into mine. "Are you okay?"

I was disarmed by the way he looked at me, accentuating the words he had just spoken with traces of genuine concern.

In the burning need to hide from his piercing stare, I looked down for a moment and that was when I noticed he had a cut on his arm. *Teresa had cut him!* A gasp of surprise left my body as anger and worry consumed me and I wondered why I suddenly felt empathy towards him. Anyone else in my situation would have been overjoyed to see him in pain, but I couldn't bring myself to be that mean. The fact that Teresa had cut him because he was defending me didn't leave me indifferent either. Of its own accord, my hand reached towards him and I gently ran my fingers around his injured flesh. Then I looked up at him, suddenly letting go of my gloomy thoughts.

"I'm fine. But you—you are hurt. Why didn't you let them take care of your cut?"

While I addressed my concern, his eyes gazed at me with unusual warmth and the realization of my action hit me. *Oh my God, I touched him!* I quickly let go of his hand, acting as if I had been burned by the raging fire and he seemed to be amused by my reaction.

Gradually, the loud beating of my heart rose all the way to my ears and as my self-consciousness started working against me, it was getting hard for me to breathe. While I tried to inhale harsh, nervous breaths, the redness of shame spread all over my face and he wouldn't stop smiling. I gulped, once again clenching hard onto the towel and I noticed that the light in his eyes slowly subsided until it was gone and replaced by

another emotion, far more earnest and darker than the one before.

“It’s nothing, Isabelle. A little alcohol for disinfection and it will pass.” He sighed and interrupted me when I parted my lips to protest, though I was sure I still couldn’t speak. “Don’t worry about it. Get some rest; I have to get back to work.” He gently caressed my burning cheek and left the room. He knew how much his presence disturbed me.

I remained standing at the same spot after he left, wondering about the inexplicable feeling of compassion he had managed to awake in me.

Sebastian came to the bedroom quite late, but I still wasn’t asleep. I kept the lamp on the nightstand on, because images of Teresa holding a knife above me wouldn’t disappear. He approached me with caution, looking at me as though he knew I was still frightened of everything that had transpired. When he sat on the bed next to me, he looked away and I couldn’t help but mentally scowl at myself for feeling guilty because of what had happened to him.

“Does it hurt?” I asked in a soft voice and now I felt guilty because I openly demonstrated my concern for him again.

“No, it’s nothing. It will heal,” he reassured me as his eyes returned to me and his face settled into a boyish, almost innocent expression.

Mysteriously, a strong desire to help him wouldn’t leave me alone and I wanted to nurture him like he had nurtured me when I was burning up with fever. I knew it wasn’t a good idea, but he looked like he truly needed someone and I wasn’t made of stone. No matter how hard I tried to tell myself he didn’t deserve my empathy, I couldn’t bear to see him like that.

“Can I help you take care of it?” I blushed and looked away because I wasn’t used to sharing any kind of closeness with him.

A light smile curved his lips and he looked at me with that same disarming warmth glaring from his eyes. Curiosity about his behavior worried my mind with hundreds of questions. *Where did the arrogant man, who'd humiliated me and hurt me without showing the slightest trace of mercy, disappear to?* I didn't know if his darkness lurked in the background, but I hoped he would manage to restrain it for the rest of the night.

"You can rub some alcohol on it. It's in the medicine cabinet. Just look for Isopropyl," he said quietly, snapping me out of my thoughts.

With a sudden need to create some distance between us, I quickly went to the bathroom, opened the medicine cabinet and looked for the label that said *Isopropyl*. When I managed to find it after long seconds of searching, I took a piece of cotton wool and composed myself before going back into the room. The first thing I noticed when I walked inside was Sebastian's clothes, spread on the table across from the bed. I gulped as I turned to face him. His eyes were closed and I thought he had fallen asleep already. When I got into the bed, his eyes opened abruptly and he stretched his arm towards me, waiting for me to rub the alcohol on his wound. At first, I hesitated, but then I noticed the sign of approval in his green beaming eyes.

Nevertheless, I was terribly nervous because I was about to consciously touch him for the first time ever. He had touched me so many times, but I had never dared to lay a finger on him. In fact, the thought had never occurred to me because of the terror I felt whenever he was around.

Trying to pretend that I wasn't fazed with what I was about to do, I applied some alcohol on the cotton wool and lifted up his arm. For some reason, I couldn't make eye contact with him, so I looked away and my cheeks reddened with some kind of inexplicable shame like I was doing something that was wrong and forbidden. A cynical smile appeared on my lips for a short moment because I thought how absurd it was to feel so confused about touching the man who was my husband. When I pressed the cotton wool against his

cut, he tensed. It had to have caused him pain and I knew for a fact that it burnt like hell, but he remained still and didn't make a sound. Luckily, the wound wasn't deep, so there was little chance of inflammation or infection, but it still looked quite painful to me. When I was almost done, he made me look at him and the blush on my cheeks deepened even more.

"Thank you," he whispered softly.

"You're welcome," I said in one breath, gaping at him.

I realized I was still holding onto his hand, even though I wasn't rubbing any alcohol on his cut, so I swiftly let go of it. He wouldn't take his eyes off of me and it made me nervous. I felt exposed, like he could see right through me, like he could reach into my mind and see exactly what I was thinking.

"There's something I need to tell you." He broke the awkward silence and I looked at him in anticipation. "I'm leaving on a business trip to Las Vegas tomorrow and I want you to join me."

I exhaled, my eyes widening in shock and he silently observed my reaction to his blunt demand.

"But...Why?" I couldn't shake off the scary feeling of mistrust.

"There will be a fundraiser in the evening and I want my wife to accompany me. Why is that so weird?" he whispered his question, acting like it was perfectly normal for him to seek my company.

"Because you have never wanted me to accompany you before," I said and looked away from him.

"But I want you to accompany me *now*." His voice was decisive, letting me know he probably wouldn't give me any choice in the matter.

"I... I don't want to go," I said insecurely and he sighed, displeased by my defiance.

"Do you mind telling me why?" he asked in his falsely composed voice.

“I’m...” I closed my eyes, trying to hide my discomfort from him. “It’s just that I’m afraid of... f-flying.”

It wasn’t a complete lie, I did feel uncomfortable in a plane and if I could get a chance to avoid flying, I would definitely take it, but there were other things that worried me a lot more than that—like being completely alone with him in an unfamiliar city where I didn’t know a living soul.

“I’m pretty sure it’s something else you’re afraid of.” A contour of a smile twitched the edge of his lips as he gave me a knowing look but when he saw my fearful reaction, his teasing had subsided and he became serious. “You’re that scared of me, huh?” It was a rhetorical question, one he already knew the answer to. “Rest assured, Isabelle. There is nothing I could do to you in Las Vegas that I couldn’t do right here in this room.” I flinched and tried to move away from him but he gently held me by my arm to stop me. “Don’t. I made you a promise, so there is no reason for you to fear this trip. It’s just a fundraiser; no big deal.” His eyes looked straight into mine, but I still couldn’t determine if he was telling the truth.

“If it’s not a big deal, then why do I have to attend?” I asked the obvious.

He stared at me for a while, like he contemplated something in his mind. “Isabelle, don’t fight me on this. You’re going. It’s not negotiable,” he said firmly, but after a moment, his expression softened. His hand cupped my chin and he brushed his thumb along my cheek. “Relax and go to sleep. You have my word that there is no need to be afraid,” he said in a whisper and when he realized I wouldn’t say a word, he sighed and switched off the light, leaving us in darkness.

I turned my back to him and tensed up, wondering why on earth he would want to take me on a trip with him so eagerly—and it wasn’t just about the trip. He said he wanted us to attend a fundraiser together and it didn’t make any sense. Just a few days ago he was nervous about us attending the dinner at his parent’s house because he was afraid I would embarrass him and suddenly he had no problem with taking me to something as formal as a fundraiser. Events like these

were a big deal in the rich people's world. What puzzled me even more was that Sebastian had shown me that he was ashamed of me on numerous occasions and yet, even though nothing had changed, he wanted to present *me*—the wife who was beneath him, to his work associates. There had to be some hidden motive behind this. I knew he was a master of deception. I knew the probability that he tried to manipulate me was a lot higher than the chance that he actually wanted to make things better between us.

I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and focused on the darkness of night to keep my mind from thinking about Sebastian's sinister plans, the wedding night horror or the sharp blade of the knife that aimed to kill me that day.

Chapter Twenty-Four

As the plane started taking off, I clenched my fists in an attempt to fight the anxiety. Just like the few previous experiences in a plane, this one was quite unnerving as well. The plane had to have belonged to the Everett family because it was decorated in sheer luxury. There were two flight attendants who accompanied us, to cater to our needs. Sebastian didn't really care about my fear of flying because he was too busy managing all sorts of business phone calls, and when he wasn't talking on the phone, he was typing on his laptop. I wondered where he found the energy to fulfill all the things on his busy schedule. His persistence was the one thing I both admired and feared about him. One of the attendants noticed how anxious I was, so he offered me a glass of wine, which I refused. Only when the pilot announced that we were landing did I manage to relax a little. It was already dark outside and I dared to peek through the small window. I was amazed by the megalomaniac skyscrapers and buildings that seemed to be even more imposing than those in New York. The skyline of Las Vegas was magnificent with all the shining lights illuminating the sky.

When we landed, Sebastian was still on the phone, raging about some kind of a business deal gone wrong. He got up and started walking towards the exit, motioning his eyebrows towards me to let me know that I should follow him. After six hours of flying, I left the plane in a daze, confused and exhausted. Soon after the procedural things were taken care of, we got in the back seat of an SUV and headed towards our hotel, or so I supposed. Sebastian continued his annoying business conversation and I wished he'd stop yelling for at least a moment. Tired of listening to his raging, I shut out and focused all my attention on the glaring lights and the exciting night life of the city I'd never got to visit before, and had it not been for Sebastian's fundraiser, probably never would have.

Not even once had he glanced outside the window to observe the lights of one of the most famous cities in the world. On the contrary, he seemed to be completely uninterested and he looked like nothing could impress him.

When the car stopped in front of our five-star hotel, Sebastian finally decided to greet the person he had on the line and ended the call. Without saying a word, he got out of the car and I followed him inside. The moment we walked into the hotel, the feeling of uneasiness washed over me. When we approached the hotel reception and Sebastian got the key to our room, a scary flashback appeared before my eyes and sheer terror crept up my bones again.

“Come,” he said quietly and held me by my elbow.

We walked towards the elevator and when he led me into that tight space, I experienced an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. I looked up at him, trying to decipher his facial expression, but there were no emotions visible on his features—just his cold, mysterious mask. A nervous shiver twisted my stomach, and when the elevator door opened, I hesitated, because another scary image flashed through my mind. I remembered our wedding night and how I had fearfully followed him through the hallway, stumbling on my wedding dress. Fear gripped me as he led me through the hallway again, and the moment we reached the door to our room, a series of frightening memories attacked my mind and I knew I was bound to have a panic attack. He unlocked the door, and just like on our wedding night, motioned for me to go in first. With every step, my breathing became more rapid and when my eyes stilled on the bed in the middle of the room—it was too late for me to pull myself together. Violent shivers ripped through my body as everything he had done to me became real again. I felt the color drain from my face and when I heard his steps behind me, hysteria took over and a violent tremor ripped through my insides. I looked around, searching for the bathroom door and when I spotted it, I ran straight inside. I heard Sebastian’s confused voice calling after me, but I had no time to reply. I knelt next to the toilet, leaned above it and started throwing up. Sebastian rushed into the bathroom right after me and he seemed to have been shocked by what he had

seen. Food kept coming out and I was sure the exhausting convulsions that twisted my stomach would never come to an end. Humiliation crept over me when he knelt beside me and lifted my hair with his hands. I tried so hard to stop, but my tortured body wasn't ready to leave me at peace yet. He kept stroking my hair and telling me to relax. After another ten minutes went by and I threw up two more times—with Sebastian right by my side—I finally felt my physical torment was over, but the torment of my complete emotional humiliation was only just beginning. My drained body leaned on the toilet seat and I had no intention to look at him. When I stilled and realized what had just happened, heavy emotions came to the surface and tears of disgrace started dwelling in my eyes.

“Isabelle,” he said in the gentlest whisper I had ever heard, but I still didn't dare face him.

He continued stroking my hair and caressing my trembling body while I wept like nothing in this world could console me. He wrapped his arms around me and started pulling me away from the toilet and into his strong embrace.

“N-no, don't.” I started panicking because I didn't want him to see me.

He sat on the floor and leaned against the wall without letting me escape from his possessive grip. Vomit was smeared all over my chin and I tried to hide my face from him, but he wouldn't allow it. He reached over to the sink to get to the roll of toilet paper and he wiped away the vomit from my face. Then it hit me. The arrogant perfectionist, Sebastian Everett, was wiping away the sticky vomit from my face. Undoubtedly, he was disgusted with me. Apart from that night when he'd raped me, this had to be the most embarrassing experience in my life. A choked sob escaped my throat as I desperately tried to shield myself away from him, but I was no match for his strength. To my complete astonishment, he started rocking me in his arms, all the while caressing my hair and deeply flushed cheeks.

“It's okay. Don't cry. Tell me what's wrong,” he whispered and lifted up my face.

His eyes gazed at me with unexpected compassion and I was cornered into admitting my fear to him. I didn't want to speak while he looked at me. I couldn't imagine how awful my breath must have been, but surprisingly, he didn't seem to mind. However, I did. It bothered me tremendously and it made me even more vulnerable. I turned my head away from him, anticipating he would fixate my gaze on him at any moment, but he didn't. He patiently waited for me to say something.

"I..." I tried to speak, but my lips started shaking. "I ate something bad," I mumbled, hoping he would accept my explanation.

"You ate something bad?" He sighed. "And that's why you're crying and shaking like you're about to die?"

I closed my eyes tightly and fresh tears rolled down my cheeks. *Why wouldn't he just leave me alone?* I couldn't tell him the truth, and I doubted he wanted to hear it.

"I didn't forget my promise. I told you that I wouldn't push you to be intimate with me and I won't," he spoke in a soft, steady voice.

"Then why... why am I here?" I dared to utter the burning question.

"You are here because I want you to be here. I want your company."

"You've never wanted my company before," I said almost accusingly.

"Isabelle..." He gasped loudly which was an obvious sign of irritation. "After everything that happened with Teresa I couldn't leave without you and I really *do* want you to accompany me to the fundraiser tomorrow." He looked at me with intensity.

"I don't believe you," I muttered and looked away.

He sighed. "I know, but I hope you're aware that if I wanted to fuck you, I could have done it back home. I didn't have to drag you all the way to Las Vegas to get you to perform your marital duties."

I tensed up in his arms because the terms *'fuck you'* and *'marital duties'* made me feel cheap and dirty. He had to have felt it because he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, tightening his grip around me.

“What I meant to say,” his voice went from rough to soft in a second, “was that there is nothing for you to fear.”

I begged to differ because I didn't trust him and in my mind I had every reason to fear him. Instead of reacting on his gentle reassurances, I lowered my gaze and numbly stared at the tiled floor. He cleared his throat, warning me that he was still there, but I chose to pretend that he wasn't. I rested in his arms motionlessly, feeling exhausted and ashamed. After a while, his hand found my scalp, and started a series of familiar strokes along the tangled strands of my blond hair. My eyelids succumbed to his calming fondle and covered my eyes. The only sense I had left was the feeling of his touch and the smell of his cologne which, surprisingly, didn't scare me anymore. I realized that his cologne didn't trigger the bad memories because it wasn't the same scent from before. For some reason, he'd changed it and I counted my blessings because bearing with the images that would always emerge when I inhaled that scent would have been the end of me at that moment.

I cringed when his hand traveled along my face all the way down to the collar of my shirt. When he touched the top button, every hair on the back of my neck stood up.

“Relax,” he said in a whisper. “You have to get out of these clothes and have a bath.”

The fact that he wanted to take off my clothes sent me in a state of complete shock. When he twisted his fingers to unbutton that first button on my shirt, every fiber of my being became alarmed and I caught his palm to stop him. Aggressive shivers took complete control of my body again and my teeth chattered when I tried to tell him I didn't want him to undress me.

“Don't.” A silent plea escaped my lips.

He removed his hand from my shirt and placed it on my trembling chin. His fingers brushed along my lips and then he made me look at him.

“Isabelle, you have to take off your dirty clothes and clean up. Right now, you are too weak, but it has to be done, so you’re going to have to let me do it,” he reassured me.

“No. You said you wouldn’t hurt me. You promised,” I said desperately, still denying his request.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Trust me... at least a little bit.” He tried to convince me, but he didn’t understand the depth of my despair.

“I c-can’t... Please.” I felt the fire burning my cheeks.

He gave me a knowing look and it only made me blush deeper.

“Hey,” he started whispering again. “There’s no need to be ashamed. I am your husband. It’s okay.”

I winced when I heard him say that, and when he noticed he had scared me, an apologetic expression graced his face.

“Don’t be alarmed, I have already promised I wouldn’t touch you.”

“I don’t want you to s-see me naked.” I looked at him pleadingly, remembering his words from long ago.

A husband and wife don’t hide from each other.

He stared at me for a while like he was trying to make some kind of a decision in his mind.

“Then I won’t look. I give you my word.” He fixated his eyes on mine and his hand reached for the button on my shirt again. I froze. “I won’t take my eyes away from yours, okay?” he asked in a quiet voice and patiently waited for my permission.

After moments of hesitation, I offered him a light nod and he looked at me with compassion, like he knew how difficult it was for me to trust him and let him do this. While

he unbuttoned my shirt, his eyes never once broke the gaze shared between us. My breathing became shallow, because I expected him to break his promise, but he was determined not to look away. He pulled my arms out of the sleeves and then reached towards my shoes. He removed them in one swift move and I knew he would take off my pants next. I flinched and held my breath, causing him to pause in the middle of his movement when he touched the zipper.

“It’s alright. I won’t look,” he said convincingly.

He didn’t continue until I managed to calm down and draw in a steady breath. While he unzipped my pants and started lowering them down, his other hand returned to my hair and he repeatedly brushed his fingers along the tip of my forehead. He slowly made me sit upright so that he could pull the pants from my legs and I closed my eyes, breaking our gaze, when the shameful realization that I sat in his lap almost naked settled in my mind.

“Look at me.” I heard his silent plea.

I opened my tired eyes and gazed at him mistrustfully. I tensed up when his hand reached behind to my back and undid my bra. The image from the wedding night sprang to my mind. At first I clenched my arms around the bra, afraid to let it fall down, but after he gave me some time to come to terms with it, his warm expression disarmed me and I gradually relaxed and allowed him to take it off. The moment I lost the protection of the fabric, my arms wound up wrapped around my exposed chest. A light smile appeared on Sebastian’s face, probably because I was blushing, but I couldn’t help it. The fact that he was my husband didn’t lessen my shame. If anything, it only deepened it. I started shivering when his hand lingered down my body because I knew there was only one piece of clothing left. He pulled the edge of my panties and I whimpered when another flashback startled me.

“Shh...” He gazed at me tenderly and then leaned his forehead against mine. “Don’t be afraid. Nothing bad will happen.” The words eased my panic as he slowly took off my panties.

He kept his promise and he didn't spare as much as a glance at my naked body, but I still felt vulnerable and exposed. The reality of being dependant on him and completely at his mercy deeply disturbed me. His forehead was still leaned on mine when he warned me that he would lift me up and take me to the bathtub. My body stiffened when he started carrying me and I buried my face in the nape of his neck, trying to deal with the unnerving shame and the sudden fear that sent chills down my spine. He carefully lowered my body into the tub and I quickly curved into a ball because I was self-conscious about my nakedness. I tensed even more when he knelt to my level. Defenseless, I sat there hugging my legs as tightly as I could and staring at my knees to avoid his knowing eyes. The recollection of the morning after our wedding night managed to creep into my mind and I remembered how I had been absolutely terrified of him, fearing he would punish me because I had vomited all over the bathroom floor. Despite his efforts to console me, the present situation wasn't very different, because nothing could erase the fear and wariness he had once instilled in me.

After observing me for several moments, he got up and took off his tie. My gaze remained focused on my knees and I slightly shuddered when he unbuttoned his shirt and took it off as well. Then he approached the tub again and ran a shower. I remained curled in a ball, tightening my grip around myself as I felt the warm water spreading over my weakened body. At first I didn't want to relax and give in to the feeling of pleasure, because he was the one providing it. Still, even though my mind was prideful and cautious, my body started to enjoy the soothing sensation brought about by the stream of a hot shower. Melancholy took hold of me as he massaged shampoo into my damp hair with so much tenderness, that I melted from the sensation and wondered why it had to be so difficult to trust him. The answer to my question vividly appeared before my eyes. At that moment, I was very grateful for the shower because it camouflaged my sadness. The fact that he was the one who was washing me, taking away the troubling feeling of impurity was not only sad, but ironic as well. When he finished washing my hair, he squeezed some shower gel on his hand and spread it over my back. I tensed up

because I didn't expect him to do that, but eventually my body softened under his skilful hands. I kept crying the entire time. He touched me so gently it made my heart ache. After rinsing my back, he handed me the bottle and then disappeared into the room. When I turned off the shower, he came back with a big T-shirt and a pair of underwear in his hands. He reached for one of the towels and walked up to me. My body shivered from the cold as well as embarrassment, because I had to reveal my nakedness to him again. I was surprised by his patience, when he slowly started drying my hair, face, shoulders and back.

“Can you stand up?” His lips brushed against my ear and sudden fright consumed every inch of me.

I wanted to protest, but I was so exhausted, I knew I couldn't do it without him. All my energy had been drained out of me and I had no strength left to defy him. Somehow I managed to stand up, covering my body with my arms in the process. Sebastian was standing in front of me, gazing straight into my eyes. He wrapped the towel around me and asked me if I could wipe the rest of my body. I nodded and mechanically dried the rest of my skin. He was holding the T-shirt, waiting for me to finish.

“It's one of my T-shirts. I hope you don't mind?” he asked quietly.

I shrugged, feigning indifference and raised my trembling arms when he lifted up the shirt to put it on me. He looked at me warmly like he understood my pain and humiliation while he rolled the shirt that smelled like him over my nude skin. A slight feeling of relief swept over me, because ridiculously, I felt safer when that thin layer of fabric covered me all the way to my thighs. I reached for the panties and quickly put it on before he got a chance to do it. He chuckled when I did that, gazing at me with some kind of strange fire in his eyes.

“Can you walk to the room?” he asked in a mild voice.

I nodded without thinking and he caught me by my elbow to help me get out of the bathtub and walk me to the

room, but my legs were so weak that I collapsed on the floor after barely taking a few steps. Sebastian swore under his breath as I tried to get back on my feet, but it was hard for me to catch my balance again.

“Calm down. Are you okay?” he asked, but I was still trying to get up. He didn’t like it at all and wrapped his arms around me to stop me. “Don’t move.” He scowled at me in a light voice and I stilled at once.

“I’m sorry.” I barely managed to get the words out, looking at him with what had to have been an expression of immense helplessness.

“You’re not the one who should be sorry,” he whispered softly, getting lost in his thoughts as I gazed at him with confusion, fighting to stay awake.

There was so much silent compassion in his eyes and I wished for him to say the words that were left unsaid, but as usual he snapped out his gloomy mood before it could get the best of him.

“You need to get some sleep,” he said as he lifted me in his arms and blackness appeared before my eyes the moment my head landed on his chest.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Something heavy was pressing on my chest and I couldn't catch a breath. I woke up in a daze, surrounded by the darkness and the sound of Sebastian's breathing was the only thing breaking the deadly silence. He seemed to be so close that I actually felt his breath on my skin. Startled by my discovery, I urged myself to regain complete consciousness. Then I became aware that his arm was wrapped around my waist and his chest pressed tightly against my back. I felt something hard against my lower back, and when I realized what it was, I shrieked and sat up so fiercely that he had to pull me towards him to stop me from falling off the bed. He exhaled loudly, then shifted on his back and lay next to me. I observed him with apparent mistrust, still disturbed by my nervous awakening.

“Another scary nightmare?” His voice was hoarse and he was still sleepy.

“No. I just couldn't sleep.”

“Why?” He wouldn't let it go.

I remained silent, wrapped up in my thoughts, ashamed to answer his question.

“For heaven's sake, talk to me.” He pushed away the covers from his body and I flinched, startled by his sudden movement. Shaking his head, he sighed and looked at me in confusion. “What is going through your mind?” he asked in an inquiring voice.

I bit my lower lip to stop myself from showing him how truly distressed I was. As he came closer, I winced and turned to stone. Showing empathy for my troubled state of mind, he looked at me knowingly and moved his body away from mine. However, he still kept his arms wrapped around

me, making me feel trapped. I closed my eyes and focused on my heavy breathing, trying to control the rush of adrenaline that caused the fast beating of my heart.

“Breathe, you have to breathe!” He encouraged me when I started panting for air.

Moments passed by, but my breathing still didn't return to normal. He swallowed and looked me in the eyes. “Isabelle, I gave you my word. I'm not going to do anything.”

“I can't help it... I'm scared,” I said through a shallow breath.

I had no idea where this flood of honesty towards him came from. Only a few days ago, I wouldn't have dared to utter a single word about my feelings or fears to him, whereas now I talked to him without hesitation like I wasn't afraid of any consequences.

“There is no need to be afraid. It's nothing.” He ran his fingers down my hair and along my cheeks. “You don't think I'm going to hurt you, do you?” It almost sounded like he was worried.

I could try to hide my true emotions all I wanted, but my body had a mind of its own and its response to his closeness gave him all the confirmation he needed. His reaction to the realization that I was still terrified of him didn't escape me. The emotion in his eyes was clear and unmistakable—he was filled with frustration, but he fought to keep it at bay. I wondered how long it would take for him to release the monster. I wondered how long I could tip toe around the threats that were driving me insane. And while I stared at his revealing emerald eyes, I could tell we both wondered how long before this would come to its inevitable, tragic end.

But while I waited for the bubble to burst, he seemed to have been set on a mission to prove me wrong by replacing his irritation with patience of a saint.

“I know I've crossed many limits—limits I shouldn't have crossed, but I never lied to you, Isabelle. I'm not trying to

trick you, I promise.” He waited for my reply, but when I didn’t say anything, he tried a different approach to gain my trust. “I’m running a multi-million dollar company. Do you think people would want to do business with me if my word didn’t hold credibility?”

I shook my head to give him a peace of mind, but only one thought consumed my mind.

He sighed. “You can shake your head all you want, but you don’t trust me. I can see it in your eyes,” he said in a disappointed tone and then looked at me with his piercing green stare. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” I whispered as my cheeks burned with embarrassment.

That was when he decided to turn on the lamp on the nightstand. He lightly gripped my hip and slowly turned me on my side. He tilted up my chin and brought my face to his level. I was daunted by the way he looked at me and it was obvious that he would ignore my plea and talk about it anyway.

“Why are you still afraid when I’ve repeatedly told you I wouldn’t push you past your boundaries?” He remained silent for a while, like he thought about something that caused him distress. “What do you think I’ll do?” he asked softly.

When I heard his question, memories rushed in a fast stream, bringing back the pain, the humiliation and the shame he had caused, but I couldn’t tell him that he had scarred me for life.

I shrugged. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters,” he said firmly. “What scares you *right now*?”

For a moment I thought I could win and keep him locked out of my mind and my heart, but his persistent stare told me there was no escaping this so I finally gave up.

“I... I think you’ll,” my cheeks were on fire and he brushed his knuckles along one of them, encouraging me to continue. I finished the sentence in a shaky breath, “t-touch me.”

Instead of saying something, he continued running his fingers down my hair and along my cheeks. “*This* is what scares you?” His expectant stare pushed me to act and I nodded shyly after a while, wanting to hide from him, but he wouldn’t allow it. His eyes were trained on mine. “Is it that bad?”

He gently let his hand slide down my shoulder and I shivered from the feeling of goose bumps that threatened to appear on my skin. I shook my head. *No, it isn’t bad, but it’s dangerous.*

“Then why? Why are you afraid?” he asked in a soft voice.

“Because I think you’ll t-touch me and...” I couldn’t finish. I couldn’t have this conversation with him. “Please, I can’t...”

He didn’t push me to finish the sentence; it was obvious he knew exactly what I feared.

“Your fear is understandable, but I would like you to try and see beyond it.” I didn’t expect him to say that. I wasn’t prepared for the level of sympathy he was displaying. “If I wanted to do something else, I would have done it a long time ago.”

His eyes gleamed at me, trying to lock out a reaction, but I had nothing to reciprocate with.

“Tell me how to make it better.” He had a perplexed look on his face. “What do you want me to do?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” I answered quietly, feeling the building pressure that was about to explode.

“Then make me understand. I need to know,” he pleaded.

I gave in and opened up to him. “I always thought it would be different. I had dreams b-before...” I swallowed the words, but he knew what I wanted to say.

“What did you want before you married me?” he asked cautiously.

I remembered the things I wanted and what a naive, foolish girl I had been. With eyes wide open, I shook my head as the bitter memories attacked my tired mind and he looked at me like he could read my every emotion.

“All I ever wanted was someone who would l-love me. But I don’t believe in fairytales anymore.” I looked away in shame of sharing this with him, but he decisively made me look back at him.

“Did you ever meet that man? Were you ever in love?” Tenderness reflected in his stare while I slowly shook my head. “Isabelle,” he said my name in a whisper. “There is nothing wrong with the things you wanted. Everyone deserves to be loved. I wish—” He stopped abruptly, trailing off into his own mind, and then swallowed whatever he was trying to say. “Why did you marry me? Did you think I would be that man for you?” he asked instead and I winced at his words as the image of my mother’s conniving face flashed before my eyes.

I shook my head. *No, I never thought you could be that man.*

“Then why? I even gave you a chance to leave at the altar. Why didn’t you take it?” he asked quietly, confusion ringing from his voice.

Remembering what he had told me in the church before we got married brought about the immense feeling of sadness and pain. *You don’t have to do this Isabelle. Just say the word and you will walk out free.* If only I had taken heed in his warning. But despite my wishes, I knew back then, as well as now, that nothing could have saved me from marrying him.

“I didn’t have a choice. I had to marry you,” I admitted.

“Why do you keep saying that? Rosario didn’t force you to sign that contract.” He looked at me in confusion. “Did she?”

“She didn’t.” I paused for a moment because what I was about to say was hard. “My mother did,” I said in a vague whisper. “I didn’t want to get married to a stranger, but she

wanted the money so badly and I eventually gave in to her threats.” I tried to keep my voice even and hide the contempt I felt towards that woman.

“So your own mother blackmailed you into marrying me?” There was an undertone of accusation in his voice. “It’s unbelievable what greed does to people.”

Even though I wasn’t sure what he tried to tell me, I took his words to heart and the shameful feeling of disgust I felt towards myself came to the surface.

“I’m well aware of the fact that I married you because you’re rich. You don’t have to remind me that I’m a pathetic gold digger,” I scowled at myself, taking the full blame for entering this failed and toxic marriage.

“Isabelle, I didn’t mean...” The contours of his face settled into an apologetic expression.

“Yes, you did! But I don’t blame you. Why would you respect me when even I can’t bring myself to do that?” The words came out in a whisper.

His breathing was getting harsher as he stared at me vigilantly, like I had insulted him in some way. “Don’t you ever refer to yourself as a gold digger again! *You* are my wife and I do respect you, but I’ll be damned if I let you continue walking all over yourself like that. You hold none of the guilt, Isabelle. None.” His stare gleamed with raw affection until it became softer and a lot more sophisticated. “You’re wrong if you think I’m not affected by this mess. I hate to see you like this. I wish... I wish I could have been that man for you. I wish I gave you a fairytale instead of nightmares,” he whispered, finishing the sentence he left hanging moments ago.

My heart started beating rapidly as I tried to process his words. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t escape his captivating gaze. His eyes were trained on mine, and for the first time, I found something in them—a glitter of light, a sparkle of hope to hold onto.

“Don’t...” I closed my eyes because I didn’t want to look at him and see honesty. It was too much for me to bear. “Please don’t pretend that you care!”

Taking advantage of my moment of weakness, he pulled me closer to him. He kissed the top of my head and kept his face on my hair, inhaling its scent. I opened my eyes and stared at him. At first, he just returned my stare, confronting me with the green storm gleaming from his eyes and then he pulled me dangerously close. I observed him anxiously as he parted his lips and let out a gasped chunk of air.

“I care.” He looked at me like he was in pain. “I care about you, Isabelle.” He exhaled and suddenly seemed relieved of some burden.

My eyes widened in surprise because there was something powerful radiating from his gaze. He leaned even closer to me, embracing me like he would never let go. Our breaths simultaneously picked up the fast rhythm as he stared at me with visible restraint on his face. I froze because he looked at me like he saw me for the first time in his life, like he’d discovered something new—like he truly cared. He took my hand and slowly leaned it against his hot chest. I closed my eyes and felt his rapid heartbeat under the layers of hard muscles. When I opened my eyes again and looked up at him, the beating of his heart seemed to have been even faster and more powerful. He gently cupped my face and repeated the words, wanting to convince me they were true.

“I care.” His voice was a gentle, reassuring whisper.

Then he brought his lips an inch from mine and paused for a moment. I started breathing nervously because for the first time apart from fear, I also felt a strange fluttering feeling that went all the way down to my stomach. I saw him part his lips, ready to kiss me, and I was bewildered by the magnetic power of emotion that suddenly pulled me towards him. We closed our eyes and I was ready, but when his lips brushed against mine, my body intuitively moved away from him in fear.

I felt a painful lump of regret squeezing my throat, and my eyes opened wide from the surprise of my reaction, whereas his remained shut. When he looked at me again, he had a pained expression on his face. He opened his mouth to say something, but he gave up and just rolled over and lay on his back. That's how we spent the rest of the night—lying awake; listening to each other's breathing and not sharing a single word.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The bright sunlight woke me up and the first thing I saw was a pair of piercing green eyes staring at me. *Sebastian was watching me sleep*. He had to have been awake for a while, because he was already fully dressed and prepared to leave. I waited for him to say something and break the awkward silence, but to my misfortune, he had no intention to ease my discomfort and kept observing me with an undecipherable expression on his face. His usually dominant posture was slightly threatened by something and he almost looked like he was hurt. He tapped his fingers on the nearby table and I knew he was still thinking about what had happened between us the previous night. So was I.

“I have to go to a meeting,” he said in a voice that was stripped of any emotion, but the deep dark hole in his eyes gave out his inner turmoil. “I’ll be back around seven. Make sure you’re ready for the fundraiser by then.” He looked at me, asking for a confirmation and I nodded in response.

Then he stood up, took something from his wallet and laid it on the table. I was confused by his action, but I diverted my gaze from him and didn’t say anything about it.

“If you want to go shopping, you can use the credit card I left on the table,” he said softly.

I glanced at him with what had to have been an incredulous look on my face. After our conversation last night, I had no intention to spend as much as a cent of his money.

“I don’t want to go shopping,” I asserted.

He looked defeated, like I had offended him. “Please, don’t take this the wrong way. I just thought you might want to do something on your own today.” He gulped to compose his now tormented voice.

Suddenly I wanted to amend for my harsh reaction. “I know. Thank you,” I said quietly and forced a weak smile.

His eyes danced on my face before he tore them away from me and looked towards the window. Seconds passed by and he stared at the sky like he was frozen in space and time. The sight in front of me was surreal and I was starting to freak out.

“Sebastian...” I wanted to ask him if he was okay, but the moment my eyes collided with his icy gaze, I swallowed the words and stared at him confusedly.

He sighed and started walking outside. “Be ready by seven,” he said before shutting the door behind him.

After he left, I took a long shower and observed the city panorama from the balcony. Sebastian’s weird behavior was a constant on my mind, and I knew I had to do something to distract myself from thinking about it. The weather was beautiful, so I decided to go outside and explore the city for a while.

As I walked through the sunny streets of Las Vegas, something tightened around my heart. Everywhere I looked, there were happy couples who were in love, excited tourists, or people who simply enjoyed a nice day out with their friends and I had never felt so alone in my entire life. People who surrounded me seemed to have embraced life and decided to explore it to the fullest. They were living, whereas I merely existed.

“Excuse me,” a chirpy woman’s voice traveled in my direction.

I turned towards this unknown woman who held a camera in her hands and smiled at me.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you could take a photo of me and my husband?” she asked, her smile unwavering.

“Yes, of course.” A short smile twisted my lips while she explained how the camera worked.

They hugged each other, smiled broadly and raised their thumbs. Her husband was a typical middle-aged man. He was a bit chubby, with traces of gray in his brown hair and he had a moustache. She was blonde, thin and a lot shorter than him. Nevertheless, they looked like they belonged together—like they were meant to be.

“Cheese,” I said before taking a beautiful picture of them.

Returning the camera, I showed them the picture and they burst into laughter. It was nice to see that they were so happy together. There was a time when I dreamt of finding someone to take goofy pictures with, but those dreams were long gone. I almost turned around and walked away, when she looked at me again.

“Thank you. We love the photo. You would make an excellent photographer,” the woman teased me.

“You’re welcome.” I smiled at her, preparing to leave.

“I’m sorry, but... Can I ask you something?” Suddenly she became serious.

“I guess,” I said, confused.

“Kate, please!” Her husband seemed uncomfortable and he tried to pull her away from me.

“No, I need to tell her,” she reassured him.

I was beyond confused when she took hold of my right hand and looked into my palm. I wondered what on earth this stranger was doing to me.

“You know, I feel things and I can see you’re distressed. Did something bad happen to you?” she asked, but she seemed to have known the answer already.

Ridiculously, my cheeks blushed and I ripped my hand away from her in shock. I just stared at her and my chin started trembling while I tried to compose myself.

“It’s okay. I can see you’ve suffered through a traumatizing experience not that long ago. Someone has hurt you.” Certainty rang from her voice.

“How can you possibly...?” I was stunned.

She smiled at me again. “We all have our little gifts.” She lifted her head towards the sky. “You’re also talented, but you seem to be stuck in one place because something is holding you back.”

She seemed to be lost deep in thoughts like she could actually see everything she was talking about. I wrapped my hands around my middle and started shaking my head at her. That was all I could do, because she made me feel completely uncomfortable. She started saying something else, but her husband stopped her when he noticed that all the color had drained from my face.

“Kate, please. Can’t you see you’re freaking her out?” He was persistent.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” she said warmly. “I just thought that you needed to know that things are not as bad as you think. You shouldn’t worry. Everything will fall into place. There are great things waiting for you in the future.” She winked at me as her husband lost all of his patience and she started walking after him.

“One day you’ll remember my words,” she said before they disappeared into the crowd.

My legs wouldn’t move and I stood frozen in one place needing to process everything that woman had told me. I didn’t believe in fortune tellers, psychics or whatever she was, but I couldn’t help being a little shaken by the experience. Maybe she was just a crook, but in a way, I knew she had told me exactly what I needed to hear. A disbelieving smile curved my lips and I tried to decide whether or not meeting that woman had been some kind of an omen. Struck by my unusual experience, I slowly walked back to the hotel.

At seven o’clock sharp, the door to the room opened and Sebastian stormed inside. As usual, he was in the middle of a business phone call, scowling at somebody who didn’t do their job right. He picked up the credit card which had

remained in the exact same spot where he had left it and sighed before returning it to his wallet. When he hung up the phone, he shortly glanced at my simple black dress, informed me that we were leaving and ushered me towards the door. He seemed to be detached and lost in thought.

“Isabelle...” He stopped me by the door to tell me something, but when I turned around he just looked at me like he wanted to share something delicate, but didn’t know how.

“I’ll try my best not to embarrass you,” I said quietly, convinced he wanted to warn me about my behavior just like at his parent’s house.

He looked at me with what seemed to be surprise on his face. “That’s not...” He sighed. “You couldn’t embarrass me,” he said in a soft voice and let go of my elbow.

Astonished by his words, I didn’t know what to say and we remained on the same spot for a few moments, staring at each other.

“We should go.” He finally regained his dominance and put himself together.

The ride to the fundraiser went by in a gloomy atmosphere. Both of us were lost in our own world. That woman’s words that everything would turn out to be okay troubled my mind. I glanced at Sebastian, wondering if it could be even partially true, but the look in his murky eyes didn’t give me much hope.

After minutes of awkward silence in the car, we arrived at the location where the fundraiser was held. Instead of being relieved, I freaked out when I saw all of the reporters around our car and in front of the building. Sebastian got out first and then took my hand, helping me out of the car. He gently placed his hand on the small of my back and I felt goose bumps from the contact. Reporters screamed his name, begging him to answer only one question or to allow them to take one shot of us, but he kept ignoring them and led me straight inside.

The feeling of not belonging swept over me the very second we entered the magnificent hall filled with conceited high-class society members who always managed to intimidate me. Maybe I had a wild imagination, but I got the impression that a lot of people knew who I was and I could feel them staring at me with stern condemnation.

“Relax. I’m here,” Sebastian whispered in my ear when he noticed I was distressed.

It was easier said than done, because when we sat at our table, all I could think of was that Sebastian would leave me alone like he had at his parent’s dinner party. Luckily, his evil sister wasn’t lurking around with her vile plans to humiliate me, but I also didn’t have anyone else I knew around me. I was dependent solely on Sebastian and that made me uncomfortable. Despite my fears that he would leave me by myself in a room filled with stuck-up, rich people, he didn’t leave our table at any moment. Several people had approached him and he had introduced me to them. They all congratulated us on our marriage and he thanked them with a smile that seemed to be so genuine that even I believed it. His abilities to deceive people were extraordinary. But even though he was very talkative and nice to those people who would come to greet him, his coldness would return the moment we were left alone. He observed me the entire time like he was intensively thinking about something.

“Well, if it isn’t the notorious Sebastian Everett. Long time, no see.” I heard a deep baritone voice and when I looked up I saw a young man standing next to our table.

“Ethan Shaffer, you, of all people, call me notorious?” Sebastian teased the man. “It’s been a long time since college indeed. How’s the oil business?” I realized the man was Sebastian’s colleague from college.

“Flourishing!” Ethan laughed and Sebastian joined him. I’d never actually seen him laugh before and he seemed to be a completely different person when he was carefree. “But I don’t want to talk about business. Who’s the lovely lady?” Ethan smiled at me and looked at Sebastian.

“My wife,” Sebastian replied simply.

“Oh, did it happen at last? I’m Ethan.” He offered his hand and just when I was about to say my name, he forestalled me. “Nice to finally meet you, Cora.”

I momentarily froze at his words and deep blush covered my cheeks.

Sebastian became serious and looked at Ethan with an upset look on his face. “Her name is Isabelle.” A courteous smile twisted his lips.

Ethan seemed to be flabbergasted, ashamed and confused at the same time. “I apologize. Please forgive me, Isabelle,” he told me and returned his attention to Sebastian. “I just thought... you know since college, when you said...” He felt uncomfortable about his hasty assumption about who I was.

Sebastian shrugged. “Well, it didn’t work out.”

“Yes, well... You certainly don’t need to feel sorry about that when you have this beauty sitting across the table from you.” He laughed again trying to remedy the bad situation his comment had caused, but Sebastian’s cold demeanor gave the impression that he didn’t think Ethan’s comment was funny. “Again, I apologize for my mistake. I have to go to my table. It was nice to see you again, man. We’ll keep in touch!” He patted Sebastian on the shoulder and rushed away.

I was still blushing because of Ethan’s comment and Sebastian observed as I struggled with my discomfort.

“I’m sorry,” he said gently. “I should have introduced the two of you immediately and then he wouldn’t have made that wrong assumption.”

I took my time to compose myself and then I said something stupid. “I’m sorry as well. I know you would have been a lot happier if Cora was the one sitting across the table from you right now.” The words spilled from my lips before I got the chance to think about what I was saying.

His murky eyes suddenly looked at me in a threatening manner, like they were condemning me with their green depths. “You should stop trying to decode what I think or how I feel, because you’re doing a very lousy job at it.” His voice was like fire that managed to melt me and I found myself wrapped up in a tangled web of his mesmerizing words.

I care. The remembrance of his admission came back into my mind with a full force that swept over me. For a few short ridiculous moments, I struggled to come up with something to say, but nothing came to mind. I was speechless.

The rest of the evening went by in painful slowness. Sebastian and I didn’t share another word, but he never took his eyes away from me and the more he looked at me, the more I was intrigued by the man that lay behind that icy cold, arrogant surface. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but something about him was different. Something had changed.

After numerous speeches about cancer, I was appalled that most of the people weren’t courteous enough to pay at least a bit attention to them. It seemed as though nobody came there because they cared about the cause.

It had occurred to me that half of them probably didn’t even know what the fundraiser was about. I was relieved when Sebastian donated a large sum of money and told me that we were leaving.

The driver was already waiting for us when we left the building and I was relieved to see that the most of the press was gone. I reached for the handle, but Sebastian gently brushed his palm against my hand and opened the door for me. It would be an understatement to say I was surprised by his action. He never ceased to shock me, because he was capable of doing such a gesture while his mood was so dark and cold. The proof of that was that he didn’t pay any attention to me when we got into the car. With an earnest expression, he looked out the window and gaped at the glowing streets of Las Vegas. Although it was unlike him to act this way, it didn’t bother me at all. If anything, I was happy I could have a

moment of peace. Since I didn't get much sleep the night before, I tried to stay awake. I didn't want to fall asleep in the car, but I was fighting a losing battle. Before I knew it, my mind drifted into distant dreams.

At first, there was nothing but the frightening darkness before my eyes, but slowly, the music emerged from the background and I tensed up when I recognized the lyrics of the song. *'Cause it's a bittersweet symphony, this life.'* I was certain that I was in a moving car and it triggered some of the bad memories. The urge to open my eyes was strong, but I pushed it back because the fear of the unknown had returned to taunt me. The driver suddenly braked and I was startled from my dream.

I woke up confused, realizing that I'd fallen asleep during our short ride to the hotel. When I looked up, I noticed Sebastian's eyes were boring into me. For several moments, his gaze remained frozen on me so much that he didn't even blink during that time. The discomfort caused by his undecipherable stare made me nervous and he looked away when my breathing became unbearably harsh. When the car pulled up in front of the hotel, he repeated his earlier gesture and waited for me to get out as well. Normally, I would always have to follow him and catch up with his rapid pace, so this sudden change of behavior left me somewhat confused. Then, just like in front of the building where the fundraiser was held, he placed his hand on the small of my back and led me inside the hotel. I was convinced that he'd done it for show earlier, but the reason behind his repeated gesture was fathomless to me now. Even when we entered the elevator, his hand remained lingering on my lower back and at one moment I felt him tighten his touch on me—a direct display of emotion. An electric shiver ran through my body when his grip became stronger and I flinched a little. I regretted it right away, when I saw that another layer of darkness settled in his already bleak eyes.

He removed his hand from my back when we reached the door to our room, because he had to look for the card to unlock it. As usual, when the door opened, he patiently waited for me to go in first. I took a few steps inside, aware that his

eyes were boring into my back, and in a reckless attempt to storm into the room, I tripped in my high heels. Sebastian tried to stop me from falling, but it was too late and I ended up on the floor. He held his hand out to me and I silently cursed at myself for being so clumsy and for having no other choice but to accept his helping hand. As my palm settled into his with noticeable reluctance, he carefully lifted me up and my back ended up being pressed against the wall.

“Are you okay?” he whispered and it seemed as though his darkness from moments ago had completely subsided.

I nodded and then cautiously looked up at him. As our eyes met for a split second, his lips landed on mine before I got a chance to process what was about to happen. I was startled and my body started shaking all over while his lips patiently brushed against my mouth. His eyes met my surprised gaze and pierced into me while we were bathing in semi-darkness. At first, my lips only trembled against his as he kissed them gently, almost innocently, like he could sense my panic. Then, he slowly started parting them with his tongue and they opened for him without hesitation, even though my mind told me that I should stop him. The moment his tongue gained entrance, his fingers slid between mine and his eyes closed as he tenderly deepened the kiss. With each moment, my panic lessened until it was completely gone and I gave in to his skilful lips, allowing him to consume this last part of me that I naively thought I could keep for myself. My body relaxed against his, while his tongue started softly massaging mine and the feeling of pleasure settled in together with the unnerving guilt. The hand he was holding me with pressed even harder against my palm, whereas his other hand ended up on my head and his fingers twisted through the strands of my hair. I was entirely overwhelmed, enjoying this passionate moment between us and letting him tear down my usually guarded walls. The reassuring tenderness of his kiss made me close my eyes and I heard myself moan into his mouth. The heat rose up to my cheeks as he started touching me with more passion and I felt that fluttering feeling again, only this time it traveled all the way down until it reached its peak between my legs. I started breathing loudly because I couldn't believe that

his hands were nowhere near that area and I could get that aroused only from his kiss. A part of me liked this newfound pleasure and I saw how easily I could give in to him. At the same time, my subconscious was overloaded with the signs of warning produced by the images I fought to suppress in the back of my mind. There wasn't anything demanding or forceful about his kiss, but I could tell his breathing became harsh and his restrained excitement gleamed from his eyes. I tried to focus on his tender caresses, but then his erection brushed against my upper thigh and just like that, the magic was over. I froze and let out a frightened moan that broke our kiss momentarily. His eyes flew open as he stepped away from me and we just stared at each other, trying to get our breathing back to normal.

“Isabelle,” he whispered my name as his hand reached towards me and I cowered from his touch.

Confusion swept over his face while he glared at me incredulously. I looked away, breaking the gaze between us and my hands instinctively wrapped around my middle. He could tell I was back in my protective mode and he didn't make another attempt at touching me.

Suddenly, the realization of what had just happened between us hit me with the strength of an explosion. In a way, it felt like my head and my heart were fighting each other in a harsh battle that would end in madness. It felt like the tables had turned and from that moment I knew that I should fear myself more than I should fear him.

Whereas his breathing and posture returned to normal after brief seconds, my breathing was still rapid and shallow. No matter how hard I tried to compose myself, I couldn't calm down when he was only inches away, staring at me intently. I turned around and hurried towards the balcony door, hoping that he wouldn't follow after me.

The first thing I did when I got outside was inhale a big chunk of fresh air. That was when I became aware that he had just given me my first kiss that had managed to turn me upside down and evoke such powerful emotions. Deep down, I knew how dangerous those emotions were and I felt ashamed for

giving in to the touch of the one man I should stay away from. Pain threatened to return as I remembered all of the harsh things he had said and done to me. Then again, there were his compassionate caresses, words of consolation and now that kiss that had left me completely bewildered. I knew that the constant interchanging between his cold cruelty and compassion would eventually manage to creep up against my guarded defense and my vulnerability made me scared to death.

“Why did you run away?” His low voice startled me.

My mind had drifted away and I hadn't even realized that he was standing behind me. I wondered how long he had been there. He touched my shoulder and I swiftly turned to face him, but I couldn't look him in the eyes. He tried to make eye contact, but I resisted his demand.

“Please, look at me,” he said in a hoarse voice.

I turned my head away from him, but he didn't try to force me look at him anymore. He just gazed at me like he wanted to give me space to decide what to do.

“I can't look at you,” I said so quietly that I thought he couldn't have possibly heard me.

He exhaled harshly and took one step closer. I didn't step back, but my body started to quiver because it was threatened by his closeness again.

“Isabelle, there was nothing wrong with that kiss,” he whispered decisively.

“Then why does it feel so wrong?” I finally looked at him with pure desperation glaring from my watering eyes.

“It feels wrong because you think I had the wrong intentions. Like...” He closed his eyes before finishing his sentence. “Like that night when I made the biggest mistake of my life.” I winced at the remembrance caused by his words. “I know. I know, Isabelle,” he said in a soft, guilt-filled voice. “I'm a terrible man and I deserve to rot in hell for the pain I've caused you.” He looked at me with a pained expression on his face and suddenly the ground beneath my feet trembled.

This couldn't be happening.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

His humbleness as well as his regretful admission caught me off guard. I remembered his cruel words when I'd begged him to stop that night. He had told me that he had rights and I had obligations as his wife. He had threatened that nothing in the universe would save me from obliging to his wishes because he owned me and he could do whatever he wanted with me. Then my mother's words crept into my mind as well and the cruel feeling of defeat returned, together with the memory of her warning voice, repeating a message that a wife shouldn't deny her husband, especially on her wedding night.

"It was your right." I shrugged and bravely repeated the sentence that crossed both his and my mother's lips.

He looked at me with painful shock written all over his face. "No, Isabelle!" He shook his head. "What I've done was wrong on so many levels. I had no right." His voice cracked a little and he closed his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them again, they glowed at me like shiny green jewels that were filled with pain. "A man has to earn a woman's trust before sharing that kind of intimacy with her. I broke that trust before I even got a chance to earn it and I regret it deeply." Honesty rang from his now composed voice and his admission astonished me.

Unshed tears filled my eyes and he looked at me like I would break if he dared to touch me.

"Don't. Please don't shed tears anymore. I know I hurt you with so much cruelty, but..." He paused and then said softly. "Tonight, and for a long time already, my intentions have been very different, Isabelle. Hurting you is the last thing on my mind."

“Sebastian, I...” I was in shock and I didn’t know what to say.

“I know I’m asking for a lot, but please, try to forget about that black night that happened between us.” He looked at me with what seemed to be sheer desperation as he came undone before me.

“My life was filled with black nights,” I replied sincerely, “but that night was the darkest of them all and I can’t forget.” I was at the verge of crying as I whispered into thin air.

For a moment I feared that he would be angered by my reply, but he seemed to have accepted it calmly. “I don’t expect you to forget this very moment. I know that it will take time; a lot of time. I wish I had a magic wand so I can take it all away, but I can’t. All I can offer you is my unconditional support and sincere apology. *I’m sorry. Please, forgive me!*”

I started shivering as he said the exact words I’d longed to hear for so long, but they didn’t take away even the fraction of the pain. When I looked at him and saw the undeniable proof of the genuine regret that I never thought I’d see in his eyes, I broke down.

“Please, don’t ask my forgiveness.” My lips were quivering. “Don’t ask me to forget. It’s too late, I...” I closed my eyes and choked back the words. *I will never heal.*

“It’s not too late, Isabelle. We can fix this. No matter what you think, you’re not broken beyond repair. You’re hurting, but you will get better!” He said decisively and then his voice became velvety soft. “I don’t care what it takes, but I will make it better.”

I desperately wanted to hold onto something that made sense, something that was familiar and could distract my mind from getting caught up in his mesmerizing words.

“Sebastian, we can’t fix something that was destined to fail from the very beginning. The only reason we got married is so that we could get divorced and that’s exactly what you’re trying...”

“No,” he interrupted me, then gently ran both of his hands through my hair and made me face his captivating emerald gaze. “Forget about that contract. I don’t want to divorce you. I want—” He stopped talking like he was afraid to say what he was about to say. “I want to give our marriage a chance.” His soothing voice tried to convince me in the sincerity of his words.

It took me a while to compose myself and make out if I was hallucinating or if he had actually said what I had just heard him say. Trying to imagine what our marriage would be like if we tried to fix it had only managed to deepen my despair and I stared at him with a visible dose of disbelief and mistrust before finally pushing myself to say something.

“In a normal marriage a husband and wife should...” I was mortified by the thought. “And I c-can’t.”

He looked at me with understanding and compassion, melting the walls of my wariness with his warm gaze.

“In a normal marriage a husband and wife should respect and care for each other.” He tried to reassure me in a mild voice. “There are no expectations, Isabelle. The pace I want us to take will be really slow and I promise I won’t pressure you with anything—least of all sex,” he said without the slightest trace of hesitation.

“Why should I trust you?” I meant to say it firmly, but the words came out in a broken whisper.

“You probably shouldn’t,” he said in defeat and looked at me with the shiny eyes that would be my doom. “But you’ve told me once that you believe that everyone deserves a second chance and now, I’m asking for mine. I know I don’t have the right to ask, but I need to fix the damage that I’ve caused. Please, let me earn your trust.”

“And how do you intend to do that? How can we trust each other after everything that happened?” I dragged out the words in a small voice.

“I don’t know if we could, but I really want us to try. Not just because I want to make it up to you. Isabelle I...” He

laid my palm against his chest and his heart was beating in a fast rhythm just like the night before when he had repeatedly told me he cared. “I can’t get you out of my mind.”

Why on earth would he say something like that?

Caught in wonder, I drew in a sharp breath because I didn’t want to believe that I meant something to him. He was Sebastian Everett, the heir to a multi-million dollar empire. He didn’t do feelings and certainly not with someone like me.

“Why would you do this? Why, when you could take so easily what you’ve taken once before?” I timidly asked the obvious.

“Isabelle, I don’t *ever* want to take from you again.” He took hold of my hand and brushed his thumb against my knuckles; his touch spreading softness along my skin like it was made of cashmere. An emotion, a feeling—something—was there, lurking in the air that was shared between us. Our breaths collided as both of us wanted to say something at the same time and he took the chance to precede me. “I want to give you the world. All the things I’ve never wanted to share with any other woman; I want to share it with you.” The glare in his eyes was so powerful like it could move mountains. “*You*,” he repeated with confidence.

I was flabbergasted by his answer and I looked away towards the gleaming lights of the city. Ironically, I dreamed of hearing those sweet promises from a man one day—any other man except him. As much as I tried to tell myself that I was immune to his words, I couldn’t escape the frightening truth that began to reveal itself in my heart.

“There are times when you make me forget for a moment and I think... I think you must be that man because you make me feel things I’ve never felt before. But then I remember. I always remember and it’s never enough to make me forget. It’s never enough to make me trust you.” The frightening confession I made eventually settled in my mind and I was hit by the bitter realization. “Sometimes I wish that *you* weren’t the one who caused this pain,” I said numbly, denying myself the privilege to feel broken and sad.

As I poured out my heart to him for the first time, I could feel his body tense with each word I was saying. He stood right behind me and it seemed we were worlds apart, trapped in our mesmerized thoughts, analyzing this dysfunctional marriage we were trapped in. His hand lightly brushed against my shoulder before he whispered the words that would change everything between us.

“You don’t need to remind me how much I’ve wronged you. It’s something I wake up and go to sleep with every day. And it hurts to look at you,” he let out a shaky breath, “because I know that I’m the one who robbed you of your dreams. I’m the one who hurt you.” I couldn’t hold it in anymore and tears spilled from my eyes. He gently pulled my shoulder, willing me to turn around and when I did, he stared at me like he was hurt by the fact that I was crying. Placing a light kiss on my forehead, he traced the wet stream coming from my eyes and looked at me hauntingly. “I’m the one who brought tears to these beautiful eyes.” He swallowed hard and uncovered his pleading stare. “Please, let me take them away.”

I’ve lost count of how many times he had said *please* in the course of the night. In all honesty, I thought I would see the day when purple snow would cover the streets, but not the day I heard Sebastian Everett said *please*.

His wide eyes looked at me expectantly as my mind was being attacked by the mingled storm of good and bad memories. The feeling of helplessness rushed through me as I wondered why it had to be like this. *Why couldn’t he have been this man from the very beginning?*

“When I begged you to spare me, you were unaffected by my tears,” I said in a sad whisper and made myself look at him. “You’re asking for a second chance, when you never even gave me one.”

He looked away again and I was flabbergasted by his inability to look me in the eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Isabelle.” His voice was shaking. “Even if I was blessed with a miracle and you found it in your heart

to forgive me, I'll never forgive myself for what I've done to you."

My eyes flew to his in a split second and he looked at me with undeniable desperation, like he was tormented by the memories as well. I never thought I would see him like that.

To think there was a heart under those layers of cold darkness and arrogance. To think that he was hurting as well was too abstract for me to comprehend. Something heavy pressed on my chest and I started thinking about all of the events that consequently led us towards this moment and it was a hard pill to swallow. I wanted to hold back my sadness and be strong, but the tears continued falling on their own. In a burning need to find shelter, I buried my head deep into his shirt and fought not to make a sound because I didn't want him to see me cry. I was tired of being weak and feeling trapped. His arms tensed around me and I knew he was aware that I was crying. I couldn't hide from him. He knew; he always knew what was going through my mind. He took a step back from me and I looked away, ashamed of my tears. He cupped my chin and for the longest time ever, stared at my tear-stained face.

"I shattered you and I will put you back together, piece by piece." I got lost in the sound of his soothing voice as he gently pulled me back in his arms and lowered us to the large seat on the balcony. "Shh." He laid his finger on my lips when I let out a small sob. "Let me take away the tears. Let me take away the pain," he said with such powerful reassurance that I immediately stilled in his arms and the summer breeze carried his pleading voice in my direction. "Let me be that man."

All of my energy was gone and I was drained, but that last sentence kept echoing in my mind. His hand softly circled along my head, trying to ease the tension. The storm was over, and now, the only thing left was the aching silence. Sebastian leaned his head on mine and then whispered to me.

"I can't go back, but if I could..." He swallowed. "I'd hold you in my arms." He wrapped his arms even tighter around me and took a long break while I kept crying because the memories were tearing me apart. "And I'd wipe away your

tears.” His thumb removed the fresh teardrops that appeared in my eyes. “I would rest your head on my chest,” he said as he leaned my head right under his fast-beating heart. “And I would whisper in your ears.” His voice became silky soft, almost inaudible. “I would tell you there is no need to be afraid because I would never hurt an angel.”

When I heard him say that, my eyelids slowly lifted up until they were half open. As I stared into the night skyline, I drifted back to the memory of the darkest of all nights. I was stuck with the image of pitch blackness which was filled with pain and cold despair. There hadn't been a single star gracing the horizon when I searched for the comfort of their light. But tonight, the sky was filled with millions of stars and they were spreading around the blackness like shining glitter. I remembered the words of the woman I met in the city. *Things are not as bad as you think.*

“There are so many stars in the sky,” I said in a quiet, broken voice.

Sebastian didn't say a thing. His only response was a small kiss on my temple. He didn't know what was going through my mind. He couldn't see the memories that were stuck with me. He couldn't feel my pain, but... *Maybe... Maybe he could help me?*

In a sudden need to seek his solace, my head collapsed on his chest and I closed my eyes, focusing on the rhythm of his breathing. My body rose together with his chest every time he inhaled and eventually I relaxed against him. One more time, my tired eyes darted towards the night sky and I was still struck by the stardust that was sprinkled all over the dark clouds.

“I've never seen... so many... stars.” I exhaled and drifted away to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

As I sat in the plane waiting to be taken back to New York where I had nothing but bad memories and an empty life, I kept looking towards the gray, gloomy sky. It was raining and my eyes focused on one raindrop that traveled down the window. As much as I tried to maintain the emptiness of my mind because I was in a desperate need of emotional relief, I couldn't block the thoughts that kept barging in.

I glanced towards Sebastian who was preoccupied with conducting his business, but this time he was sitting next to me. We'd hardly spoken since our conversation the previous night, but he continued treating me with silent tenderness and when he looked at me, there was that same glow, reflecting the unmistakable regret in his eyes.

The engine of the plane started making noise which meant that soon we would be flying up in the air and the thought made me nervous. After my first time in a plane, I was convinced that I would be more relaxed the following times, but it turned out it was only getting worse and one thing was for sure—I hated flying.

While fidgeting in my seat, I fought not to seek Sebastian's help, because I knew that he was a workaholic and nothing could keep him away from closing yet another business deal. The plane started taking off and instinctively, I looked towards him, wanting nothing more than for him to notice my discomfort, but the harsh words he told me that time I tore down the book shelf in the library rang in my ears as a warning. *I don't like to be interrupted while I'm working.* As the sickening fear he'd made me feel back then returned to haunt me, I quickly looked away, praying that I'd manage to get through this without upsetting him, but when we experienced turbulence, I shuddered, wrapping my arms around myself and he noticed. Contrary to my expectation, he

immediately closed his laptop and gave me his full attention. I'd never seen him discard of his obligations that easily and I couldn't help feeling uneasy about it.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, insecure and avoiding his eyes because I didn't want to see if they were filled with darkness again. I wanted to hold onto the memory of his tenderness for as long as I could.

"Why would you be sorry?" His voice was soft and inviting, instead of accusing like I expected.

"I... I didn't mean to interrupt your work."

"The well-being of my wife will always come before work, Isabelle. Don't ever apologize for that again," he reassured me and cupped my chin so that I would have to look at him.

His warm expression turned one shade lighter as I stared at him, wondering about the motives that drove him to do everything he had done lately. *Why did he apologize after all this time, asking for my forgiveness like it meant the world to him? Why did he say that he wanted to give our marriage a chance?* So many questions attacked my mind, but for some reason, I didn't want to ruin the moment. I didn't want to see that shade of light in his eyes fade away, so I swallowed the words I wanted to say. Softly, he removed the lock of hair from my face and held it between his fingers.

"Why don't you go to sleep and I'll wake you up when we arrive in New York?" he encouraged me in a quiet voice, caressing my face and I tried to focus on his touch, but I couldn't go to sleep. There was too much on my mind.

"Sebastian..." I called his name and when I opened my eyes, he was looking at me expectantly as I contemplated on whether or not it was a good idea to say what I was about to say, but it was now or never. "I want to talk," I demanded in a quiet voice and a knowing look graced his expression.

"What do you want to talk about?" he asked, wariness showing on his face.

“All those things you’ve said...” My heart started pounding in a fast rhythm as heat rose up to my cheeks, giving away how difficult it was for me to talk about it. “After all this time...”

“I know you’re confused, Isabelle. But I will make you understand that I’ve meant every word of it.” He observed me with silent admiration glaring from his eyes. “I want to work on our marriage,” he whispered.

His voice sounded so sincere but instead of putting my mind at ease, it only managed to deepen my doubts.

“But why... Why would someone like you want to have a real marriage with someone like me?” I saw his hand twitch and it was obvious that my question had caused him discomfort.

After moments of silence passed by and I patiently waited for him to gather his thoughts, he finally said something.

“Why wouldn’t someone like me want a real marriage with someone like you?” he asked in a tender voice, looking at me almost brokenly.

“Because we are two worlds apart. Because I will never fit in, no matter—”

“I think you’ve just answered your question,” he interrupted me. “There are very few good and uncorrupted things in my world. I’m glad you don’t fit in. I don’t want you to fit in.” There was fire in his eyes when he said that.

As much as I pushed myself to understand, I just couldn’t.

“But nothing’s changed. I was the same girl b-before when you...” I trailed off, trying to brush off the feeling of fear and sadness that always lurked in the hidden depths of my mind.

“When I took something only you had the right to give to a man,” he finished my sentence as the attendant approached us with drinks and I blushed from the embarrassment, wondering if he had heard him, but to my

horror Sebastian continued talking like he was completely unfazed by his presence. “I know that my apology came much too late, Isabelle, but I still hope...” He swallowed. “I hope you’ll think about everything I’ve said,” he whispered the last words like it was hard for him to say them.

The attendant, who poured our drinks while covertly listening to our conversation, glanced at me, entertained by our exchange and wondering what I would say.

“You’re here to serve drinks, not play agent Bond!” Sebastian cut him off with an abrupt remark and the man managed to put on an apologetic look on his face before quickly disappearing from our sight.

Perplexed, I looked at him, processing the exchange that had just happened before my eyes. Sebastian was extremely cold and cruel towards the waiter, showing arrogance that sent shivers down my spine, reminding me that I couldn’t trust him that easily. But the moment his eyes settled back on mine, the warmth was back, traces of the cold conceit from moments ago completely gone.

“How about we strike a deal?” he asked with caution.

“A deal? What... What kind of a deal?” I tried to figure out what was going through his mind.

“We will try to get to know each other before deciding if our marriage can work out or not. What do you say?” The edge of his lips twisted in a smile.

“How are we going to get to know each other?”

His eyes lit up. “By spending time together,” he replied simply and shrugged. “By doing things that normal couples do.”

Normal couples. Alarm bells rang in my mind when I remembered our conversation about what a normal marriage should look like.

“What kind of things?” I observed him suspiciously because I still didn’t trust him.

“Not the kind of things you have in mind,” he said in a reassuring voice and I looked away in shame. He gently cupped my face and turned it back towards him. “Isabelle, those things are completely off the table for the time being, and to prove you that I mean it, I’ll move out of the master bedroom once we are home. We’ll take it one step at a time. No pressure, I promise,” he whispered softly.

“You mean we... we won’t have to sleep together anymore?” I was taken aback by his move.

“You won’t have to do anything that makes you uncomfortable or afraid. I want you to get to know me before we share any kind of intimacy again. I would never ask or take anything that you’re not willing to give.” Again, that was not at all what I expected to ever hear from him.

He said he wanted me to get to know him. But I already knew him. I knew him all too well and I was so sure he would never change. Now I didn’t know what to think anymore. There was only one thing I was absolutely sure of.

“I’m afraid. I don’t... I don’t want you... to break me again.” I stared at him with sincerity as I barely whispered the words, remembering the pain I felt when he broke me the first time, and my eyes filled with tears, but not one of them escaped my eyes.

He touched my shoulder and then pulled me into his arms, kissing the top of my head. That was when I surrendered and felt a tear slide down my cheek as his voice provided me with hope and comfort.

“I won’t break you, *angel*. I’ll take care of you. I’ll fix your broken wings. Just wait and you’ll see,” he whispered in my ears and goose bumps rose on my skin as I felt the breeze of his breath on my face.

I closed my eyes, waiting to go back to New York; waiting to see if he would stay true to his word.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Twelve days. It had been twelve days since we returned from Las Vegas and Sebastian had stayed true to his word. He'd moved all of his things out of the master bedroom and we didn't sleep together anymore. I wasn't sure how I felt about it though. Never in a million years did I think I would say it, but I kind of missed his comfort when I woke up in the middle of the night after a bad dream. Deep down, I knew it was depraved to feel that way, because he was the cause of my nightmares. But then again, he was also the one who put me back together every time I'd wake up in sweat and fear. However, I didn't miss the constant tension that was caused by his presence, so I had decided that dealing with the nightmares on my own might actually be good for me. Other than moving from our bedroom, Sebastian didn't do any of the other things he talked about when we were in Las Vegas. As a matter of fact, I hadn't seen him at all in the past ten days and I started to think he was avoiding me. I didn't know how I felt about that either.

I was just getting ready to go to the library and find a nice book to read when I heard a knock on the door. A nervous twitch squeezed my chest because I was one hundred percent sure that Sebastian would barge in any second. I was surprised when nobody came inside. *Was he waiting for my permission to enter the room?* That would have been a first.

"Come in," I said in a forcibly calm voice.

The door opened and I lifted up my head, convinced that I would see my husband but I was surprised when a young woman with blond hair entered my room. She was taken aback by my reaction, I could tell, but I had no idea what she was doing there. I waited for her to say something, but she seemed to be under some kind of pressure and she was blushing like she was ashamed of me, like I held some kind of authority

over her. She wouldn't even look me in the eyes. That was a first one too. Nobody in that house had ever treated me with such silent respect. Probably because they all knew my story and they had seen how Sebastian treated me, but this girl was different. *Who was she?*

"Can I help you with anything?" I asked with caution.

"I'm sorry. It's my first day here." She wiped her sweaty hand along her jeans before offering it to me. *Why was she so nervous?* "I'm Annette, Teresa's replacement. Anne told me I should check if I can help you with anything, madam. I'm sorry if I did something wrong."

I felt pretty bad for that girl because I realized she was intimidated by me after being hired by Sebastian. She had to have thought I was the same strict, conceited control-freak like him. This girl didn't have a clue about anything and I sort of liked that, although I was sure she would soon hear gossip about the true nature of my marriage. I smiled at her and we shook hands.

"I'm Isabelle. It's nice to meet you." I rolled my eyes in a playful manner. "Please don't call me madam."

I tried to act friendly towards her, because after all she was close to my age and I was excited about having someone like her around. She seemed to be normal and I craved normal. Sure, I had Anne and Helen around, but Anne had been so busy lately and weeks had gone by since Helen's last visit. First impressions could be deceiving, but still, I kind of liked Annette at first sight. She didn't know what to say and I couldn't believe that anyone could be that nervous around me.

"I like your name. Anne probably thinks it's funny. It's kind of a longer version of her name." I smiled, trying to break the ice.

"Actually, it's short for Antoinette, madam." She smiled for the first time and I could tell she relaxed a little. "My mother is a big fan of the French history so she gave me that name, but I prefer Annette."

“Wow! That’s very interesting. Please, call me Isabelle.”

Her face expression turned serious again. She didn’t have to tell me. I knew what she was about to say. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Everett warned me to be professional with you. I’m not supposed to call you by your name.”

“Did Mr. Everett tell you why you shouldn’t do that?”

“Because you are his wife and you are to be treated with the utmost respect,” she said shyly.

How very convenient. He’d disrespected me so many times and whenever he’d felt like it, but he expected everyone else to treat me with the utmost respect. Somehow, I sensed that there was more than his sudden need to redeem himself behind this request. Clearly, he didn’t think it was appropriate for his wife to interact with the help and that’s why he had set up a barrier between us before I even got a chance to meet her. That made me sad because I became aware that nothing had changed.

“I know that he can be intimidating, but you don’t have to follow his strict rules when he’s not around. I promise I won’t say a word.”

I hoped she would relax, but she seemed to be very hesitant to accept my offer.

“Madam I honestly—”

“I think I’m going to call you Antoinette until you stop calling me madam.” I laughed a little because I noticed at once that she hated the idea.

“Madam, I would prefer if you called me Annette.”

“And I would like you to call me Isabelle.” I smiled. “But not when Sebastian’s around,” I whispered and chuckled at the thought of Sebastian’s facial expression when somebody disobeyed him. “What do you say Antoinette? Do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal, Isabelle.” We ended up laughing together and it felt good to be that carefree for once—even if it

was only for a moment.

“I’m glad to hear that Annette.”

Instead of going to the library, I decided to stay and clean the room with Annette. Once she relaxed, we had a wonderful time together. I found out that she was only one year younger than me and she’d started working for Sebastian because she needed money for her school tuition. When I heard that she was studying English literature, I was glad we shared a common interest, but also immensely sad because I knew the chances that I would live up to that dream were slim. I couldn’t bring myself to answer her questions about my life. It was kind of selfish of me, because she shared all the information about herself despite the fact that we were practically strangers. It was too soon, too fresh. I couldn’t unleash my demons on somebody I’d known for less than two hours. I excused myself and headed for the library.

It was the only place in the house where I could relax and be myself. Running my fingers through the shelves that were filled with hundreds of books, had a therapeutic effect on me and having thousands of different worlds waiting to be discovered within the reach of my hand gave me a sense of tranquility. I wanted to tell Annette that she was more than welcome to borrow the books from the library but I wasn’t sure if I was okay with that. Again, I was being selfish because I felt like the library was my own private space where I could escape and hide into my imaginary world. Also, I didn’t feel like I had any rights in that house and I knew that Sebastian would have hated the idea that one of his employees had the opportunity to freely roam around the house and use any of his possessions. I knew he didn’t operate that way.

For the first time ever, I heard the muffled sound of the music echoing through the hallway and I was surprised because other than the few times when Sebastian played the piano, there was nothing but deadly silence lurking in the house. Somebody had turned on the surround sound system and music could be heard all around the house. Whoever dared to do it should have prayed that Sebastian wasn’t home, because he would flip about this. I had a feeling it was

Annette, because only a person who didn't know Sebastian would do something like that without his approval. I recognized the melody of a familiar song and sang along. The lyrics couldn't have possibly been more taunting. *'No I don't wanna fall in love with you.'* As I glanced around the shelf with classic romance novels and continued my duet with *Chris Isaak*, I noticed *Wuthering Heights*. Excited, I picked it up from the shelf and started reading the summary even though I had already read the book. The song in the background was the perfect description of the love-hate relationship between Catherine and Heathcliff. *'I never dreamed that I'd love somebody like you. And I never dreamed that I'd lose somebody like you.'* Well, at least I had found something that would occupy me for the day.

The song ended with the last striking part *'Nobody loves no one'* and, unexpectedly, my book went flying to the floor when I turned around and saw my husband, standing by the aisle and staring at me. The shiny shade of green that still haunted my dreams returned to torture me. Gulping, I looked past him because I was afraid to look at his emotionless expression. Cautiously, I leaned down to pick up the book, gathering the courage to stand up and face him. At first, my gaze was directed at the floor, but as I was slowly standing up, I took in his entire appearance. First, my eyes rested on his shiny, leather, expensive-looking shoes. Then his dark gray suit that fell perfectly along his Adonis body. There wasn't even one wrinkled spot on his clothes. That alone was enough for him to earn the title of being a meticulous perfectionist. Finally, my eyes settled on his shiny bronze face and his cold gaze. It had been a long time since Vegas and his promises. Then I had seen pain and regret in his eyes, but now all of that was gone. He was back to being himself and I didn't know what to expect or how to behave. I was wondering if his cruel darkness would emerge to the surface again. I gazed at him with pure mistrust, and I dared to relax only when a slight smile appeared on his face. I drew in a breath, without even realizing that I had stopped breathing for a few moments because of him.

“I’m sorry.” He looked at me softly. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

At last, he had said something. Actually, he had just kind of apologized to me and it was weird. He wasn’t upset or angry. There wasn’t any darkness. There wasn’t any reason for me to fear him. This Sebastian didn’t want to humiliate me or hurt me. I didn’t know how to react to him.

“How long have you been here?” I made myself ask because the unbearable silence started making me anxious.

“For a while.” He snickered and I already knew that he had witnessed my little singing escapade.

Tiny beads of cold sweat appeared on my forehead when I realized that I had made a complete fool out of myself in front of him. “How... how did you...”

An inviting warm smile twisted his lips before I got a chance to put myself together and finish my question. “I figured that the library is the first place to look if I wanted to find you. Your love for literature didn’t go unnoticed.”

“I guess I’m really predictable.” I still stared at him warily.

“I beg to differ. So far, you’ve been nothing if not full of surprises,” he said in a mild voice, training his eyes on me like he would never look away.

I blushed. I was blushing crimson red like a little girl, wondering why his simple words managed to have such a strong effect on me. I never knew how to accept a compliment and I’d never thought I’d see the day he would offer me one. I wasn’t even sure he meant it as a compliment. He dismissed my sudden change of character and approached me. I could tell he was observing my reaction to his presence. The blush from my face didn’t disappear, but I didn’t flinch away from him either. That had to have been the first time I didn’t feel threatened by him on any level. It was strange. It wasn’t what I was used to. He was close, but remained on a safe distance instead of taking up my personal space like before. That too, was strange.

“Isabelle?” His voice invited me back to reality.

Confused, I lifted up my head and faced him. “Huh?”

“I asked what you were reading. You seem to be lost in thought.”

He smiled again. It lasted as long as the flash of a camera, but it was there. *Sebastian smiled at me.*

“Oh.” I parted my lips to draw in a breath and lifted the book. “Wuthering Heights.”

He glanced at the cover and then at me again. “Do you have any plans for tonight?”

Now that was a strange question. I never had any plans and he knew it. Instead of replying, I shook my head. I was a bit nervous to hear *his* plans for the evening.

“I would like to take you on a date,” he blurted out self-confidently and I gaped at him, surprised that he had proposed something so innocent, yet so milestone-changing for our relationship.

“You want to take me on... on a date?” A deep blush covered my face. I had never been on a date before. I felt so pathetic. He smiled like he sensed what I was thinking about and his eyes flickered with an emotion I couldn't place.

“Yes.” He smiled warmly. “I would like to take you out. You're spending way too much time inside. I thought that we could go to the movies. Helen told me you liked it when you went together.”

I remembered that day and the way it ended. When I came home I found him naked in our bedroom. That was the first time he was gentle with me. The first time he kind of tried to fight his demons and remedy the damage he had caused. That attempt hadn't ended too well.

“Isabelle?” His voice made me snap out of my thoughts after I wandered off again.

I looked at him with vivid caution, trying to keep the demons of the past at bay.

“What do you say? I promise I’ll be on my best behavior.” He looked at me expectantly and I melted under his warm gaze.

“Yes, I would like to go to the movies tonight,” I replied quietly, without actually realizing what I was agreeing to.

His face wore a satisfactory, warm expression. “What time would you like to go?”

“I—” My voice froze because I hadn’t expected him to let me decide anything.

The fact that he wanted me to choose the time left me a bit confused, but then again so had everything he had said and done lately. He was the one who always made all the decisions and I simply had to follow through. Now he wanted to give me a choice, but I had lived in fear and without a choice for so long that it became difficult to make one, no matter how ridiculous and harmless it was.

“How about six?” He took over the control and looked at me with piercing tenderness, as if he could visualize the storm of thoughts that was running wildly through my mind.

“Six is fine,” I said, observing the reappearance of the smile that didn’t even seem to leave his face and consequently, I smiled back.

When I did that, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, like he wanted to savor the moment, like he knew that I would turn serious in a split second and look at him with the overpowering mistrust that still wouldn’t leave my system.

He slowly opened his eyes and the man I met in Las Vegas was back in front of me. There was a flicker of pain and regret that I wanted to deny and question, but couldn’t because it was so raw and genuine that it made me crumble in front of him.

“I never thought...” He swallowed and stared at me like he just realized something, but he quickly brushed it off. “I’ll see you at six then,” he said with a smile that was an

obvious attempt to camouflage the pain that still reflected in his eyes and left me alone, gaping after him.

What had just happened here?

Chapter Thirty

That afternoon I tried to focus on my book, but it was an impossible mission. I kept lingering on the same sentence and I would go through a couple of pages without having any idea what I'd actually read. I was tired. *No, I wasn't tired.* The truth was I couldn't focus on anything because I knew I was going to the movies with Sebastian. It would be the first time we went somewhere together like a normal couple. Technically, it would be my first date ever with none other than Sebastian Everett. But something was wrong because I wasn't excited about going out with him. What I felt was dread, not enthusiasm. There were so many things on my mind so I finally decided to close my book since I couldn't concentrate on anything at the moment. My eyes kept darting at the clock on the wall. The memory of that night in Vegas sprang to my mind. *Could I go through with this? Could I give him a chance and try to pretend like nothing bad had happened between us? Could we have a fresh start?* The time ticked away and I was getting more nervous with each passing second.

When the time to get ready came at last, I opted for a fancy black skirt and a white V-cut blouse. My intention hadn't been to impress him. I had to wear what I was wearing because I didn't own a single item of casual clothing in my wardrobe. I was just putting on the last touches of my light make up when I heard a knock on the door. I looked at the clock and it was exactly six o'clock. He was right on time, just like always. I opened the door and swallowed my surprise.

Sebastian was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt. Before, I thought that he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen and if anyone had told me that beauty could have been surpassed by anything, I wouldn't have believed it, but now I had changed my mind. He looked so normal, fresh and

relaxed. I'd never seen him like that. It wasn't just his appearance; something had altered within him as well. He looked at me with a soft expression on his face. I realized I was gaping at him and I looked away, ashamed of my behavior. He smirked while his eyes traveled along the length of my body.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked in a light voice.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded because I was too taken aback to speak. He offered me his hand and I stared at it hesitantly for a few short moments before slowly resting my palm in his. His eyes lit up when I touched him and as we walked towards the car, I was getting more self-conscious about the fact that I was about to share yet another thing that was supposed to be special with him. Whether I liked it or not, my every first experience, good or frighteningly bad belonged to the man walking next to me.

“Earth to Isabelle.” A familiar voice rang in my ears and I smiled briefly, trying to camouflage my nervousness.

His glowing eyes pierced through me, making the smile fade away from my face and turn into something raw that blossomed under his overpowering gaze.

“You look amazing,” he whispered in an attempt to ease my discomfort. “Too bad we're going to the movies, because I think I won't be able to keep my eyes off you tonight,” he said in a teasing voice, but his stare was ruled by something mysterious and powerful.

I looked at him shyly, revealing my innocence and naivety. He talked to me like a man talks to a woman, like a husband talks to his wife. Everything from his lips sounded so beautiful and alluring, but despite all that, it left me confused. *If I liked the way he spoke to me, why did I still feel so uncomfortable?* The painful truth crept up my mind and made my shame even deeper and more unbearable. I was still broken, still shattered in pieces. *Pieces he wanted to mend back together.* Biting my lip to resist the need to release the painful burden that troubled me, I just continued returning his

intense gaze. This time he seemed to be the one who was lost in thoughts.

“So sweet,” he said quietly. “I love to see you blush. It’s beautiful.” I looked down to avoid his eyes and he sighed like it did something to him. “You’re beautiful,” he said in a mild voice that rang with an undertone filled with something I recognized as desire and it made the fire on my cheeks spread even deeper.

Even though I was sure he didn’t mean to cause it, a scary flashback accompanied by the sickening feeling of shame replayed itself before my eyes. *Let’s see where else I can make you blush.* As I tried to brush off the dark memories that threatened to ruin the evening before it even began, a nervous shiver passed through me, reminding me that I wasn’t taking a step; I was taking a huge leap. I was going to let him try to fix something I was sure was irreparable and could cause only more trouble.

When I peeked up at him, I met his worried gaze. He realized something was wrong. Taking a step towards me, he smiled with reassurance, but I took a step back. Visibly shaken by my behavior, he stopped smiling and narrowed his eyes at me, making me feel cornered and scared that I would have to tell him what was going through my mind.

“Hey. What’s wrong?” he asked confused while his eyes meticulously scanned my face.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down, but I stood fragile in front of him as the memories consumed my mind. Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe it was more than I could handle.

“Sebastian I think I c-can’t...” I started panicking because I didn’t want to upset him.

Instead of showing anger like I expected, he provided me with comfort and reassurance. With restraint and caution, he approached me and gently brushed his finger along my trembling lips.

“Shh, I know you’re scared.” He confronted me with the shade of green that used to be so restless, but now seemed to carry the depths of a peaceful sea without a single wave. “There’s nothing wrong with that, Isabelle. It’s okay to be afraid.”

He let his finger slide down my cheek, while his eyes still bored into me and I gasped under the pressure caused by the feelings his simple touch had managed to awaken so effortlessly.

“I don’t want to be afraid,” I said desperately. “It’s just so hard to—”

“No,” he stopped me. “The fear will go away, I promise. Don’t think about the past or the future. We’ll take it one day at a time.” His voice was so convincing, like he was completely sure in what he was saying; like he had a plan to make it all better. “Just think about tonight. Imagine we are simply Sebastian and Isabelle. Only two people getting to know each other. Nothing more than that.” He opened the door to the car and offered me his hand again.

After moments went by and I remained standing on the same spot, contemplating on what I should do, he spoke in a determined, yet pleading voice. “Please, be patient, and let me show you that it will be alright.”

Just like that, I was disarmed by his words and my hand had fallen into his, returning his strong grip with the same intensity. I knew it was still wrong, but something had changed. Something had fallen into place. Regardless of my subconscious determination to fight it, something started to feel right.

We had hardly spoken again until we came to the cinema. He seemed to lighten up a bit and even encouraged me to choose the movie we would watch. There were only two choices—a romantic comedy or a war drama. I wasn’t a big fan of romantic comedies but I certainly wasn’t in the mood for heartbreaking horrors of war either, so the choice wasn’t all that difficult. Sebastian smiled when I suggested we should

watch the romantic comedy and he told me he wasn't surprised by my choice. He bought a big bag of popcorns and two Cokes and we were all set to watch our movie. I was surprised to see him meticulously inspect his seat before sitting on it. His perfectionism would never cease to surprise me. The hall was filled with other couples who seemed to be so in love and smitten with each other. I looked at my husband who was sitting next to me and, for a moment, I wondered if we could have been a normal couple, if all the bad things in the past hadn't have happened. What if I took his advice and pretended for one evening that we were just Sebastian and Isabelle? I didn't know if I was strong enough to put all of the emotional baggage and past to the side. I glanced at him and I knew I still wasn't ready for that. I needed to have faith in him if I wanted to move forward. I didn't trust him yet and I had no way of knowing if I ever would. *Take it one day at a time.*

Everybody else was talking to each other, laughing and having a good time while waiting for the movie to begin. We remained silent and I was already afraid that the evening would turn into a disaster. There was a couple sitting only two seats away from me and they were all over each other. My cheeks were on fire and I felt uncomfortable. I didn't have any other choice but to look towards Sebastian. He glanced at me and then leaned over my head to look at the kissing couple before returning his gaze to me. Those emerald eyes were glowing at me with radiant warmth and frighteningly, I felt like it could be enough for me to yield to him. The feeling of relief washed over me when the lights in the hall finally went out and we were bathed in darkness.

The movie turned out to be quite good for a romantic comedy. There were several hilarious moments and both of us laughed at the same scenes which helped me relax a little. It was a complete cliché, but our hands ended up touching for a few times because we both simultaneously reached for popcorn. The last time we had done it, our eyes locked and we actually smiled at each other. I felt a pleasant shiver of emotion run through me.

When the movie ended and the bright light filled the room, it felt like the magic had disappeared. My body tensed

when I became aware that I had just had a great time with Sebastian and something about that scared me. I was still afraid to let him in and trust him. His demeanor told me that he was aware of that and I hoped he wouldn't press the matter. And he didn't. He continued looking at me affectionately like he hadn't noticed any change in my behavior. Little by little, his understanding and patience melted my discomfort and I even managed a brief smile while we were leaving the cinema. Once we were out on the street and walking to the car, he cautiously started talking to me.

“Did you like the movie?”

“I loved it. It was a lot better than I expected,” I said softly.

A light smile graced his lips and the conversation went dead. It was strange, but I didn't want the conversation to stop. I didn't want this evening to end. There was a sparkle of light in the dark and I didn't want it to disappear that soon.

“How... How did you like the movie?” I tried to keep the sparkle alive.

He seemed to be glad that I asked him that question. “It was interesting. Some of the scenes were hilarious; especially the one where she makes a fool out of herself in a restaurant.”

I couldn't help but laugh when I remembered that scene and he joined me.

“Oh, when she didn't know how to pronounce the name of that French dish. I would probably make an even bigger fool out of myself if I was in that situation.” I was still laughing but Sebastian became serious. Something was bothering him.

He stopped walking and I stared at him, baffled, because I didn't understand what was wrong. He looked at me with an expression I couldn't comprehend.

“Remember the day we met? When you had trouble with cutting the salmon and I mocked you?”

A vibrant chill passed through me. Why did he bring this up when he knew it would only spoil the moment?

“Yes, I remember,” I admitted with reluctance.

One look into his tortured expression and I knew what he was about to say. I didn’t want him to say it. I didn’t need him to apologize. Just a while ago I would have thrived to see him on his knees because I hated him, but something had changed. His words from earlier crossed my mind again and I decided to accept his advice. We would have to talk about the past, but not tonight. It would only ruin this beautiful moment we shared and we didn’t have much left to build on if that happened. Brushing away his comment, I actually started laughing and I could tell he was flabbergasted.

“Well, come to think of it, I guess I have been in that situation already. I didn’t find it that funny at the time, but it must have been hilarious. I don’t even want to think about what I did to that poor fish.”

He tried to suppress his chuckle, but he couldn’t help it. He burst into laughter and it was beautiful. Never in all of my days with him did I think it would be possible for us to laugh together. His eyes glanced at me with a flicker of admiration and I wondered what he was thinking about.

“Would you like to take a short walk? Or do you want to go home?” he asked in a tender voice.

“No. I would like to walk,” I asserted decisively because I wanted to prolong the moment in which I could pretend that Sebastian was somebody else and not the man who had hurt me or made me afraid.

We continued walking down the street and I felt safe next to him even though we were making our way through the dark alley. There was something alluring about it.

“I met the new girl today,” I said and Sebastian gave me a confused look. “Teresa’s replacement.” I smiled.

“Oh yes, Antoinette. It’s a very interesting name to say the least.” He snickered.

“Actually, she told me she prefers to be called Annette. She seems to be nice.”

Sebastian suddenly tensed up and looked at me intently. Coldness ruled his gaze.

“Isabelle, I don’t want you to become too close to her. She is just an employee and you should treat her like that,” he said firmly.

“Why? Because you think she is beneath you? I don’t judge people that easily, Sebastian.” I glared at him.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes at me and regained his scary dominant posture. “I don’t think she is beneath me. I’m just trying to warn you about the dangers that lurk in my world, Isabelle. You’ve seen what happened with Teresa. One can never be too cautious.” His voice was calm but I could tell he was everything but. I knew him that well by now.

“Teresa was different. She looked down on me from the moment I met her. And why is it okay for me to associate with Anne but not with the rest of the help?” I asked with defiance.

“Anne has worked for us for years and she is loyal. She is practically a part of the family. Don’t be naive and think that Antoinette or whatever her name is, puts the benefit of the family before her own interests.”

I wanted to protest but I knew he had a point. I didn’t know anything about that girl and I judged her too soon. The difference in our characters showed once again. Maybe it wasn’t our characters as much as the life experience. Sebastian was cautious and controlling whereas I was impulsive in making my decisions. He was a businessman through and through and I—I didn’t know what the hell I was.

“I understand what you’re trying to tell me,” I said cautiously. “But I don’t see why I shouldn’t spend time with her to get to know her or why you’ve ordered her to call me madam. I don’t like that.”

All of the sudden, his expression had changed and he looked at me with amusement glowing in his eyes. “You never cease to surprise me. Most of the people would thrive in the

fact that they held the power to extort respect and obedience from others, but you find it disturbing.”

We stopped walking and he came a bit closer, looking at me like he was about to kiss me. He seemed to wander off in thought and then his gaze turned into something gentler, something magnetic that pulled me towards him. He sighed and my lips parted of their own accord. All the doubts that troubled my mind returned together with the remembrance of our first and only kiss. My lips started trembling from the nervousness because although I knew he wouldn't break his promise, I had no idea what I wanted him to do. He swallowed and stepped away from me.

“I don't mind you spending time with Annette,” he playfully rolled his eyes at the mention of her name, “but please don't share any personal information with that girl. The press would love to get a cover story from someone like her.”

He seemed to be so cautious—too cautious—when it came to Annette. Then it hit me. Maybe she wasn't the one he didn't trust. Maybe it was me. Maybe I had to earn his trust just like he had to earn mine.

“I promise I'll be careful,” my voice was firm and I looked him straight into the eyes.

“I know you will,” he said softly.

It was getting chilly and we headed back to the car. He opened the door for me again and I liked the way he was tentative with me. On our way back we listened to the radio station, which happened to host the actors from the movie we had just seen, and we had so much fun listening about their experience of shooting the movie. I managed to relax in a way I hadn't for months. The evening with Sebastian turned out to be much more than what I'd hoped for and, in a silly way, I felt like I was with someone else and not him. It was almost surreal to believe that he could be that pleasant to be around.

Whatever gave me a sense of peace disappeared the moment we entered the house. That space was filled with bad

memories and as Sebastian escorted me to my bedroom I was getting more nervous around him. When I saw the door at the end of the hallway I almost froze, because a series of unpleasant thoughts attacked my mind. The feeling of doubt swept over me and left me wondering if he would expect something in return for taking me out. My alarms went on and I feared that he wanted to manipulate me. When we reached the door to the room, I started feeling uneasy because I was convinced he would follow me inside. I took hold of the doorknob and his hand landed on mine to stop me. A shiver passed through me and he pulled his hand away, letting me know he could feel my discomfort, but he chose not to comment on it.

“I had a great time tonight,” he spoke softly.

“Me too,” I said in a whisper, still observing him with caution.

“Sleep tight.” He gave me a knowing look and I realized he was referring to my nightmares.

He leaned closer and I gasped when he laid a gentle kiss on my forehead. “If you need anything you know where to find me, right?”

I nodded and his lips twisted in a light smile. I stared at him as he left to his own room.

“Good night,” I said quietly and walked into dark, empty space.

Chapter Thirty-One

A scream woke me up. I sat upright in panic and opened my eyes, covering my face with my hands because I was afraid of what I'd see in the darkness. The salty dampness of tears was smeared all over my cheeks and I was shocked by the fact that I had been crying. *Breathe Isabelle. You have to breathe.* I tried to listen to the coaching voice in my head, but taking in a breath seemed to be an impossible mission. I was too frightened to breathe. I uncovered my face and allowed myself to look around the dark room. My heartbeat was slowly returning to normal and I managed to draw in quick, shallow breaths. It took me a while to realize what was happening. I was trembling, and when I glanced at the empty side of the bed next to me, I cringed in fear and quickly looked away. As my breathing returned to normal I became aware what had happened. I had been awoken by my own screams caused by another terrible nightmare. I had dreamt that Sebastian had barged into my room and attacked me. I froze when I remembered the bitter feeling of betrayal that swept over me in my dream. Deep down, I knew that my fear of Sebastian was still very real. I was afraid that striking this deal with him would lead me into an even deeper despair. I felt sad and abandoned, lonely and confused. There was no one to comfort me and tell me there was nothing to fear.

“It’s okay. You’re safe,” I whispered the words that Sebastian would always say when he held me in the dark and a strange feeling of security rushed through me.

I lowered my head on the pillow, fantasizing about the soothing warmth and solace of his embrace. I closed my eyes and imagined him gently stroking my hair and kissing my forehead. It was disturbing. I knew it wasn’t normal to crave his protection. It was quite depraved, but it had worked and I calmed down in a matter of seconds.

However, falling asleep was a much bigger struggle. The dream I had, made me analyze everything that was going on with Sebastian lately. The images of the evening I'd spent with him kept appearing before my eyes and I couldn't lie and convince myself that I didn't enjoy his company. I cherished every moment of it, but a huge part of me was still holding a lot of resentment towards him. One beautiful night wasn't enough to erase the bitter remembrance of so many nights that were filled with fear and sadness. To a certain extent, I felt guilty because I didn't mean to torture him by withholding my forgiveness, but I still couldn't forget.

After realizing that sleep wouldn't come, I decided to get up and reach for the book I gave up on the day before, when I was nervous about going out with Sebastian.

Not wanting to stay in the solitude of my room where the walls started crashing down on me, I descended the stairs and walked to the patio. The unnerving tension would always sweep over me when I walked through the house at night because I still wasn't used to living in the mansion with endless hallways, huge windows and numerous doors that held the potential danger of hiding something scary. I knew I was overreacting, but I had seen way too many horror movies and sometimes it caused my mind to play tricks on me. In moments like these, I missed the simplicity of life and some other world I used to belong to before being pushed into this unholy mess which made everything so hard and complicated.

The moment I got to the patio, I relaxed and enjoyed the view of the beautiful garden at night. I smiled at the thought that this unholy mess I was trapped in had also brought some nice things in my life. Like a huge library I had always dreamt of, and this garden that was breathtakingly beautiful. There were some things I would miss if I had to return to my old life. *You'd miss him as well.* Out of nowhere, a surprising thought rang in my mind and I started wondering. Would I miss Sebastian if our ways parted and I knew I'd never see him again? If someone had asked me that question only a short while ago, I wouldn't hesitate with my answer. But now I wasn't so sure anymore. I wasn't sure of anything

and I hated the troubling feeling of the fear of the unknown that fed my confusion.

During the hours that followed, I decided to focus all of my attention on reading, and I wouldn't allow myself to take my eyes off the book, because I knew I would start thinking about the things I couldn't have dealt with at the time. When the morning sun found its way to the room, my eyelids started getting heavy and though I managed to fight the need to sleep for a while, eventually I gave in and drifted away into a newfound peaceful world of dreams.

“Rise and shine, sleepyhead.” A cheerful voice rang in my ears and I opened my eyes when I felt a hand brushing against my shoulder.

I was surprised when I realized that I had fallen asleep while reading in the patio and as I wanted to stretch my arms, the book I had been reading fell from my hands and onto the floor. An even bigger surprise took hold of me when I realized Helen stood staring at me before leaning down to pick up the book.

“Please don't tell me you spent the whole night reading. You're such a bookworm, Isabelle.” She shook her head and smiled when she saw the title of the book. “Oh, I loved this one. Well, at least the movie. I don't know about the book, but Ralph Fiennes nailed it as Heathcliff. If you ask me that's why movies beat the books *every* single time,” she kept on rambling and I couldn't help but laugh at her sweetness. God, this girl always knew how to cheer me up.

I got up and hugged her tightly. “I've missed you so much, Helen.”

“I'm sorry.” Her face held an apologetic expression. “I know I haven't come to see you in a while, but I promise I'll make it up to you. Whatever you need, I'm at your service.” She winked at me and saluted in a playful manner.

I loved her silliness. “Be careful. You know I might take you up on that offer.”

We laughed for a moment and I felt carefree, but when the laughter subsided, I noticed there was something different about Helen. She looked at me with strange curiosity. As if she was wondering about something. Having her look at me like that was more than I could handle so I quickly forced a smile, hoping to lighten up the mood.

A warm smile appeared on her face but her eyes still looked at me with a recognizable silent compassion she'd displayed for me so many times before when I had been sad in her company. But this time I wasn't depressed or crying, yet she looked at me like that all the same. I wanted to ask her if something was wrong, but I gave it up when her cheerfulness suddenly returned and lit up the room.

"I have a surprise for you," she said happily and before I got a chance to say anything, she disappeared into the hallway only to return moments after, carrying a huge wrapped up box in her hands.

I was beyond curious. "Helen?" I gasped a smile. "What is this?"

"It's a present, silly. Open it and you'll see what it is." Her voice sparked with excitement as I took off the huge bow on top of the box and unwrapped the shiny golden paper. "I hope you like it," she said modestly and I looked up at her with gratitude. She was so sweet and caring. I was so lucky to have her in my life.

"Whatever it is, I like it already. Thank you for being so sweet. I don't know what I would do without you."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she spoke in her light, happy voice. "Open it," she encouraged in a small whisper.

I took off the lid from the box and to say that I was surprised wouldn't do the justice to describe how I felt when seeing its content. It was filled with clothes. As I started going through the pile, I noticed there wasn't even one fancy piece of outfit in there. All I could see were ordinary jeans, T-shirts and pretty, but obviously cheap, dresses you could buy on a sale for a price next to nothing. And every item matched my size.

Confused, I looked towards Helen who glared at me with a firm smile on her face. It was hard to suppress the overwhelming feeling of nostalgia as I observed the clothes that resembled those that Sebastian shamed me for and threw out of my closet. Those clothes belonged to that other world. They reminded me of my former life and the simplicity I had longed for.

“I thought it might be a good time for a makeover. Do you like it?” Helen asked impatiently and then started joking. “Please, don’t tell me you hate it. The lady in the store will kill me if I take it back. I gave her hell.”

I looked at her with a pinch of sadness. Her surprise was wonderful, but I knew better than to accept it. I couldn’t embarrass Sebastian by walking around in *rags*. Although he tried to make things better between us, I knew that appearances still meant a lot to him.

“Thank you. I love it. It’s just that,” I swallowed, trying to speak in a calm voice, but suddenly it had become much more difficult to control my emotions, “I can’t accept it.”

“Why not?”

She narrowed her eyes at me and I looked away, replaying the memory of Sebastian’s cruelty and the humiliation he’d made me feel because I was simply being myself.

It dawned on me how he had said that he liked I didn’t fit into his world, yet he did everything to try to make me fit in. From cutlery usage lessons with Mr. Andre to brand new expensive clothes that turned me into someone I didn’t want to be. It hurt to remember. It hurt to think he might do it again.

“It’s not appropriate for me to wear these clothes,” I whispered in a calm voice to hide my sadness.

“Isabelle...” She touched my hand and I looked at her, silently thanking for the comfort she once again provided me with. “He told you this, didn’t he?” she asked with certainty in her voice and I nodded, feeling a tear slide down my face.

I quickly wiped it away and tried to pull myself together, not wanting to make Helen suspicious of my behavior.

She squeezed my hand and just looked at me for a while. “Well, Sebastian must have finally come to his senses because he was the one who asked me to do some shopping for you,” she said warmly.

Sebastian asked Helen to buy clothes for me? And not just any clothes. It was the same clothes he’d once looked at disgust, threatening me that I would never wear them again.

“Helen, but these clothes are... He couldn’t have possibly...” I was sure this was a misunderstanding.

“No fancy, expensive items; those were his strict orders.” My eyes widened in surprise and Helen laughed. “I don’t know what you did to him, Isabelle, but I’ve never seen him like this.” She smiled and seemed to be lost in thoughts. “He’s infatuated by you.”

A blush spread over my face and I swallowed hard, trying to keep in mind that we were talking about Sebastian—the man who was generally impossible to impress.

“He’s not infatuated by me. He just—” I didn’t know how he felt, but I was certain that his feelings and intentions had nothing to do with fascination, certainly not fascination by me.

“Isabelle, he cares about you so much, that for the first time he’s willing to let go of the rules he’s followed his entire life, just because he wants to make you happy. The Sebastian I know would never go to such great lengths for anyone, but for *you*, he’s making an exception,” she said confidently, waiting for me to say something, but I remained silent and struck by her words. “I don’t know what happened between the two of you, but it must have been really bad, because I can tell that both of you are hurting.” I sighed nervously when she said that, but the reassuring light in her gaze eased my discomfort. “Don’t worry. I won’t ask. Whatever it is, I just hope you’ll manage to make it through. No matter what happens, don’t forget that you’ll always have a friend in me.”

“Thank you, Helen. No matter what, I’ll never forget your kindness.” I looked at her with sincere gratitude.

Her lips stretched in a smile while her eyes filled with dampness. “I should probably leave before I get all emotional... But not before you try on every single item in that box,” she said teasingly and we both started laughing with tears in our eyes.

We didn’t talk about anything serious anymore. We just had fun; goofy, careless, girly kind of fun. And it felt good to busy my mind with something other than my marriage. Still, every now and then, Sebastian’s face would appear before my eyes and remind me of his unexpected gesture. The question sparked in the back of my mind, leaving me restless and wondering.

A couple of hours later, when Helen left and I headed towards my room, hoping to make up for the sleepless night I’d spent reading, I found a message from an unknown number on my phone. When I read it, my heart skipped a beat and a pleasant shiver rushed through my body.

Angel, I know there are still many bad memories to keep you awake at night, but hopefully I can take at least one of them away. Forgive me for making you feel less than perfect because you’re lovely just the way you are. I’m sorry I can’t give you your old clothes back, but I hope you like the ones Helen picked out for you. Please, wear them.

Forever yours,

Sebastian

Chapter Thirty-Two

As days turned to weeks, Sebastian's kind gestures made the nightmares rarer but they were still present and I hated waking up alone in the darkness. The dream would always be the same. He mocked my naivety and laughed at me for trusting him. In the beginning, he would always try to hurt me physically, but that part of my dreams had disappeared in time. I tried to remember the exact moment I had stopped fearing his physical retaliation but I couldn't figure it out. The only thing I knew was that, with every passing day, I was becoming less anxious in Sebastian's presence. The apprehension that he might be manipulating me still didn't leave my system, but despite that possibility, I couldn't deny that he was trying hard to make things better between us.

He respected my limits and slowly built his way in, always trying to lessen my visible panic with his patience. After he had said he wanted to earn my trust, he demonstrated every day that he was seriously set on that mission. Beside his patient and compassionate demeanor, he was also spending a lot more time with me. Every morning, we had breakfast together and he would always try to make it home in time for dinner. He often insisted that we watch movies in the media room, sometimes until late hours in the night. Other than that, his constant obsession with following the etiquette had lessened as well. I knew that I had become closer with Annette more than Sebastian would have wished, but he didn't protest or try to limit my time with her in any way. It felt as though he was giving up some of his control for no other reason than to make me happy.

The fear I'd once felt towards him had almost completely subsided because he honored his promise and never once tried to touch me or pressure me with anything. Instead, he seemed to be keen on learning things about me and

getting to know me in deep layers. The biggest surprise of all was that he always tried to make me laugh and he succeeded at it. I knew that he consciously avoided serious conversations that needed to happen between us, but in reality, neither of us was ready for them yet. All I wanted was to block the past and the future for as long as I could because I wanted to live in the alluring present. Maybe I was delusional, but because of that attitude I hadn't shed a single tear in days and it was liberating.

One evening, when we agreed to watch a movie together, Sebastian appeared in the media room and handed me the notebook I had lost in the garden weeks ago. My face reddened in shame. He had it all this time and didn't say anything until now.

"Did you write this?" he asked in a soft, demanding voice.

I looked at him with caution, trying to guess what he was thinking. *Should I confess? Would he mock me for writing that story?* His posture was relaxed but his facial expression remained serious.

"Did you read it?" I decided to play it safe.

"I did," he asserted without hesitation as if he thought he had done nothing wrong.

However, I thought that there was everything wrong with what he had done. In a way, this was a personal attack on my privacy because I'd never let anyone read my stories. Besides, I was aware that he disapproved of the books that I was reading and the story in his hands was nothing but a cheesy romance. *Or was it?* Discomfort washed over me when I remembered I had altered the plot of the story and turned it into something twisted and dark. The hero had hurt the heroine badly, betrayed her trust and then wanted to redeem himself. The irony wasn't lost on me because I was well aware of the fact that I had been using that story as a getaway and a personal therapy for my marriage problems. My deepest thoughts and fears described into detail were hiding behind the

covers of that notebook. Sebastian wasn't a fool. If he had read it, he must have noticed the underlying content which had inspired me to write something that disturbing.

"How does it end?" he asked in a quiet voice, obviously convinced I had indeed been the one who wrote it.

"I don't know yet," I replied sincerely.

He smiled, revealing hidden layers of sadness and his eyes pierced through me, giving away that he knew what had inspired my writing. He handed me the notebook and sat beside me. I was desperately ashamed because one of the most critical people I knew read something that came straight from my heart. Imagining what he must have thought about the story made me even more nervous and even though his eyes were fixed on me, I stared at the floor. *Was I really that insecure that I couldn't even bring myself to look at him?* The answer to my question was crystal clear when seconds, if not minutes went by, and my eyes still gazed at the hardwood floor. Sebastian smiled at me and gently lowered his hand on my shoulder. It had been weeks since he touched me in any way and that sudden, innocent contact sent goose bumps through my whole body. When he'd touched me before, I would always tremble from fear that he wanted to hurt me, but this feeling was different, *pleasant*.

"I think you're really talented and I enjoyed the story."

I looked at him in disbelief. The shock on my face as well as the fact that I didn't believe him had to have been obvious because Sebastian burst in laughter.

"It's okay. You don't have to pretend you like it," I muttered with a polite smile.

He looked away and before I knew it, his emerald eyes stared directly into mine.

"I never pretend, Isabelle; especially when it comes to you." He swallowed hard before continuing. "You shouldn't doubt my sincerity because I don't hand out compliments that easily, but when I do then I really mean it," he spoke softly.

Helen's words sprang into my mind. "*He's infatuated by you.*" Could it be even partially true? It certainly felt like he cared about me, but was I something of consequential value to him? I wasn't so sure.

"Thank you. It means a lot," I replied at last.

He narrowed his eyes at me and scanned my face. He often did that when something about me puzzled him.

"What were your plans before you married me? What did you want to do with your life?"

His question took me off guard and thinking about all of the lost opportunities that would never cross my way again made me sad.

"I wanted to study English literature and write. I always dreamed that one day I would publish my own book." I sealed the words with a nostalgic smile. "But that doesn't matter anymore." I shrugged.

"Why? It's never too late to pursue your dreams," he said with determination.

"I've kind of lost my drive," I admitted in a quiet voice. "It was a silly dream to begin with. It's not like I would have gotten that far from Rosemont anyway."

"Maybe you would, maybe you wouldn't. Who knows?! But the fact is that you're miles away from Rosemont now and you're living in one of the most prosperous cities in the world. I could help you find a publisher for your book. As a matter of fact, I've wanted to suggest that for a while now," he said in his serious businessman voice.

My mouth fell open in surprise and Sebastian started laughing again. I loved to see him laugh because he looked so beautiful and harmless.

"I...I don't know what to say." I tried to defend my timid reaction to his suggestion.

He smiled at me and something sparked in his eyes. "Say yes," he whispered.

I was excited and horrified at the same time. He wanted to help me, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to take that step and publish something I'd written for everyone to read, yet. Hell, it wasn't a step, it was a huge leap. The word *yes* danced at the tip of my tongue but I didn't dare to say it.

"What are you thinking about? You already know the answer," he encouraged me.

"Yes," I said in the quietest whisper.

He chuckled. "Yes, you know the answer, or yes, you want me to help you publish your story?"

"Yes to both." I smiled warmly.

"There is only one condition," he said in a serious voice.

Looking at him with wariness, I wondered what he would ask of me for this favor.

"What condition?" I felt my face burning as if he had already said the words I was dreading.

A wide smile suddenly curled his lips and he shook his head because he figured out what was going through my mind. I hated myself for being so transparent and obvious. *Couldn't I save myself from embarrassment at least once?*

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I won't ask you to sleep with me in exchange for my support. I'm not that big of an asshole."

I didn't think it was possible, but I felt a deeper shade of red settling on my cheeks as his green eyes glowed at me with an undecipherable emotion. Whatever it was, it sent tingles through my entire body. He hadn't even touched me and I was reacting to his closeness, but not like before. This was completely different and the power of it scared me.

"What do you want then?" I asked in a small voice, looking away from him.

"I want a happy ending to the story. I think it's only fair and they both deserve it after all the hardships they've been through."

My eyes widened. “I don’t know if it’s possible. I don’t know if they could ever be happy together after everything that happened.”

“He had hurt her before, but he learned from his mistakes and he’s prepared to do anything to make things right between them,” he said in a soft, almost pleading voice.

A shiver of emotion ran through me. I didn’t know if I could keep playing this game. The threat of the past and the uncertainty of our future crushed my mind and I couldn’t pretend that all those painful things weren’t there anymore.

“Maybe... Maybe that’s not enough. Perhaps he had hurt her too much.”

He closed his eyes and remained silent for a while like he was gathering the courage to say something.

“Could she ever forgive him?” He asked in one breath.

I tensed up. I didn’t want to have this conversation.

“She wants to let it go, but it’s a lot harder than she thought.”

A flicker of pain flashed in his eyes and the feeling of regret settled in my chest.

“Do you want them to have a happy ending?” he asked like he was afraid of the answer.

I sighed and answered in a whisper. “I do. I want it from the bottom of my heart, but I don’t know how.”

He smiled at me, but the sadness was visible in his eyes. “Where there is a will, there is a way. We can find happiness, Isabelle,” he said in a firm tone, suddenly breaking the game we played with the fates of the characters in my book and making it painfully clear it was us we had been talking about all along.

“It’s hard to find happiness after being trapped in the dark for so long.” My shaky voice was sprinkled with notes of the hurt that remained.

Those green eyes froze on my face with such intensity like he was indeed infatuated by me.

“Someone as pure and innocent as you doesn’t deserve to be trapped in darkness,” he said in a flat voice that was suddenly hit by the gasped presence of a heavy emotion. “Angels shouldn’t cry or feel pain.”

Gazing at him, I remained silent because I didn’t know what to say. His words had touched the deepest part of my heart.

“But I’m not pure. I’m not innocent.” I looked at him with sheer sadness. “Sebastian, I’ll never be those things again.”

“Isabelle,” he looked at me with so much compassion that I thought I would break down right then and there, “losing your virginity has nothing to do with...”

“Please, don’t.” I had to interrupt him. “Sebastian, please. I c-can’t talk about it.” My cheeks burned from the embarrassment and I had to look away.

“Shh.” His fingers brushed against my lips. “It’s not your shame. It’s mine.” Fragile softness rang in his humble voice and I felt the unwanted tears burn in my eyes. He tilted up my chin and wiped them away. “They’re not your tears, they’re mine.” He kissed the wet spot on my face, looking at me like he would cry as well, but then he looked away, and when he looked back at me, the storm that threatened to spill from his eyes was gone. “You’re wrong, angel. Nothing I did to you on that black night could have tainted the purity of your heart or the innocence of your soul. I know you’re still hurting, but there is no pain that couldn’t be healed by love.”

Love. I shivered at the very mention of the word, letting the current of fear as well as inexplicable excitement rush through me.

He kissed the top of my head and whispered to me. “Isabelle, we won’t be unhappy. I’ll give you the happy ending you always dreamed of. We’ll get there, I promise.”

“Sebastian,” I called his name, aching, and I sighed when he lifted up his head to confront me with the green light that suddenly pulled me towards him. “I... I don’t want to be in the dark anymore.”

“Let me pull you to the light, then.” His hand gently leaned against mine and I took hold of it strongly like I never wanted to let go. “Please, have a little faith and I’ll give you a hundred smiles for every tear I made you cry.”

But there were so many tears. Too many. I looked at him, offering a small, sad smile. “If you did that, I’d never stop smiling.”

He brought his lips an inch from my forehead and whispered to me before kissing it with the lightness of a summer breeze. “That’s the point, angel.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

After a long time, I was surrounded by heavenly peace and quiet, feeling warm and safe in someone's arms. Their embrace was familiar and it seemed I had unconsciously longed for it, but suddenly, I was alone and I was getting cold. Goose bumps started rising on my skin as the light breeze rushed along my body and I shuddered, wanting nothing more than for the warmth that had kept me safe only moments ago to return. As I troubled my mind, thinking about the coldness that made me so uncomfortable, I heard silent steps and before I knew it, a warm, soft blanket was covered over my freezing body. I was being lifted up and moved towards the source of light and I imagined I was floating on a soft cloud. Inhaling the familiar soothing scent, I realized that Sebastian carried me to the room and when he carefully laid my body on the bed, I opened my eyes and met his soft gaze. His arm was still touching my shoulder, keeping me upright, and I observed as the first rays of sun replaced the brightness of illuminating moonlight on his face. He still looked at me with that same glow that reflected the affection he'd demonstrated the previous night. I wanted to say something to show him that I was deeply touched by everything he had said and done, but when I tried to speak, I realized that my throat was dry and sore from all the crying.

"Shh," he whispered as he gently laid my head on the soft pillow. "Go back to sleep." His eyes closed as his lips brushed against my forehead.

He wanted to go and leave me alone. I sensed it and for some reason, I didn't like the idea. "Sebastian..." I looked at him pleadingly and spoke in a raspy voice. "Don't leave."

A light smile graced his lips and he swallowed like he was touched by my demand. "I don't want to leave," he

paused like he already regretted what he would say, “but I have to take care of something urgent in the company.”

“Can’t it wait?” I asked, feeling childish because he had already said the matter was urgent.

He looked away, like he was thinking about something that bothered him. “I’m afraid it can’t.”

We remained frozen and silent for a long while, until he returned his gaze at me again. “I’ll make it up to you. How about you get some rest and pack some clothes when you wake up. I won’t be gone for long.”

I looked at him in confusion. “Why do I need to pack?”

“Because I’m taking you somewhere special.”

“Oh.” I was taken aback by his proposal. “Where are we going?”

“I can’t tell you.” He smiled and ran his fingers through my hair. “Don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Well then,” I said in a small voice, fighting to keep the contour of a smile on my lips. “You should go.” But I didn’t want him to leave.

Despite my fears, he remained sitting on the bed next to me and patiently waited for me to fall asleep. Every now and then I would lift my eyelids half way to check if he was still there and his beautiful eyes welcomed mine every time, until I didn’t have the strength to open them anymore. I heard the screech of the door and I knew he was gone. It started getting cold again.

Just like he promised, he returned only hours after he left and he still wanted to take me that special location he had talked about. After the conversation we had the previous night, the trip to the mysterious place went by slowly. Too slowly. It was obvious that we both felt uneasy and pressured to make small talk. Just like two strangers who met at the bus station for the first time, we talked about the weather, complimented each other’s appearance and occasionally commented on the

beauty of the breathtaking landscape. It seemed as though Sebastian was pressured by something that ruled his entire mind and kept him too preoccupied to pay attention to me. But he did smile a lot, and when he looked at me it was with apparent tenderness that seemed to have effortlessly emerged from his gleaming eyes. In a thoughtful manner, he would ask me how I felt or if I wanted to stop and have a break every once in a while.

When he stopped at a gas station, he surprised me with a chocolate bar and a bottle of iced tea from the store. Foolish as it may seem, I blushed when he gave it to me because I didn't know how to accept it. The thought that he had to have been annoyed by me wouldn't leave my mind. Hell, I was annoying myself and I just wanted to snap out of my stupid trance and act normal. *Why was it so difficult for me to accept something from him?*

"It's okay. It won't bite you." He chuckled and I felt that the redness on my face turned one shade deeper.

"Thank you," I whispered the words and accepted his little gift.

He reacted when he noticed the bewildered look on my face. "Wrong flavor?"

"No, not at all... Strawberry is my favorite. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess." He winked at me and I smiled.

"I have a good feeling that Anne played a part in this?"

He smirked and shook his head at me. "My lips are sealed. I promised not to tell and you know I always keep my promises."

My mouth partially opened and I turned serious. I knew what he was referring to and at this point I did believe that he would keep his promise. I realized that I trusted him that much and it meant a lot.

"I know," I said quietly and headed towards the car.

Like a true gentleman, he opened the door for me and I overheard the comment of the couple whose car was close to ours. The girl reprimanded her boyfriend for never doing those sweet things for her and added, with a sigh, that I must be one lucky girl. It's funny how people make sudden conclusions based on sheer appearances, *but everything is often not the way it seems to be*. Still, it felt good to hear that somebody envied me for once in my life.

The feeling of anticipation, excitement and a small dose of fear took hold of me when Sebastian told me that we had almost reached our destination. As I slowly took in the magnificent surrounding of the hills in the distance and the forest that stretched along the road, I got lost in thoughts, observing its allure. I snapped out of my daydreams when the car pulled up in front of a huge driveway. Sebastian had to get out of the car to open the large metal gate with a key which was very unusual for such estates, because the door would often open automatically. I started wondering where we were and what his purpose for taking me there was. He managed to open the gate and within seconds he was back inside the car and before I knew it we were standing in front of a huge, castle-like mansion. It looked very old, but magnificently beautiful. Sebastian smiled at me when I revealed my curious stare.

“It was my grandfather’s house. He spent the last few years of his life here because he wanted to enjoy the serenity of this place. I come here for the very same reason,” he said proudly, glancing at the imposing structure.

He took hold of my hand and led me towards the entrance. The unexpected touch surprised me but I managed to smile at him and even lightly squeeze his hand. My response seemed to have pleased him because an aura of tender warmth began looming around his presence. He unlocked the door and we found ourselves in a dark space that smelled like old wood and leather. Sebastian hurried to open the curtains and as the light hit the room, I curiously observed the lavish antique

furniture and stuffed animal heads that hung like trophies on the wall.

“He was a hunter.” I heard Sebastian’s voice behind me and flinched a bit because I hadn’t heard him approach me. He laid his hand in mine again and started telling me about his grandfather with nostalgia ringing from his voice.

“Hunting animals for sport was his passion and he was quite good at it, as you can see. I find it a bit creepy, but I couldn’t bring myself to take them off the wall.”

The way he said it made me realize that he was sharing something very personal. He had deeply loved his grandfather. It was obvious from the way he wanted to preserve the memory of him intact.

“I could take them down temporarily if they bother you,” he said in a gentle voice and I exhaled in surprise. *He would do that for me?*

“No,” I said with haste. “No, they don’t bother me.”

His lips twitched into a sad smile. I could tell he was thinking about his grandfather. “Let’s go upstairs; I want to show you something.”

Next thing I knew, he led me towards the stairs. As we walked along the wall, I noticed an old painting of a man that had the same green eyes like Sebastian. Without giving it much thought, I glanced towards the small tile that stood under the painting and saw the name that sent chills down my spine. Collin Everett. Sebastian’s great grandfather—the man who’d sealed my destiny years ago with his insensible request that forced his heirs to marry the girls from Rosemont. I froze and my palm started sweating in Sebastian’s hand as the realization hit me. Like a sharp needle, the existence of that threatening contract broke the cloud I was floating on and the unsettling panic ruled my mind again. Sebastian looked at the painting and then back at me, his gaze revealing he knew what I was thinking about. I looked away from his scrutinizing eyes, trying to keep the urge to breathe in a bag at bay.

“Hey.” He pulled me closer and inspected my face. “Are you alright?”

I nodded but my body started quivering, and I felt guilty and ashamed.

He sighed. “No, you’re not alright.” He looked at me with a mixture of compassion and worry. “You’re trembling. What is the matter?” When his whisper traveled to me, I quickly shook my head, trying to suppress the blush on my face as he turned more serious.

“N-nothing. I... I was surprised. I’m fine now.” I was such a fool. I never knew when to keep my mouth shut. The stuttering revealed that I was everything but okay.

“Sweet Isabelle.” He let go of my hand and continued gazing at me, still with that gentle spark, accentuated by something mysterious that made the entire world around him disappear in an instant. “As long as I’m here, there is nothing to fear. No contract will determinate our fate or affect the way I feel.” He tilted up my chin, making it impossible for me to escape the spell of his piercing stare. “Forget about the will. Forget about my family.”

“Sebastian we can’t...” I said with consuming worry and his thumb brushed against my lips, forcing me to keep the words of condemnation to myself.

“Forget about it all.” He caught a strand of my hair between his fingers and leaned so close to me, causing me to gasp as a powerful shiver streamed through every fiber of my being. “Let it go and relax.” He kissed the bridge of my nose and whispered. “Leave the worrying to me.” I felt his lips brush against my ear and it was getting harder and harder to breathe. “I won’t let them hurt you.”

He moved away from me and I took in a deep breath, but I was still shivering. Our eyes locked together intensely, connected with some invisible string. Then I saw it. The light; the soothing green light that emerged from the thick, black mist and illuminated me. And just like that, my body stopped shaking and my breathing returned to normal. At first, I just looked at him with my eyes wide open, hardly blinking. I

knew there was trouble ahead. I knew there was danger. I was aware of all those things, but I was struck by his sincerity and I held onto it. He cared. He wouldn't betray me. Led by my new discovery, I had made a decision in a split second and instantly performed the action. I rested my palm in his and squeezed it tightly. The message was clear—I trust you.

After putting my mind at ease, Sebastian gave me some time to relax and get some rest. The room he accommodated me in felt so foreign and I couldn't brush off the feeling that I was intruding on someone's personal space. For some reason, the old furniture which was immaculate yet branded with some strange out-date scent gave me the chills. I felt relieved when he knocked on my door and suggested we take a walk around the estate.

The beauty of that place couldn't be put into words and I understood why Sebastian spent his moments of serenity there. We were walking through the small narrow path which led us deeper into the beautiful woods that was a part of the estate. He held my hand and told me a couple of funny stories about his childhood adventures on his grandfather's estate. He told me that he had a lot of fun playing with Helen and that they had teased Dianne a lot because she hated the estate. I really enjoyed his company and at moments he seemed to be so excited, like he was back to being that little boy who used to climb trees and explore the nature of this mysterious estate years ago. In an inexplicable way, I was both content and excited that he provided me with a sneak peak of that part of his life. When we reached the beautiful stream, we walked to the small stone beach and enjoyed the tranquility that surrounded us. Listening to the soothing sound of the water and the chirping of the birds, we simply sat next to each other. He wrapped one arm around my waist and pulled me closer to him. Enjoying the absolute peace that reigned around me, I kept my eyes closed, focusing on the precious beauty of the moment. I took a deep breath and opened my eyes, meeting Sebastian's shiny green ones. There was so much warmth and emotion radiating from his persistent and unmoving stare. More than ever, at that moment I wanted him to kiss me. I

wanted that gentle fairytale moment. I wanted him to be my Prince Charming. His eyes told me that he wanted that too, but still he pulled away from me, creating some distance between us and letting that moment slip away into the infinity of time. The man who had broken me and showed me that I was nothing to him, was now treating me with extreme care, like I was his most valuable, fragile possession and strange as it may seem, for once in my life I felt precious.

“What about your childhood? Are there any interesting stories you’d care to share with me?” he spoke softly, disrupting my deep thoughts.

“There’s really not much to tell. My childhood wasn’t as exciting as yours. Because we were poor, we never went on family vacations and my mother was too strict to let us explore Rosemont and make friends when we were kids. But still, Ashley and I had a lot of fun playing. We used to drive our mother crazy.” I laughed, remembering how much fun I had with my sister.

“Do you miss Ashley?”

“I do,” I looked into the transparent clear water, “I miss her every day.” I smiled sadly.

“She can come to visit whenever you want. Your family is always welcome. You know that, right?”

“I’d choose my words more carefully if I were you. I’m sure you wouldn’t want to make a person like my mother feel too welcome in your house,” I said quietly.

“Our house,” he corrected. “Was she that bad?”

“She just wasn’t very... caring, I guess. She was never the motherly type.”

“What about your father? He seemed quite standoffish when he led you towards the altar.”

He’d noticed that?

“That was my uncle. My father died when I was little.” He gaped at me with a question mark over his head. “He was

an alcoholic. Liver cirrhosis took him away,” I said with a lump in my throat.

“I’m sorry,” he paused and then looked at me as realization swept over him. “Is that why you avoid alcohol?”

“Yeah,” I admitted, feeling the murky clouds of the past settled above me.

Suddenly, I was struck by the memory of Sebastian’s commanding voice that had made me drink a glass full of whiskey, and tears surfaced in my eyes. I wanted to brush it off and make the flashbacks go away, but I couldn’t get a hold of myself. The last thing I wanted to do was to cry but I just couldn’t help it. I tried to look away but he knew. He knew what was on my mind and a tortured expression covered up his face as tears spilled from my eyes and he cursed almost inaudibly and then pulled me into his arms. I crumbled against him when he hugged me tightly and laid my head on his chest.

“Shh. Please don’t. Don’t cry.” he said in a soothing voice. “How can I take it away, princess? Tell me what to do.”

Princess? That gentle term of endearment was enough to make my heart ache. I wanted to say so much. I wanted to lean closer to him and whisper the words that were stuck in my throat. *I don’t want all this guilt and insecurity between us. I’m sad because we couldn’t have a nice start. I’m sorry because I can’t let go of the past when you’re trying so hard to push us forward. I forgive you, but I still need time to forget’.* Instead of that, as the memories kept barging in, pushing me further over the edge, I asked for the only thing I needed at that moment.

“Just hold me, please.”

And he did. He pressed me tightly against his chest and continued caressing me. It felt as though his hands were everywhere around me, causing the tingling sensations in the hidden depths of my very being. I closed my eyes as we were bathed in silence; the only sounds around us were the streaming of the restless water and the fast beating of his heart. He placed his hand in the palm of my hand entwining our fingers, and I felt like for the first time we were connected on

a deeper, more meaningful level. Even though there was so much pain that was building the hard concrete walls between us, at that moment, we shared the feeling of peace and the sense of belonging to each other. With fragile tenderness, he placed my hand onto his beating heart and kissed the top of my head.

“It’s you, Isabelle. Only you can make my heart beat out of my chest,” he whispered in a voice filled with powerful emotion, and as I felt the rhythm of his heart on the palm of my hand, my own heart started beating in accord.

It felt like a wave of rushing water swept over me and made me feel something I’d never felt before. A ray of sun hit my face and I took in a deep breath allowing myself to be taken away by the heat of the moment. Deep down, I knew that it would never be like this again. What I felt was a once in a life time thing, sacred and special. We remained laying in each other’s arms peacefully until the sun was ready to set. Together, we watched as the firing ball faded away from the sky, bathing us in the darkness until its light was replaced by the glowing brightness of the full moon. As we were illuminated by the moonlight, we stared at each other, feeling the drawing force. His fingers traced the soft skin of my cheek and he seemed to have broken down under the pressure.

“I want to stay away, but I can’t,” he said in a soft voice and his lips grazed against mine.

My eyes snapped open and locked with his gaze in intensity. We were breathing in the same rhythm, our bodies wanting more. Of their own accord, my lips parted, trembling against his; pleading him to deepen the kiss. The green eyes that used to terrify me, sparkled with light and warmth that now gave me solace and hope. Visibly fighting the strong sensations, he took in a heavy breath and moved away from me. He smiled while I looked at him in confusion.

“I’m still not worthy of you, angel,” he whispered. “But one day I will be. And when that day comes, I’ll give you the moon and the stars together with my heart.” He kissed the back of my hand and squeezed it between his hands.

I couldn't fight the emotion anymore and I looked at him with tears in my eyes.

“Sebastian, I forgive you. I forgive you and whatever it is I... I feel it too.” I touched his face when he started wiping away my tears. “Don't,” I whispered. “Don't. They're not those kinds of tears.”

He gazed at me as realization built in his eyes and he came closer to me again, leaning his forehead on mine. We were at a loss of words, carried away with each other. Slowly, he pulled me tighter and tighter in his embrace like he never wanted to let go and when he looked at me again, I noticed the sparkling glow of tears in his eyes. It hurt me to see him in pain and I reached over to wipe away the dampness that was about to spill on his cheeks, but his hand stopped me.

“No, Isabelle. They're not those kinds of tears.” He smiled as they spilled from his eyes and I knew that he lied to me because there was a mixture of emotions in his stare, the strongest of which was pain.

So, I wiped them away anyway and I kissed his forehead, just like he had kissed mine. I gave him my comfort and with it, I irrevocably handed him a piece of my heart which fell into a bigger puzzle I had yet to piece together. I fell asleep on his chest and for the first time I cared. I cared about him. And I wasn't scared or confused. It felt right. It felt safe.

I drifted away into sleep with a light smile on my face and after some time, I was awoken by a soft breath blowing on my face. I opened my eyes and saw Sebastian looking down at me with a tender light gleaming from his stare.

“It's getting late. We should head back.”

I nodded reluctantly and he helped me get up on my feet. We walked to the house in silence, but there was nothing unpleasant about it. It didn't matter because no words could describe the feelings inside us. I needed time to think and process. Both of us needed time to let the experience of the day sink in. As we walked up the squeaky stairs, we only glanced at each other before our ways parted and we headed to our rooms.

“Good night, princess,” he whispered after me, probably thinking that I wouldn’t hear him.

I stopped walking. *Princess*. Something warmed around my heart when I heard him say that again and I felt beautiful, flustered, like I belonged. That rush that took hold of me earlier returned and my heart skipped a beat. With reluctant slowness, I turned around and we faced each other in semi-darkness. This unknown force was pulling us together so strongly that we didn’t even blink as we stared. It was hard to deal with the flood of emotions. It was hard to breathe.

“Good night, Sebastian,” I barely managed to say and hurried towards my room while Sebastian remained frozen in place, staring after me.

I closed the door of the room and tried to get my breathing back to normal. I had to calm down because I couldn’t let things escalate between us. I felt it with everything in me, but I needed more time. I wasn’t ready. *Was I?* I tried to rationalize everything that was going through my mind and brush it off by diminishing its significance, but the result of my effort was achieving exactly the opposite. The more I fought, the more I felt and yearned. I was like Eve, desiring the forbidden fruit, even though, now more than ever, I was fully aware of its probable danger.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Sleeping was a hard, almost impossible mission that night. Apart from Sebastian's image that suddenly wouldn't stop dancing in front of my eyes, the murky atmosphere of the room I was settled in gave me the creeps. Although I tried to make myself feel comfortable, I just couldn't. I was even afraid to turn off the lights. It was ridiculous. After a while, I managed to go to sleep, but I ended up having a scary dream about seeing a ghost of that man from the painting and I woke up in sweat because it was so hot that the oxygen was simply unavailable to breathe. The mixture of fear of staying in that room after my scary dream and the fact that I was almost suffocating from the lack of air encouraged me to go outside. That way, I could get some fresh air and try to settle my thoughts at the same time.

The extent of my ridiculous and childish behavior, triggered by my irrational fears of the house, became even more obvious when I stepped into the dark hallway and heard the cracking sound of the old wooden floor. The scream that left my throat lasted only a second and I was almost certain that Sebastian would rush out of his room any moment, but after the echo of my voice subsided, silence reigned the house again and I was relieved that he didn't wake up. In the slowest pace I could produce, I descended the stairs, trying my best not to make a sound, but getting to the ground floor quietly was a hopeless task. A victorious smile appeared on my face when I got to the terrace and there was no sign of Sebastian. Still, even though I longed for the moment of uninterrupted loneliness, the silliest part was that I kind of secretly hoped I actually would wake him up. *What the hell was wrong with me?*

The mild summer breeze grazed my skin and I breathed deeply, taking the fresh, uncorrupted taste of air

inside my lungs. My eyes darted towards the bright sky where I'd seen the moon hugged by hundreds, if not thousands of stars. Standing under that live magical exposition made me feel at ease. It seemed like I was staring at the night sky forever, counting the stars and guessing different shapes they formed. It was something I used to do a lot when I was a little girl. I would sneak out in the night, when everybody was asleep and I would just stare at the beauty of the night, dreaming of doing something big and meaningful when I grew up. Sadness settled in me when I remembered my dreams and hopes as a child. None of them came true. At that moment, when I was feeling a bit depressed, I noticed a glimmering light descending from the sky. *A falling star.* I closed my eyes, remembering how I had once seen a falling star when I was a little girl. The excitement I felt back then replayed in my memory and I thought about the wish I had made. I remembered the exact same words of a little girl in Rosemont who had dreamed of finding happiness. *Dear star, I'm sorry you have to die, but before you do, please grant me one wish. I read a story about a prince and princess and I liked it a lot. Please give me my Prince Charming when I grow up. I promise I don't need a white horse... or a castle... Just make my wish come true.* Suddenly, I was startled by arms that gently hugged me around my waist and I winced from shock.

“Make a wish, princess.” Sebastian’s soft whisper brought about the immediate peace inside me.

My eyes snapped open and I exhaled in surprise, unable to speak. *This couldn't have just happen, could it?*

“And? Did you make your wish?” he whispered even softer in my ear and it caused me to breathe in small pants.

As I slowly shook my head, fearing that uttering a single sound would uncover my state of mind, Sebastian smiled against the nape of my neck and it did something to me. It made me feel... *happy?*

Reluctantly, he released me from his embrace and came to stand next to me, leaning on the small iron fence. His eyes closed for a brief moment, and once he opened them the moonlight brightened their green depths, uncovering the

miraculous peace that started radiating from his gaze. Looking at him was intense, almost unbearable. I was like Icarus, getting too close to the sun, knowing that it would burn me. To save myself from drowning in my own uneasiness, I did the only thing I could; I looked away from him and focused on the night sky once again.

“Too late, princess,” he said playfully, causing my eyes to give him their full attention once again. “I already stole your wish.”

I gaped at him, eyes wide open, unable to breathe again. “What did you wish for?”

He shook his head. “If I tell you, it won’t come true. And the only thing that matters to me right now is to turn that wish into reality.”

I smiled. He was being so silly. “That’s some real businessman talk right there. I wonder what your associates would say if they heard you now,” I teased him and he chuckled, but soon his smile was replaced by a serious expression.

“I don’t care what they would say. The only opinion I value is yours, Isabelle. I’ll say whatever it takes to draw a smile on that lovely face.” There was harsh honesty ringing from his voice; the undeniable truth that, once again, left me speechless.

Make him cherish you. Helen’s almost forgotten words sprang to my mind again.

“I’m sorry if I woke you up. I tried to be quiet, but it was impossible.” I was in a desperate need to change the subject.

“I was already awake.” His expression turned hundred shades lighter. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Neither could I,” I said in one breath, once again caught into the web tangled by the mesmerized beauty of his eyes.

“Bad dream?” He asked in a silent, almost humble voice like he already knew the answer to his question.

I nodded, regretting it when I saw a layer of guilt settle all over his features. It was so obvious that he was being vulnerable in front of me, uncovering himself and his flaws. Never did I ever think that I would see the day when I would witness what I was just witnessing. Somehow, the tables had turned and now I was the one comforting him. He had given me the power to become stronger, but the sacrifice for it was his own weakness.

“Sebastian...” I started, but my cheeks blushed knowing what I would say. Still, even though I felt uneasy, I knew I had to say it. “I haven’t dreamt about... about that night. As a matter of fact, I haven’t dreamt about it in a while.”

He looked at me with light relief and some of the tension left his system. He hugged me gently, paying attention that his arms only brushed against my body, not pressing into me.

“I don’t ever want you to dream about it again,” he said brokenly.

“I won’t,” I said with a pinch of uncertainty, smiling and he returned my smile, laying a tender kiss on my temple.

He took a step back and gazed at my widened eyes. His pupils dilated under the moonlight and lit up with a spark of fire that burned its way to my fragile heart.

“I promise there will be no more nightmares, Isabelle. I won’t betray your trust. One day...” He looked at me tenderly. “One day I’m going to show you how it’s supposed to be.”

In an instant, his words left me paralyzed. I truly forgave him for what he had done to me, but the thought of us being intimate continued to make me uneasy. It was a step I still wasn’t ready to take.

“That’s what you wished for, isn’t it?” I asked in a small voice and looked at him with regret, wishing that it would have been easier for me to cross the boundaries that still kept me away from him. His remitting silence was all the

answer I needed. “Sebastian... I’m sorry but I still...” I fought not to break down. “I still can’t,” I said in one harsh breath.

He caressed my cheek, bringing some calm to the storm in my mind. “It’s okay, Isabelle. I don’t expect you to.” He tilted up my chin. “Don’t say you’re sorry. We’ll take it slow. Baby steps slow,” he whispered, sending electric shivers down my skin from head to toe.

Everything he said sounded so beautiful. I could almost reach it, but the very idea of being naked in front of him, let alone sleeping with him, still scared me. No matter how much I wished for it, I still wasn’t ready.

“I wish ...” I started saying in a tortured voice.

“Shh,” he silenced my troubled rumbling. “Everything will fall into place. We will be happy.”

“How can you be so sure?” I asked in a whisper, patiently waiting for his reply, but he didn’t say anything, he just smiled and looked towards the sky.

My eyes followed his and as we both observed the same fraction of the glitter in the dark, the image of the falling star returned to my mind. If I could have one wish, I knew what it would be. All those years had passed by since I was a little girl, but I still yearned for the same. Glancing towards Sebastian who suddenly held his deep emerald gaze on my face, I wondered if we could be happy with all the obstacles that stood on our way and made everything so hard. If he was my Prince Charming, the man I was supposed to end up with, wasn’t it supposed to be easier than this? I knew the answer to my question because I’d learned it the hard way. There are different kinds of love and not every one of them is a fairytale.

“You know, when I was a little boy,” he started telling another one of his childhood stories and it disrupted the thoughts that kept barging into my head, “I used to sneak out at night to look at the stars.” My heart started beating loudly when I heard him say that. “I wondered if anyone else was secretly awake, staring at the night sky and I tried to imagine how it looked like from that person’s view.” I gasped in shock. I did that too. “Once, I saw a falling star. The same like the

one tonight.” I swallowed loudly. “And I wondered if that other person could see it as well. Then I thought about the possibility that we made a wish at the same time and I asked myself if both of them would come true.” His eyes sparked with glowing clarity. “Mine did.” He smiled. “Do you want to know what I wished for?”

I nodded my head, looking at him expectantly.

“I wished for an angel.” His whisper broke the sound barrier between us and I shivered from the vibration of his soft voice. “For so long, I waited for someone to break the darkness around me and then you appeared in my life.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. After a long break, he spoke again. “God has given me an angel and I shattered her to pieces,” he said in a tormented voice and opened his eyes, slowly taking in the contours of my face. “How could I have believed you were after the dark when you brought so much light into my life?”

That last sentence caused me to try to see things from his point of view and somehow I understood what had driven him to hurt me. Wrong perceptions can lead a man astray, but acting under the influence of hurt and rage can only produce more pain. And I wanted the pain to stop.

“Sebastian, please.” I looked at him, pleading. “Stop torturing yourself.” I said in a quiet voice.

A light wind blew a few locks of hair on my face and he removed them with a soft caress, letting his fingers slide down to my shoulder where he kept his stare.

“You’re too kind, Isabelle. I don’t deserve you,” he said brokenly. “But I’m too selfish to let you go.”

Touched by his admission, I brushed my hand along his cheek and waited for him to look at me. When his eyes sprang to mine in an instant, I got carried away by the reflection of the moonlight in them. “Hold me, then. Don’t let me go.” I spoke in a mild voice and instantly felt his arms wrap around me.

He pulled me into a soothing embrace and we didn't speak anymore. We just lay under the illuminating wonder that twinkled around the moon and stared at it in awe like we were two lost pieces of the same puzzle that were finally joined together.

As the wind became stronger and my body trembled from the cold, Sebastian hugged me tighter and kept me warm with his own body. The tender memory of his gesture was already engraved in my mind and I wanted for the warmth he provided to never end. However, my wish was declined when he moved away from me.

"It's getting cold. We should go inside," he said softly.

With everything in me, I wanted to prolong our time, but I knew he was right so I just nodded and followed his lead inside the house. My eyes darted towards the big pianoforte in the living space area and before my brain even got the chance to process what I was about to say, I said it.

"Will you play for me, Sebastian?" I blurted out, admiring the beautiful instrument in front of us.

He looked at me like he was about to dismiss my request because he thought I needed to go to sleep, but I interrupted him before he got a chance to say anything.

"Please." I gave him a pleading look. "I don't want to go to sleep. That room scares me. It gives me nightmares," I admitted, openly acting like a child.

Sebastian smirked and shook his head, considering my proposition. "What am I going to do with you, Isabelle?" He laughed for a while and then suddenly turned serious. "I'll play for you, princess." His tender gaze settled on my eyes. "But you should know that I don't play for free," he said in a playful voice.

"No?" I breathed.

"No." He shook his head. "My performances are really special and extremely expensive." Something lit up in his eyes and I gulped from the unknown excitement that rushed through me.

“It’s a shame then, because I can’t afford them,” I said quietly and he smiled.

“Oh, but you can.” He came closer. “You have a very valuable currency I happen to gladly accept.”

“W-Which currency?” I asked in a confused voice and Sebastian snickered.

He leaned over to me and whispered in my ear. “My angel has a dirty mind. Must you always doubt me?” A deep shade of red settled on my cheeks and Sebastian brushed his knuckles against one of them and lifted up my chin. “What I want is far more innocent and not at all scary.” His soft voice warmed me and I felt like my knees were getting weak. “Just a smile, Isabelle. All I ask for is to see you smile.” Encouraged by his inviting voice, a weak smile appeared on my lips and he smiled back at me before walking towards the piano.

I inhaled a chunk of stale air, fighting the fever that spread over my body before joining him. I sat on one of the chairs near the piano and observed as he settled his graceful long fingers on the keys. He lifted up his face, confronting me with his interrogating gaze.

“Any special requests?” he asked, smiling at me.

“I... I think I want you to surprise me,” I requested with a warm expression on my face.

“Challenge accepted,” he said and returned his attention to the keys of the piano.

My eyes were frozen on his fingers, waiting in anticipation for him to start playing. After a few moments, the wonderful sound of the piano broke the deadly silence that ruled the house. It felt as though all the shadows that frightened me were chased away by the magical music that filled the room. Sebastian was completely wrapped up in his own world, pouring himself into the music he was creating. Closing my eyes, I drifted into my own world as well. Entranced by the magical sound of the music, I traveled into my happy place, filled with beautiful roses, the soothing sound of the water and the feeling of serenity. As I was doing that, I

created a comfortable connection with the person who was taking me there—the only person who had the ability to make me feel better, regardless of the bitter past and the uncertain present. As the fascinating sound of the music subsided, I slowly opened my eyes and saw him gaping at me.

“That was beautiful.” I smiled widely, paying for his performance in the desired currency.

“Nothing is more beautiful than the look in your eyes right now.” I blushed at his comment and bit my lower lip to stop myself from giggling like a little girl. My reactions to him were driving me crazy.

“What...” My voice caught on so I had to clear my throat before continuing. “What is the name of the composition?”

“Nocturne—the music of the night,” he whispered. “It’s my favorite and one of the rare ones I know by heart.”

I observed him in wonder. “When did you learn to play?”

He looked at me with nostalgia in his eyes. “When I was little, my mother insisted on piano lessons. It was the drill. I used to hate it, but now I’m glad my parents made me do it.”

Hearing him say that made me think of my own parents. They never insisted on developing our talents. As a matter of fact, it had been the last thing on their minds.

“It’s fascinating. I always wanted to learn, but never got a chance to do it,” I said with apparent regret.

“Well, today is your lucky day, princess. Come, sit next to me.” He tucked the empty space on the large piano chair he was sitting on.

Hesitating, I blinked a few times before accepting his offer and sitting next to him. He smiled at me and gently laid my hand on the piano keys before covering my fingers with his own. The current brought about by his innocent touch flowed through me again and I felt like my body was being taken over by the force I couldn’t control.

“What are we going to play?” I asked to keep my mind from thinking about his touch.

He smiled. “Hmm... I think I want you to surprise me.”

“Challenge accepted,” I breathed.

His skillful hand started guiding my fingers through the piano keys and suddenly we were playing the familiar melody. I started laughing because I felt so happy that we were doing this together.

He leaned close to me and whispered in my ear. “What is this beautiful melody you are playing?”

I chuckled and whispered in an almost inaudible voice. “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

At that moment, my mind filled with fresh memories of the night sky, the falling stars and the beautiful, loving sound of the music that warmed up my heart.

He looked at me softly, with pure affection gleaming from his bright eyes and I melted into the sensation. Our lips were so dangerously close, almost touching, and we took a breath at the same time. Sebastian was filled with painful restraint and so was I. I could tell he would push me away because he was about to lose control but instead of letting him do that, I leaned even closer so that our noses were touching and I parted my lips, drawing in another breath and causing Sebastian to swallow loudly and exhale almost like he was in pain.

“You are worthy. You are worthy of me, Sebastian,” I whispered and as sudden realization surged through him, his lips landed on mine in an instant and he kissed me gently, catching my upper lip with his lips, savoring the feeling for a few moments before he moved away without deepening the kiss.

My whole body trembled from the impact of his warm lips. *I was falling...*

Chapter Thirty-Five

The aroma of fresh coffee that spread around the house woke me up and my eyes snapped open, taking in the space around me. That room still scared me senseless, but the warm memories from the previous night made me feel at ease. I remembered the stars, Sebastian's story, the captivating sound of the piano, his soft touch and—his lips on mine. The very thought of our short kiss made me shiver and I knew that things wouldn't be the same between us anymore. To a certain point, it felt awkward to face him after everything that happened. I kept wondering how I would react if he decided to kiss me again. Little by little, I began accepting the fact that he was my husband because his nice gestures provided me with the peace I'd hungered for so long, and I truly believed there had been nothing wrong with our kiss.

In the last couple of months, we had experienced such a drastic change that influenced the very nature of our marriage, and while I was happy we were making progress, I was defeated by the unnerving awareness that we were getting closer to that one big step. And the very idea of being intimate with Sebastian still mortified me. I was so happy with the way things were between us and I was afraid that intimacy could somehow ruin it all. Still, despite Sebastian's admirable patience and understanding, I knew we couldn't live like this forever. Even though his compassionate demeanor made it clear that I was the one who held the power to make the decision about the moment we would start living like a real married couple, I was aware that soon I would be running out of excuses and the thought made me nervous. Something was changing within me, and the speed in which Sebastian managed to erase the terror I felt towards him and work his way around my cautiously guarded walls, fascinated and scared me.

The storm of gloomy thoughts was disrupted by that scent of coffee that kept tempting my senses and I decided to finally give in and follow its inviting aroma. As I descended the stairs and walked through the big hallway where the portraits of Sebastian's ancestors were placed, I willed myself to remain walking straight because I didn't need the stress only one glance at Collin Everett could produce. But as usual, my curiosity surpassed the warnings of common sense and before I could stop myself, I looked towards his portrait only to end up gazing at the empty spot on the wall. The painting had been removed and I knew Sebastian was the one who took it down. *Another gesture, another stitch gone.*

Blinking a few times, I walked towards the conjoined kitchen and dining room area and the sight in front of me was astonishing. Sebastian was standing in front of a fully set breakfast table. Other than the time when he'd made me a cup of tea, I had never seen him go anywhere near the kitchen, and somehow I had always believed he was too vain to do these things by himself. Come to think of it, I had never seen him pour a cup of coffee, let alone make one by himself. It was hard to hide my surprise.

"I thought you might be hungry when you woke up," he said softly, letting me know he noticed my confusion, and my eyes darted towards the tray that was placed on the table.

There were two cups of coffee and a plate filled with pancakes. *Sebastian could make pancakes?* My initial surprise by his cooking abilities which were apparently, to my disgrace, by far better than mine, was disrupted when I looked at him and slowly took in his appearance. Just like that evening when he took me to the movies, he wore a pair of jeans and a dark blue T-Shirt. He had probably taken a shower in the early morning because his hair was still wet and some of the damp strands fell over his light and freshly-shaved face. The moment I looked into his green eyes that radiated some kind of a newfound peace within him, I couldn't shake off the feeling that I was staring at the most beautiful man on the face of the earth. The less I feared him, the more I began to realize that I wasn't completely immune to his breathtaking beauty.

“I didn’t know you like to cook,” I said quietly to make the fact that I was carried away by him less obvious.

He smiled. “No, I don’t like to cook. Actually, I hate it.”

He started approaching me and I was frozen in place. I. Couldn’t. Stop. Staring. “But it smells so…” He was standing in front of me and my mind went vacant as the scent of his cologne claimed the tight space between us. He gazed at me, waiting to hear the ending of my sentence. I swallowed and pushed out the words in a shaky breath. “...so delicious.”

He wasn’t a fool. It was clear he could see all too well the reaction he was causing within me. A victorious smirk appeared on his face as he leaned closer to me and started whispering the confirmation to my doubts in a self-assured voice. “What is delicious?” His lips gently brushed against my ear. “Me? Or the pancakes?”

I gasped as a current that was both pleasant and unpleasant, streamed through my body and he chuckled.

“S-Sebastian.” I looked at him with a mixture of unwelcome curiosity and slight desperation because I couldn’t handle his closeness anymore. Without actually doing anything, he was doing something to me. After gaping at my flushed face for a few moments that felt like eternity, he started laughing.

“It’s just a joke, angel.”

In a light kiss, his lips leaned against my forehead and slowly trailed down my face until his nose softly touched mine and our lips leveled up. Feeling his captivating minty breath on my skin filled me with anticipation, and my heart started beating in a crazy, loud rhythm. *He’s going to kiss me again.*

The emerald eyes gazed at me with brightness, building tension, and I could feel my eyes widen in the guidance of his powerful stare. “Sometimes it’s so hard to resist the temptation.” He held an expression of self-discipline and moderate perplexity as his hand slid down my shoulder, all the way to my wrist, producing goose bumps on the trailed

path of my skin and he stared at me intensely, like he was losing some kind of an inner battle. “You shouldn’t look at me like that, Isabelle. Not yet. Not unless you’re ready for me to look at you in the same way,” he whispered gently and his breath brushed the delicate skin of my mouth, but instead of kissing me in the way I expected, he slowly pushed his head up and placed a tender kiss on the bridge of my nose, stepping away from me.

“Sebastian, I...” I swallowed, fighting the sudden flood of emotion.

“I didn’t mean to scare you beautiful,” he said in a light voice. “But I can’t help it. After all, I’m only a man.” His stare shifted into something raw and possessive and I felt his eyes pierce through me. Composing himself, he caressed my cheek and I gulped at the feeling of his touch. “There’s only so much a man can take,” he muttered like it was hard for him to say the words.

The fact that my newfound attraction towards him had been so transparent made me feel ashamed, and it triggered the series of unsettling thoughts about intimacy again. He was absolutely right. I wasn’t at all ready to see desire in his eyes yet. Uneasy, I focused my eyes on the table and stared at the pancakes.

His alluring voice made me look back at him. “Don’t get your hopes up. It’s the only thing I can make and I haven’t cooked since college, so I can’t guarantee that it’s edible.” He smiled and pulled out a chair for me. He seemed to understand that I wasn’t ready to talk about what happened moments ago and I was grateful for that.

Smiling back, I sat on the chair and reached for the pancake, but his hand gently took hold of mine and stopped me.

“Allow me,” he said in a soft voice and placed the pancake on my plate. “Maple syrup?” He raised his eyebrows and I nodded.

After spreading some syrup on my plate, he took a seat across the table from me and observed with curiosity as I took

a bite of the pancake. At first, I hesitated trying the small piece of hot dough on my fork, but once I took a bite, it melted in my mouth and tasted like pure heaven. I looked at him incredulously, because I couldn't believe he could prepare something so tasty. This was another side of him that I couldn't have even imagined existed.

"This is the best pancake I've ever had," I praised his cooking and he smiled at me.

"You obviously haven't tried many pancakes, have you?" He chuckled.

"No, I haven't," I said in a soft voice. "But this one is really good." I took another bite and it tasted even better than the first one. "It's almost addictive."

"I guess I'll have to make them more often, then."

"I'd really like that." I smiled, savoring the combination of delicious food and coffee that caused an explosion on my taste buds. "How about tomorrow?"

Sebastian took a sip of his coffee and then looked at me softly.

"I'm afraid it will have to wait since I'll be gone for a week." I stared at him in confusion and he smiled, offering an explanation. "I'm leaving on a business trip."

For the first time, I was kind of disappointed that he was leaving for that long, but I had already gotten used to the fact that he was often absent and up until now I had never really missed his presence. Something told me that this time it might be different.

I gazed at him with a light expression on my face and uttered a question I had never dared to ask before. "Where are you going?"

He smirked at me kind of boyishly, with a mysterious glow in his eyes. "Paris," he said calmly, as if going on such a trip was a regular thing for him while I gasped at the very mention of that city. Then I remembered who he was and I realized that most of the things that fascinated me didn't affect him in the least.

“You... You’re going to Paris?” I asked in a surprised voice.

He chuckled. “I know what you’re thinking, but Paris is no fun if you have to experience it on your own. I’ll take you, if you want to go, but not when I’m there on business.”

The little girl inside me squeaked at his offer, but the thought of visiting Paris with Sebastian still didn’t seem like a good idea because I knew what would happen if he took me there. He looked at me expectantly and I felt pressured to speak.

Led by my desperate need to change the subject, I simply nodded and decided to try my luck by asking another question I had never dared to ask until now. “Sebastian...” He gave me his full attention and I already started blushing because of what I would ask him. “What... What is it that you do?” I asked, feeling funny about the fact I had no idea what his company was actually about.

He smirked at me and crossed his arms, leaning his back on the chair. “It’s outrageous that you don’t know what your husband does for a living,” he said in teasing voice. “Don’t you think?” He arched his eyebrows and I blushed in embarrassment.

“I... It’s just that I never...” I had no idea what I actually wanted to say.

The feeling of shame that swept over me had to have amused him, because he started laughing again. “I’m an architect. I design buildings all over the world and then build them for millions of dollars profit.”

I gaped in wonder. “And you’re building something in Paris?”

He produced a self-confident expression on his face and the ruthless businessman side of him came to the surface. “If the negotiations go well, I am.”

“I assume you’re really good at negotiating,” I said what I was thinking out loud.

He narrowed his eyes at me and smiled. “I guess you could say that. Once I find something I want, I don’t give up until I seal the deal and make it mine.”

Affected by his words, I asked quietly. “So, even if it seems impossible to get whatever it is that you want, you never simply let it go and move on?”

He looked down and it seemed as though he was lost in thoughts for a while. “No,” he said in a decisive tone and slowly lifted up his head again. “Not if I can help it.”

The green emerald eyes bored into me, and I swallowed hard, sensing the undertone of his words and the message he was trying to send me.

Pretending to be oblivious to what he was trying to say, I commented on his sentence. “Such life is probably filled with stress and pressure,” I uttered, more to myself than him.

He shrugged. “Not if you’re investing time and energy in something or someone you love.” Even though he said it in a whisper, the magnitude of his voice traveled to me with such power that it woke up something inside of me.

For a moment I was speechless and then I asked the first thing that came to mind. “Have you designed something I know about?” I asked in a voice that was kind of shaky, trying to keep the expression of curiosity on my face.

He snickered, knowing I was deliberately misunderstanding him. “As a matter of fact, I have.” I looked at him in anticipation. “I designed our house.”

He said it again. *Our house*. The fact that he designed something as imposing and beautiful as the mansion we lived in left me bewildered.

“It’s magnificent. You should be proud of yourself for creating such a unique structure,” I said with admiration.

He smiled kind of sadly. “It’s just a house. The real art is turning it into a home.”

“You don’t feel like that house is your home?” I asked in surprise.

He raised his eyebrows. “Do you?” he asked like he already knew the answer to his question.

Something squeezed around my heart. I remembered how he had told me we were going home the first time he was taking me there. Even though things between us now seemed to be going much better than at that time, I still couldn't bring myself to think about that house as my home. Not with bad memories lurking behind every door. I took in a breath, delaying the torture of having to lie to him and just when I parted my lips to say something, he preceded me.

“Don't bother, angel. I don't need you to lie.” He looked at me tenderly and then smiled, trying to lighten up the atmosphere. “Besides, you make a terrible liar... But that's just one of the many things I like about you.” My heart skipped a beat. *One of the many things he liked about me?*

Stunned by his comment, I remained silent, deciding to take another bite of the delicious pancake and after that, the conversation went dead.

In a short while, we left that beautiful estate and headed back to the place that didn't represent anything but bitter memories for the both of us. For a long time, I gazed out the window, wrapping my thoughts into the passing life of magnificent nature and then, I felt a familiar warm, electric shiver rush through me. Everything in me woke up as I realized that Sebastian gently entwined our fingers and held my hand. Gulping, I turned towards him with painful slowness and though his eyes were fixed on the road, it felt like he was piercing through me with the green lightning of his stare. I couldn't help thinking that my hand fell into his with such incredible smoothness and a part of me wondered if he was the only man in the world who could evoke that fluttering feeling of excitement. With a smile on his face, he pulled my hand towards him, lowering his lips on my knuckles and burning a beautiful memory with a small, ticklish kiss. Then, as if he could read my mind, he glanced at me, his eyes warm and trusting, observing me like I consumed the deepest part of his thoughts and the idea of it made me feel cherished and special. Everything seemed better, at the reach of our hands. We just

had to be patient and wait for it. At that moment, it felt like someday, somewhere... we could actually build a home together.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The shiny, warm clarity of summer had been replaced by the cold, murky autumn sky and I observed as the golden leaves fell from the trees, leaving their branches naked and vulnerable for the merciless winter to come. Carried by the strength of the wind, the leaves flew away in a dance, taking away the playful spectrum of colors along with them. The monotonous picture of the once beautiful garden now seemed to be dark and gray. Startled by the approaching noise, I looked away from the depressing imagery on the outside and I was welcomed by a scowling voice.

“Isabelle, you’ve barely touched your food.” Anne expressed her worry when she found me lost in thoughts at a breakfast table.

“I’m just not that hungry,” I said quietly and forced a smile.

Anne smiled and looked at me like she was trying to decipher my thoughts. “I wonder if your sudden loss of appetite has anything to do with Sebastian’s absence.” She winked at me and I blushed.

I caught myself analyzing what she had told me and I was struck by the truth of her words. Sebastian had been gone for three days, and just like the bright summer had been replaced by the dampening fall, the colorful world he put me in went black and white again. The man whose presence used to be the last thing I desired suddenly wouldn’t leave my mind and this fresh revelation that I was becoming dependent on him left me bewildered.

“It’s alright, dear. You don’t have to say a thing, but I can tell that he’s warming up to your heart. I’m glad to see that he’s trying to make amends,” she said softly.

I swallowed and looked at her with a pinch of sadness. Even though I'd never told her, I felt she must have had a hunch about what happened between us and she knew how he used to treat me.

"Making amends is all he ever does lately," I said in a whisper. "And he's quite good at it," I mumbled to myself.

A slight smile appeared on Anne's lips and she rested her hand on my shoulder. "Sebastian can be quite charming when he wants to be. Be careful, because he just might steal your heart." She meant it as a joke, but I didn't find it funny for obvious reasons.

I swallowed my answer. *It's too late to be careful.*

Anne observed me suspiciously. She knew that things had changed, but as always, she didn't comment on it. As kind as she was, she just continued clearing up the table and every now and then glanced at me with a kind expression on her face. I was really blessed to have her near and I couldn't help but think that she was more attached to me than my own mother.

"Thank you, Anne," I said when she was about to leave the room and she smiled at me warmly, letting me know she was aware I was thanking her for a lot more than clearing the table.

Defying, heavy rain started falling from the sullen sky, preventing me from going outside and I resigned my original idea to find something that would consume my restless thoughts for a while and instead, I headed towards my bedroom. When I walked past the media room, the memory of the painful conversation I had with Sebastian returned to taunt me. The sound of his voice when he presented me with the story I had written and demanded a happy ending for the characters consumed my mind again and I realized that my doubts since then had lessened and I started believing that my characters could have their happily ever after if they worked hard for it. Up until now, I'd had a huge writer's block because I couldn't think of anything the hero could do to redeem himself, but suddenly, I was bursting with inspiration and I

had more than one idea of how he could try to amend for his actions. The fact that I had managed to find something that would distract me from thinking about my husband who was closing business deals in Paris while I spent lonely hours in that huge, empty house filled me with satisfaction and I couldn't wait to start writing again.

Excited, I searched for the notebook that held one of my most prized possessions, and once I found it, a childish squeak left my throat, forcing me to laugh at myself for being so silly. Before I dived into the depressing world of my characters, which I wanted to change, I decided to return to the kitchen and prepare a cup of soothing chamomile tea. Another dear remembrance of Sebastian's thoughtfulness filled me with the flustering feeling of anticipation again and I smiled to an empty room, being completely aware that once more, I missed my husband's presence.

Hours went by quickly, and I wrote with so much enthusiasm that my thoughts seemed to be faster than my hand and the words that were stuck in my mind for so long seemed to have effortlessly spilled on the blank paper. The new concept of the story I had created filled me with happiness, and for the first time after starting to work on this novel, I felt like it was going in the right direction and I couldn't help but feel proud about it. The hero decided to show that even though he had hurt the heroine and left her broken, he could derive enough strength for both of them and prove her that there was a way out of their bad situation. Every day, he would demonstrate patience and care for the heroine who had managed to work her way into his heart and with the small, but milestone-changing gestures, he slowly tried to work his way into hers. At first, she was confused by the attention he showered her with, and she was wary to accept his apology and believe in the honesty of his intentions, but eventually, his warmth had melted her mistrust and she yielded to him, even though she knew that by doing so, she would make herself vulnerable again, but it was a risk she was willing to take. Many obstacles still ruled and threatened the safety of their newfound world, but at least now, she was prepared to give him her trust and fight along with him.

Despite the fact that it was getting late and my eyes as well as my hands were getting tired, the excitement hadn't subsided. The urge to keep on writing was overwhelming, and had it not been for the sudden knock on the door, I'm sure I would have fallen asleep with the pen in my hands and my head on the desk.

With reluctance, I put the notebook away and invited whoever was on the other side of the door to come inside. The door opened halfway and I was greeted with the sight of Annette partially leaning over the door, staring at me with a smile on her face. Even though I was tired, I was glad to see her, but her mysterious behavior left me baffled.

"Why don't you come inside?" I asked in a light voice and she looked at me with strange excitement glowing from her eyes.

Confused, I started laughing because I didn't know what she was hiding behind that door. Annette was slowly relaxing around me, but at times she still seemed to be tense in my presence.

"I have something for you," she finally said in a controlled voice that hid her obvious thrill and she pulled a beautiful bouquet that consisted of simple, but breathtakingly beautiful red roses.

Unable to speak because I was taken aback by the sight in front of me, I remained gazing at Annette until I snapped out of my trance.

"You've bought me flowers?" I looked at her in surprise, while she shook her head at me, smiling in enigma.

"No, don't worry." She chuckled. "They have just been delivered and I have a good feeling about the identity of your secret admirer," she said in a teasing voice while walking towards me.

In complete awe, I accepted the wonderful bundle of my favorite flowers and even though I knew who had sent them, I hesitated before reading the little card that was attached to the top of the bouquet. Instead, I closed my eyes,

savoring the scent of alluring roses, and as my action evoked the image of Sebastian's smiling face, my eyes tore open in surprise. I was daydreaming about this man. With obvious excitement, my hand reached for the note and I couldn't help but smile when I read its touching content.

Sweet Isabelle,

Even when I'm miles away, somehow you still manage to

creep into my mind and keep me awake until the late hours of the night.

*I secretly hope the roses will make you think of me,
like I think of you.*

Greetings from the loneliest man in Paris

Shivering current rushed through my body when I read what was written on that card and my heart started beating in a fast rhythm while my cheeks blushed in the deepest shade of red, revealing my mesmerized state of mind.

"Are they from Sebastian?" Annette asked with excitement and curiosity.

"Yes, they are," I whispered, still blushing from the overpowering reaction another one of his gestures evoked in me.

"They're beautiful. I wish I had someone to buy me flowers." Her voice was filled with longing.

I turned to look at her and something about her comment caught my attention, but I chose to dismiss it.

"I love roses. Especially the red ones," I stated in a quiet voice.

"Me too." She leaned over to inhale the scent that evaporated from the red petals.

"Another thing we have in common, then," I commented with a slight smile as she stepped away.

For a moment she just stood there and then she started staring at me with a baffled look on her face. “Isabelle, I was wondering...” She hesitated to ask something delicate and I turned serious, already bracing myself to hear her uncomfortable question. “It’s just that, if your husband is so thoughtful then how come...” My nerves were getting the best of me and I thought the anticipation would kill me if she wouldn’t speak, but instead of saying what she wanted to say, she shrugged and regained her composure. “It doesn’t matter. Never mind.” She waved her hand and smiled, but I could tell she was still thinking about something that preoccupied her mind and I had an overwhelming feeling that that something was my marriage.

For a while, we remained silent, both of us trying to come up with something to say to break the awkwardness of the situation.

“Please, let me put them in the water for you.” Annette produced a shy smile and reached for the bouquet. I slowly handed it to her, still feeling weird about her sudden interest in Sebastian’s behavior towards me.

While she walked towards the vanity to get the ceramic vase and busied herself with creating a beautiful decoration, my mind was preoccupied with Sebastian’s warnings about Annette. Maybe I had judged her too easily. When she was done, she turned towards me with a light expression on her face and I sighed, scowling at myself for ever thinking this girl could have had bad intentions, but I just had to know.

“Annette, what did you want to ask me?” My voice was slow as I dragged out the question.

“Oh.” She exhaled in discomfort, making it obvious she hadn’t expected that I would insist on the matter. “Nothing. I...” She was stalling with her answer and it made me all the more suspicious, so I held my breath when she smiled and started talking. “I was just wondering how come he didn’t take you to Paris, but I’m sure he has a good reason,” she offered an explanation and her innocent answer had put my mind at ease.

I sighed with relief and smiled. I understood how she could wonder about that, but something told me there was more to it. Shaking off the bad thoughts, I head-strongly decided to ignore my intuition which always managed to make me doubt people's intentions ever since my trust had been battered. In my mind, I kept repeating to myself that Annette was a kind person and someone who was becoming a friend. She wouldn't betray me. Producing an inviting and light expression on my face, I smiled at her and it seemed to calm her down.

"Sebastian prefers I stay home while he travels on business. I've accompanied him once and it didn't end too well," I said, remembering our trip to Las Vegas and all the drama that went on there.

Annette chuckled. "Like I've said, I knew he had a good reason. It's great to know that you're always on his mind though."

Her words made me wander off and for a moment and I was lost in deep thoughts. "Yes, it's nice to know that," I confirmed.

She sighed and took another short peek at the roses. "They truly are magnificent," she whispered in awe and then looked at me with a spark of something I interpreted as a pinch of innocent jealousy. "Well, it's getting late. I should get going. I have college tomorrow." She yawned and now I was the one with a pinch of jealousy coming from my stare because I was reminded that she was leading the life I always dreamt of and while I was stuck on dreaming, she was busy with turning her plans into reality.

I brushed off the sad thoughts and swallowed a lump that was forming in my throat. "I understand. You should get your rest," I said in a caring, soft voice.

"Thank you. You should go to sleep too. No offense, but you look really tired," she teased me and it made me laugh.

I could only imagine the traces of exhaustion that were probably showing on my face after hours of writing. "None

taken. I'm going to take a shower and call it a night," I said in a sleepy voice.

Annette smiled and turned to leave, but then she stopped and turned back towards me with a slight blush on her face. "I'm sorry. I feel bad that I have to ask you this, but could I borrow a few books from the library? I need them for a project and I didn't have enough time to get them myself. I hope it's not inconvenient..."

"Annette!" She kept mumbling and I felt like I should stop her. "It's okay," I said in a reassuring voice and smiled. I didn't know how Sebastian felt about the books being taken away from the library and I certainly wasn't too happy about it myself, but I was glad to help. "Take whatever you need, but please return it before Sebastian arrives home."

She nodded, thanked me in an enthusiastic voice and left the room, turning around one more time to express her gratitude before she closed the door. I was left with my confusing thoughts, wondering why I had asked her to return the books before Sebastian's return. Deep down, maybe there was a part of me that still feared the darkness that could emerge from the corners that were well hidden in plain sight. I walked towards the window and observed the cold autumn night, realizing that nature, just like life, was nothing else but a constant exchange of the dark and the light.

Then my gaze darted towards the red roses and the sight of his beautiful gift made me smile again, chasing away the thoughts of confusion.

After running a warm bath and taking a long time to relax from all the commotion that was going on in my mind, I finally put on my pajamas and decided to go to bed. I turned off the lights and tried to fall asleep, but I couldn't stop thinking about all of the crazy things he'd been doing for me. The once scary flashbacks that had made me shiver with fear, were now completely gone and I was struck with an odd realization. Somehow, Sebastian had managed to replace each and every hurtful memory with a happy one, and all that remained of that painful period were seldom doubts that were slowly fading from my mind. I patted the covers in frustration,

thinking that Sebastian had gotten his wish, since I couldn't go to sleep because he made me think about him. Closing my eyes tight, I tried to fall asleep, but to no avail, because I was interrupted by the loud ringing of the phone which would probably manage to wake the dead. I sat upright, turned on the lamp on the nightstand and answered the phone without even checking the number. Suddenly, I was afraid that something might have happened to someone in Rosemont because nobody ever called me this late.

"H-Hello," I greeted the person on the line.

"Hello." A familiar whisper sounded in my ears and I melted, without even realizing how much I'd missed to hear it. When I didn't say anything, a loud chuckle contrasted by the soft voice, broke through the phone. "Don't worry, I don't have magical powers to get to you over the phone, even though that's exactly what I'd like to do," Sebastian teased.

I didn't know what to say. Taken aback by the fact that he had called me, I gasped into the phone, trying to control my nervous breathing and the fast beating of my heart.

"Did I wake you up?" he asked in a tender voice and I shook my head, smiling even though he couldn't see me.

"No, you didn't wake me up. As a matter of fact, I think I have a bad case of insomnia," I said through slight laughter.

"How so?" He breathed into the phone and I swallowed.

"Someone decided to surprise me today and I really liked the surprise. I can't stop thinking about it."

I blushed at my bluntness, and once again I felt grateful that Sebastian couldn't witness the embarrassment on my face.

I could envision his smile. "You're blushing, aren't you?" he teased. I froze and looked around the room, wondering if there were cameras around.

"Are you spying on me?" I asked in a half-serious voice and he started laughing.

“No, I’m not spying on you.” There was a sudden break. “I just know you better than you think, angel.”

The blush on my face turned deeper and I sensed he knew that too, and for some reason I was unable to speak again.

“So, you like the roses?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“I love them,” I breathed and looked towards the vase on the vanity. “They’re beautiful.”

“I’m glad,” he whispered in a light voice.

The memory of his warm expression danced before my eyes. “You’re smiling, aren’t you?” I asked quietly and I heard his muffled laughter.

“Why, I think you are spying on me, Mrs. Everett,” he whispered and a warm shiver streamed through my body when he addressed me as his wife. It was as if he said: *‘You belong with me. You’re mine.’*

“No, I wouldn’t dare to spy on you, Mr. Everett.” I returned the favor, suddenly thinking that the fact that Sebastian was my husband didn’t seem like such a bad thing at all lately. “I just know you better than you think,” I muttered with confidence.

For a while, we remained silent, but there wasn’t anything uncomfortable about it. I focused on the sound of his breathing and it was enough for me to relax and almost drift away to sleep.

“Isabelle...” I heard him whisper to me, but I was already in a daze, entering a rare, beautiful dream. “Are you awake?” His voice was a bit louder this time and I fought to tell him I wasn’t asleep, but all I could do was produce a soft moan that sounded through the phone. He sighed and as the world around me slowly faded away I could hear a tender voice that made me feel like I had butterflies dancing in my stomach. “Sleep tight, love,” he murmured and took a deep breath. “I miss you,” he said softly and hung up the phone with obvious reluctance.

Even though I knew he couldn't hear me, the words at the tip of my tongue were spoken of their own accord, before sleep finally claimed me. "*I miss you, too.*"

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Cooking could be a lot of fun. More fun than I had ever imagined. I'd never actually prepared a decent meal in my entire life, but that day Norma was sick and Anne had taken the day off, so I decided to help Annette in the kitchen to keep my mind off how lonely I felt without Sebastian. Like myself, she wasn't an expert with the oven, but with the little help of the Internet, we found a simple recipe for cupcakes and decided to try our luck. To lighten up the atmosphere and ease the pressure, we listened to music and goofed around while mixing the ingredients. It turned out to be a lot easier than I thought and in no time we were filling the little cups with the delicious looking pastry. I was wearing a simple white dress from the pile Sebastian had asked Helen to buy me and it felt so liberating to wear the things I liked again. With extreme caution, I was doing the finishing touches with the pastry and Annette teased me for not wanting to make my dress dirty.

“And here we were, thinking we couldn't even bake an egg. These puppies look amazing,” Annette joked and I loved how this situation made her relax.

I laughed. “They sure do. But don't get your hopes up. They still need to be baked. That's the hard part.”

With caution, I placed the pan in the oven and smiled at Annette. She beamed at me and as I took the dirty bowl and started washing it by hand instead of putting it in the dishwasher, she couldn't hide her surprise.

“Maybe I can't find my way around the oven, but doing the dishes is something I excel at.” I winked at her.

“You know, I can't believe that someone like you could be so simple and fun to be around,” she said with a ring of amazement in her voice.

“The feeling is entirely mutual. I think you’re really fun to be around too. The girl before you gave me a lot of trouble.” I bit my lip, reprimanding myself for starting the dangerous subject.

“You mean Teresa?” My mouth fell open when I realized that Annette already knew who I was talking about. “I heard she was crazy about Sebastian and that she wanted him for herself.” Her voice was serious, but then it turned a few shades lighter again. “No offense, but I can’t blame her. The man is drop dead gorgeous. You are one lucky woman, Isabelle.”

Struck by her words, I just smiled in response, hiding my true emotions, but then she chuckled and said something that sent me over the edge. “I bet he’s great in bed too.”

The bowl dropped from my hands and onto the floor. My hands shook as I bent down to pick it up and Annette looked at me with a mixture of worry and disbelief.

“Are you alright?” She was on the verge of panicking and I took a deep breath to calm both myself and her down.

“I’m fine.” I forced a smile, but I knew she could tell it was fake.

“I’m so sorry, Isabelle. I had no right to say that.” She looked at me worriedly. “Please, just forget I said anything.”

But I couldn’t forget. I knew she only tried to have a normal girly talk, but her words had caused a storm of emotions I wasn’t ready to deal with. With growing pain in my heart, I analyzed the effect that one sentence had on me and consequently, I compared myself to the girl standing in front of me. I was bruised and damaged. She wasn’t. I had a lot of trouble speaking my mind and building up my self-confidence. She didn’t. As a matter of fact, the more time I’d spent around her, the more I realized she was bursting with faith in herself and her dreams. I couldn’t even think about intimacy, even though Sebastian tried so hard to make me forget. Without a doubt, Annette didn’t have any issues with trust when it came to relationships. Besides, this was the second time she tried to

get me to talk about my marriage and I couldn't shake off the feeling that something wasn't right.

Suddenly, I looked at her as someone who was dangerously close to Sebastian, and I wondered if it was only a matter of time before he gave up on me and craved someone who wasn't damaged—someone who was normal. Staring at her with disbelief, I slowly realized that what I felt couldn't be described as anything else but jealousy. The discovery shocked me.

“Isabelle, please say something.” Annette's pleading voice made me snap out of my gloomy thoughts. I wanted to ease her discomfort and tried to diminish the feelings of doubt that swept over me.

“It wasn't your fault.” I smiled, trying to block the threatening thoughts in the back of my mind. “I just have a lot on my mind. I'm sorry I reacted that harshly.”

A smile twisted her lips. “Isabelle, I know I crossed the line with my joke, but I would never betray your trust. I'm not like Teresa. Please believe me.” She sounded sincere and her face seemed to radiate honesty. I felt guilty for making her feel that bad just because she wanted to have some innocent fun.

“Annette...”

“Something smells delicious.” Sebastian's deep voice sounded through the room and both Annette and I turned towards him, startled by his presence.

“T-thank you for helping me in the kitchen, madam. I have to go do the other c-chores now.” Annette's uneasiness around Sebastian was obvious when she blushed and nervously fled the room, leaving me alone with him.

He exhaled and chuckled for a brief moment. Annette's behavior entertained him. His face turned slightly serious and he directed his gaze at me. I gulped, because I knew that my behavior with Annette was against his high standards and despite his lovely gestures, even I felt uneasy around him at the moment, wondering if I had crossed the line.

“I thought you were in Paris,” I said in a small voice.

He shrugged. "I closed the deal and decided to come back earlier." His eyes darted towards the mess on the table and the sink filled with dishes that still needed to be done.

"Norma wasn't feeling well," I tried to justify why I was in the kitchen before he got a chance to scowl at me first.

"I know."

"And..." I paused, uncertain of what I should say.

"And?" He encouraged me in a light voice, but his face still didn't give out if he was upset.

"I just... I thought I could help Annette in the kitchen."

For a few short moments he remained silent as if something bothered him. My mind raced when he looked at me with an apparent intention to speak.

"I didn't know you like to cook." He finally smiled, taunting me with the same sentence I threw his way not that long ago and it brought some peace to my mind. "It's very nice of you to help, but I think Antoinette can find her way around the kitchen."

He used her real name and it puzzled me. It meant that he still didn't like her. I knew that it shouldn't have, but for some reason, the revelation made me feel at ease. However, the thought that he might have overheard fractions of our conversation made my face redden with shame.

He took in my appearance as he approached me and I was suddenly very aware of the simple dress I was wearing.. I hugged my middle, trying to hide from the piercing glare in his eyes. I'd never worn anything so revealing in his presence and the thought that he might get the wrong idea made me nervous. The almost-teasing smile wouldn't leave his face and I knew that I was being ridiculous since he had paid for the dress, but I couldn't help it. His eyes paused on my shoulder and I realized that one of the straps had slid down when I had reached for the bowl on the floor. Slowly, he directed his green gaze straight to my eyes and looked at me tenderly as his fingers brushed against my naked shoulder and pulled the strap back in place. Even when he moved his hand away, the feeling

of his soft touch still danced on my skin and sent tingles all the way down, way below the surface, causing the sense of some undefined serenity that made me hunger for more of his tenderness. As I gaped at him in wonder, the smell of something burning filled my nostrils and I gasped when Sebastian hurried towards the oven. *Cupcakes!* I'd forgotten to set the timer. A small cloud of smoke escaped when he opened the door and as I stood there, angry at myself for being so stupid, Sebastian was laughing his head off.

“Unless they were made of dark chocolate, I don't think there's much hope for these muffins.” He barely managed to say through his laughter.

His light mood was so soothing and contagious, that I couldn't help but relax and laugh as well.

“It's not funny,” I protested.

“You're right. It's not funny.” He became slightly serious. “It's hilarious.” He started laughing again full force while I shook my head at him. “I can't wait to see the look on Norma's face. I think she won't be taking a day off in a while.”

“You're wrong,” I said in a teasing voice. “They would have been delicious.”

His laughter subsided and he looked at me with the glowing light in his eyes. “I'm sure they would have been the best cupcakes I ever had.” I gazed at him with apparent surprise, but he ignored my suspicious stare and made an interesting suggestion. “Let's go out to dinner tonight.”

The idea of spending the evening in some fancy, à la carte restaurant was more than appalling, but Sebastian had done so many nice things for me and I felt like I owed him, so I decided to accept his invitation.

“Sure.” I smiled, pretending that I liked the idea. “Just give me some time to change.”

I already headed towards the door, but he stopped me by softly taking hold of my elbow and almost pulling me into an embrace. The smell of his cologne grazed my senses and a

shiver passed through me when I became aware of how painfully close we were.

“No,” his whisper carried the mint breeze I still remembered. “You don’t need to change.”

He smiled while I looked at him in confusion, thinking that he must have lost his mind.

“But... But this dress...”

“Is lovely,” he interrupted me.

“And... And my hair...” I touched the bundle of mess on my head.

“Is perfect,” he whispered and gently settled one loose strand of hair that hung above my face to the side.

“Sebastian...” I pleaded.

He tilted up my chin, speaking softly to me. “You’re perfect, Isabelle. I don’t want you to change the dress. I don’t want you to fix up your beautiful hair. I like it just the way it is.”

I realized I wasn’t going to win and persuade him into letting me wear the appropriate attire, so I gave into his expectant expression and allowed him to lead me towards the car.

The entire ride, I kept thinking about the embarrassment I would have to face in front of the staff and the guests of the restaurant. Sebastian wore a mysterious smirk on his face and I couldn’t help hating him a little for making me go into a place that would be filled with stuck up people, without giving me the opportunity to dress appropriately, especially when he was wearing one of his perfect, wrinkle-free suits. Even though I liked the new clothes he’d given me, I still hated drawing people’s attention in places we attended as a couple. Everybody were throwing silent, mean comments my way as it was, and the last thing I wanted was to give them another thing to judge me for and talk about.

As expected, he parked his car across from one of the exclusive restaurants whose French name I couldn't even begin to imagine how to pronounce. Apprehension got the best of me and I sighed, fumbling with my fingers and trying to prepare myself for the mental torture of proper cutlery usage that would only be topped by the pressure of following the etiquette to the letter. I had a feeling I would make a fool out of myself. Sebastian glanced at me shortly and smiled, providing me with encouragement, but it wasn't enough to make me relax.

"Wait here," he muttered and got out of the car.

He walked to my door and opened it for me, offering me his hand and helping me out of the car.

"Nervous?" he asked like he knew the answer to his question. I nodded and he whispered to me, offering reassurance. "Don't be."

I shrugged. It was easy for him to say. Finally making peace with the fact we were going to eat at that place that looked so pretentious that it probably served snails and other nasty food I despised, I started turning towards it, but I stopped when I heard Sebastian's chuckle behind me. I turned around, noticing he hadn't moved away from where he stood.

"Where are you going?" he asked with a smirk.

"I... I thought you said we were going to eat out." I gaped at him with confusion.

He smiled. "We are, but not in that place. I would hate to put you through hell of pronouncing the names of French dishes like that girl in the movie. Remember?" he said with a teasing undertone and I remembered the nice evening I had spent with him in the movies.

Thinking about it made me smile. It made me happy. "Where are we going then?" I asked in one breath.

"It's a surprise," he said softly and placed his hand on the small of my back and that shivering current rushed through me again.

We walked through the small park in silence, and suddenly I was facing the glowing lights of the last place I thought we'd end up at.

“Well, I hope you're hungry because we just reached our destination.” His voice was serious, but I knew he had to have been joking.

“But this is... McDonald's?!” I exclaimed in surprise, almost laughing at the thought of Sebastian eating at a place like that.

“I thought it was only fair to take you somewhere where I didn't fit in for a change.” He shrugged and I looked at him with amusement.

He was right. There would be some glares and silent comments coming his way this time. The only difference was, I kind of doubted it would be humiliating or condescending. Any other girl would be unimpressed with the dinner at the McDonald's, but I liked the thought of eating somewhere where I could relax and be myself.

The moment we entered, Sebastian immediately demonstrated how much he stood out among the rest of the clientele when he started walking towards the table, expecting to be served by one of the employees. I chuckled, realizing this was his very first time at the McDonald's. Coming from a small place as Rosemont, where McDonald's was practically unheard of, I could probably count the times I'd eaten there, but I wasn't as nearly clueless as Sebastian.

“Um, don't we need to order something first?” I asked quietly.

“Yes, of course.” Just like always, he pretended to have everything under control even though it was obvious he didn't have a clue of what he was supposed to do in a place like McDonald's.

It was fun to think that a man, who basically conquered the world, didn't have the slightest ability to fit into a normal, everyday life with the rest of the people.

When we finally ordered something and took a seat, I could tell he was confused as he looked around his plate.

“There is no cutlery,” I said with a smile on my face. “You’re supposed to eat it with your hands.”

He smiled and sighed. “I should have known.”

Without another word, he took the hamburger out of the package and started eating it with his hands. To my astonishment, he was actually being a lot less of a snob than I expected him to. “This is really tasty. I could get used to it,” he praised the meal though I was sure he hated it.

While he continued struggling with his food and even managed to stain his incredibly expensive suit with some gravy, I looked towards the other tables, suppressing the need to laugh. Just as I suspected, every now and then, people would glance at our table, then whisper something to each other. I was wondering what they thought about Sebastian and the fact that he was accompanied by someone like me, when a little girl with blonde hair, carrying a red balloon approached our table. Both Sebastian and I stopped eating and gave her our full attention. Her little cheeks blushed sweetly as she looked at Sebastian, smiling. She was adorable.

“What is your name?” she asked Sebastian timidly and he gave her a gentle smile.

“My name is...” His eyes lit up and then he acted like he was startled by something. “Oops. I can’t tell you, you’re a stranger.” He winked at her and chuckled.

The little girl giggled and pointed towards me. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“No, she’s not my girlfriend.” Sebastian smirked. “She’s my wife. I’m married to her.” He stretched his hand and seemed proud to show her the ring on his finger. “See?”

She touched his hand and he looked at her tenderly as her little fingers explored the shiny ring on his finger. It felt surreal, observing him interacting sweetly with that child, taking hold of all of her attention. He would make an excellent father one day. My earlier thoughts of comparing myself to

Annette returned to haunt me. He wanted a real marriage and life with me, but I had nothing to offer in return. Seeing him like that, I imagined him with our own child, and I realized he was perfect for the part. Still, I knew what I had to do to get that child and the very thought of it mortified me.

The girl took her eyes off of Sebastian's ring and then smiled, turning towards me. "You have a ring, too?"

I looked at Sebastian who stared at me with so much warmth, and then I looked back at the little girl. "Yes, I have one too," I whispered, smiling at her.

"Can I see?" she asked excitedly and I showed her the ring on my finger.

Even though I couldn't see his eyes, I felt they were focused on my hand, burning an impression of that ring.

"Did you buy her that pretty ring?" The little girl kept asking a storm of questions that could only open wounds that were just starting to heal.

I glanced towards Sebastian, wondering what he would say and sadness washed over me when I saw the flicker of pain in his eyes. "No," he answered the little girl's question without taking his eyes off mine. "I didn't buy her that ring, but I wish I had."

His gaze was suddenly so intense that I couldn't handle it anymore. Blushing, I swallowed and looked away.

"Madelyn, what did I tell you about leaving the table?" The girl's mother came to look for her.

Madelyn pouted her lips and looked at her mother. "Mummy, you're not supposed to say my name. They are strangers."

Sebastian laughed, looking at that little girl, but sadness still lurked in his eyes. Madelyn's mother pulled her closer and apologized for causing us trouble. While Sebastian courteously told her that little Madelyn wasn't troubling us in the least, I noticed she looked at him with awe. I had often seen that look on women's faces when they looked at him and I realized that this man could have any woman he wanted. The

drive behind his consistent persistence to work on our marriage had become more unfathomable than ever before.

Not shortly after Madelyn and her mother left our table, we headed towards the car, pushed by the tension that brewed between us. The thick, heavy air caused by the commotion on the inside, was replaced by the fresh oxygen provided by the peaceful night. While walking through the park, we were again bathed in silence, only now it felt a lot more uncomfortable than the first time.

“I liked it. I think we should go there more often,” he said with an already present undertone of nostalgia in his voice.

“Yes, we should,” I agreed, unprepared to hear what he was about to say.

“That Madelyn was really something, huh?” he asked with a smile. “I would love to have a daughter like her someday,” he said in a normal voice, making small talk, but his words cut deep into my heart.

I looked at him in wonder. “I always thought you’d want a son. An heir.” There was a hidden pinch of bitterness in my voice.

The edge of his lips twitched in a light smile as he observed me. “Actually, I’m fonder of having a daughter.” He took a step closer and trained his gaze on my face. “I can imagine her already.” He smiled and took a strand of my hair between his fingers. “Beautiful curly, blonde hair,” he whispered, gazing at me like he was drowning in my eyes. “Wide, captivating chocolate eyes.” His hand slid down my face and I closed my eyes as redness settled on my cheeks. “And the most adorable pair of blushing cheeks.” He came even closer to me and his lips brushed against my ear. “I don’t mind the idea of having a female heir, sweet.” As he stepped away from me, my eyes opened in confusion and met his almost challenging stare. “I love it.”

“But... But that’s not possible,” I said with mouth wide open in surprise.

He chuckled. “Why? Because a man who’s been dead for almost one hundred years said so?!”

I nodded, looking at him with painful regret once I noticed he turned serious again.

“I don’t care about the contract and even less about his will.” He cupped my face and looked at me with sheer tenderness, leaning his forehead on mine. “This,” he swallowed and kissed my forehead, “is what I care about.” His voice was firm and decisive. “It ends with us, Isabelle. If we ever have children, I’ll make sure that they’re not forced to give up on their lives and dreams just to fulfill the wishes of a lunatic.”

Dismissing the fact that having children was something I wasn’t even remotely ready for, I thought about how much he was willing to put at stake for the sake of a marriage that still held nothing but uncertainty and it seemed unfair.

I looked at him, unable to hide my worry. “You might lose everything,” I whispered and looked away.

He pulled me back towards him and ran his fingers through my hair, captivating me under the spell of his glowing emerald eyes. “You still don’t get it, do you?” As I slowly shook my head, he leaned closer and leaned his soft lips against mine, causing a trembling sensation that spread like fire within me. “*You are my everything!*”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

That night, when we came home from McDonalds, it was hard for me to fall asleep. Sebastian's words from earlier kept returning to my mind like a sweet torture. Excitement rose in my system, the images of his caring gestures interchanging before my eyes until the late hours of the night. I remembered how he took me to the movies and bought me a whole new wardrobe to make up for throwing away my clothes. Our visit to his grandfather's estate where he shared all of his childhood stories and even made an amazing breakfast for me, warmed up my heart and a smile spread across my face when I thought about the fact that this man, whom I used to consider incapable of producing affection, even sent me flowers when he was closing a business deal in Paris. The proof of his intention to fight for our marriage was undeniably strong and this last tentative surprise made me laugh because I still couldn't believe he'd actually taken me to McDonald's. All of those things seemed almost too good to be true, but I didn't care. With each passing day, we were getting closer to each other and I knew that it was only a matter of time before we started living like a real married couple. Unlike before, the thought somehow seemed a bit less frightening, and I was starting to believe that his patience and reassurance would manage to melt the iceberg of my fear away.

After a long time of tossing and turning in my bed, I fell asleep, feeling careless and happy with the way my life had been unfolding. The only thing that scared me was the threat that something might take that happiness away.

Heavy raindrops colliding against the window woke me up in the morning. I glanced at the grey clouds that stretched along the murky sky and I sighed in disappointment. I hated autumn and I longed for the warmth of the summer

when I could spend most of my time outside, avoiding the impression that the walls of that immaculately decorated, yet cold mansion were closing down on me. After spending some time in bed, because there wasn't much I could do on a rainy day, I finally got up to get dressed and head downstairs for breakfast. The bags on my tired eyes revealed that I hadn't had much sleep the previous night, but I was too tired and too hungry to hide them with makeup. When I reached the ground floor, I heard flusters and I became aware that Sebastian hadn't gone to work yet. Suddenly, for some reason, I wished I had made myself somewhat more presentable.

Almost shyly, I entered the dining room and I felt grateful that he was busy reading his newest issue of *The Guardian*, just like every other morning. I chuckled at the fact that the newspaper had been so huge that it covered up his entire face. I pulled out a chair and took a seat, convinced that he was completely unaware of my presence.

The moment I sat down, he folded his newspaper and tossed it aside. That was the first time I saw him do that and I couldn't hide the surprise on my face fast enough. His morning routines were always the same and reading *The Guardian* seemed sacred to him. A mysterious smile appeared glued to his face and his expression was exactly the same like the day before, when he'd hugged me in the park. I could hear those words echoing in my mind again. *You are my everything*. The shiny emerald eyes were trained on mine and I cleared my throat in a useless attempt to stop myself from blushing.

My reaction to his attention seemed to have amused him, because that smile on his face soon turned into a teasing smirk.

“Good morning, sweetness. I thought you'd never come downstairs. Did you sleep well?” he asked and when I remembered that my face screamed I had everything but a good night sleep, the blushing became even worse as it spread deeper on my cheeks.

“Good morning,” I replied in a quiet voice. “I slept well, thank you,” I lied.

“Well, that makes one of us. I find it difficult to sleep lately.”

“How come?”

He shrugged. “I guess I miss a certain someone.” His voice was light, joking and he even winked at me, but I felt there was some harsh sincerity behind his remark.

I gulped, feeling a bit uneasy and I was relieved that Annette entered the room because I had no idea what to say to him.

She served our breakfast in silence and I noticed her hands trembled when she was putting food in front of Sebastian. I found it difficult to believe that after all this time she was still intimidated by him. It was almost like she had some hidden reason that made her wary of his presence. For a moment I got lost in thought, thinking how she intrusively inquired to find out things about the nature of my marriage, and the more I paid attention to it, the more I felt there were some hidden dots I should be able to connect together, but the moment she approached me and smiled with the same genuine expression like usual, I discarded my doubts and returned her warm smile.

“Here you go, Isabe...” She sighed in discomfort because she had almost called me by my name in front of Sebastian, even though he had strictly forbidden it. “I... I’m s-sorry madam,” she said in a frightened voice, and then glanced at Sebastian who was wiping his mouth to suppress his obvious need to burst out laughing.

As if she was carried by a raging tornado, she stormed from the room as fast as her legs would carry her. I remained staring at Sebastian, who chuckled and looked at me with amusement in his eyes. However, that amusement was soon replaced by a serious expression and I knew he would address her behavior.

“I see that you’ve become quite close to Antoinette,” he said softly, but his face still held that firm expression.

“What... What are you trying to say?” I was kind of taken aback by his statement.

“What I’m trying to say, *madam*,” he smiled, “is that I’m perfectly aware that she calls you by your name behind my back, so you can tell her there is no need to continue with the charade, because I’m not an idiot.” There was a flicker of detest in his voice and the fact that he disliked her remained very real.

Suddenly, I remembered how things had gone with Teresa and I became alarmed because I was still convinced that Annette wasn’t anything like that corrupted girl from before.

“Sebastian, it’s not her fault. Please...” I already started pleading with him, but the childish smirk on his face told me he didn’t take me seriously.

“Relax. I’m not going to fire your friend.” His expression turned lighter and he shook his head at me. “Why do you always expect the worst from me?” he asked in a voice that was kind of humble and I regretted my hasty conclusion.

“I’m sorry... It’s just that I have the feeling that you really don’t like her.” I looked at him apologetically and then offered a very stupid argument that did anything but support my case. “I mean... You even call her by her real name.”

He snickered and playfully shook his head at me. “How rude of me not to indulge her silly requests! Isabelle, I am her employer, not one of her girlfriends.” His voice became quieter as he started admitting what I had doubted all along. “But to be honest, you’re right. I don’t like her that much—if at all.”

“But why?” I looked at him in confusion. “She hasn’t done anything wrong.”

I looked away, feeling a bit guilty for not telling him about all the things that were going on with Annette, but I knew that he hated nosy people and if I had said as much as a word, he would surely fire her and there would be nothing I could say or do to stop him so I decided to remain quiet.

“Maybe she hasn’t done anything wrong... yet,” he said in a suspecting voice. “But there’s something off with that girl. Sometimes I wonder how she managed to get that close to you in the first place.” He looked at me with a puzzled stare.

I shrugged and offered a simple reply. “Becoming friends with her wasn’t at all difficult. It came kind of naturally,” I admitted. “We just have a lot of things in common. She likes reading the classics just as I do and she’s even studying English literature.”

Sebastian exhaled and moved his chair a bit closer to the table. “How interesting that I managed to employ somebody who just happens to share all of your interests...” He narrowed his eyes, but after a while he shrugged as a sign that he would let it go. “Well, maybe it’s just a lucky coincidence. Don’t worry, Isabelle. I’m not going to fire her out of spite.” His glowing eyes pierced through mine. “I wouldn’t do that you.”

“Thank you.” A weak smile teased my lips and I glanced towards the window, catching a glimpse of rain that was still raging outside. “It’s just that... sometimes it gets lonely in this house and it’s nice to have a friend around, or at least someone to talk to.”

He took hold of my hand and the action caught my full attention, causing me to return my gaze at him. He looked at me gently, running his thumb over the palm of my hand.

“I’m sorry. I know that it must get lonely in here,” he whispered and after a short break of silence his eyes lit up. “I have an idea. Why don’t you come to the company with me today?” he asked in a mild voice that rang with the undertone of excitement and for a while I just gaped at him, surprised by his invitation.

“That’s okay, Sebastian. You don’t have to...” I started declining politely because I couldn’t imagine that he actually wanted to take me to his company and present me as his wife to his employees. God only knows what kind of rumors were already going on there.

“I don’t have to, Isabelle. I want to.” He looked me right into the eyes and stressed the words. “Besides, aren’t you curious to see where I work?” He smiled a wide smile, sensing that I would give in to his request.

“I am but... Is it even allowed to bring your wife to your work?” I asked confused, and just as expected, I was rewarded by his infecting laughter.

“No,” he teased. “It’s not allowed to bring your wife to your work... unless you’re the boss. And the last time I checked, I still owned the company. So I think we won’t get into trouble,” he joked.

“Oh.” I gaped at him in surprise.

“Oh,” he repeated with a smile and continued convincing me to join him. “Come on. I promise it won’t be boring. I just have to get some documents in the office and make a few phone calls. After that, we could do something together. What do you say?”

“I...” I sighed and smiled in surrender. “I’d really like that,” I said softly and his light expression told me he was more than pleased with my answer.

It rained during the entire drive to the company, but neither the rain nor the huge traffic jam in front of us, bothered me much. A small flicker of nervousness took hold of me when I remembered that he was taking me to The Goliath, the company I knew nothing about, but he took hold of my hand and smiled reassuringly, chasing away all of my fears. *Wait for me* by *The Kings of Leon* played on the radio and I started singing along when I recognized the song because I loved that band. The lyrics were inviting, saying that things were all better now and I thought it was a good time to hear it.

“You can change the song if you want,” he said when we had to wait for the traffic light.

“I thought I wasn’t supposed to touch the radio,” I blurted out in a teasing voice, but he didn’t think it was funny and when the reality of my comment hit me, neither had I.

I revisited the memory of his threat on our wedding night when he'd yelled at me because I had dared to touch the radio. Sebastian looked at me, his expression turning from light to dark and tortured within a second. His hand caressed my cheek and he swallowed, fighting something inside him.

“Don't say that again. You can take whatever you want because as long as it's mine...” His stare revealed his pain. “I'll share it all with you, Isabelle. All of it,” he whispered and kissed the palm of my hand, squeezing it between his hands.

The car behind us horned and Sebastian started driving again. We remained silent for a while and I decided to try and lighten up the mood.

“I don't want to change the song. I love it.”

He turned to me and the edge of his lips curved in a light smile. “Me too.”

Eventually, it had stopped raining and I observed the city that was waking up together with the sun. The buildings interchanging before my eyes started getting more imposing and the people on the streets were dressed in fancy suits that screamed money and power. In awe, I stared at the endless row of skyscrapers that stretched down the whole street. They must have hosted some of the most prominent companies of the world. At some point, Sebastian made a turn towards one of the buildings and used his phone to open the garage door in front of us. I read the sign that stood above the door and I knew we had reached our destination—*The Goliath Holding*. As the door opened, he drove into an underground garage and I was struck by the endless sight of expensive cars that resembled Sebastian's.

Gently placing his hand on the small of my back, Sebastian led me towards the nearby elevator and just when he was about to press the button to close the door, another man ran inside, panting for air and when he saw Sebastian, his eyes widened in surprise. Without a word, Sebastian pressed the button to the fourth floor and the door closed, leaving us in a very tight space that was filled with tension.

“Mr. Everett, I apologize...” The man spoke in a humble voice, but Sebastian cut him off.

“No need to apologize,” he said in a voice that was stripped of any emotion. “I’m sure there is a good reason why you’re late, but I advise you to avoid it in the future. This company has zero tolerance for people who don’t take their job seriously, but today you’ve got a lucky break.” He smirked and focused his eyes on me. The expression on his face turned a hundred shades lighter and his voice rang with affection just like moments ago in the car. “Isn’t that right, Mrs. Everett?” He tenderly tightened his grip on my back as a further display of emotion.

In a shy attempt to make it appear I wasn’t feeling uneasy, my eyes darted towards the man who observed me in the same way as he looked at Sebastian; almost like I held some kind of power over him. The feeling was unusual.

“Thank you, Sir. I promise it won’t happen again,” the man apologized as the door opened again. Sebastian’s only answer was a polite nod and a contour of a smile that seemed forced and didn’t even resemble a smile I was used to seeing on his face. Something told me he didn’t show that other side of him to too many people, other than me.

The moment we stepped outside the elevator, the luxurious surroundings took me by complete surprise. The more I observed the astonishing space around me, the more I couldn’t believe he had actually said he didn’t care about any of it. *Was he really willing to sacrifice all of this?* As we walked down the hall, Sebastian greeted a couple of people and I was stunned to see the look on their faces resembled the one of the man in the elevator—it screamed obedience and respect. Without a doubt, he was the highest figure of authority in that building and it was visible from the very aura that lurked around him, affecting all the people who found themselves in his presence. As we advanced further, I noticed almost everybody started turning to each other, whispering something and I could feel their eyes were glued on me, cautiously following my every move. I blushed and my

breathing became heavier as I felt the pressure of the situation settle down on my chest.

“Relax. They’re just curious to see my beautiful wife,” Sebastian whispered softly in my ear and then chuckled. “If you continue blushing like this, they might get the wrong idea about what I’m saying to you and then we’ll really become the talk of the day,” he teased and I knew he only tried to get me to relax, but his comment made me blush even deeper.

Luckily, the torture ended when we stopped in front of the massive door and Sebastian unlocked it, letting me enter first. I glanced at the group of women whose eyes were still trained on me and saw they were smiling. In a courteous manner, I smiled back before disappearing into Sebastian’s office and for the first time since I stepped into that building, I felt relieved. That relief didn’t last for long because only after short seconds the massive door opened again and a tall blonde woman dressed in a black, elegant business suit entered the office.

“Mr. Everett, the documents for The Paris agreement are—” Already from the door, she started talking in a voice that was undoubtedly ruthless, but she paused when she noticed I was in the room.

It became clear that I’d broken some kind of a well exercised routine between her and Sebastian.

“Oh. I’m sorry, Sir. I didn’t realize...” She seemed to have been stunned by the unusual sight in front of her.

“It’s okay, Emily,” Sebastian said in a pleasant voice and I could immediately make out that he was more relaxed around her than around the rest of his employees. “Come in. I want to introduce you to my lovely wife,” he said in a voice that was filled with something that sounded as pride and the woman, who’d seemed to be so cold only moments ago, smiled and offered me her hand.

“Hi. I’m Emily. Mr. Everett’s assistant.” Her ruthless voice suddenly turned mild. “You must be Isabelle.” I accepted her hand and nodded, surprised by the fact that she already knew my name. “It’s so nice to finally meet you.”

I smiled, feeling awkward because that was the first time I had seen this woman who worked so close with Sebastian, and I knew absolutely nothing about her. “It’s nice to meet you too, Emily,” I said softly, letting go of her hand.

Sebastian smiled contently and took hold of the documents Emily had prepared for him. As I continued staring at this beautiful woman in front of me, his hand brushed against my wrist, willing me to give him my attention.

“I have a few errands to run. It will only take a while,” he said the moment I looked into his light expression. “Make yourself comfortable,” he said in a soft voice and then looked at his assistant. “Emily will get you something to drink.”

She nodded and the moment Sebastian left the office, she smiled with so much sincerity that I instantly relaxed around her.

“It really is nice to finally see you in the flesh.” She looked at me with genuine excitement. “You know, Mr. Everett won’t stop talking about you and now I can see why. You’re even more beautiful than on the picture.”

Picture? For a moment I was stunned by the fact that she had seen a picture of me, but I brushed it off, remembering that there had to have been some kind of a picture from our wedding or some other event we attended in the newspaper she must have read.

“Does he really talk about me that much?” I asked with slight reluctance, feeling the rising feeling of curiosity.

She nodded her head and even chuckled. “Honestly, he wouldn’t shut up about you when we were in Paris. He even closed the deal earlier than planned just so that he could fly back home.” She looked towards the door, giving away she feared that Sebastian might come in any second and then she whispered with a smile. “Maybe I’m crossing the line, but lately he’s been in a surprisingly good mood and I have a good hunch we have to thank you for it.”

I felt a glimpse of happiness because of what she had said. To think that I had the slightest influence on his behavior

still seemed incredible. Nevertheless, another troubling thought wouldn't leave my mind. I knew that Emily was only his assistant, but when she told me she had accompanied him to Paris, I felt a pinch of a familiar and unwanted feeling—jealousy. *You're being jealous again.* Brushing off the embarrassing thought, I quickly forced a smile on my face.

“Well, look at me rumbling when I should head back to work,” she said politely. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“Water will be fine,” I said softly.

“Coming right up,” she said before she walked out, leaving me alone in that spacious office.

My eyes roamed the space around me and I chuckled at the sight of spotlessly clean furniture that was filled with meticulously ordered folders. If no one told me that I had been in Sebastian's office, I would have guessed it myself because that space screamed with sophistication. When I glanced towards the large desk in the middle of the room, I noticed that everything seemed to be right in its place, almost symmetrical as if even the smallest thing needed to remain on that same spot because it was a part of some equation. Smiling, I wondered how long it would take him to notice that something had been moved a fracture of an inch. Knowing his undeniable need for order and perfectionism, I knew he would notice immediately. When I looked at that table with more caution, I noticed there was a picture frame next to his computer and I took it in my hands, discarding the thought that I probably shouldn't touch anything as curiosity got the best of me. What I saw surprised me. I was staring at a picture of myself. Sebastian had my picture on his desk. It was one of the pictures Mrs. Moran had taken the first time she came to make arrangements for the wedding. Lost in deep thoughts, I observed the girl in the picture frame and I realized I barely resembled her anymore. Her expression was serious; her brown eyes sprinkled with traces of apparent worry and disbelief, but there was still a sparkle of light in them, as if she hadn't stopped hoping things would turn out alright. The girl on the picture had yet to learn about the real pain and sadness. With inexplicable caution, I lowered the frame back in its

place and I walked towards the huge wall that was covered in glass, providing one of the most spectacular views I had ever seen. I wrapped my arms around my middle, staring at the Manhattan panorama and I became aware that, thanks to Sebastian, I had come a long way from that scared, inexperienced girl in Rosemont. Despite the tragic beginning of our marriage, I couldn't deny that he was the one who showed me the world, truly in all its cruelty and beauty.

The sound of the door startled me from my thoughts and I glanced towards it, expecting to see Emily, but I was surprised to see Sebastian instead. He walked over to me in a steady pace and the moment he got close, he gently wrapped his arms around my waist and for a while, we enjoyed the miraculous view together. With my back leaning against his strong chest that radiated comfortable warmth, I relaxed in his arms. I liked being so close to him.

As he kissed my temple and lowered his lips to my ears, the rising excitement played with my breath, making it faster; synchronizing it with the beating of my heart.

“I love having you here. I wish I could bring you more often, but I'm afraid The Goliath would go bankrupt within a month if I made a habit of this.”

“Why is that?” I whispered, caught up with the feeling of his hot breath on my skin.

“Because I wouldn't get anything done.” He smiled. “Having you around is too distracting.”

His soft, inviting voice made me want to face him and when I turned around, he observed me with a disarming smile on his face. Slowly, he leaned over to me and sighed in discomfort.

“You really don't know what you do to me, do you?” I shook my head and he exhaled harshly, closing his eyes. “Let me show you then,” he whispered.

As his lips came closer to mine, my heartbeat hummed in my throat and I let out a shaky breath to release some of the pressure.

“Shh.” I could feel his minty breath on my lips. “It’s just a kiss. Just a small kiss.” His lips touched mine and started massaging them with persuasive sensitivity and while he gently ran his hands along my back and my hair, I managed to let go of my restraints and enjoy having him so close to me. Just as I felt that he was about to deepen the kiss, there was a loud knock on the door and I stepped away from him, trying to quickly fix up my hair and adjust my dress.

Sebastian laughed as he invited the person on the other side to come in and before I knew it, the door swung open and Emily walked in with my bottle of water. Inexplicable shame rushed through my system and I couldn’t even look her in the eyes as she handed me the bottle. I didn’t have to look up to see that Sebastian was amused by this entire situation.

“Will you need anything else, Sir?”

“No, that’s all. Thank you,” he said without taking his eyes off of me. “Cancel all my calls and don’t let anyone through to my office.”

“I understand,” she said in a light voice, like she knew exactly what had happened between us, and I wanted the ground to swallow me up.

When she finally left, I dared to glance at Sebastian who was smirking at me. He came a few steps closer and tilted up my chin, observing my flushed cheeks.

“So sweet,” he whispered. “I swear to God... Your innocence will be the death of me.” His lips were so close and I thought he would kiss me again, but instead, he raised his head and laid a soft kiss on my forehead, stepping away from me.

I swallowed, heat rising in my entire body. Gulping, I looked around in a desperate need to change the subject.

“You have a lovely assistant,” I stated and he raised his eyebrows, letting me know he knew exactly what I was trying to do.

He shrugged. “We work well together, that’s all. I wouldn’t go as far as calling her lovely.”

“She told me she went to Paris with you,” I said in a light voice, that was void of any tension, but Sebastian narrowed his eyes at me in an interrogating manner and I instantly knew that bringing this up might not have been the best idea.

He smirked. “Hmm... If I didn’t know better, I’d think that my sweet wife was jealous,” he teased and as I slowly shook my head, his smirk turned into a genuine smile. “Terrible liar.” His warm whisper sounded through the room and he approached me again, resting his palm against my face, caressing my cheek. “You shouldn’t worry about other women, Isabelle. I’ll never want anyone else.” The green in his eyes lit up with something powerful and endeavoring. “*Only you.*”

I gaped at him in wonder, at a loss of words. One piece at a time, this man was taking away my heart and my soul, stripping away all of the layers that shielded me against him, working his way to the very core of my being.

“I almost forgot. I have to tell you something.” He walked over to his desk, pulled out a small envelope and then handed it to me. “Open it,” he encouraged.

I glanced at Sebastian and carefully pulled out a small card from the envelope. As I read the content of the note, I realized it was an invitation for the wedding of his friend Jared who had also been his best man. Light dread took hold of me when I remember the way that man looked at me at our wedding and back then, his fiancé Amelia didn’t spare her mean glances my way either. *How on earth was I supposed to attend their wedding reception?*

“Sebastian...” I looked at him in an almost frightened manner, fearing to tell him I didn’t want to accompany him to this wedding. “I don’t...”

“Shh.” He sighed and pulled me into a light embrace. “They’re really nice people. You have nothing to worry about. You’ll see.”

I looked up at him. “Sebastian, they hate me.” I tried to convince him.

“Don’t be silly,” he whispered in a fit of surprise. “Of course they don’t hate you.” I tried to look away, fighting the desperate thought that he would make me attend that wedding where all those people would probably only mock my appearance, but he tilted up my chin and made me face him again. “Only a fool would hate someone as sweet and uncorrupted as you.”

“You were a fool then...” I breathed out the words, reminding him that he too, didn’t find it at all difficult to hate me.

He swallowed. “Angel, I think we’ve already established that you’re married to one of the biggest idiots in the universe.” I had to laugh since hearing him scowl at himself like that was so unlike him. He pulled me into a tighter embrace and whispered softly to me. “I promise there is no need to worry about my friends. They are looking forward to see you again.”

I shook my head. “You... you don’t know how they looked at me at our wedding.” I closed my eyes, fighting the shame. “I can’t bear to see them again. I’m... I’m so ashamed,” I admitted in a pleading voice.

“Isabelle...” He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “Forget about what happened before. Please, whatever they did to hurt you, I’m the one to blame. I’m the one who caused it and I will fix it, okay?” He leaned his head on mine and I focused on his slow breathing. “Do you trust me?” He asked in a quiet voice, patiently waiting for my reply.

I parted my lips, ready to offer him absolution that would bring peace to his mind, but the moment was interrupted by the commotion that was coming from the outside.

All I could make out was the sound of Emily’s persistent voice that tried to stop somebody from entering Sebastian’s office. The noise caused by the loud screech of the door broke through the room before we even got a chance to react.

Suddenly, I was confronted with the angry stare of the woman whom I hadn't seen in a very long time... And her eyes widened in surprise when she realized she had caught me in Sebastian's embrace.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The scrutinizing gaze of the woman in front of us held my complete attention and the strong, disapproving glow in those eyes compelled me to step away from Sebastian. The moment I did that, a mysterious smirk appeared on her porcelain looking face.

“Well, if it isn’t Romeo and Juliette in the flesh. How romantic of you to make yourself unavailable so that you could spent time with your charming bride.” She chuckled, turning in my direction. “You know what they say; better late than never.” She winked at me.

“What are you doing here?” Sebastian scowled at her.

“What a warm welcome.” Her voice rang with sarcasm. “Can’t a sister pay a visit to her beloved brother?” She produced an offended look on her face.

“I don’t think so,” he said, annoyed. “Cut the act and tell me what you want, Dianne!”

“I’d like to talk to you in,” her eyes darted towards me and her interrogating stare sent chills down my spine, “a more private atmosphere.”

I already started leaving, when Sebastian held me by my elbow. “Stay,” he said in a firm voice and then turned to Dianne. “There is nothing you can’t say to me in front of my wife.”

Appearing to be amused by Sebastian’s angry reaction, she bit her lower lip, suppressing the need to laugh.

“Oh, is that so? I see that you’ve forgotten that I’ve got quite a few stories to tell. Like the one that now you’re calling her your wife but if my memory serves me well, I’m pretty sure I can think of the times where you used very different

terms to refer to this simple girl from that hillbilly town in the middle of nowhere.” She raised her eyebrows and shook her head. “You should stop playing the tentative husband, Sebastian. It doesn’t suit you.” She snickered and looked towards me.

“I think it would be best if you leave before I lose my patience,” Sebastian said in an annoyed voice I recognized all too well and then he paused before provoking her with simple words that seemed to carry just the right dose of venom to make her crack. “And I’m pretty sure you’re the last person who should be handing out advice, considering the marital bliss you’re experiencing with that pathetic excuse you have for a husband.”

Her high-pitched laughter sounded through the room again and when I shivered at the sight of this crazed woman in front of me, Sebastian took hold of my hand, squeezing it tightly. Glancing at me with reassurance, he displayed affection in front of his evil sister and I knew that it would not go unnoticed and unaccounted for. And I was right. The moment her eyes paused on our hands, she turned serious and I could have sworn there were tears forming in her eyes, but she was a woman made of stone and as expected, she pulled them back, replacing the stare that uncovered her weakness with the one that was dark, cold and stripped of any emotion. I couldn’t help thinking that some things ran in the family.

“You know, I wonder...” There was so much bitterness in her voice. “At what point have you succumbed to this pathetic little gold digger and got to the point where your family means nothing to you?”

“Careful, Dianne!” Sebastian uttered a clear warning. “Just because you’re my sister doesn’t mean I’ll tolerate your bullshit.”

Her posture had finally loosened up a bit as she was taking heed in Sebastian’s warning. “I didn’t come here to fight you, Sebastian,” she said in a proud voice, but it was clear she had swallowed a dose of her arrogance.

“Please, enlighten me!” he said impatiently.

I stood there motionless, wondering how there could ever be so much hostility between two people who were bound by the same blood. Dianne's gaze remained frozen on me for a few moments, sending out a clear message that she wasn't comfortable discussing the matter in my presence, but she sighed and gave it up once she noticed Sebastian's eyebrows rose, signaling that he would soon be unable to stifle his irritation.

"I need your help. I want you to do something about it!" she demanded and I looked at her confused, because I had no idea what she meant, but Sebastian seemed to have understood her request perfectly, because he simply shrugged and suddenly looked at her like she evoked pity in him.

"And what exactly do you want me to do about it?" he asked in a flat voice.

"Father doesn't want to get involved anymore. But somebody has to," she asserted firmly. "Talk to her and put her in her place. Or better yet, make her go away." She raised her voice. "This disrespect has to stop! She has no right to take away what's mine. She has no rights whatsoever!"

Sebastian took a deep breath and shook his head at her. "If you're expecting me to get involved into your husband's mesmerized love life and become a part of this pathetic triangle, you've lost your mind, Dianne. If you have any dignity left, you will file for a divorce!"

"Never!" she all but yelled. "I'm an Everett. I won't yield to some low-life bitch and let her destroy my marriage."

"I hate to break your little bubble, Dianne, but your marriage has already been destroyed... for a long time. There is nothing that I, father or even God himself can do about it. And maybe none of these things would have happened if you weren't so thirsty for revenge. You thought you could play with people's lives, but you ended up destroying your own. A lesson well learned, I think."

"So, I see. You're too busy playing the husband of the year to prevent a scandal in the family." She smirked, obviously hiding the fact that she was upset by Sebastian's

refusal to help her and then she glanced at me before turning serious. “My, oh my, whatever did you do to change his mind?” Her eyes darted towards her brother. “When I only remember the tantrum you threw when you found out you’d had to marry her and look at you now. I wonder what daddy would have said if he witnessed your tacky love escapade.”

“Is that a threat?” Sebastian asked calmly. “Because if you think that I give a fuck, you’re very mistaken!”

“Don’t be a fool,” she said in a voice that rang with plea and warning. “All I ask of you is to talk to her. After all, you’re the one who owns this company.”

“And what would that achieve? Caleb is the one who needs to leave.” He was relentless.

“I refuse. I refuse to let them win!” She gritted her teeth and her face produced a painful grimace. “Divorce is not an option I’m even willing to consider.”

“Dianne, you’re being delusional. Count your losses and move on with your life,” Sebastian said in his infamous steel-cold voice, indicating that the conversation was over.

In a fit of helplessness, Dianne aimed all of her fury on me with her demeaning stare and then her eyes darted towards Sebastian. “You’re calling me delusional? Come on, Sebastian. I think it’s more than clear which one of us got lost in a world of fucking fairytales. I mean...” She shook her head and her eyes roamed the length of my body while she sighed in disbelief. “Look at her. How can you even consider keeping her as your wife? Have you already forgotten about the woman you swore you would marry no matter what? Or does getting a divorce suddenly not mean that much to you now that the time is ticking away?” Dianne’s taunting voice broke through the room, summoning all those dark and dangerous ghosts of the past that had been locked away for far too long.

A shiver of pain rushed through me, her words burning their way to my fragile heart. Insecurely, I glanced at Sebastian and I noticed his eyes were suddenly distant, expressionless and frozen on Dianne. It hurt. It shouldn’t have, but it hurt when he remained silent. Apparently, he couldn’t

have cared less about the danger presented by his family, but when it came to Cora, things seemed to have been very different. I tried to find the strength that would save me from showing weakness in front of Dianne, but as the unremitting silence kept ruling the tight space between us, I let out a shaky breath and she produced a victorious smile. She was already celebrating the fact that she'd defeated me.

“No offense darling, but we both know he’s way out of your league.” She observed my stunned demeanor for a while and then produced a fake compassionate expression on her face. “Don’t look at me like I’m your enemy. I’m only trying to help, so you see... You should thank me, actually, because I’m doing you the biggest favor of your life. Even you can’t be that ignorant to believe that a man like Sebastian could ever really fall for a girl like you.” She snickered. “Why if it weren’t for Cora’s...” She paused, looking for the right word. “setback, you would have never even entered Sebastian’s life to begin with.” She almost sang the words and I froze, unable to breathe at the mention of Cora’s name while Dianne simply shrugged her shoulders and continued patronizing me in a mocking tone. “Must be hard to deal with the loss of the woman you love, don’t you think? I bet he’s only using you to relieve some of the stress...”

“Dianne, that’s enough!” Sebastian finally spoke in a voice that was stripped of any emotion. “Leave her out of this.”

She gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh, no! How silly of me to say what everybody—including you—is thinking!” She chuckled and roamed my humbled posture. “Go ahead, ask him,” she urged me in her serpent like voice. “Ask him if he really cares...” A sardonic smile appeared on her lips. “Or is he just using you to forget about his dear Cora.”

Against my better judgment, I had allowed Dianne’s scrutinizing provocation to plant a seed of doubt in my mind and I looked at Sebastian, hoping he would say something, anything, even just a small word that would counteract her mean statement, but he remained quiet and with every long,

stretching second of heavy silence, my heart sank deeper into oblivion.

“Sebastian...” I said in a small, broken voice and instinctively, I reached out for his hand but something dark swept over him and he pulled it away, tightly closing his eyes and that simple action told me everything I needed to know.

A sharp ache formed at the center of my chest and spread everywhere around as if I'd been repeatedly stabbed by a knife. My heart thumped in a crazy rhythm, forming the growing lump in my throat that made it impossible for me to breathe in that space. As the first tear slid down my cheek, I quickly wiped it with the sweaty palm of my hand and made an attempt to walk away, but Sebastian instantly caught me by my elbow to stop my movement. For a split second; only one short fracture of time that seemed to be crumbling down around us and moving in slow motion, our eyes met and I saw the demise of the light and the return of dim shadows in those green eyes. As the heavy stone of shameful reality settled on my chest, I thought I would die on the spot from the crushing pain caused by the truth that wiped away all of my sanity. With defiance, I made myself look at him because I wanted him to see what he had done, but there was nothing in those eyes. The only display of emotion was his tightening grip on my arm. *Why was this man, who looked at me so darkly, acting like he wasn't willing to ever let me go?* He took a deep breath, like he prepared himself to say something and I feared that his words might break me beyond repair so I used all of my strength to free myself from his grip because I needed to get out of there. The moment I managed to pull away from him, I ran past Dianne who held a content smirk on her face and I headed straight for the hallway. I thought I had heard Sebastian yell something at Dianne but I felt too unwell and too caught up into my own emotions to pay attention to it. The only thing I focused on was getting as far away from his office as I could.

Under the disturbing reminiscence of Dianne's cruel treatment and Sebastian's indifference that kept haunting me, together with all the demons of the past, I roamed the hallways of The Goliath like I were a ghost. Through a fog, I could see the people staring at me with a mixture of shock and worry on

their faces. Some of them were saying something, but I couldn't make out a word. I had made it to the elevator and once I pressed the button, the commotion in my head had subsided and a splash of cold sweat appeared on my face. *Go ahead, ask him... Ask him if he really cares...* Dianne's cruel words rang in my ears as if they were set on a replay. The room was spinning around me and I felt myself fall, like I'd been pushed by the immense pressure that carried my body to the ground. I waited... I waited for the thump that would signalize my body had finally hit the cold tiled floor. I waited and waited, only to realize I didn't land on the ground because somebody held me up, embracing me with strong arms, whispering my name and begging me to calm down. At the very moment when blackness was about to claim me, the scent of familiar cologne traveled in my direction and although it shouldn't have, it made me feel at ease. When I heard a whisper that rang with warmth again, everything came rushing back with the shade of that voice. Its soft, disarming and almost desperate tone evoked the unbearable agony that gripped every cell of my feeble body.

"I'm sorry." I felt the touch of warm lips on my forehead. "I'm sorry." Those lips murmured against the nape of my neck grazing it with their soft breath. "I'm sorry." The broken voice echoed around me while I was being pulled into an even tighter embrace that felt so soothing and way too pleasant, but I knew I had to reject the comfort of those strong arms so I kept trying to set myself free. "Shh. Don't. Don't push me away, *my love*. Please, let me hold you. I can't bear to see you in pain," the man's pleading voice said, although he probably knew that even if I wanted to run away I couldn't anymore, because I was drifting into nothingness, focusing on the sound of that voice that continued repeating the words that kept me from falling further into despair. "Forgive me for the tears, angel. Please... Please, give me a chance to explain. You're my everything. I need to make you underst..." The voice faded away and everything before my eyes went black.

Chapter Forty

The overpowering scent of strong alcohol took hold of my senses and I was slowly emerging from the fog, regaining consciousness. The source of light hit my face and it was difficult to keep my eyes opened. I heard muffled voices and felt the vibrations of movement around me. I willed myself to wake up and even though it was harder than I thought, that scent of alcohol kept lurking around me, keeping me from falling back to the dark.

“Sir, she’s waking up,” a familiar woman’s voice said as my eyes started adjusting to the light.

At first, everything was blurry, but as my vision sharpened, I was stunned to realize that I was sitting on the sofa in some sort of fancy looking living space area, leaning on Sebastian’s chest. Startled by my discovery, I looked up and in a second, I found myself only inches away from those green eyes that stared at me with so much silent tenderness, making me question my sanity. Wanting to escape that gaze, my eyes moved away from him and took in the unfamiliar space that surrounded me, pausing at Emily who stood above us, holding a glass of water in her hand. Sebastian reached for the glass and without a word brought it to my lips, making me drink. He glanced back at Emily and a silent agreement was reached between them. She nodded, offering me a compassionate smile before she left the room.

Suddenly we were alone, bathed in the uncomfortable silence that only enhanced the tension between us. A question was formed in my mind, waiting to be asked at the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t—not yet. I needed to prolong this moment of peace before I asked. In all honesty, I didn’t want a conversation. I wanted to remain silent, prolonging the illusion that his arms still offered safety and pretending that everything wasn’t about to explode and crush around us. I kept telling

myself that I need to move away from him and create the distance that would stop him from ever hurting me again, but despite that, I still remained in my original position, empty and drained of any energy to fight the cruel circumstances. It was dangerous. It was unfair. It was wrong to be in his embrace. *Then why did it still feel so right?* As I wondered how it could possibly feel safe after he had shown me how little I meant to him, the unmistakable feeling of betrayal filled me with bitterness.

“You made me trust you.” A small whisper left my body as I stared at him brokenly and when I spoke again, my voice cracked into a million pieces that seemed to travel in his direction, hitting him like shrapnel. “You made me f-forgive you.”

With transparent caution, his hand landed on my hair and he started gently running his fingers through it, offering comfort that wasn't there in reality because I was frozen under his touch.

“Isabelle I...” He swallowed like he didn't know where to begin or what to say.

It hurt so much to hear that gentle whisper again. It hurt so much to think that it was all a pretty dream and I woke up into a nightmare. *Go ahead, ask him... Ask him if he really cares...*

“You're in love with her, aren't you?” I asked in defeat and moved away from him with painful slowness.

Squeezing his fingers, he formed a tight fist before swallowing hard. He tilted up my chin, making me face him and he looked me right into the eyes when he finally offered an answer to my burning question.

“NO!” he said firmly and continued gazing at me with intensity, offended by what I had asked him. “No, I'm not in love with her, Isabelle.”

He didn't pause or hesitate as he spoke in the voice that uncovered something possessive and possibly dangerous

within him. He didn't even blink for seconds after saying the words that should have reassured me, but didn't.

"I don't believe you," I said in a flat voice, trying to keep an impression of indifference.

"Isabelle," he gave me a pleading look, "after everything we've been through, is it still that easy to doubt me?"

For a moment, his words shamed me as they evoked the flashbacks of his many kind gestures. While they interchanged before my eyes, I wanted to find a reason to make myself believe he was being honest with me, but the last image of his weird and heartless reaction to Dianne's words tainted all those lovely memories, throwing dirt on the purity of their remembrance. I shrugged and looked at him with a healthy dose of skepticism.

"You made it easy," I said in a shaky whisper that was filled with sadness. "How could I have been such a fool? After everything, I stupidly believed you when you told me she wasn't your lover even though I've seen you kiss her with my own eyes..." I took a deep breath to keep myself from breaking down as I was looking at the man who lifted me up in the sky, only to let me hit the cold ground.

He exhaled and ran his fingers through his hair, closing his eyes as if returning my gaze presented too big of a challenge for him. When he finally looked at me, his expression resembled that of a man who was at his wits end.

"I know that I've done some pretty messed up things and I'm well aware that I will have to amend for them until the end of my days..." His voice froze as his eyes burned an impression on my face. "But I've never lied to you, Isabelle. Never," he accentuated the words with such certainty and there was a strange glow forming in his glare. "That kiss meant nothing and I haven't slept with Cora..." he said in a gruff voice that suddenly became noticeably softer almost like he was being careful not to hurt me further by what he was about to say. "At least not after I married you."

The nerve of him made me upset and I gave him a challenging look because I knew for a fact that he wasn't telling the truth. Being the control freak that he was, I couldn't have imagined that he would ever take the risk he claimed to have taken.

"How is that possible?" I confronted him and all he did was stare at me in confusion.

"Isabelle," he shook his head like he couldn't have made sense of my question, "I don't think I have to explain that sometimes things between a man and a woman just happen when ..."

"That's not what I meant," I interrupted him in a firm voice that had weakened as I tried to confront him with the fact that had been made painfully clear to me. "Wasn't she..." My cheeks blushed as I was about to ask the question and I had to look away from him and fixate my gaze at the floor. "Wasn't she supposed to be a... a v-virgin before you got married?" I asked in a small voice and made myself look at him again because I was dying to see his reaction.

What I saw was the exact opposite of what I'd expected, because he seemed to have looked at me with an expression of complete surprise in his eyes.

"Of course not," he said, shocked by what I had told him and I froze as he glared at me with confusion. "Who told you that?"

For a moment, I was taken aback by his act of surprise and denial, but after a while, I remembered all of the humiliation they'd made me go through before I had even gotten a chance to meet him and I knew I couldn't let him fool me because the path of hell that led me straight to this man hadn't been a dream. It was real.

"Mrs. Moran did. The first time when she came to make arrangements." I closed my eyes, willing myself to speak further. "She was even accompanied by a doctor w-who..." I swallowed the heavy words and a tear slid down my face when I remembered the rough treatment of that man that had filled me with shame and disgust.

In an attempt to take advantage of my moment of weakness, I could feel him gently tilt up my chin, but I was too consumed by painful memories to fight the act of his shameless, triumphant persistence. As the tear rolling down my cheek ended up falling onto his hand, I could feel it twitch and his soft touch stiffened on my skin.

“That’s what you meant when you talked about examination before the wedding?!” He made a statement in a soft voice that rang with a pinch of something that resembled anger, evoking one more undesirable image to come back to my mind and play with my sanity.

Seconds went by and we remained in the same position, until I couldn’t take the pressure anymore, and I opened my eyes, meeting his penetrating green gaze. Time was ticking away in silence and it felt as though we didn’t move; it felt as though we didn’t even breathe as I kept repeating the same words from back then, hoping that this time they would help me, even though they didn’t do me any good before. *Don’t cry. Don’t let him see the tears.* As if God himself answered my prayers, Sebastian finally broke the intense gaze between us and looked down at his hand, which still held the smeared wetness of my tear on its bronze skin.

“I can’t even begin to imagine...” He said in a voice reigned by clarity, but when he paused, something had changed and the rest of his words came out in a shaky whisper. “I’m so sorry for what they’ve done to you, angel.”

“Don’t...” I tried to defy him, but he laid a finger on my lips, slowly coming closer like he was approaching a wounded dove.

“I’m so sorry for what I’ve done to you,” he muttered in a quiet voice which uncovered he was under some kind of a pressure and my eyes widened as he took me by complete surprise and pulled me back into his tight embrace.

In a fit of sudden anger, I started pushing him away, but he wouldn’t let go of me and I couldn’t help thinking he was a brute who took complete advantage of the unfair

difference between us, knowing that I couldn't fight his strength.

“Damn you, Sebastian! Why don't you just put a dagger through my heart?” I shrieked in pain and as the tears of frustration started dwelling in my eyes and rolling down my cheeks. When his grip tightened around me, I continued taunting him to react like the monster from before because then it would have been so much easier to hate him. Why couldn't I just hate him? “Damn you! D-Damn all of you...”

“Shh, don't cry.” He had the audacity to comfort me and he even dared to lay soft caresses along my body as I trembled helplessly in his arms, wondering if I would ever manage to escape this hell I was trapped in. “Please don't cry. It will be okay. Trust me.”

I shook my head at his senseless demand to trust him and when he started rocking me in his arms, all the while repeating those empty reassurances, I gladly sank further into oblivion. Had there not been his intriguing words that followed after those weightless whispers, I would have surrendered to the melancholy that provided at least some sort of mental stability, but his voice had uttered something that shocked me and made me doubt everything I thought I knew.

“I cannot find the words to say how much I feel for you, Isabelle. I'm broken by everything you had to go through, but I swear I didn't know you were that innocent on our wedding night.” He stopped talking when I winced in his arms and he paused, giving me a chance to prepare for what he was about to say. “Nowhere in that will does it say that a bride needs to be a virgin before the wedding.”

As if a bomb had hit the ground and made it tremble around us, utter shock spread through my body like paralyzing venom. Wiping away my tears, I struggled to free myself from his strong embrace and when he finally let go of me, I crossed my arms over my chest, gripping my shoulders because I couldn't stop shaking.

“W-What are you saying? That doesn't make any sense. Why on earth...” My voice cracked. “Why w-would

they...?”

Sebastian looked away. Just like that night in Las Vegas when he'd apologized to me, he was unable to look me in the eyes again.

“I don't know for sure, but I guess they were probably trying to get rid of you,” he said in a voice that was filled with guilt.

It took all of my self-control to calm myself down and confront his wild statements.

“You're making this up,” I accused him in a cold voice, feeling angry because he still wouldn't look at me. “WHY would they try to get rid of me when they were the ones who contacted my mother?”

As he continued gazing at me with an empty, broken shade of green that held me under its captivating spell, making it impossible for me to look away, I realized I might have actually trapped him in a lie from which he couldn't escape, so I didn't expect an answer. It actually felt liberating to think I had managed to win a battle in this mesmerizing and hostile war, but just like always, my victory seemed to have been celebrated too early when he suddenly spoke again.

“Isabelle... I've made my peace with the fact that my conscience will never be cleared again and that the burden on my chest will still be there for as long as I breathe. So, you see, I have no reason to lie to you. Nobody contacted your mother. You...” He paused because he knew. He knew that he would shatter the remains of my already too battered world and trust into pieces that could never be mended together again. “Your mother was the one who reached out to us and demanded this marriage.”

For a fracture of a second, I allowed myself to give the benefit of the doubt to his statement, but my entire system refused to validate that despicable allegation.

“How... How dare you?” I spat out, feeling the rage towards him growing beyond repair. “How dare you lie to me you...” I spoke to him like I'd never dared before and I had

actually raised my hands and reached out towards him in an attempt to let out at least some of the frustration, but he took hold of my wrists, squeezing them tightly at first, until his grip loosened up, turning into something that was soft, gentle and depressingly persuasive.

“Listen to me!” he raised his voice slightly, willing me to give him my full attention and when I did, he let go of my wrists slowly and with caution like he feared I might want to attack him again. “Please, let me explain,” he said softly and even his eyes started forming a gaze that seemed to radiate compassion. “I’ve tried to protect you, but now I realize that one cannot be protected from the truth. I didn’t lie to you, Isabelle. Your mother was the one who started this mess.”

“So you say again but... Why would she do that?” I looked at him incredulously, trying to determine whether or not he was telling the truth by meticulously inspecting his expression, but the answer was inconclusive.

“I wish I knew why, but I’m afraid she is the only person who can give you the answer to that question.”

His emerald eyes bored into mine for a few moments, taking in my reaction to what he was saying to me. Before continuing, his lips formed a weak, almost reassuring smile and the fact that he still treated me like I was made of glass should have bothered me, but for some reason it didn’t bother me at all.

“All I can do is tell you what I know about the way in which the events that eventually led to our marriage had taken place, and maybe I can make a few wild assumptions as to why your mother did what she did, but I think they are probably close to the truth.”

“You don’t have to tell me your assumptions, Sebastian. It’s not that difficult to figure out that she sold me for cash.”

“Perhaps.” Sebastian shrugged, but his eyes still held the expression of mysterious depths. “But I think there’s more to it. Your mother is a very interesting individual, Isabelle.

One wouldn't want to have her as an enemy. Trust me on that one."

A sarcastic smile escaped my lips, because sadly, that had indeed been the only thing I trusted him on at that moment.

"Sebastian, if what you say is true..." I gave him a quizzical look. "I don't see how it could have gotten that far. You already had a fiancé. Despite your attempt to give us traits worthy of spies and mobsters, we're only poor people from some godforsaken town in the middle of nowhere and even my mother, no matter how delusional she was, wouldn't have dared to interfere in the union between a powerful New York millionaire and a rich lady who was groomed to be his wife ever since she was a little girl." I confronted him with the things I knew were true for a fact and he couldn't have denied them. And to my surprise, he didn't.

"That's true. She didn't interfere between me and Cora. Something else did."

Again, his expression turned darker when he mentioned the name of that woman and I swallowed a lump of pain and disappointment.

"What was it then?" I demanded because his reactions to her were driving me crazy. He claimed to have wanted to make me understand, but when I searched for answers about his relationship with her, he closed up and pulled into himself. "Sebastian," I called his name almost pleadingly. "There must be a reason why you didn't end up marrying the woman of your choice, the woman you love!"

"It's not that simple." He stared at me with what looked like despair and once again tried to convince me in the sincerity of his words. "Isabelle, I swear it has nothing to do with love. It just hurts to hear her name because I still care about her and Dianne's accusations have only reminded me that I've let her down."

"How did you let her down?" I asked and just like that the truth behind his words dawned on me. "By not marrying her?"

“I guess you could put it that way,” he sighed, “but essentially I’ve let her down by not being there when she needed me the most.”

His explanation left me even more confused than before and it felt like we were running in the same mesmerized circles that were getting us nowhere.

“Why would she need you?” I asked firmly, but he just looked at me with a blank stare, not saying a word. I was tired of this game. I was tired of being held in this dark ignorance, denied to be let in on all those intriguing and possibly dangerous secrets that had a scary boomerang effect on my life. I needed answers. “Tell me, Sebastian,” I urged him and closed my eyes, gathering the courage to ask. “Why does it hurt to hear her name?”

As I muttered the words in a silent whisper, my eyes slowly opened and met his shiny ones that were filled with undeniable traces of grief.

For a while he just stared at me with his lips parted, ready to speak, but still nothing came out and it filled me with anticipation.

“Because she’s dying, Isabelle,” he said in a genuine, brittle voice and I just stared at him in shock. “She’s going to die and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

While trying to make sense of what he had told me, the memory of a beautiful, sophisticated and elegant woman sprang to my eyes and I couldn’t have imagined he was telling the truth.

“How could she be dying?” I asked in disbelief. “The last time I saw her she was perfectly fine.”

Sebastian smiled sadly. “By now you must have realized that nothing is the way it seems to be in our world. Just like me, she was raised to pretend to be fine, even when she’s breaking inside. Isabelle,” he took a deep breath, “Cora has cancer and it’s very bad. She doesn’t have much time left.”

A long, stretching break filled the room around us with stillness and my heart started thumping louder as I took in

what his words had actually meant.

“So that’s why you didn’t marry her?”

The weight of my question created an unbearable pressure on my chest as the pieces of the puzzle slowly fell together into one messy structure that painted the disturbing picture of our crushing reality.

He looked away from me and fixated his gaze to the floor. “That’s part of the reason,” he said in a quiet voice. “The real reason is because eventually it became clear that she would be unable to provide me with an heir and that was when all of this unholy mess started to unravel.” He smirked sarcastically, but it sounded as if he was in pain and I knew exactly which part of the story he was referring to.

“This unholy mess...” I started in a small, humble voice. “You and me.” His hand twitched at my words and his eyes turned towards me in a speed of light, observing me brokenly. “How did it unfold, then?”

“That’s not what I meant, Isabelle,” he said, his face holding an apologetic expression. “Everything around is messed up and unholy, but not... not you... not us. Can’t you see that I love what you brought into my life? Why can’t you see that I—”

“I don’t want your sweet talk, Sebastian. I want the truth!” I attempted to say in a firm voice.

“You only want a part of the truth, angel,” he muttered more to himself, but I had heard him.

He cleared his throat and looked at me with an undecipherable stare as he was about to talk about the unfortunate moment in which my presence had caused commotion in his otherwise probably perfectly organized life.

Chapter Forty-One

Seconds that felt like years dragged on as he kept his stare on my worried face.

“This heritage that made every heir of the Everett Empire marry a girl from Rosemont descent, had lasted for quite a few decades and a few generations of my family had managed to follow the strict rule of finding a woman who had the status and upbringing that matched our own.” He paused, looking at me longingly. “Cora’s condition made us the first couple who couldn’t follow up on that rule and it meant that I had to find a new wife, regardless of the fact that I didn’t want one. My father and his lawyers agreed that it would be inappropriate for me to marry some simple girl from Rosemont.” Since I gaped at him, taking in his every word, I noticed the change in his expression when he uttered those last words because it was clear that the word they used was not a simple girl, but a gold digger. He was being courteous enough to spare me the gruesome details. Desperate to learn the truth, I urged him to continue with my impatient glare. “So they came up with the contract which would ensure us that the marriage wouldn’t be permanent. It would only last until I would be provided with an heir.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “When I read the dreadful content of that contract, I was provided with hope for the first time after Cora got sick because I couldn’t have imagined that there was a woman alive who would have been willing to accept that arrangement, regardless of the amount of money she would be given...”

He paused, postponing the explosion in order to take in my reaction. My eyes held his anticipating gaze and I pushed myself to hold my head higher. It was time for me to deal with it. It was time for me to grow up and leave the world of fairytales.

“It’s okay,” I said in a clear whisper and there wasn’t even a trace of anything that would show I was even slightly afraid, although inside, I was more terrified than ever in my life. “I need ... I need to hear it.”

Sebastian nodded, and he got just a bit closer to me, offering me his silent comfort from afar. “And I was right,” he said in a steady voice that managed to spread like restless waves in my direction. “I was right because nobody wanted to accept the conditions that in my opinion resembled the devil’s bargain. When both my father and his lawyers realized that, we became aware that for the first time after years of suppression caused by that crazy man’s will, we might have found a loop hole, because if there wasn’t a bride, there couldn’t have been a wedding and therefore we couldn’t be held accountable for not fulfilling the demands of a person who had obviously been out of his mind when he created that despicable piece of paper which managed to ruin lives of almost all of his offspring.”

As he finished the incredible story that only seemed to be the prelude to the real reasons that led to our marriage, I was flabbergasted because the more he spoke and revealed, the more I was confused and it seemed that for every new piece of puzzle he would bring to the table, there were another two pieces missing.

“I don’t understand.” I gazed at him, baffled. “If you’re saying that you’ve managed to find a way out of respecting the will of Collin Everett, then how... how in God’s name did you end up marrying me?”

Contours of a warm smile appeared on his face and I saw the Sebastian who made me laugh; the Sebastian who spoke gently to that little girl in McDonald’s; the Sebastian who called me in the middle of the night just to say that he missed me.

“I don’t want to hurt you, angel.” His fingers lifted up, wanting to reach out to me and caress my face, but after only one short moment of hesitation in which he might have been contemplating on the idea, he rested his hand back on his lap in defeat. “Does it really matter how?” He asked softly and

sighed when I didn't offer him an answer. "If I tell you that I feel like I'm the happiest man in the universe for having you as my wife, is the way in which our paths collided really relevant?"

His question sounded like the voice of reason that tempted me to tell him that it wasn't important to know, but I couldn't do that. I burned to know.

"Sebastian, it matters. No matter how much it hurts, it matters," I said sincerely, offering an explanation for my request. "When people play with your life and treat you like you're a thing, knowing why is all that matters. Otherwise, you can never let go and move on." A small nod of Sebastian's head was all the confirmation I needed that he understood so I bravely repeated my question. "So tell me... How on earth did I, a simple girl from Rosemont, end up being the wife of Sebastian Everett?"

Taking time to put himself together, he stared at the tiled floor for a few moments and he seemed to be lost in deep thought. I couldn't help thinking that he was creating a script of what he would tell me in his head.

"There's not much to tell really." He turned back and looked towards me. "After a couple of weeks passed by in complete peace, without anyone so much as mentioning the ridiculous idea of a temporary marriage, I was convinced that I would be free of this dreadful commitment to marry a complete stranger," he said in a serious voice and then, a sarcastic smile appeared on his lips, "but I rejoiced too early because one morning I got to work and I was welcomed by a very unpleasant surprise. There was an e-mail from a woman who was stating that she found out that I was looking for a wife from Rosemont and she just happened to have a lovely daughter who would be too happy to fill in the part."

My heart started thumping like crazy because I knew who he was referring to and I couldn't deny that it sounded just like my mother. "And..." I started asking with restraint. "And what did you do?"

“It was obvious that she had some connections that provided her with certain information, but I wasn’t really worried so I ignored her,” Sebastian said in a strange voice and his features formed a frowning expression. “At least I tried to ignore her, but the e-mails kept coming and each one was more aggressive and distasteful than the other. In the last e-mail that sent me over the edge, she claimed to have possessed evidence of the nature of our ties with the city of Rosemont and she had threatened to take them to the press.”

“So eventually you replied to this woman?” I asked in a weary voice, still refusing to make sense of what he was telling me.

“No,” he sighed, “I didn’t think that contacting her was a smart idea so I forwarded all those e-mails to my father. Although we weren’t sure if she was bluffing, we couldn’t have taken the risk of a public scandal so he decided that we would send one of our lawyers there with a copy of the contract, counting on the fact that she would politely decline our offer, just like everyone else.” A sarcastic smile curved his lips as he shook his head in disbelief. “Big mistake on our part!”

Caught up in the aftermath of his words, my heart jumped to my throat as if I didn’t know the outcome of this story. As if I were an idiot who didn’t understand what Sebastian tried to imply. “Why was that a mistake?” I observed him in surprise. “What did the woman do?”

“According to Rosario, the moment she read the contract, she was ecstatic, claiming that her daughter would be more than happy to oblige to the terms that were required,” he said in a quiet voice that faded away by the time he got to say the last word.

I swallowed. That meant that she knew it. My mother had known my destiny all along and she had done nothing to prevent it from happening.

“Wasn’t anyone concerned about what the daughter who allegedly wanted to marry you had to say?” I asked in disappointment, shooting daggers at him with my eyes.

When he looked at me like he was hurt, I yielded to him again, and as I was turning weaker, I could feel my stare becoming softer until I gazed at him with burning compassion. *Damn you, Sebastian...*

“I don’t know the details of that meeting,” he started speaking with apparent caution, “but Rosario described a girl who confirmed every word of what the mother had said.”

With those words, the painful memory of that first meeting with Mrs. Moran and Dr. Mayhem sprang to my mind and I remembered my shameful weakness. When I thought of how I nodded and silently confirmed every single one of my mother’s despicable statements, I felt ashamed of myself and something heavy pressed on my chest. How could I have let that woman brainwash me with such terror that I had let her ruin my life, doing nothing except for watching it happen like I was an uninvolved bystander who was completely unaffected by the consequences?

“She did what she had to do,” I muttered sadly and Sebastian nodded again, like he understood. “So Mrs. Moran told you I was a gold digger and you... you believed her.” I concluded with traces of defeat ringing in my small voice.

“Isabelle,” he said softly. “You can’t really blame me for not thinking of the possibility that a mother would actually coerce her child into something like that.” He sighed. “And back then, I was too busy handling my own life. It was a mess. With Cora being sick and my obligations to run the company all by myself because of the disputes which were happening within the family, the life of the girl who was still a stranger and for all I knew wanted exactly the same as her mother was the last thing on my mind. And so was the slightest possibility that we would ever actually get married.” With that last sentence he revealed that he had been indeed talking about my mother and suddenly it became even more real and the implication of what it meant made me sick.

“So that’s how it ended?” I asked bitterly. “They told you that I wanted to sign the contract and you agreed to marry her lovely daughter.” As my voice echoed across the room, I

couldn't help but think that my conclusion almost ridiculously resembled a very twisted version of Cinderella.

“Sadly, that’s not the end of it, Isabelle. We tried to offer her money... *A lot* of money to give up the idea of pursuing marriage, but she said that if all she wanted was money she could always simply sell us out to the tabloids which meant that we were stuck. We couldn’t have claimed that we were unable to follow through with the will because now there was a bride who was willing to sign that contract,” he said without looking away from me and I felt like everything started crushing down around me.

Knowing my mother and the life she had, I could believe she would push me into this marriage in a craze to get her hands on a large amount of money. But to think that she would insist that I marry Sebastian despite the fact that it wasn’t necessary, was too much for me to bear and it was beyond my realm of acceptance. Besides, I couldn’t have imagined that she was capable of declining that much money when it was offered to her.

“It’s a very nice story, Sebastian, but I know my mother.” There was a strong presence of irony in my voice. “Elisa Walsh wouldn’t have declined the money because that’s the only thing she ever wanted.” My voice was cold, but there was a spark of rage burning inside me.

“Like I’ve said; I’m not closely familiar with her motives, but if you ask me, what your mother wanted was the status and the power along with the money. And she believed that this marriage would provide her with those things since she would be related to a family that was both rich and prominent.” He shrugged. “Or maybe there was even more to it, but I can’t really answer those questions. There are only two people who can do that; your mother and whoever rat us out to that witch,” he said with apparent disgust.

If what he said was true it meant that she deliberately chose to ruin me even though she could have had the money without making me marry Sebastian. But it couldn’t have been possible... could it? No, he couldn’t have told the right course of the events because even my mother couldn’t be capable of

committing such a crime against her own flesh and blood. At the brink of despair, I closed my eyes in an attempt to remember the moments when she was kind to me. I was trying to evoke at least something that I could throw at Sebastian's face as a reassurance, but all I could think of was a woman who constantly scowled at me, accusing me of being just as useless as my father. There were so many bad memories that made my heart ache. So many things that pointed out that Sebastian was telling the truth, but I couldn't accept that.

"She wouldn't do that..." I tried to speak clearly, but my voice started shaking.

Sebastian gazed at me with a strange glow in his eyes that appeared to have radiated the same something that always drew me to him. I cannot find the words to say how much I feel for you, Isabelle. His attempt to make amends for earlier returned to my mind as he stared at me in silence and I started shivering in desperation, holding on to the last remains of the only thing that kept me sane—denial.

"She w-wouldn't," I repeated, shaking my head at him and trying to hold back tears.

"Isabelle," he muttered in a silent, convincing whisper and his expression resembled that of a man who was about to murder someone who was dear to him, "I'm afraid she would and she did."

And indeed... Those rushed words and the silence that followed broke through my heart like a raging bullet, finally leaving it at peace to bleed to its slow death.

"No. My mother wouldn't do that to me..." I twitched as the tearing sensation broke through my chest. It meant that my heart had given up on hope and that was when the voice of common sense took over, making me exhale in sheer agony as I closed my eyes, leaning my forehead on my knees. *Why did she do that to me?*

There was an overload in my head and I didn't know how to deal with it at the moment. As my teeth began to chatter in utter shock, I realized I was horribly cold and I had nothing that would keep me warm at the time. Fighting the

cold, I almost curved into a ball at the edge of that leather sofa and tried to sink into numbness where I wouldn't feel anything. The touch of soft fabric on my shoulders startled me and I looked up at Sebastian who was holding his suit jacket above me. Slowly, he lowered it over my shivering back and spread its front over my chest. In a moment, I was dazed by his familiar scent, that managed to evoke some of the pleasant memories in this moment of despair and like an unwanted reflex, a weak smile appeared on my lips as his hand reached out towards my face to wipe away the tears smeared all over my cheeks. Even though my mind screamed all sorts of warnings, I was unable to move and he ended up touching me, sending those electric shivers that spread along my skin with the force of a domino effect.

I swallowed and looked at him with wide open eyes. "I wonder... What did Cora say when she found out my mother made you marry me?" I whispered, observing his reaction to the mention of her name and just as I assumed, something within him had shifted again.

Suddenly, that moment of peace was broken when Sebastian removed his hand and slightly pulled away from me. Chills ran down my skin, making it shiver and I squeezed that jacket, tightening its grip over my trembling body.

He sighed, shaking his head. "At first, I thought that I could find a way to prevent the wedding from happening and Cora knew nothing about it. But that first time... The first time we met at my parent's house and you," seemingly in need of air, he loosened his tie and it resembled that talking about all of this managed to put him under immense pressure, "or better said your mother still insisted on the marriage despite the fiasco that took place here in New York, I knew that there were slim chances I could avoid the scary commitment that was staring right at my face."

"You were so cruel to me that time," I said numbly, interrupting him. "Scared me senseless and treated me like I was less worthy than dirt under..."

"There is no need to remind me," he stopped me in a serious tone and then his voice softened. "I'm sorry, Isabelle."

I'm sorry for more than you can imagine, but all I wanted back then was to prevent that wedding from happening and I intended to show you what you could expect if you pushed me into this marriage." He looked at me like he was being torn up by memories. "I had no idea that you were going through the same hell like me. I had no idea that I'd come to see the day when every single word and action would come back to haunt me because I'd learn I was marrying an innocent angel and not the devil who came to ruin my life." As if my incredulous stare disarmed him, he closed his eyes, giving up on the sweet talk and continuing with the story, speaking in a shaky breath. "When I realized that I was cornered, I had no other choice but to tell Cora." He paused and my breath froze, waiting to hear what she had to say. "It was ridiculous, really. I was scared like never in my life and she actually ended up comforting me instead the other way around."

"You say that you..." I still found it incredible to even ask. "You were afraid to marry me?" I looked at him incredulously.

"Is that really so hard to believe? In the middle of the mess that reigned my life, I had to come to terms with marrying a complete stranger who appeared to be vile enough to actually give birth to a baby in exchange for a royally paid divorce." For a moment it seemed as though the usually bronze and flawless skin on his face went pale. "I wasn't scared, Isabelle. I was terrified."

After he said that, our eyes remained locked for a long time and for the first time after we started this conversation, I decided to try and see things from his point of view. If what he said had been the truth, I didn't know how, but I could make myself believe that he hadn't had it easy either. As that realization surged through me, another frightening possibility emerged in the back of my mind.

"Sebastian," I called his name, willing him to give me his attention, because I wanted an honest answer. "Is that why?"

Even though my question consisted of simple three words, by his facial expression, I could tell that he knew what

I meant. But I could also see that he was cautious, too cautious to give me the answer right away.

“Is that why what?” He asked, resigned.

Inhaling a chunk of fresh air, I made myself look at him. “Is that why you hurt me that night?”

BOOM. There was an explosion, radiating a mixture of emotions in those shiny emerald eyes and my heart that seemed to have died only minutes ago, started thumping again in anticipation. His gaze slowly darted away from mine and roamed along the contours of my face, pausing at the nape of my neck before returning to my wide open eyes.

“No, Isabelle.” His voice was a tortured whisper. “Don’t ask me to justify my actions because I can’t give you a justification. There is no honor in what I’ve done.”

“What you’ve done may not be honorable, but there has to be a reason.” I gave him a broken, pleading look. “Please... I’ve never asked you, but now I want to know.”

His eyes turned darker, turning his stare into something distant and he was so lost in deep thoughts that it seemed as though he was in the room with me physically, but his spirit had left his body and traveled somewhere else.

“Sebastian,” I called his name once more, and he snapped like he was waking up from a long dream.

Then, he swallowed and continued stalling with his answer. “I swear I didn’t plan to do it, Isabelle,” he said with fragile tenderness. “I’ve never meant to hurt you. I thought you knew about the nature of our marriage and that you’d agreed to it willingly. In my mind, that implied that you were perfectly aware of what we would have to do in order to produce an heir. And the reason why I didn’t show you compassion was because I believed that you were your mother’s accomplice who was forcefully asserting herself in my life in such a despicable manner.”

Closing his eyes, he exhaled like he was regretting his last sentence and it felt like he was tip-toeing around me with extreme caution not to break me, but he didn’t know it was far

too late for that. I was already destroyed beyond repair and as ridiculous as it may seem, there was something liberating about knowing that there weren't any pieces left to be broken. I would never be whole again, but at least I was safe from pain. Encouraged by that realization, I looked at him, ready to hear the truth instead of cowering away from it.

He sighed. "I was prepared to deal with that clause in the agreement, but I had no intention to so much as touch you on our wedding day..." He stopped talking abruptly.

"Then why did you do it?" I asked softly. Saying those words evoked the unwanted memories and I had to look away in shame.

His nostrils flared when he made a loud exhaling sound, almost as if he was letting out his last breath. But after second passed by in quiet, he started breathing in a deep tone again.

"Because I lost all of my self-control. That whole day my blood was boiling with anger as the bitter awareness that I had actually ended up marrying you sank in. In all honesty, if that was the end of it, maybe you would have been spared. Maybe I would have just gotten drunk and let you be. And maybe we would eventually manage to see through all the scams and tried to sort this out like normal people." He observed me with traces of something; something that burned in his eyes and right through my soul. "But unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it, because your mother decided to push me over the edge. She had the nerve to provoke me by calling us love birds and hanging herself around my neck, taunting that I must be looking forward to our wedding night since she understood that my former fiancé was unable..." He gasped and stopped talking as I looked towards him in shock.

Sebastian was implying that my mother knew about Cora's illness and used it as a mean of gloating with her victory over him. Normally, I would have tried to deny his allegations because I believed that there was a moral compass within everybody that simply couldn't have allowed such atrocities. There would be a heavy stone of pain, causing tears of denial which he would then probably wipe away, but those

days were over. Nothing could take me by surprise anymore and I remained cold to the thought that my mother would actually say something like that knowing that she was talking to the man who held her daughter's destiny and wellbeing in his hands. It was crystal clear she didn't give a damn about me, but the difference between then and now was that at this very moment, the feeling was entirely mutual.

"I understand how my mother could upset you," I swallowed and continued speaking in a brave whisper, "but did it really have to end like that?"

"I wish I could tell you that things could have been different, but you didn't stand a chance, Isabelle." He stopped, observing my reaction and I think that my calmness surprised him because he looked at me with a glimpse of something I'd already learned to recognize as admiration in his eyes. As if there was a silent pact between us, he continued explaining what he meant with that sentence. "Even if I managed to look through your mother's attempt to humiliate me, it wouldn't mean anything because the real last drop that pushed me to act like a madman was your audacity to deny your obligation to follow the terms which I believed you used to trap me in this marriage." He shook his head. "Your denial enraged me beyond control because I was certain that you and your mother were playing games." A loud gasp broke his words and he stared at me in desperation. "I lost control and at that moment I swore to myself that I would do whatever it takes to get a divorce, but the joke was on me, because I couldn't bring myself to touch you after that night. I couldn't even bring myself to look at you after our wedding or think for a moment that your reaction wasn't an act because I knew what that would mean." His voice actually shivered and I observed a man who seemed afraid that he would never be given absolution for his sins.

While processing his words, I remembered the events that followed the most dreadful experience of my life. He was telling the truth. After that night, despite the fears that reigned my life, I hadn't even seen him for a whole month. He was constantly absent and when I thought about it now, it could have been that he had deliberately avoided me. Even after that,

when he terrorized me with threats, instilling the chilling fear in the very core of my being, he had never acted up on them. *Was he really bothered by what he had done even then? Was he really unable to bring himself to touch me after the tragedy which took place in the solace of that hotel room?* Suddenly, while thinking about it, all the hidden dots seemed to have connected together and everything started making sense. *What if it had all been a lie and the sweet Sebastian never even existed? What if he had only tried to do all those things to get me to give him what he wanted without having to compromise his conscience any further?*

“All this time,” the words spilled out of me before I thought it through and Sebastian looked at me confusedly, “all you ever really wanted was to get me to fulfill the terms of that contract, wasn’t it?”

If I had ever seen a man whose pride had been hurt and who looked like he was utterly disgusted and offended, it was Sebastian at the moment when I said those words. There was so much frustration radiating from his stare that it made me frightened to look at him.

“You’re being unfair, Isabelle,” he said quietly, as if he wanted to shout and this was the only way to control the magnitude of his voice. “How can you accuse me with so much certainty when I haven’t asked anything of you? Not even once.” He raised his eyebrows accentuating that last sentence. When I remained silent due to my complete confusion, his expression softened and he looked at me gently. “If I did all those things just to get you to sleep with me, don’t you think that I would have tried to make a move that would lead us into that direction? For heaven’s sake, I even insisted that we sleep in separate rooms. I’ve given you complete control and you’re attacking me for wanting to trick you into having sex with me.” Deep blush spread over my cheeks and I looked away in defeat. “You can doubt me all you want, but you can’t deny that I’ve been patient and that I’ve treated you with respect. Believe it or not, it’s not easy to sustain yourself from touching a woman you long for with every fiber of your being.”

“Then why couldn’t you sustain yourself when you kissed Cora that night?”

“Isabelle, why are you so obsessed with that kiss? How many times do I have to tell you that it had nothing to do with the things that are stuck in your head? It wasn’t like that at all.” He tried to sound convincing, but I could tell that he was slowly running thin on patience.

“How was it then?” I asked, my voice seething with defiance.

He sighed heavily, composing himself and then he looked at me with the same stare he’d had moments ago when it seemed I had offended him.

“I accompanied her to her first treatment,” he said slowly and then swallowed hard. “It was painful to see her so devastated and afraid. I couldn’t leave her alone, so I convinced her to come home with me. I tried my best to console her, but I had no idea what to do. I wanted to ensure her that she would have my support regardless of the circumstances, but I knew as well as she did that there was nothing I could do to help her. She looked so fragile and I felt guilty for everything. That kiss happened in the spur of the moment and I didn’t think that I was doing anything wrong because we didn’t even have a real marriage back then.” And suddenly, there was tenderness in his voice again. “Still, I regretted it the moment I saw you looking at me with hurt in your eyes.”

Now I was the one who felt offended. “Don’t lie. You didn’t care. You hated me, Sebastian. You hated me with the power of thousand suns.” I confronted him with the bitter truth but it didn’t seem to upset him in the least and he seemed to have taken it with complete calmness.

“You’re wrong. I tried to hate you, but I failed... miserably. The more I wanted to hate you, the more you warmed up to my heart. Day by day, you made me realize that I was gifted with perfection. Can’t you see that you’ve bewitched me, Isabelle? We both know that I didn’t fall without a fight, but there was no point in resisting, was there?”

So many women have tried, but only you managed to steal my heart.” A small, warm smile teased his lips. “Without even trying.”

As much as I wanted to stay immune to his words, I couldn't protect myself by staying unaffected. I couldn't fight the feelings that were simply there. It felt like they were in too deep and that they would never go away. *Damn you, Sebastian...*

“Sebastian... How can I be sure when you're alleged affection for me might be a desperate product of denial because you're hurt by the fact that you're going to lose Cora? I'm so sorry for that. I never meant to come in the way of your happiness.”

If anything, I expected a confirmation of my words, something that would push me away from him, but what I got was exactly the opposite.

“Isabelle... how can you say that you came in the way of my happiness when you are the only source of joy in my life? I do have feelings for Cora, but not the kind of feelings you think.” His voice was so soft, inviting, and it was so difficult to resist the need to come closer. “You have to understand that Cora and I were raised to believe we would get married. It is only natural that the knowledge of it made us develop a sense of deep care and respect for one another throughout the years... Those things are very different than love.” He gazed at me for a few moments. “I know that now. I won't deny that I wanted to show her my respect by honoring my word and marrying her despite everything. But that was before I knew you—the real you.” He paused, giving me the time to take in his words. “I've always been a man of my word, Isabelle. Always. And I didn't know what it means to break a promise or fall in love until I met you.”

“Why do you keep talking about love?” The hurt in my voice was apparent.

He got closer to me, step by step, as if I was a frightened dove who would flee the moment he approached her. And when he got really close, I felt the need to move

away because his effect on me was undeniable and it shamed me. I knew at that moment that all the people who had hurt me would forever be had locked out of my heart, but Sebastian—he was something else. The devil with the charisma of a Prince Charming had irrevocably managed to work his way in and there was no going back. His fingers gently lifted up my chin and when our eyes met, we gazed at each other for what felt like eternity. We were in an altered reality without pain, evil people who caused the mess in our lives or dark corners which were filled with dangerous memories. It was only me and him. Nobody and nothing else. Only us, stripped of any burden, leaving the pressure on our backs as light as a feather. He leaned closer and I gulped, forgetting about the danger in disguise and seeing only him, *nothing else*.

“The reason I’m talking about love is this.” His lips barely grazed mine before moving away and I was left trembling, with the feeling of burning lava rushing through my veins. “You can’t deny this, Isabelle. You can try, but the way you react to me will always give you away and I will know that you feel the same.”

His hot whisper burned me and I closed my eyes, feeling hypnotized and yearning to hear those words. Nothing made sense anymore and I didn’t care. I just wanted the words. The three words and then it would end. When he parted his lips I knew they were coming and I braced myself to hear them, shivering in anticipation.

“The reason I talk about love is because my feelings for you are real and they can’t be described as anything else.” He took a deep breath and I knew he was gazing at my face. “Isabelle... My sweet Isabelle,” he whispered tenderly and I tried to focus on his soft voice, but those words opened the door that invited the threatening discoveries, encouraging them to find their way in again and destroy my newfound oasis of peace. *Hurry up, Sebastian. Hurry up before it’s too late.* “The reason why I talk about love is because I love—”

“No!” I opened my eyes in a fit of despair and stuttered the word as the reality barged in like a burglar that came to steal my piece of heaven. Sebastian was left staring at me with

that last, third word hanging in the air. After a moment he gulped like he would say it again.

“Sebastian, please.” The voice of reason was pleading him silently, but my eyes, I was sure, were sending a completely different message. I swallowed. “Not right now. Not like this.”

As silence reigned everywhere around us, we fell out of the altered reality that kept us protected and the discovery that it wasn't just us anymore, made the air that was so sweet only moments ago polluted. Right then I knew I wouldn't be able to escape, and though I was left with no other option than to find a way to deal with the truth that had been uncovered to me, I was sure of one thing. I would be fine. Not the same as before, never the same as before, but fine.

Chapter Forty-Two

That afternoon, when an explosion occurred after days of lingering silence, I was in the patio, reading another book to pass time, to keep my mind off of the things I wasn't ready to deal with. But as the story line of *Jane Eyre* progressed, so did the level of my growing impatience, because the life of the heroine had only managed to remind me of the harsh reality I so desperately wanted to get away from. Sebastian was right—living with the truth wasn't an easy task. Still, there was something liberating about it. For the first time in ages, I felt alleviation even though it was the one of a disturbed kind, leaving me hollow and emotionless.

Sebastian selflessly gave me all the space and time I had asked him for, but it didn't make it any easier. The fact that I had locked him out filled my otherwise empty state of mind with guilt and regret because deep down, I knew we had shared the same path of hell that led us into this marriage and while I didn't understand myself at all, somehow I understood him. While I couldn't feel for myself, I felt for him. Strangely, despite the fact that I expected him to keep distance, I needed him. I wanted to reach out to him, but the very thought that there was something about that man that consumed all of me and left me defenseless, had only managed to deepen my vulnerability so I forced myself to block it out, just like everything else.

Since my choice of reading didn't manage to distract me from my gloomy thoughts, my eyes darted towards the corner decorated with white orchids. When looking at their white petals more closely, I noticed they were dying away even though the simplicity of saving their life only consisted of giving them a bit of water. Sighing, I placed the book on the glass table, relieved to get a break from the emotional scene

that only added to the distraught state I found myself trapped in.

As I was returning to the patio after getting some water for the flowers, I saw Annette. I had been avoiding her with success—until now. Startled, I stood dead in my tracks as I noticed her standing at the opposite end of the hallway, unmoving and as calm as a statue, giving me a feeling that she observed me vigilantly, almost like it was her task not to take her eyes off me. Chills spread down my spine and I started walking away from her in a quick and unsteady pace.

When I stepped inside the patio, I had to catch a breath and just as always, I brushed away the thoughts that tempted me to dig deeper into the reasons that might have caused Annette to act strange at times. But my newfound peace wasn't meant to be, because while I was halfway done with watering the almost passing orchids, I heard steps and when the noise subsided, I knew somebody was in the room with me, so I turned around, sensing I would meet an unwelcome face and I saw Annette, standing in front of me. Her posture was relaxed and she wore a light smile on her face. The fact that her behavior from moments ago had completely altered creeped me out and I was sure that I stared back at her with weariness written all over my face. The proof that my reaction made her nervous was visible as her face turned serious, but it only lasted for the shortest second because she instantly regained her composure.

“Are you all right?” I initiated the conversation, without returning her smiles as usual.

My crude behavior had to have taken her off guard because she swallowed and forced a weak smile before answering. “I'm fine... I just... I saw you carrying the water and I realized I had forgotten all about the flowers so I thought I could make up for my mistake. How embarrassing...” She reached for the water in my hands but I pulled it away and smiled at her, relaxing after hearing her explanation.

“Don't worry about it. It can happen to everybody,” I said in a soothing voice. “Besides, I really like to do it. As a

matter of fact, why don't you leave it to me from now on?" I happily suggested and she seemed to like the idea.

For a moment, she gazed at the flowers and then returned her stare to me. "Orchids are so lovely. I've always liked them." She smiled. "Maybe it's because they represent love... and beauty," she said in a longing tone and I looked away for a moment, remembering Sebastian's unfinished declaration of love.

It seemed I couldn't bear to hear the sound of that word, no matter in which context it was spoken because all those feelings that I just wanted to erase would reappear, torturing me with their irresistible allure which was opposed to all the dark, filthy memories that were still too strong to be overpowered by that emotion Sebastian talked about.

"Isabelle..." Annette called me and I looked at her expectantly, with a worn out expression on my face. "You seem to be distraught by something. You've been so distant lately. What's bothering you?" She inquired in a persistent tone.

I shrugged and brushed it off. "It's nothing. There's just a lot on my mind."

A strange awareness seemed to shape her features and she touched my shoulder in a compassionate manner, but I couldn't escape the feeling that something was off. The fact that it was getting harder to fight the instinct that told me Annette wasn't really my friend drove me crazy.

"Maybe you should talk to someone about it," she offered. "You can always confide in me and I will try to give you the best advice I can." Her gaze that was directed straight at my eyes and it felt almost disarming, but since I wouldn't let it get to me, she continued speaking in a persuasive tone. "That's what friends are for. You know I only want what's best for you," she said in a gentle voice and I stiffened at those words as the ice around my heart produced a very loud, painful crack.

There was only one person who always justified her actions by stating they were a sacrifice she had made for my

own good because she only wanted the best for me. There was only one person who knew me so well that she could manipulate me into doing her bidding every single time. Noting the rising tension caused by her hardy well-chosen words, Annette started looking around the room nervously, as if she was aware of the doubts that were forming in my mind and when her eyes landed on the glass table she sighed with apparent relief, picking up the book I had given up on mere minutes ago.

Her palm ran along the rough cover of the book and she looked like she was impressed by the work of art in her hands. The only thing that gave her away was the fact that she was trying too hard to show her enthusiasm and I stared at her in disbelief, wondering why on earth an English literature student would show such excitement when seeing those books must have been a normal, daily occurrence for them. In a fit of unnerving suspicion, I had decided to perform a little experiment and I wondered what her reaction would be.

“Oh, I love this book so much. It’s one of my favorites,” she said in an excited voice and I even smiled at her, trying to get her to believe that her words from moments ago had vanished from my mind.

“That’s nice to hear,” I said and then asked the question I’d been meaning to ask, all the while willing my all but accusing voice to come out in a careless tone. “What’s your favorite part?”

I didn’t know what I was trying to achieve or where I was going with this irrelevant chat, but I was merely following an overpowering feeling caused by my burning intuition that warned me I should be wary of this girl who seemed to be nothing but harmless and innocent. Somehow, I still hoped to be wrong about her and I wanted to assign those troubling doubts to my disoriented state of mind. But when she remained silent, smiling anxiously without offering a reply to my question, an interesting fact represented itself on the table and as I realized that she praised the book she hadn’t even read for the mere reason to come closer to me, another piece of the frozen ice broke off, causing the momentary loss of air in my

lungs. *Who was this girl and what did she want from me?* I already knew the answer to my question, but I decided to ignore it for just a little while longer.

“Jane Eyre is so great that it’s just difficult to make up your mind, I guess.” I trained my voice to stay calm and continued smiling, observing her relaxing a little while hiding my true state of mind.

Again, I was about to do something that didn’t make any sense, but I just felt like I was walking a path that would lead me to a certain discovery, so I did it anyway.

“You know, I enjoyed reading how Jane was treated with so much care when she was staying with the Reeds.” I made up a complete lie, twisting the plot of the book and wondering once again about the purpose of this strange game I suddenly felt the need to complete. “For some reason it makes me feel at ease, because I really missed all those things during my own childhood,” I continued in a sad tone and Annette’s face turned serious, some troubling realization surging through her, leaving her paralyzed for a few moments.

Then, she smiled again, looking at me warmly. “You’re right. It is difficult to decide which part of this amazing book is the best, but you know what’s really weird? My childhood wasn’t the happiest either and if I would have to choose, I’d say that was my favorite part of the book as well...” Her voice faded away as she pretended to be lost in thought.

“That’s weird, indeed...” I said softly, swallowing the rest of the sentence I yearned to say. *...Because it never happened, dear Annette.*

I gave her a vague look, silently communicating with the probably accusing glare in my eyes. *The Reeds were terrible to Jane, but you wouldn’t know that, would you? How could you possibly know what you’re talking about since you haven’t even read the book? That’s the key to your secret, isn’t it? You’re not an English literature student at all...* As the discovery surged through me and the cold ice exploded into pieces, releasing all of the suppressed emotions to the surface all at once. *Who are you, Annette?*

Suddenly, I felt what I should have felt all along; the immense anger that boiled in my very core because of the injustice that had been done to me. Right then, as the final realization of the role the girl in front of me held in this scam that was forced upon me; I knew that the day when I would face my tormentor had come. But there was no fear, not even a trace of it, because I wasn't scared, I was furious. Nevertheless, I knew I had to keep my anger at bay for a while longer so I forced a slight laughter even though I was disgusted by what I was about to say.

"It's interesting that we have so many things in common. Incredible, actually," I said quietly, accentuating my obvious confusion. "If I didn't know better, I'd say that we were twins because you seem to be an exact copy of me." I stared at her with a puzzled expression, but I kept the smile on my face.

Annette, however, wasn't smiling anymore. Her cheeks blushed, revealing her obvious distress and it had only strengthened my resolve. "I... I agree. It's really interesting and I'm so happy that I got to kn-know you." Her voice caught on by the end of her sentence and she looked at me with the eyes of a criminal who had been caught in the middle of a burglary. She didn't have to say a single word since I could read her expression perfectly and I knew what she would say before she'd even said it. "I-I'm sorry." She took a step back from me. "I'd like to stay but I have a lot of work to do now." She was dying to leave the room with such eagerness that she turned and started walking out the moment I smiled and nodded, giving her the impression that she was off the hook.

"Antoinette..." Just as she was about to walk out to door, I called her name—the one that would make her realize that whatever game she was playing was about to come to an end—in a firm, yet composed voice and she stopped, just standing there with her back still turned to me as if she was frozen and unable to move. "Please, greet her for me," I said, adding a final punch to this already defeated intruder.

When she heard me, her shoulders dropped in defeat and she sighed, taken aback by what had just happened.

Slowly, she turned to face me and her entire body screamed that she was filled with panic. Her lips were trembling, but the slightly defiant glare in her eyes told me she still wasn't ready to give up her act.

“What... What are you talking about, Isabelle?” It was apparent that she tried to sound like she was surprised, but the traces of fear that ruled her voice gave her away. “W-Who do you want me to greet?”

“I think you know very well who I'm talking about.” Ignoring her meek display of confusion, I decided to continue with my inquiry for answers instead of letting her go like she probably expected me to. “I just wonder how she got you to do it. What did she promise you? Her filthy money?”

Annette swallowed and looked at me in shock. Her skin was as pale as a ghost.

“Isabelle I don't...”

“You don't know who you're dealing with,” I interrupted her in a quiet voice and as the last piece of the ice broke off, setting me free, I gained strength to confront people who had so easily decided they have the right to play with my life. “She's a serpent, you know....” I sighed, correcting myself. “You all are. But don't worry. From now on, things are going to change around here because I'm done letting her walk all over me and play with my life like it's of no consequence to her.” There was a moment of silence before I uttered my final warning. “It's time to give up, Antoinette... or whatever your name is.”

Such disturbing stress settled in her features, that she observed me with her wide eyes which seemed to be filled with hysteria. “Isabelle, I didn't... I didn't mean to cause you trouble. P-Please, let me explain.”

“Explain what?” I stared at her in disbelief. “How you used my kind-hearted nature against me by pretending to be my friend while plotting your way into my life together with my mother?” There was a clear expression of disgust radiating from my eyes. “I'll ask you one last time. How and why did she get you to do this?”

After staring at me with visible and restraining hesitation, a loud sigh broke off her body, signaling that she had finally given up the fight. That was when the tears, the pleading and the endless apologizing began. She told me how she came to work for Sebastian because my mother had encouraged her to ask employment in place of Teresa who got fired only days after promising her she would inform her about the way my marriage had been unfolding. Antoinette was a simple girl from Rosemont who knew nothing about famous writers or literature, but she received a very lengthy and quite successful instruction from my mother on how she was supposed to behave in order to gain both mine and Sebastian's trust. I almost choked on a bitter laugh when I realized that once again, I had demonstrated the extent of my inexperience by trusting the last person I should have trusted. Indeed, I was naive, and naivety was a terrible trait to keep. The fact that Sebastian had warned me about her all along, left me ashamed as she continued explaining that she came from a poor family and that she really needed the money, otherwise she wouldn't have done any of it. It was apparent that she wanted me to show her mercy by forgetting how she'd ended up in New York. With reluctance, I offered her a small hug, trying to get her to calm down and that was when something inexplicable possessed every fiber of my being.

"It's okay now," I muttered. "It's okay. Wipe your tears," I told her in an almost commanding voice and when she listened to me, I stepped away from her and whispered the only thing I could say. "Pack your things and leave by the end of the day."

Shock replaced the soft expression on her face because she obviously expected me to let her stay and continue working for Sebastian like nothing had happened. While the old Isabelle would have done that in the blink of an eye, as she stared at me with a sad, desperate gaze, I realized that I wanted to forgive her—but couldn't. For the first time, I became aware that some people weren't worthy of my kindness, especially after betraying it in such a cold-hearted manner. There were so many opportunities when she could have told me the truth and I could have forgiven her then, but not now.

“You’re fired!” I heard the echo of my quiet, yet clear voice and it startled me as if I wasn’t expecting I would actually say it.

The incredulous gaze in those eyes made it more than clear that she wasn’t expecting to hear those words and suddenly, the shock and the pleading from moments ago were erased by an obvious act of defiance as she gasped a condescending smile, making it a lot easier for me to stand my ground. “You can’t fire me!” she said in a mocking whisper.

Remaining calm, I looked at her with confidence. “Suit yourself, but if I see you here tomorrow, you’ll be fired by someone else—someone who won’t be as kind as me and let you off the hook that easily.” Apparent dread seethed through her eyes and I realized that if one thing about her was real, it was her fear of Sebastian and I knew she would avoid a confrontation with him at any cost. “If I were you, I’d be gone before he gets a chance to do that.”

My face heated as I stood up and hurried out of the room, leaving her alone and baffled after uttering my final warning. As I walked away, I had a good feeling I would never see Antoinette again and while I was happy about that, I also wondered what on earth had possessed me to act that way. What bothered me even more was that it actually felt good to confront somebody who had hurt me and betrayed my trust. As my body trembled from the shock of what I had just done, I tried to suppress the anger, but I knew there was only one thing which could bring me peace so I hurried to my room, got my phone and practically ran in the garden because I couldn’t wait anymore. I couldn’t wait one more second to get it all out.

The moment I got to the swing chair in the garden I sighed, taking in the sad image of roses that died away under the merciless late autumn cold. Since it was late afternoon, it was already getting misty and it was only a matter of time before the sun completely set, leaving me in the dark, but I had to do this. It was now or never. I grabbed the phone with my shaky hands and dialed the number I hadn’t dared to dial even once since I had been married off to Sebastian. Even though it

was cold, beads of sweat ran down my face as the phone rang. Once... Twice... Three times.

“What a pleasant surprise!” That high-pitched voice sounded through the phone, sending chills down my spine and I froze for a moment, thinking that she still held power over me and that I wouldn’t be able to fight her in order to set myself free.

Chapter Forty-Three

Moments went by and I tried to say something, but my throat clenched under the pressure and there were so many things I wanted to scream at her at the same time.

“Is something the matter?” she inquired self-assuredly as always when she realized I wouldn’t speak. “Or has my dear daughter finally decided to call her mother and pay her some respect. I’ve been wondering when you’d do that.”

Something about her voice and the manner in which she spoke opened the same gate that had pushed me to fire Annette and as defiance and inexplicable detest towards this woman who’d gifted me life only to destroy it for her own selfish motives rose inside of me, I gained the power to settle my accounts with her once and for all.

“Don’t flatter yourself. Paying respect to someone like you is the last thing on my mind.” I was surprised when I said the words in a calm, clear voice and it encouraged me to add something I had been dying to say. “And don’t waste your breath calling me your daughter because you don’t have one anymore!”

“Young lady,” she started in her usual demeaning tone. “What gives you the right to talk to me like that? Apologize this instant!” Her deep southern accent brought about some of the worst memories and I sighed into the phone, suddenly feeling discouraged and sad. But I wouldn’t let her bring me down, those days were over!

“Tell me,” I muttered in a shaky voice that had a strange sense of demand in it, making it abundantly clear that her request for an apology would be denied. “How can you live with yourself? Don’t you have any conscience that keeps you awake at night?” As I said that, all the images of the painful experiences that had crossed my life appeared before

my eyes, ironically, because of the one person who should have protected me from them. “Mother...” the term escaped my lips almost involuntarily, but I couldn’t help it. Even now, when I seethed with anger, a part of me longed for her love and acceptance. “Do you have any idea what you’ve put me through?” Despite my strong resolution to stay relentless, the words came out in a broken, almost pleading whisper. I wanted to give her a chance to repent for her sins, but I might as well been trying to evoke compassion from a dead man, because my mother’s heart had been made of stone.

“Oh, I have an idea, dear. Actually, I have a few. Please, tell me... What is it that’s not to your liking? Is the mansion you live in too big or are the pretty clothes you wear too extravagant for your taste? Or maybe your handsome husband is just too perfect and you’re afraid that—”

“Enough!” I couldn’t take the sound of her condescending tone any longer. I wouldn’t let it get to me. Not anymore. “How about I do the talking this time? I think it’s only fair to force you to face the truth after all the lies and deceit,” I said in a dignifying voice, without revealing the actual extend of my anger.

There was a break and I even thought that the line might have been broken, but then I heard her sigh in the phone.

“The truth?” She sang the words mockingly. “What truth, darling?”

“The truth about the way you orchestrated the wedding that was never supposed to happen,” I muttered in a cold voice. “The truth about how you sold me to these people like I was a thing you wanted to discard off. And you knew exactly what would happen, didn’t you?” My voice rang with an emotion I couldn’t really place, but it was there and the pressure became stronger with each passing second, consuming my mind with the unwanted bitterness. “How could you force me into Sebastian’s arms, knowing what my debt to him would be? You knew, and still...”

“Isabelle, what is it that you are accusing me off?” Her voice darkened and she reciprocated by showing the level of her annoyance. “You were always an insolent brat, you know that?” She raised her voice and I could already picture her, shaking her head and nervously tapping her fingers on the nearest surface and I could tell I was right because I heard the annoying sound of her long nails bouncing off of something. “Maybe you would have been better off if I made you marry some drunken hobo from Rosemont, because honestly, you didn’t deserve any better. After all the sacrifices I’ve made. How dare you disrespect me like that?! I gave you everything a girl can wish for and this is how you repay me?”

The memories of the bitter beginning of my marriage to Sebastian attacked my mind and I stilled for a while, remembering a girl who lived in her own version of a dark, twisted fairytale, completely broken, neglected by everybody and depending on nothing else but terrorizing fear.

“Everything a girl can wish for?” I asked in disbelief. “You really have no idea what a man is capable of doing when he’s forced to marry a woman he doesn’t want, do you?”

A loud sigh broke through the phone and my mother’s victorious voice came to the surface. “Oh please, stop complaining. Every woman has to deal with a little discomfort in her marriage.” She didn’t even try to deny my accusations. Instead, she chose to minimize the terrorizing experience I had been through by speaking to me in her falsely reassuring voice and the very sound of it sent shivers down my spine, making me queasy and sick with detest. “Besides, I’m sure that a man like Sebastian is very agreeable—and reasonable when it comes to these things,” she continued in the same sickening tone.

I clenched my fist, fighting the pain, fighting the urge to scream. It only took a moment—one agonizing moment to deal with the loss. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and silently uttered the final *goodbye*. After that, there wasn’t any feeling tying me to this evil woman anymore. I felt nothing. Not even resentment.

“Unfortunately for you, he has been quite reasonable,” I admitted to her as well as to myself for the first time. Despite the fact that he had hurt me, he could have done so much more to enhance my suffering, but didn’t and there was no escaping that truth. “It turns out that prolonging my discomfort didn’t hold his interest as much as you thought it would have.”

“Oh, my...” She faked her surprise. “Are you telling me that you’ve managed to work your charms on your wealthy husband, after all?” she asked in a condescending tone as if the fact amused her, crushing my last hope that there was any good left in her. “I have to admit that I’m pleasantly surprised, dear, because I didn’t think you had it in you. Why, by the looks of it, you may bless me with a grandson a lot sooner than I thought.”

“By the looks of it, you can say farewell to your precious money, because I’d rather die than fulfill the terms of that contract.” Even though I tried to control my temper, I practically yelled at her.

She snickered, dismissing my words and mocking me with her indifference to them. “I’m sure you would honey, but I think that your beautiful husband looks a bit differently on that matter. You don’t actually think that he wants to stay married to you forever, do you?”

I swallowed and froze at her words. Even though I’d promised myself I wouldn’t let her get to me, she’d managed to insert doubt and fear into my mind all over again. Willing myself to stay strong, I decided not to cower away, despite the sudden feeling of insecurity that she managed to create in me after all.

“What if that’s exactly what he wants?” I challenged her in a voice that rang with uncertainty because I was wondering myself if that was indeed what he wanted. Like a vulture lurking in the shadows, she sensed that her prey was slowly giving in.

“You poor thing... You do believe he will protect you, don’t you?” she said victoriously and I winced. “When will you grow up and realize that men like Sebastian Everett are

not to be trusted? Put your faith in him all you want, but at the end of the day, the outcome of your marriage will always be the same... Sooner or later he'll want you out of his life and it will be my door you'll be knocking on when that happens."

Don't listen to her! Don't let her get to you! I repeated the mantra in my head.

"If you think—" I started speaking in a harsh, decisive voice, but she interrupted me, repossessing the power she held over me for so long.

"I'd choose my words carefully if I were you, Isabelle," enjoying torturing me, she paused before adding a final nail to the coffin she'd so meticulously created for me, "I'll let this little incident slip my mind, but you should treat me with respect in the future unless you want to face the consequences. I'm sure you wouldn't like to have to explain to your dear sister why disrespect in this family isn't tolerated."

A storm of emotions boiled inside me and I remained silent for a while, contemplating on her warning. Ashley was the reason I'd ended up marrying Sebastian and my mother's most powerful weapon to keep me in check. Thinking about the possibility that my rebellion could hurt her evoked an overwhelming panic, but I chose to suppress it. I talked myself into calming down and once I could think with a clear head, I realized that this was nothing but yet another attempt to manipulate me and I couldn't let that happen. Ashley would be eighteen in a few months and if Mother chose to punish her because of me, she didn't have much time to do it anyway.

"You can threaten me all you want, Mother but my resolve is still the same. Nothing you say or do can get to me anymore. You're a thing of the past and whatever the future holds, you won't be a part of it anymore." I inhaled a chunk of fresh air and felt liberated. "Don't get your hopes up because yours would be the last door I would knock on."

"We'll see about that, darling. We'll see." She sighed, producing an annoying high pitched noise. "That husband of yours... He's clever alright." A condescending chuckle

sounded through the phone. “Was he the one who got you to do this little show?”

Fury rose inside me because she obviously thought I was incapable of standing up for myself. “This may come as a surprise to you, but I don’t need Sebastian to tell me I have a pathetic excuse for a mother.”

Shivers ran through my body, leaving me in a shock I needed to recover from. I had never dared to speak to her like that and I had a good feeling there would be a retaliation coming my way. Surprisingly, I was wrong.

“I guess it’s true what they say: Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. Judging by what’s become of you, it’s quite clear that he’s been keeping you very, very close to his side,” she sang the words mockingly.

“I’m sure you would know,” I spoke in a melancholic tone filled with indifference. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you a single word because your little spy has already told you everything.”

“Spy?!” She burst in a fit of laughter, but it was the nervous kind which told me she knew exactly what I was referring to. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not being ridiculous. I think I’m making sense for the first time in my life. What kind of a mother sells her child? If you had any sense of decency, you would have escorted yourself out of my life long before we had this conversation.” I gasped a smile, realizing that I was indeed being ridiculous. “But you don’t have even a bit of shame, decency or motherly instinct in your body, have you? It’s all been sucked away by greed!”

The words must have stung her because her usually instant and clever reply seemed to have been missing this time.

“What would you know about what it feels like to be a mother of a child who represents the loss of every single one of your dreams?” Her voice was serious, yet there were traces of resentment that seemed to have been buried deep inside her. “You want the truth? I’ll give you the truth!” she said fiercely.

“I never wanted you. You’re a consequence of an incident that was never supposed to happen.”

It should have hurt to hear her say those words; her sharp knife should have left a terrible, bloody wound—but it didn’t. When she realized I wouldn’t dignify her cruel confession with a response, she simply decided to add some oil to the already raging fire, eager to burn the remains of the bridges between us. It didn’t matter anymore, because that feeling was entirely mutual.

“Don’t whine to me about being forced into a marriage because I know fine well what it means to be married to a man you despise in order to avoid a public scandal.” Her voice was silent, but filled with terrifying hatred and contempt, making me understand what she was trying to say. “I was supposed to get married to a man who worked for a rich family in New York and move away from this dump—make something of myself. Things were lined up for me perfectly, but then...” As she paused I became aware that she had just revealed her ties to the Everett family. That man she talked about must have been the one who informed her about the fact that Sebastian was getting married. “Only one night with that drunken scum of your father resulted in you, and just like that my entire life was ruined.”

Those last words made me realize the extent of her hatred. This woman was filled with loathing and resentment that seethed off her like venom. Indeed, she was a monster, incapable to feel or show affection. Now more than ever, I wondered about the roots of her selfishness that made her see only herself and nobody else. Ruining people’s lives held no importance to her and her complete lack of self-reflection and compassion towards those she had wronged, left me bewildered. The image of my father when I was little and the man who died only a couple of years after appeared before my eyes and suddenly I understood that man perfectly. In an attempt to bury his sorrow because just like mine, his need for love and affection from Elisa Walsh had been rebuffed, he turned into an alcoholic and ended up paying with his life for loving my mother. But I wouldn’t share his destiny. I couldn’t let her pull me back into the dark pit of despair. A string

between a mother and a daughter was never to be broken, but the fact that we'd probably never shared that sacred connection to begin with, made it all the easier for me to bring this to an end.

"I'm sorry you had to marry the man you didn't choose for yourself." I sighed, fighting to stay calm. "But that still doesn't justify your hatred and resolve to hurt me with the intention of ruining my life. I know you'll never admit your mistakes and ask for my forgiveness." I paused, realizing that I was talking to the wind, the trees and dried out roses because she wouldn't hear me. No matter how much I tried to get to her, she always chose not to hear me. Still, even though she refused to acknowledge me with her love, I needed closure because that was the only thing that could bring me relief. "But you have it all the same." She breathed nervously, ready to attack me with her bitterness again, but I raised my voice as a warning that I didn't want her to interrupt me. "Don't worry, I realize that I can't make you understand any more than I can make you love me."

As if there was a piece of her heart that wasn't rotting away under the scrutiny of hatred, she produced a sad sigh, trying to show that there was a part of her that wasn't completely made of stone. But I knew her all too well and before she even said anything, I realized she simply wanted to guilt trip me into doing her bidding again.

"All I ever did was driven by love, Isabelle." The words she spoke in a quiet, humble voice demonstrated I was right. The very thought that she managed to get me to believe her with similar acts so many times, made my blood boil. "It's the only way I know how to be."

"I don't think so, Mother," I said quietly. "You're not capable of producing that emotion."

"Oh, really?" She said in a firm, challenging voice. "May I remind you that I am a respected member of the church? Would a person who is incapable to love, pray for the less fortunate and help those in need? All my life, I've been making sacrifices for others and you can accuse me all you

like, but my conscience is clear. One cannot be held accountable for evil which emerged from good intentions.”

Swallowing, I actually smiled as I realized how deliberately delusional she was being. The religious freak that was, I could imagine that she believed in her words, being completely oblivious to the fact that she had already sinned way beyond the point where she could redeem herself.

“You can pray to your saints all you like and go to church every single day, but nothing will save your rotten soul, Mama.” It was the first time I referred to her with that term of endearment and it would be the last. “You will burn in hell for what you’ve done to me!”

With those words, I hung up the phone; the one she got for me the day when Mrs. Moran first came to visit. Glancing at it, I realized I wanted absolutely nothing of hers in my presence so I threw it away, discarding of it without a glimpse of regret. Then, I got up off the swing chair and headed back towards the house. As I walked through the thick, white mist, I held my head up high, feeling like I had turned a new page in my life because Elisa Walsh held absolutely no power over me anymore. Somehow, deep down I knew that it wasn’t the end of it. She would do whatever it takes to ensure my compliance in her twisted plan, but I also knew that I wouldn’t go down without a fight and the revelation evoked the sense of immediate relief.

Within minutes, I reached the mansion and opened the front door, entering the dark and quiet space that was filled with so many painful memories, but I was certain they wouldn’t make me cower away anymore. I dragged myself upstairs, feeling exhausted and wanting nothing more than to sleep through the rest of the day even though it wasn’t that late.

The moment I got inside the silent solitude of my room, I took off my shoes and lowered my body on the bed, instantly closing my eyes and praying for the sleep to come. But given the events of the day, falling asleep was everything

but easy. For a long time, I tossed and turned in bed as some kind of inexplicable restlessness continued torturing my mind. No matter how hard I tried to block out the dark thoughts, they would still come to torture me in the dead of the night. For the longest time, I remained lying in my bed, with eyes wide open, trapped between the worlds of reality and dreams. As I willed myself to think happy thoughts, which would help me sink deeper into a captivating daze, an image of a smiling man with soft, satin bronze skin, black hair and the most captivating, shining, emerald gaze danced before my eyes and I had to inhale a chunk of the stale air that lurked around me, to keep my heart from beating out of my chest because only one thought consumed my mind—I both missed and needed him now. The fact that I could run away for millions of miles and alter my ego hundreds of times made me realize that everything about me could change, but one thing would always remain the same. Without a doubt, I was capable of blocking out everything and everybody, but not that man.

“Where are you, Sebastian?” I whispered into thin air, calling for him with the yearning need that was stronger than ever before.

To my complete astonishment, only moments after that silent plea escaped my lips, the familiar, muffled melody of the piano traveled in my direction, making me think I was hallucinating. With the determination to prove to myself that I wasn't losing my mind, I sat up, covering my ears with my hands to block the sound, which I was sure would be gone by the time I removed them. Focusing on nothing but the silence, I counted to ten and removed my hands only to be welcomed by that captivating music again. The sound of its allure spread everywhere around me, pulling me towards it like magnet, inviting me to find its source because my heart knew it would lead me to that man with the shiny eyes that might have been dangerous and flawed, but it didn't matter because he had already captured my soul. As if I was sleepwalking, I got up to follow the sound of the most beautiful composition that filled me with hope and gave me the peace of mind I had searched for so long. This was my sanctuary and I had to take the risk. I had to find him.

Chapter Forty-Four

The magical sound of the piano became louder as I descended the stairs, cautiously brushing my hands along the wall to get a sense of orientation until the dark got broken by a glimpse of light emerging from that same room where I found him playing long ago, when seeking him had been the last thing on my mind.

As I approached the door, savoring the echoing sounds of the notes that created the melody which evoked warm reassurance as well as painful melancholy within me, I knew that I would kill the magic of the moment as soon as I entered that room, so for a while, I just stood there, waiting, hesitating and absorbing every sound like it was a spring of life from which I drank in order to survive. Letting go, I leaned on the wall, closing my eyes and surrendering to the familiar sensation that streamed through my body in hot, overwhelming waves. In a moment, I was swept away by the passion that emerged from this bewitching piece of music spreading through the silky, black veil of silence so calmly and effortlessly, my heart pounded in a crazy rhythm. I could already feel Sebastian's presence. To my great disappointment, the man I sought out suddenly seemed to press the keys with amazing caution and tenderness, announcing the slow ending of the beautiful melody. As he produced the last sounds that soothed my soul and brought about an immense feeling of unexpected joy, I became aware that I was moving towards the door, pulled by invisible strings carrying my body, pulling me closer to the remains of the music, still echoing through the dark, leading me straight to its creator.

In accord with the last note, I slowly opened my eyes, absorbing the final vibration of the charming sound as Sebastian's graceful, wide form appeared in front of my small and fragile one. Unaware of his movement, I only registered

that one moment I was alone and the next, he was standing in front of me, keeping a safe distance, like he was afraid to come as much as an inch closer. When I looked up at him, I realized he was staring at me in confusion as if he had seen a ghost.

In the quiet calmness of the late night hour, we just stared at each other, taking our time, observing the features of our faces and comparing them to the sketches in our memory, like we were old friends who hadn't seen each other in years. After a while, when the pressure became overwhelming, we both drew in a breath and spoke at the same time, almost like we could read each other's minds.

“I'm sorry if I—”

“I couldn't—”

“woke you up—“

“sleep.” The sound of his low voice intertwined with the words I uttered in one soft breath.

Instantly, we smiled at each other and it felt like nothing had changed. He was the same sweet man who took me to the movies and I was that same girl on the brink of surrender who slowly allowed him to take over her heart.

“What kept you awake?” He asked with caution, like he prepared himself to hear the unwanted answer.

I shrugged, brushing off my insomnia as being insignificant because I wanted to offer him reassurance. “Just a lot on my mind, I guess.”

He took in a deep breath and confronted me with his green gaze which radiated a spectrum of emotions, none of which seemed to have been happiness. “I understand.”

He produced a weak smile on his face and my eyes darted towards the piano because it hurt to see him in that state. As I explored the imposing size of the instrument, my gaze froze on the half-filled glass of red wine, and I recognized the same scene from the last time I had heard him play in that room.

“Don’t worry. I won’t be offering you any alcohol tonight.” His low voice transcended into a warm teasing whisper that seemed to have cost him a lot of effort.

As I looked at him again, the thought of the excruciating events of the day crept in my mind and made me reflect on my new found determination to make a change in my life. It meant that I had to try and defeat all of my boundaries and fears, one at a time. *And what better time to start then now?*

“Actually,” I smiled, fully aware of Sebastian’s probable reaction to what I was about to say, “I think I would like a glass of wine.”

Just as expected, his eyes narrowed at me, conducting a silent interrogation. “Isabelle, is something wrong?” he asked with a mixture of worry and curiosity. “Besides the obvious, I mean,” he added in a light voice.

“Everything is fine, Sebastian.” I started in a firm and clear voice, but couldn’t help the urge to whisper his name, gulping and relishing in the sensation provided by the feeling of its syllables rolling down my lips. I swallowed, suppressing the need to laugh because he was so bad at hiding his shock. “Why?”

He chuckled, relaxing a bit at last. “It just isn’t like you to drink wine—or seek me out in the middle of the night,” he said with a playfulness that held traces of a serious admission.

“Well, I’ve decided to give it a try,” I whispered with self-assurance.

Something sparked in his eyes and he smiled mysteriously, walking away without adding another word.

The scent of his cologne remained in the air, and strange enough, even though he was gone for only a few moments, I already missed him. Shaking my head to dismiss the silly thoughts that formed in my head, I wrapped my arms around my middle and walked towards the window. A thick shade of darkness covered up the already gloomy sky, and if it hadn’t been for the full moon that emerged through the murky

fog, the scenery outside would have been entirely black and soulless. The boring skyline had been stripped of its night decorations and I found it disappointing that there wasn't a single star on the sky. *The day had already been awfully bad, why would the night be any better?* Glancing away from the depressing view, I looked towards the door to see if Sebastian had returned, but there was no sign of him yet. Suddenly, the quiet atmosphere was interrupted by the sounds coming from the outside. My eyes darted back at the night sky and I was awestruck by the sight in front of me.

A large flock of birds, flying so high they managed to create the illusion that it was crossing right over the shiny moon. I smiled at the bewildering scene in front of me. Some things are a rarity on their own and when they cross your way, you know they will never cross it again. This was one of those once-in-a-lifetime things. Following the movement of hundreds of birds trying to find their way through darkness, I secretly envied them for the unconditional freedom they obtained with such ease and smoothness.

“Here you go.” The appeal of Sebastian's voice enhanced by a pleasantness of his hand touching my shoulder, managed to wake me from deep thoughts and I turned to face him. “A glass of sweet red wine for an incredibly sweet girl.” He winked and handed me a half-filled glass.

I took a sip of its contents, observing Sebastian's smile as I slowly swallowed the liquid that filled me with inexplicable feeling of warmth and unfamiliar sense of courage. I didn't know how it felt for others, but I already felt intoxicated.

Longingly, I turned around because I wanted to observe the birds for a while longer, even though they were almost gone from the horizon. As I gazed at the sky once again, Sebastian stood behind me and joined me. He was at a safe distance, making sure that he didn't touch me in any way, and yet he was close enough for me to feel the warmth of the captivating energy that seethed off of his body. I let out a shaky breath, fighting the threat of being affected by his presence more than I would have liked. Silence reigned the

tight space between us as we focused our attention on the passing flock, keeping our thoughts to ourselves.

“Where do you think they fly to?” I asked in a quiet voice, uncovering my course of thoughts.

Sebastian shrugged and although I couldn't see him, I felt that he was smiling behind me. “I don't think they have a specific destination. I think they are looking for something and once they find what they're looking for, they settle down,” he pondered, almost as if his mind had wandered off with the birds.

A short-lived smile escaped my lips. “And what is it that they're looking for?” I asked with genuine curiosity, wondering how the world looked like from their perspective.

“What do we all search for?” He replied in a soft voice. “Happiness... acceptance... friendship...” He swallowed, taking a small break before whispering that alluring word. “*Love.*”

I turned to face him and at first I regarded him with a serious expression, but then I chuckled softly and shook my head at him. “You're being awfully melodramatic,” I said in a teasing voice and he stilled for a while, looking at me in a strange way, which I would have described almost as silent pride for the lack of a better word.

“You can't blame a guy for trying,” he said smartly and then narrowed his eyes at me in a playful manner. “Maybe I'm wrong, but you're sparkling with some kind of a new aura,” he said puzzled, and smiled. “And I like it very much, sweet.”

His eyes were trained on me for moments after he said that and I started blushing under his infatuating green gaze. Looking away, I thought some things, such as my childish reactions to his compliments, would never change.

“I fired Antoinette,” I blurted out half-conscious because I needed to say something to break the overwhelming, tension-filled silence, and now the words were out I realized that once again my tongue had been faster than my brain.

Part of me became slightly nervous, because I had fired a member of staff without consulting him about it first, and now I felt a bit guilty, thinking that he might be upset about it. But once he rewarded me with a warm smile, I relaxed because Annette being gone didn't seem to bother him in the least.

"I know," he revealed and offered an explanation when I gaped at him, caught in complete wonder. "Anne told me."

Theresa's words sprang to my mind and I realized she had actually made a good point that time she tortured me with her evil remarks in the dining room.

"I heard that news travel fast around here," I said teasingly, taking another sip of wine.

"It sure does," Sebastian asserted self-confidently, his eyes vividly following the movement of my glass. "And even if it didn't, nothing that goes around here escapes my eyes, sweetness."

Sweetness. The silent echo of his raspy voice travelled to my ears, spreading the warmth along my cheeks. I didn't know if it was the wine or the simple fact that I felt happy in his presence, but I smiled at him and bluntly returned the favor.

"You know, you're quite sweet yourself... And beautiful," I breathed, taking a closer look at my husband. "And... And handsome," I added softly, blushing like a little girl and causing him to fall into a fit of light, teasing laughter.

"Is that so?" he asked in a light voice, still smiling.

I nodded and smiled back at him. "Sebastian, I think I like you," I whispered in a hot breath and suddenly turned serious. "I think I like you a lot."

Saying those words, made me feel a bit embarrassed, but I didn't look away from him.

The already familiar melody of his vibrating laughter filled the room and he leaned closer to me, forgetting all about the safe distance that kept him from me so far. "If it's any consolation..." His gaze turned into fire that burned through

my skin, devouring every part of me without actually touching me. “I like you a lot, too.” He winked at me and caressed my cheek with excruciating slowness, prolonging the contact by forcing his palm to linger on my skin for as long as possible.

Goose bumps danced on my skin and warmth radiated where he had touched me as I slowly looked up to face him. He gazed at me with a broken, yearning stare, like this innocent action made him realize that he wanted to touch me for so long and I wanted him to. *God, I wanted him to.*

I swallowed, closing my eyes while trying to deal with the feeling of his unexpected touch. Even the most innocent caress made me feel something so powerful that it couldn't be described as a separate feeling, but a spectrum of all kinds of different emotions. After I remained standing at the same spot for a while, he frowned and took one step closer to me. It was enough to turn my legs to jelly. When I opened my eyes and met his gaze, I knew that he was aware of the reaction he was causing within me.

Smiling lightly, he leaned even closer and I held my breath when his scent traveled in my direction. “I know that I shouldn't, but I want to kiss you so badly right now,” he whispered.

Training my eyes on his full, inviting lips, I realized that was exactly what I wanted him to do. “Kiss me, then...” I said in one breath, waiting for his lips to touch mine.

As our breaths collided, a shivering current rushed through my body, evoking a tingling sensation all over my skin. Inviting, my body rose closer to him and that was all the confirmation he needed. Pulling me into a captivating embrace, his lips crashed against mine and I was taken into a colorful world of sheer passion. He had never kissed me like that before, without hesitation or painful restraint. His kiss had managed to consume all of me—body, mind and soul. If he had asked for it, I would have given him everything at that moment. But he didn't ask. He didn't push me any further. Showing admirable restraint, he only stole a kiss even though I was sure he sensed he could have taken a lot more if he wanted to. By the time he moved away, we were both panting

for air, our thoughts still in the kiss. We were still connected to each other. He didn't have to say a word. I knew what he felt—I could see it in his eyes.

His hand brushed along my deeply flushed cheeks and his emerald eyes pierced through mine as he observed me in awe. “God, you're beautiful,” he said in one breath, without blinking, without taking his eyes off mine. He looked at me with so much honesty, reassurance and consolation, holding me under the power of his transparent gaze. Then he smiled sadly and caressed my hair in a touch that was light as a feather. “You don't know how much I want to take away your fears,” he said in a silent voice that rang with hidden desperation. He leaned just a bit closer and kissed my temple, inhaling my scent with lingering restraint like it caused him pain. “I would like to erase all those memories that make you tremble in my arms.” He leaned his forehead on mine and his pleading whisper broke through me into a thousand fractured pieces. “I ache for you, Isabelle.”

In that moment, I became aware how much self-control he had to have had to keep his promise. Even though we had been married for months, our marriage had only been consummated once. The memories of the time when he was a monster fled from the hidden corners of my mind and I was confronted with the fact that even then, despite all of his dreadful threats and un-kept sordid promises, he had never once tried to get me to be intimate with him after that night. His words from not that long ago returned as a challenging memory. *There's only so much a man can take.* As I contemplated on my next action, trying to collect courage, the conversation I had with my mother suddenly haunted my mind like a torturing demon, but I refused to let her ruin me from afar. If I had to choose to put my faith in someone, it would be Sebastian. Without thinking about what I was about to do, I looked at him with trust I prayed he wouldn't betray and with painful slowness, I undid a couple of the buttons on my thin dress.

“Isabelle...” He looked at me. My action had startled him.

“It’s okay.” I tried to say firmly, but my voice came out in a shaky whisper.

With one soft touch, he tilted up my chin and let his eyes roam along the contours of my face, almost as if he wanted to figure out what was going through my mind. After a few moments, he gave up his inspection and focused his gaze on my chin, observing the very spot where his hand touched me. Then, in a split second, those green eyes that always shone with mysterious light snapped wide open and pierced right into mine. His stare was a raging storm, guided by obvious desire so powerful it made me gulp in a mild consternation. I couldn’t have mistaken that gaze for anything else because it had been engraved in my memory. *It’s exactly how he looked at me that night...* The only reassurance that made all the difference in the world was that back then his gaze had been guided by darkness, whereas now there was so much light and besides the strong presence of the carnal lust he couldn’t escape, his eyes gleamed with another emotion hidden in the background of their emerald depths. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly there, offering me something to lean on.

“Isabelle, if you knew...” He leaned his forehead on mine, whispering softly like he fell in a trance. “If you knew how much I feel.”

In one swift movement, his hand dropped from my chin as he uttered those words and then, he gently picked me up in his arms, declining to postpone his aching torture any longer. As he carried me to his room, I closed my eyes, clenching onto him, trying to think about all the sweet gestures and the reassurance he provided me with. I focused on his scent—a mixture of his cologne and something raw that was simply him. I held onto a string of salvation he seemed to offer so patiently and sweetly, but as if the devil himself came to torture my mind, the memory of the dreadful pain that I felt after that one and only time kept appearing in frightening flashes, bringing forth the fear of the unknown, the fear of the pain that I could experience again... *Very soon.*

As he lowered my body on the bed, in a panicked attempt to chase away the gloomy memories, my eyes snapped

open and I saw him—my husband—staring at me like I was made of glass. Like one simple touch could break me into million pieces.

“You’re trembling,” he said softly and removed a strand of tangled up hair from my face. “Are you afraid?”

It was the same question he had asked before, when he mocked my fear and my tears, only now it was asked in a voice that was filled with patience and compassion. “You’re frightened,” he whispered after I shook my head, offering a weak and barely noticeable reply.

Knowing I was about to crumble under the immense pressure, I tried to look away from him, but he gently caught my face between his fingers, trying to get me to calm down, to simply let go and trust him.

“Please, don’t,” he whispered and as I looked up at him, his hand slid down on the unbuttoned opening of my nightgown and although it shouldn’t have, it took me by complete surprise. The sudden dread I hadn’t felt for so long, took hold of me as I closed my eyes, expecting him to undo the remaining buttons. “Shh.” The thumb of his other hand brushed against my lips when I let out a small moan of protest. “Don’t.” He kissed the bridge of my nose. “Don’t be afraid, my love...”

With headstrong persistence, I kept telling myself that he was my husband and that it was okay. I continued repeating that this time there wouldn’t be any pain. Still, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t shake off the thought that I might not like what he was about to do to me, but I didn’t want to deny him. Not this time. I kept my eyes closed, but I could still feel his piercing glare on me. I waited. I prayed not to break down when he took hold of one of the remaining buttons. “I’ll show you how it’s supposed to be, angel.” My cheeks flushed, betraying me and I swallowed in unnerving anticipation. Sebastian’s fingers moved and I gasped as he did the last thing I expected and slowly buttoned up my dress. “One day, soon sweetheart. Don’t be afraid. Tonight I only want to hold you in my arms.” He finished his sentence in a soft whisper, but with

obvious frustration and I opened my eyes, in complete shock by what he had done.

I lowered my gaze, utterly ashamed by my fearful reaction. *Why was I such a coward? Why could I stand up to my mother with so much bravery, but still couldn't endure to be intimate with a man who meant everything to me?* I felt like a failure, wishing the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

Drawing in a breath, I said his name, trying to defy my weakness and falsely reassure him that I wasn't afraid, even though I still trembled in his arms. "Sebastian, please. I want..."

"Shh," he interrupted me, laying a soft caress on my cheek, before I got a chance to say anything else. "Don't ask me to take something you're not ready to give, Isabelle." He closed his eyes as if he was making an oath. "I promise I will always fulfill each and every one of your wishes, but don't ask me to do something that might hurt you. It's a risk I cannot take, love." He opened his eyes and looked at me like he was in pain. "Besides, I would like to take care of some important things first. I don't want any doubts or insecurities between us." Pulling me into a tight embrace, he kissed the top of my head and whispered the words that melted my heart even though I didn't have the slightest idea of their true meaning. "When I make love to you for the first time, I want it to be real. I want you to give yourself completely, knowing that you can truly trust me with your heart and soul for sacred eternity."

The extend of Sebastian's understanding and compassion took my breath away, and I blinked in disbelief, feeling guiltier than ever for not being able to be the kind of wife who would be able to reward his traits in a suitable manner.

"You've been so patient. You've been so kind. You deserve someone who can make you happy. Someone who can..." I swallowed as the shame caused by my failed attempt to get over my fear returned to haunt me.

He didn't even blink before he answered. "I already have that someone." In a gesture that confirmed the sincerity of his words, he pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly, resting my tired head on his shoulder. The feeling of warmth and comfort spread through my body as his fingers softly ran through my hair, massaging my scalp and taking away the tension. He leaned even closer and kissed my temple, before whispering in my ears. "There is no need to look for something that's right in my arms. I would never leave you, Isabelle," he said firmly and a small, mysterious smile curved his lips as his voice turned into a hot whisper. "One cannot live without a heart. One cannot live without a soul. You took them both."

I swallowed and my voice became heavy with pressure. "But what if I never..." I choked on a lump of fear.

"Shh, don't worry. We'll get there, love. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but we'll get there real soon. I promise."

There was so much protection, reassurance and compassion in his soft gaze that I had no other option but to trust and lean on him. I broke my word and I'd shown weakness, but maybe he was right. Maybe things would fall into place of their own accord.

As my head fell onto his chest, he embraced me with his strong arms, offering me shelter. "I missed you so much," he breathed, holding me tighter, inhaling the scent of my hair. "Sweet torture... I can't believe you're finally here, next to me"

My eyelids dropped as he started a series of light caresses that spread along my entire body with such precision that it felt like he knew every spot that could help me relax and make me shiver in his arms from something entirely different than fear. His lips gently traveled from my forehead—exploring, sensing and burning with every small kiss he laid on my temple, my cheeks, the corner of my lips and my chin. After such a long time, we shared a bed together and only at this moment of heavenly pleasure he was providing me with, did I realize that this was the first time I was about to sleep

next to him feeling safe and blessed in his embrace. And while the ultimate goal I yearned to offer him as a gift still seemed to be out of our reach, this intimate situation seemed to have been something we could use as the first step towards it and the revelation supplied me with a sense of relief.

Sensation of disarming calmness took hold of me as I let myself go, enjoying every feeling, every kiss, every touch. Slowly, I drowned in the sea of his tenderness; taking deep even breaths as if I was asleep, but I was still conscious of everything he did to me.

With fragile sensitivity, he leaned above me and I could feel his gaze piercing through my closed eyelids. I could sense the vibration of his lips trembling above mine, but I didn't move—didn't make a sound. Patiently, I waited in sweet anticipation and when he parted his lips, I felt the fresh breeze of his breath on my delicate skin.

“I love you, princess,” he whispered the unexpected words in one desperate, shaky breath which was filled with so much disarming affection that it touched the deepest part of my heart and one revealing tear slid down my face at the very moment he leaned down to kiss me. “*Forever.*”

His fragile, silky voice filled my ears as his lips gently brushed against mine, then moved towards my left cheek, kissing away the teardrop that stained my flushed cheek. He knew I had heard him. For a short while he stared at me, without doing anything else except for curiously observing the features of my face. When I swallowed hard under the power of the feelings he had evoked in me, he leaned the palm of his hand on my warm skin in one soft touch. Then he lay next to me, pulling me towards him and carefully leaning my back against his strong, warm chest. He wrapped one of his arms around my abdomen while his lips nuzzled against my hair, still laying incredibly pleasant, soft kisses and whispering warm reassurances.

Something warmed around my heart and I repeated the word in my mind before drifting away into the most beautiful sleep. *Forever.*

Chapter Forty-Five

The shiny rays of the sun danced on my face and spread through my closed eyelids, making me see the shadows of fiery red. Enjoying the feeling of warmth and protection, I decided to sink back into the world of comforting dreams because I wanted nothing more than to prolong this experience of heavenly bliss. To think that sleeping in his bed and waking up in his arms would make me feel like I was floating in a soft, silky cocoon that guarded me from any harm, felt surreal. It was a commonly accepted belief that people with our past could never find a way to coexist together because the mere thought that we could ever produce enough light to chase away all the darkness from our memories, fought the very conception of what was considered possible. And yet there we were, peacefully sleeping in each other's arms, producing the light, fighting the laws of common sense and dancing on the realm of possible.

As his fingers—still gently pressed against my abdomen—started moving in a light circling motion again, the warm feeling that spread along the ticklish surface of my skin became overwhelming and I couldn't suppress the giggle that threatened to come out with a loud annunciation. At first, I squeezed my lips and closed my eyes, trying to keep the impression that I was still asleep, but with each moment I was losing the battle and as my stomach started moving up and down, I buried my head in the pillow and started laughing as quietly as I could, but it was still loud enough for him to hear me. With incredible sensitivity, he pulled me even closer to him, until my back collided with his firm and warm chest. While I continued suppressing my giggle with an obvious effort, he stopped touching me and as his nose nuzzled against my loose hair and travelled through its golden strands, I stilled in his arms, not making a single sound. Those soft lips were

fixated right above my ear and I inhaled deeply, waiting to be burned by his hot breath.

“Too late, sweetness, I know you’re awake,” he whispered in a sleepy voice and slowly turned me around to face him.

Invited by his soothing scent, my eyes snapped open and met the illuminating sunrise in his deep, emerald gaze. More than ever before, there was life in his eyes and unlike the previous night when he wore a tortured expression after playing that captivating melody, now he appeared to be filled with so much joy that exploded in those shiny, green jewels. Carried away by the way he looked at me, I allowed myself to become his willing prisoner and the only weapon I could use against him was a small smile of genuine helplessness.

“I forgot that nothing escapes your eyes, Mr. Everett,” I teased him in a barely audible voice and he chuckled, placing the palm of his hand on my face.

“Oh, Mrs. Everett, you have yet to learn how vigilant and protective I am of what’s mine.”

“Then I guess I’ll have to be on my best behavior.” I looked at him in playful defiance.

“That’s alright, angel. I don’t think I want you on your best behavior,” he whispered seductively and for a moment he seemed to be caught up by something. I didn’t have to wait long to find out what it was. “Did you really fire Antoinette?” He still couldn’t believe I was actually capable of such a thing.

“I did,” I replied and then revealed something I was sure escaped his watchful eyes. “I also told my mother she can go to hell.” Sebastian’s smile slowly turned into a straight line and like he was taken aback by what I had told him and even though I didn’t laugh, I thought it was really funny. “Well, not in those exact words, but she got the point.” I joked to ease the sudden tension.

His frowning expression told me he connected the dots which made him understand why the two awful events took place at the very same day and suddenly I observed him with

mild trepidation. Like someone who knew me in depth, he chose to respect the glare in my eyes which told him I didn't want him to ask for answers which were already obvious.

Instead of pushing the painful topic further, he laughed softly, making an apparent effort to regain the comfortable atmosphere between us. "You seem to be on a roll, sweet. Are you going to send me to hell as well?" he asked in half-serious voice, starting one of his funny mind games and I gladly took the bait.

"Hmm," I pretended to give it a serious thought and then I looked at him tenderly. "I'll have to think about it."

"You're bluffing," he challenged like he could read my mind.

"What makes you so sure?" I raised my eyebrows, but kept the smile on my face.

"A number of things," he said self-assuredly.

I looked at him with mild curiosity. "Such as?"

While his hand slid down my face in one uninterrupted, gentle touch, his eyes followed it and then quickly returned to mine the moment his gaze reached the edge of my collarbone. "For one, you're too kind," he said in a quiet voice, "and I'm too adorable for my own good." He winked at me and then his face formed a light expression, revealing a true picture of his inner state.

"Did anyone ever tell you you're the most conceited person at the face of the earth?" I shook my head and stared at him with infatuation.

To my surprise, a wide smile graced his beautiful face and for the first time I noticed little dimples at the corners of his lips. *Beautiful.*

"No, not really," he replied softly, pretending to think about it. "Actually, I've been told that I was sweet." As I took in a breath, recognizing the words I'd said to him the previous night, he kissed my forehead and confronted me with his powerful gaze again. A smile danced on his lips when he noticed a deep shade of red settling on my cheeks and the

playfulness in his eyes made it clear he wasn't about to stop the sweet torture. "Beautiful." The word held a double meaning and his gaze paused on my parted lips, observing as I took in small, shallow breaths. "And handsome."

I cleared my throat. "And who told you that?"

"A certain beauty who likes me... *a lot*," he accentuated the words with one hot breath that traveled to my skin in a light breeze and the shade of crimson red returned on my face, causing him to fall in a fit of contagious laughter. After a few moments, when the laughter subsided, he still looked at me with tenderness and I felt I was blossoming under his warm gaze.

He actually grinned and leaned closer, deliberately teasing me with his undeniable appeal. His lips got so close that they were almost touching mine, but he kept them at this almost invisible distance quite consciously, and it made the torturing anticipation all the more unbearable.

In order to control the sudden loud beating of my heart, I started a round of foolish babbling. "Well, she forgot to tell you that you're really childish," I gulped when I took in the features of his breathtaking face, "and dangerous."

His eyebrows arched and his nose snuggled against mine, making me gasp in sudden excitement. "Sounds like a great combination. I think I'll take it as a compliment," he muttered and then kissed me softly, only grazing my lips, but it was enough to make me shiver.

A smile appeared on his face and he seemed to have enjoyed the easiness with which he could make me yield to him.

"You really are arrogant, Sebastian," I teased, pretending that his small kiss didn't faze me as much as it did.

"No sweet, not arrogant." His lips moved when he spoke and it caused them to brush against mine one more time. "Helpless..."

As goose bumps exploded all over my skin, I felt exactly that—helpless and at his mercy. Then, he looked up at

me, waiting for permission to continue, and since I knew he wouldn't push me past my boundaries, I gave it to him without delay, thinking that I probably wanted this even more than he did. Gently, he deepened the kiss until I gave in and our breaths intertwined in one sweet substance that left us hungry for more after he slowed the rhythm of the kiss, capturing my upper lip between his lips and then reluctantly moved away from me.

His shiny eyes bored into me. "I could wake up like this every morning, princess," he whispered softly and a shiver rushed through me as his sweet exclamation of love from the previous night rang in my ears again. *I love you, princess.*

Gasping, I swallowed and looked at him with burning tenderness, secretly wanting him to repeat the words again and he parted his lips, about to say something, but the knock on the door interrupted the magic of the moment.

We looked at each other and I could tell that Sebastian would ignore it, but when the repeated knock sounded through the room again, he swiftly got up, put on his pants, then rushed to the door and opened it only halfway. The first thing I saw was Anne's baffled face which revealed the state of her discomfort. She wasn't fast enough to hide her surprise or look away from me. The betraying blush spread through my cheeks as I contemplated what she probably had to have been thinking and right at that unfortunate moment, Sebastian turned to glance at me. By the way he shook his head and smiled teasingly, it was more than apparent he could tell I felt embarrassed by the fact that Anne saw me in his bed.

Winking at me, he stepped out to the hallway, closing the door almost completely to save both me and Anne from further discomfort. Through the small crack of the door, I could hear Anne's apologetic voice that couldn't stress enough how sorry she was for intruding. Sebastian reassured her kindly, saying that he knew she must have had a good reason to look for him and she revealed that his sister was waiting for us downstairs. Sebastian asked her something, but I couldn't hear a word, because suddenly he closed the door all the way. *That wasn't a good sign.*

The crimson red on my face was replaced by paleness which spread along my skin together with the feeling of disbelief.

Sebastian entered the room, smiling, but I didn't return his smile. Somehow, I was sure that Dianne had come to visit us and the day which started out so wonderfully was already ruined. I wasn't afraid of her and I certainly wouldn't let her talk down to me, without replying in a suitable manner again, but the very thought of having that woman in my presence gave me the creeps. Sebastian seemed to have realized that because he frowned in confusion.

Instead of starting an inquiry about his evil sister, which would probably end with expected results, I decided to excuse myself and head straight to my room. "I need to take a shower and make myself ready," I said softly and something flickered in his eyes.

"Why don't you get ready here?" he offered and acted offended when I narrowed my eyes at him. "I know what you're thinking, but I swear I won't bother you, sweet." He paused, staring at me. "Okay, maybe I'll bother you a little." He tried to make it sound like he was joking, but he did a terrible job at it.

I chuckled at his boyish expression. "That's a nice offer, but I have nothing to wear here and I really need to get changed." I looked at him with confidence, sensing that I found a loop-hole in his meticulously worked out plan.

He smirked and looked at me seductively. As his gaze roamed the length of my body, for a moment it felt like he was undressing me with his eyes. There were times when that hungry look would leave me petrified, but now there wasn't even a trace of fear. It felt good to know that I could catch all of his attention by simply gracing him with my presence.

"Suit yourself, but I don't really see what's the problem, angel." He crossed his arms and winked at me.

I couldn't help smiling. "I'm sure you don't."

For another moment, my gaze held his light expression. Then I greeted him with a soft smile and headed towards my own room. As I was walking, I turned around and I saw him leaning on the door of his room, staring after me. "I'll be waiting if you change your mind," his soft voice echoed through the hallway and I laughed at his blunt silliness.

"Shh," I shushed him when he wanted to say something else. "We need to hurry. Your sister is waiting."

Ignoring his pleading and childish expression, I turned around and went straight to my room, without glancing at him again, even though I sensed he remained in his original position, following my every move.

While taking a short shower, I couldn't stop smiling as the fresh memories of the perfect morning with Sebastian returned to my mind, making me feel reborn and filled with a whole new dose of happiness. Only when I stood in front of my closet, choosing something to wear, was my mood threatened by the fact that I might see one of my least favorite people in a matter of moments. In an act of defiance, I decided to wear the most casual items in my closet, deciding that it was a perfect way to send a clear message to Dianne. She could try to humiliate me with observations about my descent all she wanted, but I wouldn't cower away from her anymore. I was proud of the person I'd become and I felt like nothing could weaken that resolve.

When I descended the stairs and approached the dining room, I realized that Sebastian still wasn't there, but I didn't have enough time to become upset because I was welcomed by a very sweet and familiar face. *Helen!*

She smiled at once and rushed towards me, giving me a warm hug. I chuckled, thinking how Sebastian's secretive behavior with Anne made me reject the idea that Helen was the one who was waiting for us.

"I thought you'd make me wait forever," she teased me.

“If I knew you were the sister Anne had referred to, I swear I wouldn’t make you wait for another second.”

“Please don’t tell me that you actually thought Dianne came to visit?” she asked in surprise and I nodded. “You poor thing, I can’t blame you. Actually she is the person I’m trying to get away from. I’m sorry to bother you, but I just had to get out of that house.”

I smiled reassuringly. “Helen, of course you’re not bothering me. I’m look forward to your visits. I wouldn’t mind if you came to see me every day.”

“Careful, Isabelle...” Sebastian’s soft voice filled the room and both of us turned to face him. “She might take you up on that offer. My little sister has a really bad sense of humor.”

With apparent gentleness, he glanced at Helen who sent a feigned offended glare his way. “Look who’s talking. I don’t think I’m the one who has the chronic seriousness syndrome, Mr. Grumpy.”

Everybody laughed at that and while they continued their little funny dispute, I took the time to observe Sebastian’s appearance. He looked so relaxed, like he was enjoying himself and I appreciated the sight because I’d so rarely see him carefree.

“Why don’t we ask your wife?” Helen’s voice traveled in my direction and snapped me out of my thoughts. When I looked up at them, I realized that both of them were staring at me expectantly.

“Ask me what?” I asked in a clear voice, hiding the fact that I had no idea what they were talking about.

“My perfectionist of a brother dared to deny that he’s a total control-freak,” Helen said with an accusing smile. “You of all people should help me unmask this liar.” Even she laughed, realizing how silly this was.

“Isabelle. I’m war—” Sebastian started in a teasing voice, but Helen wouldn’t let him finish.

“Don’t you dare, Sebastian!” She raised her index finger. “Let the lady speak the truth.”

Without taking my eyes off him, I smiled warmly, letting him know I would speak on his behalf. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Helen, but lately he’s been a lot more easygoing than you think.”

Helen looked at Sebastian, laughing with mild surprise.

“What can I say? The lady spoke the truth.” Sebastian shrugged his shoulders and walked over to me, clearly celebrating his victory. “I hope this taught you not to mess with my beautiful wife, Helen,” he whispered, looking at me like I meant the world to him.

If anyone ever asked me how a man in love looked like, I would have described his face, because I couldn’t have imagined that a person could ever display more emotion than he had at that moment. An electric current rushed through my body as his words from last night echoed in my mind. *I love you, princess.*

Placing his hand on my waist, he winked at me and leaned closer to give me a small kiss with Helen standing right there behind us. I was unable to hide my surprise, because this was the first time he did something like that in front of someone we knew.

“I wish I could stay but I have to go to work.” He sighed almost like he regretted it. Slowly, he removed his hand from my waist and smiled at Helen, before walking towards the door. “You ladies have fun. I hope to join you soon,” he said on his way out and then turned one more time, flashing me a smile before he disappeared out of our sight.

Now that we were alone, Helen wouldn’t stop staring at me with both an inquiring and teasing smile on her face. She raised her eyebrows and her entire face glowed. Something had made her both intrigued and happy. “It’s so nice to see you two get along,” she said excitedly and then almost sang the words. “Love is in the air!”

“Helen.” I felt the attack of redness on my cheeks again and asked her to stop teasing me about Sebastian’s opened display of affection.

“Don’t shoot the messenger,” she said in a happy voice and then remained silent for a moment, letting me know she would let it go for the time being. “So what do you want to do today?”

It took me a short while to think about it, but I came up with an idea. I suggested that we could watch movies in the media room since we hadn’t done that in a while and Helen loved my proposition. The moment we entered the room, she busied herself with the large choice of movies, trying to find the perfect one. She worked her way through all titles, and despite the imposing choice, still couldn’t find the one movie that held her interest, until she found a black nameless case. To my absolute astonishment, she seemed super excited to have found that particular movie and I wondered what was so special about it.

“Oh, if this is what I think it is, you’re going to love it!” she exclaimed happily and played the movie before I even got a chance to ask anything about it.

The screen seemed to remain black for far too long, but Helen didn’t seem to be worried about it in the least.

“What are we watching?” My voice was tinged with impatience.

“Can’t tell you,” she replied with a smirk, adding to the mystery. “You’ll see.... Look! Look!” She became ecstatic as the image finally appeared on the wall and I was stunned by the most adorable scene ever.

A boy and a girl were playing hide and seek in the garden and a woman, whose voice sounded familiar, was talking behind the camera. As the little boy covered his eyes with his hands and counted to ten, the camera followed the little girl who ran away to hide behind the tree. When the boy stopped counting, he turned to face the camera and there was a clear close-up of his face. I gasped as I recognized those unmistakable green eyes and black hair.

“Quickly, you have to find Helen!” The soothing woman’s voice encouraged Sebastian to go find his sister, and it didn’t take him long to find her. Soon they were chasing each other on the grass and the sound of children’s laughter filled the room.

I glanced towards Helen, noticing that her eyes were glued to the screen and she couldn’t stop smiling. Neither could I. For a moment, I wondered about Dianne, but it didn’t take long before the woman rotated the camera towards the little girl who sat at the table, pouting like something had made her upset. Without a doubt, that little conceited girl was none other than Dianne Everett. After long persuasion, the woman finally managed to get her to join her siblings. Helen and I looked at each other when young Dianne marched towards young Helen and Sebastian and we were probably thinking the same—even when she’d been a little girl, she still didn’t know how to let go and simply be a child.

“Okay, Helen’s going to count next,” the woman instructed, but Dianne obviously didn’t like the idea because she pushed Helen as hard as she could, causing her to fall on the grass.

What happened next brought tears to my eyes. Before the woman even got a chance to react, Sebastian ran over to his crying sister and he helped her get up. With recognizable tenderness he hugged her tightly and told her she would be alright. The scene was touching and adorable. He didn’t stop hugging her until she stopped crying and when she finally calmed down he kissed her on the cheek before letting go of her. Then, he glared at Dianne and asked her to apologize to Helen. When she gave him a nasty look and refused, he turned towards the camera and spoke to the lady, revealing her identity.

“Anne, please send Dianne away. She doesn’t want to play nicely.”

Dianne started arguing and the camera was suddenly switched off. Both Helen and I started laughing and commenting that things hadn’t changed that much since then. Seeing that adorable scene from Sebastian’s childhood made

me like him even more. There was no doubt in my mind that he indeed was a good man. That video was followed by many others, showing Sebastian's recitals at school, family dinners, walks with his dog, games he played with his sisters and so many other situations, mostly videotaped by Anne. Helen explained she was more of a mother to them than Catherine was.

After spending the entire afternoon watching those adorable homemade videos, we finally came to the last one and it was a true privilege to watch it. Sebastian was sitting by the piano and in this video he looked a lot younger than on the previous ones. Helen told me it was even before she was adopted, when he was about six years old. Judging by the tree and the decorations, it had to have been a Christmas party. Like a true pianist, he was dressed up in a suit with his hair combed back and he sat there calmly while a large number of people surrounded him, waiting for his performance. As the first notes of *Mozart's Alla Turca* spread through the room, I couldn't hide my surprise at his talent from such an early age. I glanced at Helen with eyes wide open in shock.

"I know, right. He's amazing. He used to dream of pursuing musical career, but Theodore wouldn't hear of it."

"That's really sad," Both my and Sebastian's dreams had been crushed by our parents.

"It is, but on the bright side, he's a great architect and he loves his job. It could have been worse." She shrugged in resign.

"I guess you're right," I whispered, focusing my attention back on the screen.

For a while, my eyes lingered on Sebastian's fingers and I couldn't comprehend that a six-year-old could actually produce such captivating music. The applause distracted me so I looked away from little Sebastian and focused on the crowd that stood in the background. As I searched through the faces which were undeniably glued to the piano in the middle of the room, I recognized Anne, Sebastian's parents, Dianne and a young man whom I recognized to be their butler Frederick.

Momentarily, my gaze froze on the girl standing next to him. Some kind of a gut feeling wouldn't let me look away from her. Her dark brown, curly hair, very little to no make-up and demure clothing didn't ring a bell, but yet I felt drawn to that figure as if I'd known her forever. I was about to shrug it off and look away, but then she smiled, revealing her perfect white teeth and shock took hold of me as I recognized that condescending smile. The girl standing next to the butler was none other than my mother. I replayed our conversation and remembered how she talked about a man who informed her that Sebastian needed a wife. A man whom she wanted to marry, but couldn't because of her unwanted pregnancy. That man was Frederick. Still taken aback by my unexpected discovery, I looked towards Helen, wondering if she had recognized my mother, but after a mere second I realized it was impossible because even I had barely figured out who the young woman was.

As much as this revelation made me happy, I still needed to figure out what I would do with the piece of information that had accidentally traveled my way. When the last notes of *Mozart's* masterpiece echoed through the room and the screen went black again, we sat in silence for a few moments, my glare targeted at that wall. I couldn't forget what I had just seen.

"Isabelle..." Helen called me and I turned towards her. "Is something the matter?" She noticed I got lost in thoughts.

"No," I replied, not wanting to make her suspicious. "I'm just still caught up with that video. It was incredibly cute." And I meant that. The impression it had left on me was beyond words.

"Oh, that's so sweet." She smiled. "You know, now I feel all mushy too. It's been a while since I'd seen these tapes."

"I'm really glad you found that DVD. It would have never occurred to me to watch it had I found it myself. Thank you for this, Helen. It's been a perfect afternoon," I said with true gratitude and pulled her into a warm hug.

“No, thank you,” she accentuated the words. “If I had to spend one more moment at that house, I would have gone crazy. Dianne throws a tantrum every second and sometimes it’s just impossible to stay away from her.”

“I’ve tried to understand her, but I just don’t get it.” I frowned. “What makes her act like that?”

Helen shrugged. “I think it’s her character and that’s why some things about her will never change, but for the most part, she is desperate to keep up appearances. Everybody knows she’s trapped in an awful marriage, but she thinks she can hide it by acting happy,” she said with mild disbelief.

I observed Helen in surprise and her words cut deep. In a weird way, I admired Dianne because pretending to be caught up in marital bliss had never been my forte.

“I guess money and power can’t make you happy after all, can it?” I concluded in haste.

“They definitely can’t, Isabelle. But it was clear you knew that all along and that’s why I liked you from the start.” She looked at me with the compassion she used to produce when my marriage was still hell. “I know that it took a while for Sebastian to realize those things and even though you always denied it, I was aware he was far away from being the kind of husband you deserved.” She smiled sadly. “I’m glad to see he’s finally making amends and treating you with the care and respect he should have from the very beginning.”

“Those were very dark times,” I said in a distant voice, traveling into the not so recent past that still lurked in the corners of my mind. But it wasn’t as painful as it used to be. “But now they’re behind us,” I said in a light voice, free from any hurt or resentment.

“You have a really big heart, Isabelle. Sebastian better treat you like a queen or else that lucky bastard will have to deal with me!” We laughed at her menacing words and once again, I realized how much I truly loved her.

“Thank you so much, Helen. You’re truly an angel,” I said softly and she chuckled.

“Well, it takes one to know one.” She winked and I smiled at her silliness. “I should really get going. They might be worried about me back in hell,” she joked about the Everett residence and I couldn’t blame her. I felt exactly the same about that house. I wanted to hug her one more time before she left, but then she said something that caught me by surprise. “I guess I’ll see you at the wedding then.”

“The wedding?” I asked, confused.

“Yes, Jared, the son of family associates is getting married. Sebastian’s best friend.” She frowned. “It still doesn’t ring a bell?” She exhaled angrily. “He didn’t tell you again, did he?”

“He did,” I said in a small voice, remembering the invitation he’d showed me in his office, but with everything that had happened that day, I’d put it out of my mind. “It’s just that I’m not really looking forward to it, that’s all.”

Helen gave me a knowing look and then she smiled reassuringly. “Oh, trust me you’ll love it. Jared is a great guy. He’ll make you feel welcome, you’ll see.”

I managed to produce a smile that would confirm I agreed with what she had said, but all I could think of was the cold man from my wedding that had looked at me with sheer contempt. “I’m sure you’re right,” I said resigned, and we finally kissed and said goodbye.

It was already early in the evening when Helen left and despite his promise that he would join us soon, Sebastian still hadn’t returned home. On my way to my bedroom, I paused next to his door, wondering if I should simply be bold enough to wait for him there, but the idea seemed strange and I realized I would feel awkward if he found me sleeping in his bed so I decided to go to my own room, painfully aware of the fact that it still felt wrong for me to take initiative in our relationship.

Even though I was tired, it was still too early for me to go to sleep, so I decided to do something I hadn’t done in a

while. After changing into fluffy, comfortable pajamas, I reached out for the notebook with my story, lay into a comfortable position and started writing; striving once again to reach a happy ending for my characters. Time went by faster than ever and when I looked at the clock, I realized I had been writing for almost two hours. Stretching my hand, I realized I was done with the adding anything to the story for the day, but I still wanted to proofread what I had written down. While reading, I got lost in the world of my imagination and before I knew it, my eyelids were getting heavy. As I fought to keep my eyes open, a light knock on the door startled me from my fatigue. I smiled, knowing exactly who was at the other side of the door and suddenly I was wide awake.

“Come in,” I said in a mild voice and quickly sat upright when I saw the doorknob turning.

The very moment he entered the room, my heart started beating in a loud rhythm while I stared at him with shameless directness. He wore simple blue pajama pants and a black T-shirt. I couldn't help but think that very few people could look amazing wearing the simplest clothing items, and Sebastian was definitely one of them. The contours of his chest were showing through his shirt and when he brushed his hand against it, I looked away in shame because he realized I'd been staring. I heard his muffled laughter as he approached closer. Happy excitement rose in my system and I turned towards him when he sat on the edge of my bed. For a moment we simply stared, enjoying each other's quiet company.

“It's late,” I said softly.

“I know.” He sighed and the exhaustion was clear on his face. “It's been a long day.”

I felt bad for him, knowing how difficult it had to have been to spend a day in the office after a restless night with almost no sleep. “You must be really tired.”

He didn't reply, he just smiled kind of sadly and focused his eyes on the notebook in my hands. Afraid he would reach for it, I clenched my fingers around it in a

protective manner and that was when his soft gaze traveled to mine.

“Wouldn’t it be easier if you used a laptop?” he asked and I was taken off guard because I hadn’t expected it.

“It’s okay. I like writing like this. It helps me relax,” I offered as an explanation.

He nodded and smiled at me. “Are you going to let me read it?” He asked the question I’d been dreading.

I sighed, contemplating the idea and it was hard because I was so sensitive about sharing my stories—this one especially. But I knew that there wasn’t a person alive who would be more appropriate to share it with. “I would love for you to read it.” He reached for the notebook, but I put it to the side. “Once it’s finished,” I said in a pleading voice and after a moment of confusion, he pulled his hand back and showed me that he would respect my decision.

“I was waiting for you.” He changed the subject, revealing the true reason of his arrival. “I couldn’t go to sleep, I thought that ...”

He left his silent confession hanging in the air, but the words didn’t matter because we understood each other perfectly. Without hesitation, I removed the covers on the other side of the bed, inviting him to lie next to me. And after letting out a sigh of visible relief, he did. The moment his body touched the mattress, he pulled me into a tight embrace, placing my head onto his chest and it made me feel like that was exactly where I belonged.

“It’s impossible to spend another night on my own,” he whispered and kissed my temple. “I need you.”

I sighed as my body absorbed the warmth of his smooth, bronze skin. “I need you too, Sebastian.”

His grip around me became even tighter. “Then it’s settled. We won’t sleep apart again?” he asked in a small voice, like he feared my answer.

Those emerald eyes gazed at me expectantly and I knew I couldn’t deny his request even if I wanted to. “It’s

settled,” I breathed, still keeping my eyes on his and the affection that radiated from them filled me with happiness.

He ran his fingers through my hair. “Did you have a nice day with Helen?”

Remembering the wonderful afternoon I had spent with his sister brought a smile to my face and Sebastian gazed at me with genuine curiosity. “I had a wonderful time with Helen. You’ll never guess what we did.”

The playfulness was back in his eyes and he shook his head at me. “I’m sensing trouble.”

“Relax, Mr. Grumpy,” I teased him, using the nickname Helen gave him. “We didn’t even leave the house. We spent the entire afternoon watching your childhood videos.”

“Sounds like trouble.” He smirked and something lit up in his eyes. “Did you see anything interesting?”

His question made me think about the discovery of my mother’s connections to his family, but I chose to keep it to myself. Maybe I was making the wrong decision, but I wanted to keep the messy past away from our lives so badly that I chose to forget I’d ever recognized her on that video.

“Oh, we saw more than you can imagine, and Helen told me a few interesting stories too,” I replied in a cheerful tone. “You do realize I’ll never stop teasing you now, don’t you?” I challenged in a light voice and he started laughing.

Spreading light kisses and caressed along my entire body, he reminisced about the scenes I’d seen on the video. Our conversation resembled that of a well-rehearsed play. There wasn’t even a moment filled with awkwardness or unpleasant silence. I could ask him as many questions as I wanted and he gladly answered every single one of them, making me want to turn this moment into our everyday routine. More than ever, I felt like we were a normal, average couple; two people who fulfilled each other by doing simple, everyday things, things that made life beautiful. We talked about his piano performances, school experiences, his parents’

strict rules, and lastly, about all the mischievous things he did with his friend Jared.

The moment he mentioned his name, I turned serious and Sebastian narrowed his eyes

“Helen reminded me that he’s getting married soon and I...I forgot that we had to attend the wedding,” I admitted, revealing the extent of my uneasiness.

“You’re not getting off the hook, sweet. Jared really wants you there. There’s really nothing I can do about it,” he tried to reassure me in a warm voice.

Even though I knew he only said it to make me feel better, I smiled and finally made my peace with the fact that no matter how painful the experience of attending that wedding would be, I would survive it. After all, in this case I could really say that I’d been through worse and made it out alive. Dealing with rich, condescending people was an almost everyday occurrence as it was. Plus, it was Sebastian’s best friend’s wedding and I would do whatever it takes to make him happy.

“It must be nice to have a friend you’ve known your entire life.”

Sebastian smiled. “It is,” he confirmed. “He’s like a brother to me. It was really nice to have him around when I was a child.” He seemed to travel back in time and his lips twisted into a secretive smirk. “Although I’m sure Anne would disagree. We used to drive her crazy.”

“You? Drive someone crazy?” I needled him. “I cannot imagine.”

He chuckled and stopped touching me. Then he took advantage of my slight surprise and pulled me really close, disarming me with his stormy gaze.

“Maybe I should show you?” His whisper burned my skin and while I knew he was joking, my reaction to him was very real and only one look at my self-assured husband told me he was perfectly aware of it.

“That’s okay,” I said as my voice melted under the warmth of his glare. “I think I’ll have to trust you on that one.” Although I politely turned down this make-believe offer, I couldn’t deny the presence of the tension between us, which was still rising like a bubble that was about to break and I needed to do something to keep it at bay. “You—” I swallowed when his hand traveled down my arm, and then shifted to my hip. Suddenly, I realized there was nothing make-believe about it, he *really* meant to show me. “You were saying,” My voice caught up as he kept teasing me with his caresses and I felt a hot, fluttering feeling that would indeed drive me crazy if he didn’t stop. “You were saying h-how...” He kissed the corner of my lips and I inhaled to keep myself composed. “... how you used to drive Anne...” He smiled and then he did something he had never done before; he caught my earlobe between his lips and sucked on it lightly, causing a strange warm sensation to travel all the way down my torso “You drove her...” The sensation was unbearable. “C-Crazy....” The word came out of my lips in one shaky breath describing exactly the way he made me feel at that moment.

Releasing my ear, he raised his head to look at me with adorably devilish eyes seething with desire. The moment he saw my flushed face, he smirked as if managing to set me on fire brought him great satisfaction. “Sweetness...” The word came out in one hot whisper. “Anne is the last person you should be thinking about at a moment like this. Besides,” he caressed my hair gently, my heart thumping in a crazy rhythm and it seemed that for as long as he was around it would never come down, “she isn’t the one who’s being driven to the brink of insanity right now.”

Gulping, I blinked at him, realizing he had just showed me a glimpse of the hidden world of pleasure I never even dreamed existed. For a moment, I caught myself thinking that if only this one simple action could cause a total meltdown in my system, what it would feel like if I let him take things one step further. *If I let him...*

Even faster than it had appeared the enthusiasm I felt was swept away, and the events of the previous night lodged in my mind. Mortification emerged out of nowhere, and in an

attempt to escape his knowing gaze, I buried my head in the nape of his neck. Under his tensed, bronze skin, I felt his rapid heartbeat and I knew seeking solace from him must have caught him off guard. However, he relaxed after only a short moment. Before I knew it, he wrapped his arms around me and caressed my back. He kissed the top of my head, but didn't try to make me look at him.

“Angel, I'm sorry if I overreacted.” He apologized and I stopped him by lightly shaking my head, still buried in the nape of his neck. “What's wrong then?” he asked in a mild voice and I felt his hand landing softly on my head.

I didn't reply and he sighed and began stroking my hair, remaining silent for a while. When I completely relaxed in his arms, he took advantage of the situation and slowly tilted up my chin, until our eyes locked in an expectant glare.

“Isabelle, it's okay.” He smiled and caressed one of my deeply flushed cheeks. “It's okay to take what I want to give you,” he whispered in a light voice and his thumb brushed against my lips making me tremble with warmth and gulp with trepidation at the same time. “Don't be ashamed to let go and enjoy my touch, love, because that's all I'll ever ask in return.”

Instead of evoking peace, his words awakened regret. I had to give him something in return. Anything that would show him that I wasn't made of stone. I needed him to know that I felt—I felt too much.

“I'm sorry,” I said in the smallest voice ever and he wanted to say something but I placed my index finger on his lips, asking him to remain quiet.

Encouraged by the green light in his eyes, I brought my shaky lips an inch from his and for a second he seemed to be almost startled by my action, but he remained calm. Waiting. Ignoring my racing heart I kissed him lightly, feeling the softness and the warmth of his full lips. His deep breath gave away his state of mind as I repeated the words. “I-I'm sorry.” My hand reached towards him and I ran my fingers through his smooth, dark hair.

He closed his eyes, seemingly savoring my touch and then in a moment, his eyes snapped open and he caught my wrist, pulling it towards him while I watched in anticipation.

“Sebastian.”

“Shh, don’t say you’re sorry,” he said in a determined whisper, leaning down to kiss the top of my hand. Holding onto my fingers, he looked up at me again. “And don’t ever doubt me. I’ll wait for you, Isabelle.” He leaned his forehead on mine. “I’ll wait for you, love. Just like in the fairytales you seem to like so much. I don’t care if you lost your shoe, fell asleep for a hundred years or ate a poisoned apple. I’ll wait for you. For as long as it takes.”

I knew he was being over the top cheesy just to cheer me up and I appreciated him immensely for bringing a smile to my face at a difficult moment like this.

“I didn’t know you were so familiar with fairytales.” I cooperated, ignoring the troubling thoughts that he tried to chase away from my mind.

He smirked. “Another thing you can blame on Anne. Years of listening to the bedtime stories she had told my sisters seemed to have taken its toll, I guess.”

I laughed, imagining fairytale sessions with little Sebastian from the videotape. It made me think of my own childhood and the fact that nobody took the time to read to me before I went to sleep.

“I wouldn’t complain if I were you,” I said with a pinch of sadness. “At least you had Anne. Nobody ever told me bedtime stories when I was little.”

For a while he gazed at me with a distant look and then he smiled. “Well, I think it’s outrageous that nobody told stories to my princess.” His voice was light, soft, alluring.

I chuckled. “It been quite damaging, but I think I’ll live.”

“Absolutely not,” he counteracted in teasing voice. “The damage will have to be fixed right now.” He pulled my head back on his chest and lowered us on the bed.

“Sebastian, what on earth...”

“Shh, no words. Close your eyes,” he instructed and I gave up, deciding to listen to him. After a short break of silence, he began speaking in a soft voice. “Once upon a time...”

My eyes snapped open in shock. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing, sweet?” He smiled when I didn’t reply. “I’m about to have the honor of telling you your very first bedtime story...”

Defying his request, I suddenly opened my eyes and gave him a quizzical look because I thought he had taken his joke one step too far, but after a moment I realized he was dead serious about this. I couldn’t help but smile and shake my head in disbelief. *My husband was losing his mind.*

Chapter Forty-Six

Still looking at him in disbelief, I ignored his teasing expression and decided to confront him with his childish behavior. “You cannot be serious.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“A little bit.” I giggled and he joined me in laughter.

“Then I suggest you close your eyes before I put on my serious storytelling face,” he threatened in a mild voice.

I smiled, defying him with wide open eyes, but when he arched his eyebrows again, I closed them tightly, placing my head back on his chest and focusing on the soothing rhythm of his breathing. There was something magical about the fact that a man like Sebastian would actually go to such lengths just to give me another beautiful memory.

Taking a deep breath, he said the sentence that took me back in time and made me feel like I was a little girl all over again. “Once upon a time...”

As I felt the alluring vibrations of his deep voice streaming down his chest, I ignored the rest of my surroundings, or better said, reality altogether. In that moment, I tried to focus on nothing else but his words and imagine the fantasy world he was introducing me with.

“Once upon a time there was...” He paused, needing time to think of something and I waited patiently, not making a single sound. After a few moments, he seemed to have come up with a concept in his head and began retelling it in a self-assured voice. “There was a sweet girl with the most beautiful long, golden hair in the entire world. She lived in a small house with her mother in a far-away kingdom ruled by a young and cruel king who thought that—”

“Sebastian,” I interrupted him.

“What?” he asked sweetly.

I hesitated for a short while before finally addressing the problem. “You forgot their names.”

“Do they really matter?” He sounded slightly confused.

“Of course. I cannot imagine their faces unless I know their names.” I opened my eyes again and gave him a pleading look.

His lips twisted in a charming smile, letting me know that once again, he was powerless in making a decision to deny my request.

“Okay, I can do that,” he said calmly and then spent a few moments thinking about it. “King Peter and...Kate.”

I burst into mild laughter. “King Peter and Kate?”

“Yes,” he said with playful defensiveness. “What’s wrong with that?”

“It’s just...too plain for a story. You should give them names that scream beauty and power. Peter and Kate are just...” I stopped when I noticed his expression was turning serious.

Sometimes I would forget that he was a perfectionist with an admirably-sized ego that was not to be undermined at any circumstances, no matter how foolish they appeared to be.

“Watch it, sweetness.” Contrary to my expectations, his voice came out in a light, charming tone and he managed to draw another smile to my face by joking about his characters. “Right now, Peter and Kate are starting to get upset because you’re sabotaging their story. We don’t want to cause a riot here. I think you should just let me continue.”

With that smile still present on my features, I shook my head and stared at him bewildered, completely captivated with his light.

“You’re being so silly. I’m just saying that I cannot imagine a king named Peter.”

I observed as he sighed and tilted up my chin, making me look right into his glowing emerald eyes. “Fine, I give up, Mrs. Author. You choose the names.”

Maybe his ego wasn't as untouchable as I thought.

“How about...” His expectant gaze made me feel foolishly pressured to come up with a stunning fairytale couple, but despite that it took me only a moment to blurt out the names which were more appropriate for the characters. “King Alexander and Princess Leila.”

“I didn't say anything about her being a princess.” I sighed, rolling my eyes at him and he pretended like he didn't like it one little bit. “It's my story, sweet. Don't mess with my copyright or you will deal with my team of lawyers. Trust me, they're badass and you wouldn't like to fight them.”

We both laughed. “Alright. Tell me about this King and the girl who is not a princess.”

“Well, as I was saying before I got interrupted. Kate ___”

I cleared my throat as a warning that he used the wrong name and he shook his head at me before continuing. “Leila lived with her mother—” I parted my lips and he cut me off before I got a chance to say anything, “whose name will remain undisclosed for safety reasons.”

“Safety reasons?” I gave him a baffled look.

“Witness protection system. Long story, sweet.” He said in a content voice, probably feeling proud of himself for getting off the hook. “Anyway, since they had to give all of their money to the mean King Alexander, they had no food, so one day Leila's mother asked her to go to the forest to get some wood for the fire and try to find something to eat. Both of them knew it was risky because it was forbidden to walk through the King's forest, but Leila took the risk all the same.”

“You know, I wonder why the daughter always needs to be the one who gets into trouble in these stories. Can't a mother take the risk for once and leave the daughter at home?” I said with a pinch of bitterness and Sebastian laughed.

“Angel, you’re way too serious about this.”

“No, but really when you think about it... What kind of a mother sends her daughter alone into a forest knowing she could be in great danger?” *Your mother!* The voice in my head screamed and I frowned, thinking that my mother would make a perfect fairytale villain.

Sebastian seemed to be a little caught up. “You didn’t give me a chance to explain. Leila’s mother would have loved to go instead of her daughter, but she was too weak to walk due to malnourishment.”

He looked at me expectantly and I chuckled. “It does make sense,” I said in a quiet voice and nodded. “I guess I can work with that. So, what happened when Leila went into the forest?”

“I thought you’d never ask. At first she was really afraid, but after a while when she realized she was completely alone, she relaxed and collected branches for the fire. But just when she was about to leave, she heard scary growling behind her. She turned around and her knees went weak when she saw —”

“The king!” I drew in a sharp breath, realizing I had actually said it aloud.

“No, not the king!” Sebastian chuckled and finally revealed the mystery figure in front of Leila. “It was a huge dog that seemed like he might attack her any second, and it scared her senseless. She tried to defend herself by swinging with a branch, but it didn’t really help her. While she was busy trying to get the dog to go away, somebody approached her from behind and lay a sword on her shoulder.”

“Who was it?” I asked curiously, still trying to connect to the story.

“Well, that’s exactly what she was wondering, and even though she was scared more than ever in her life, she turned around and saw one of the king’s knights staring at her with an evil grin as if he was about to cut her with that sword.

Just like that she forgot all about the raging dog behind her and passed out.”

He took a short break to prolong the suspense and I stared at him in anticipation, thinking that so far, I really liked his story.

“What happened when she woke up?” I asked when I couldn’t handle the waiting anymore, proving that I was way more childish than him.

“She recognized the approaching sound of horses and when she regained consciousness, she looked up halfway and realized that the man who stared down at her from his horse was none other than the notorious King Alexander.”

“Was he beautiful?” I didn’t know why I asked that. I guess the fairytale girl inside me wanted all the juicy details.

Sebastian seemed to be amused by my question and I was surprised by his answer. “Actually, he was pretty much pissed off when his soldiers told him she attacked his dog while stealing in his forest. Leila was that intimidated by him that she didn’t even dare to look up at his beautiful face because she knew he had no mercy.”

“He kind of sounds like a jerk,” I said and Sebastian smirked at my remark.

“Oh, sweetness, this is only the beginning.” His voice turned mysterious.

“What did he do to her?” I asked with fright. Suddenly, I didn’t like where this story was going.

Sebastian looked away for a moment and then returned his gaze at me. “His knights started fighting about which one would kill her to show his allegiance to the king and at that moment she knew her destiny was sealed. Leila looked him right into the eyes and Alexander suddenly felt something he never felt before. He didn’t understand what it was but it left him unable to order his knights to hurt her,” he whispered, sinking deeper into his thoughts.

“He let her go, didn’t he?” I wondered.

“I’m afraid he didn’t,” Sebastian answered in a voice that sounded kind of sad. “The fact that she managed to get to him with his beauty and make him look weak in front of his men made him furious. In a fit of anger, he ordered one of his knights to cut off her beautiful, long hair and take her to the castle where she would be forced to work as a maid of the lowest rank.”

“That’s awful.” I exhaled in surprise. This is not how things in fairy tales usually went. This king sounded like a major villain rather than a hero. “Please, tell me she managed to escape.”

His lips curved into a light smile. “She tried to reason with him, but she was just a simple girl and he was the king.” Suddenly, his words rang with familiarity and I recognized the exact thought procedure this imaginary character was led by. “No matter how much she tried to convince him she had a sick mother at home and that she only wanted a few branches for the fire, she couldn’t get to Alexander. He called her a thief and signed for his men to go through with his orders. Before she managed to react she was tied up and he rode off. His men didn’t care about her pleas when they were cutting her hair and they even mocked her boyish look during the trip to the castle.”

“That’s it...I hate him! How could he do that to her?” I found myself upset with a person who didn’t even exist. Even though I was perfectly aware of that, I still couldn’t stop lashing out at him. “Who does he think he is? King or not, he has no right to treat her like that!”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes at me. “In his eyes she was a thief and that’s how he dealt with thieves. Most of the people around him were dishonest, so he had no reason to believe she was telling the truth.” He shrugged his shoulders and I realized I shouldn’t be surprised in the least that he would feel compassion for such a dark character.

“Well, I think he’s a pathetic excuse for a king. I hope he was ashamed of himself.” Even I was surprised by the harshness of my voice and Sebastian laughed at me.

“Maybe it’s enough storytelling for one evening, love. I don’t want you to kill me in my sleep. We’ll continue tomorrow.” His tender expression evoked me back into reality and just like that magically helped me to calm down.

“Absolutely not,” I whispered in a soft voice. “I want to know how the story ends. What did Alexander do once he had her in his palace?” I demanded, pleading with him to continue the story.

“He didn’t really do much.” He smirked. “For a first couple of days, she would enter his thoughts at times, but under the pressure of his obligations, the incident eventually slipped his mind.”

“It slipped his mind?” I asked in disbelief. “So he had absolutely no remorse?” I sighed, wondering if such character could ever redeem himself.

“He was the notorious and merciless king, remember? Dealing with traitors, cheats and thieves was his everyday routine. Besides, she was among the rare ones whose life had been spared. He thought he did her a huge favor,” Sebastian continued in a smooth voice.

“Of course he would think that.” I rolled my eyes and one glance into a baffled Sebastian made us both laugh. “It’s not funny. This guy is awful,” I urged him as well as myself to stop laughing. “What about Leila? Didn’t they ever meet? After all, they kind of lived in the same place,” I asked once we became somewhat serious.

“Leila spent her days working hard and worrying about her mother so much that she couldn’t even eat in the beginning. She was lucky enough to befriend the lady who was her superior and that lady promised to provide help for her sick mother in exchange for Leila’s promise to take care of herself.” Sebastian spoke in such great detail that I almost felt like I was right there reliving the whole thing with this poor female character. I admired his narration skills. “And she did everything she could to avoid another confrontation with Alexander,” he added after a short break of silence.

Something tore through my chest...For some reason, this story started sounding all too familiar.

“I hope that that lady managed to help her escape before she met Alexander bec—”

“No such luck, sweet,” he interrupted me and instantly gripped my attention. “One day, when she was scrubbing the hallway floors, the door in front of her suddenly swung open and the bucket of water and soap spilled all over the expensive shoes of a person who was on his way out. To her complete shock, that person was the man she feared the most—King Alexander.”

For a moment, I lost my breath because I could have truly put myself in that girl’s shoes.

“He yelled at her,” I started saying so certainly as if I was the one telling the story and not Sebastian.

“He did,” he confirmed. “But his fury didn’t last for long. She complied when he ordered her to get up on her feet and the moment he saw her golden hair had grown back, he recognized the girl from the forest. For some reason, he was happy to see her again, but when he made her look at him, he was disappointed to see that all the loveliness had evaporated from her face,” Sebastian said in a distant voice.

“What did he expect? Alexander is the one who broke her. He’s the last man who deserved to take credit for her smiles,” I advocated on Leila’s behalf.

Sebastian nodded. “He was aware of that. When he took a strand of her hair in his hands, he stared at her horrified face and suddenly it made him act in a manner which would help him conserve his untouchable pride.”

Sebastian’s face turned serious and I looked at him with the same horrified expression poor Leila must have had on her face.

As the probable plot development dawned on me, I burned with fury. “If he ordered someone to cut her hair again, I swear...”

“He didn’t,” Sebastian dismissed my worry. “He simply let go of her and walked away.”

I gulped, looking surprised. “He didn’t hurt her?” Sebastian shook his head. “Why?” I asked.

“Because he didn’t want to hurt her, but he didn’t want to feel guilty about the state in which he had found her either,” Sebastian explained. “After that meeting things went back to normal for Alexander and Leila. He was back to being the mean king and she was back to being the invisible housekeeper. Invisible to everyone but Alexander, that is.”

This sudden twist made me look up at Sebastian in wonder. “So, he apologized to her after all?” I asked with genuine interest and felt a bit disappointed when he shook his head.

“He admired her from afar,” he whispered and a small smile graced his lips. “Watching Leila’s determination to enjoy life despite her harsh reality made him reconsider his opinion of her and one day when he saw her return the money she had found while cleaning, he was sure he was wrong about her. She wasn’t a thief after all, but Alexander was the fearless king who was raised to never apologize to anyone under any circumstances and he wasn’t about to start with Leila. Still, he wanted to find a way to make it up to her,” Sebastian described the king’s turmoil.

I chuckled, thinking about the depth he tried to give to these two people but my opinion of Alexander still hadn’t changed a bit. “How on earth does he plan to make it up to her without apologizing for his mistakes?”

He smirked. “Alexander was quite sure of himself. He thought that turning Leila into a lady, buying her expensive jewelry and dresses would make her warm up to him, but no matter what he did, she remained indifferent and determined to lock him out of her heart.” Sebastian suddenly sighed, pausing and I smiled at him.

“It seems that even kings cannot buy love,” I concluded and looked away from him.

“Alexander was starting to realize that when she broke down and asked him to let her go home. Deep down, he knew he was hurting her even more than before, but the very thought of living without her tore him apart. It was impossible to let her go.” Something in his voice revealed his own inner turmoil. He was remembering something. And so was I. “Refusing to give up, he made her join him for dinner every evening, hoping that she would reconsider, but all of his attempts to get her to open up and talk to him were rebuffed. His Leila was like a stone with no emotion.” There was something alluring about the way he said that with longing in his voice as if he could feel for Alexander and his Leila—who wasn’t his at all at the time.

“Maybe she was scared of being hurt again.” There was a ring of pain in my voice.

“You’re right. She was scared. With a good reason,” Sebastian confirmed my doubts and I looked at him with a puzzled look on my face.

“Did he hurt her?” I asked in a small voice.

Sebastian nodded. “But not on purpose. On one of the dinners, they were accompanied by the king’s conceited friends who heard the court rumors about Leila and they started making fun of her in front of Alexander. They laughed at her poor background, called her a thief, asked how it felt to have her hair cut down and they even mockingly complimented her for her housekeeping skills.”

“Alexander had to have been furious!” I interrupted him, but didn’t get an answer. “Please, don’t tell me that he dared to join his rude friends in making fun of Leila.”

Sebastian shrugged. “He didn’t join them, but he didn’t stop them either. Even when she looked at him with unshed tears in her eyes, seeking his protection and opening up to him for the first time, he remained silent in the fear of damaging his pride and reputation.”

Once again, although I was perfectly aware these people weren’t real, I felt revolted by his actions. Hell, I wished this king Alexander was real so I could give him a

piece of my mind. “Sebastian, I don’t understand where you’re going with the story. I can’t see how she could ever forgive him for this.”

“Neither did Leila.” Sebastian smiled, revealing mystery in his eyes. “She had finally had enough and she ran away from that dinner, causing a scene despite the fact that she knew it would enrage the king. But she didn’t know that he was everything but enraged. He felt terribly ashamed for his weakness, and that night he decided to put everything he had known aside and ask for her forgiveness even if he had to beg her on his knees.”

There was a moment of silence. “That’s very nice, but I don’t think he has a chance,” I said in a detached voice.

Something lit up in Sebastian’s eyes. “Unfortunately, it was too late to find out. When Alexander went to see her, all he found was an empty room and an open window. It didn’t take him long to realize the lady who was her friend helped her escape to avoid his wrath. Now that he finally wanted to make things right, Leila was gone.” He sighed. “For the first time in his life, Alexander felt what it was like to miss somebody. His days without Leila were gray and depressing.”

“So what did he do? I bet he sent an entire army to go look for her.” I arched my eyebrows and Sebastian snickered.

“No, actually he did the only thing he could do. He reached for his phone and—what?” He asked in a defensive tone when he noticed my confused expression. “It’s a story with modern elements.”

So far it was going great, but the mention of the phone, suddenly broke my little fairytale bubble.

“But you already have them riding on horseback. I turned a blind eye to the witness protection system, but the phone is just unacceptable,” I complained.

Sebastian shook his head in playful disapproval. “Sweetness, I swear to God, you’re being impossible right now.”

“No, I’m not,” I protested. “I’m only trying to help. If you go on like this you’ll make the whole setting—”

“Alright, alright. I get it.” He laughed and then sighed. “How about this? Alexander took his feather, dipped it in a large bottle of ink and wrote her a long letter. Then, he waited two weeks for a reply.” He looked at me, proud of his sudden wit. “Happy now, princess?”

“Very.” I chuckled. “So, did Leila forgive him?”

“No, she told him he could go to hell.”

I laughed, remembering we had a similar conversation.

“It must be a bluff. She’s just playing hard to get!” We both looked at each other and smiled. “Go on, please.”

“After he read her letter, Alexander wouldn’t give up, but he knew that she didn’t want to see him or speak to him. So one day, he listened to his advisor’s advice. With great effort, Alexander convinced Leila’s friend to reveal her whereabouts and then he dressed up as a simple peasant and visited Leila and her mother under the pretense that he lost his way.”

A loud chuckle escaped my lips. Sebastian was surprisingly good at storytelling.

I imagined the scene and then came to the inevitable conclusion. “Leila gladly helped him, I assume.”

“She did, but not before telling him that he couldn’t have found the worst place to get lost in because it was ruled by the biggest idiot in the world.” I gasped, feeling uncomfortable and waiting for Alexander’s retaliation. Sebastian smirked as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. “Don’t worry. Alexander’s pride was really hurt, but the easiness in which he let go of her crude comment surprised him even more than her audacity to offend him.”

“Well, I don’t want to take sides, but he kind of deserved it.” Sarcasm dripped off of my voice.

“You’re right, sweet, he saw it coming... And that’s why he spent the following month away from all the luxury

and power he was accustomed to live in. But he didn't mind. Because taking care of Leila and her mother, as well as doing small things in order to slowly win over her heart, turned out to be a lot more satisfactory than he thought it would be in the beginning. He lived for the moments they would spend together next to the nearby river where they got to know each other. There was no doubt in his mind—he was in love with Leila, but he wasn't sure how she felt about him. He tried to get her to talk about her experience when she was trapped in his palace, but all she wanted to reveal was that there was a very cruel and dangerous man looking for her.”

“I hope he told her the truth.” I looked at Sebastian. “I hope he told her there was nothing to fear.”

“He wanted to tell her the truth, but when she hugged him and told him she isn't afraid of that evil man anymore because she had him to protect her, something broke inside him and he kissed her. After that, he didn't have the heart to steal this figure of a peasant Leila fell in love with. Despite the fact that he finally managed to win over her heart, he still didn't dare to tell her his secret. But one day, his soldiers came to Leila's house to ask for money they didn't have,” Sebastian said in a tensed voice, almost like he was reliving everything.

It was so much fun listening to this story and I finally started to feel for Alexander. I don't know how it happened, but I wanted Leila to forgive him.

“Is that when he revealed his true identity?”

“So impatient...” He smiled. “He tried to make them go away without telling them who he was, but after they hit him and mocked his appearance, he had no other choice but to remove his disguise and show them he was their king.”

I laughed, trying to picture the sight. “I can imagine the look on their faces.”

Sebastian smirked and nodded. “They were rightfully scared, because Alexander never spared the lives of those who offended him. Nobody was more surprised than those soldiers when he pardoned them and told them to return to their homes.”

At last, I could see the happy ending approaching in the story.

“Leila must have been so proud of him,” I said softly, already daydreaming about their beautiful wedding, when Sebastian destroyed my hopes for the couple.

“Actually, she slapped him and sent him to hell all over again. He tried to explain, but she ran away before he got a chance to say anything.”

I frowned. “Wow, I kind of feel bad for him right now.”

“I know.” He sighed. “But despite her rejection he still wouldn’t give up on her. He searched for her the entire day, until he found her sitting next to the beautiful river where they’d kissed for the first time. Suddenly, Alexander, the ruthless king who was known for his undeniable boldness, felt so threatened by the possibility that this simple, helpless girl might reject him again that he spent at least an hour watching her sit by the water.”

I smiled, imagining the sight and I was so proud of Leila for not giving in easily to Alexander, despite the fact that he was the king.

Sebastian continued with the story. “Only when she got up to leave did he dare approach her, with so much delicacy like she was a frightened doe that might escape at the first sight of him.”

“And did she escape?”

“To both his and her surprise, she didn’t make a move or looked away from him until he stood right in front of her. Then, she did the last thing he expected and started bowing to him, but he wouldn’t let her do that. Instead, she was the one to look in surprise when the ruthless King Alexander who never apologized or bowed to anyone, went down on his knees and begged her forgiveness.” Pleasantness streamed through me as I pictured Alexander’s gesture.

“Please, oh please make her forgive him!” I whispered in excitement.

Sebastian burst in a fit of laughter. “What happened to ‘I hate him’ and ‘He’s a jerk’?!” he imitated my angry voice.

“I’ve changed my mind.” I shrugged and chuckled at his impression. “Now, please tell me what happens next because I’m dying to hear the rest of the story.”

“Leila forgave him without hesitation, but she also asked him to leave her alone. Nevertheless, Alexander was a persistent man and leaving her behind wasn’t an option he was even willing to consider, so he immediately refused her request and decided to do whatever it takes to convince her to stay with him,” Sebastian said in a determined voice and then smiled like he was about to tell the part of the story he enjoyed the most. “He gave her the key that unlocked all of the important doors in the kingdom. That key was his most prized possession that made him a king.”

“And he gave it to her? Just like that?” I was surprised.

“Just like that,” he said casually. “When he handed her the key, he told her she could do whatever she wanted with it. Then he asked her to marry him. Leila was confused by Alexander’s actions and she demanded an explanation. His clarification consisted of three simple words.”

“I love you.” I closed my eyes and whispered, unconsciously finishing his sentence.

“We’re kind of in the middle of the story here, sweet, but nice of you to share.” He said softly and winked at me, making me realize that it came out like a confession of love to Sebastian, and my cheeks flushed from embarrassment. Sebastian seemed to enjoy the show.

“Love you too.” The warmth of his soft voice traveled to my skin and he gave me a small kiss before revealing the ending of the story in a hot whisper. “Was exactly what Leila said to Alexander right before she agreed to marry him and become his queen.”

Suddenly, we both laughed at the little play of words which kind of made us say ‘I love you’ to each other for the first time.

Sebastian pulled me into a tight embrace and turned me to my side to face him. For the longest time ever, he just gazed at me, occasionally touching the contours of my face and closing his eyes as if he savored the touch. I observed as he kept his eyes closed for a long time and then they opened in a quick moment and I drowned in their green serenity.

“So, how did you like your first bedtime story?” he asked in a light whisper.

“I loved it!” I accentuated the words. “But you forgot something?”

He looked at me in light surprise. “What could I have possibly forgotten?”

“Only the most crucial part of a fairytale,” I said teasingly and smirked when he still didn’t get it. “You didn’t say that they lived happily ever after.”

He snickered. “I must be the worst storyteller ever. Is it too late to fix this inexcusable mistake?” I shook my head and he sighed, feigning relief before officially finishing his beautiful story. “They lived happily ever after. There,” he said in a pleased voice. “Anything else?”

“Do you mind telling me the title of this beautiful tale?”

“Not at all. The title of this story is... *Omnia vincit amor.*” He leaned closer to me and whispered. “Love conquers all.”

A smile curved my lips and warmth rushed through me when I heard him say those words. I looked up at him. He couldn’t have chosen a better title for his story, this night or anything in our lives that emerged from the dust of the shattered things that separated us, only to bring us together. *Love.*

“Your Majesty,” I addressed him in a suitable manner. “You do realize that I’m perfectly aware of the obvious metaphor you’re trying to create here?”

He smiled with mystery. “I hope so, princess.” He leaned closer and pulled me into a long, passionate kiss. Still

holding me close, he lowered our bodies onto the mattress and turned out the lamp on the nightstand.

“Sleep tight, love.” He kissed my forehead, pulling my head onto his warm chest and it felt great to fall asleep in his arms knowing that was exactly where I would wake up.

Chapter Forty-Seven

After days of anticipation, filled with careless joy I experienced with Sebastian, the day of Jared's and Amelia's wedding had finally arrived. As I sat in the church that was filled with the same crowd that had once made me feel unworthy of their presence, mild discomfort troubled my mind. But I pushed it down. Sebastian would occasionally glance my way, smiling at me and it reminded me of his reassurance that things would turn out a lot better than I expected.

The first notes of *The Wedding March* echoed across the spacious interior of the church, announcing the arrival of the bride. Curiously, I glanced her way the moment I heard the sound of her shoes touching the tiled floor and I saw a graceful woman, proudly walking down the aisle, at times quickening her pace, eager to meet her husband-to-be and have him make her his wife. The hem of her beautiful white gown followed her decisive steps and she looked like she was the happiest woman alive. As the little girls sprinkled white rose petals on her way to happiness, a wide sincere smile wouldn't leave her face. The moment she approached Jared, they held hands and looked at each other lovingly. *This is how a bride should look like on her wedding day.*

Even though evoking bad memories or making comparisons was the last thing I wanted to do at the time, the moment the priest started the ceremony and the lovely couple revealed their excitement by smiling at each other, I couldn't help but remember. Like a taunting memory, the image of a scared girl standing in front of a cold, cruel and powerful man suddenly consumed my mind.

For seconds, if not minutes, my eyes were glued to that happy couple who was about to pledge their eternal love to

each other and I couldn't look away. At some point—I don't know when exactly because I wasn't really paying attention to my surroundings—I felt the fire of that green gaze burning an impression on my skin, compelling me to turn and face him. Slowly, I directed my gaze at Sebastian and met his light stare that instantly tried to convince me that the man from that dark memory didn't exist anymore. The storm that was building in his eyes told me that he was well aware of the flashbacks that appeared so vividly in my mind and in that moment, I knew he was thinking the same. Not wanting to prolong this moment of discomfort, I looked away from him and directed my gaze at the shiny floor. The words of the priest and sweet exclamations of love that Jared and Amelia had written for each other echoed through the room, but I didn't hear them.

Deep inside, I cursed for allowing myself to get lost in thoughts which reminded me of that scary contract, as well as the fact that we still hadn't consummated our marriage after our wedding night. Hopelessly, I wondered if things would ever fall into place for us. I wondered if we would ever look at each other just like Jared and Amelia had; with the strength that could not be broken by anything on this world or the one beyond.

As if witnessing an instant miracle, I heard the angelic words that spread through the room like a sacred melody representing an unmistakable reassurance and an answer to my long forgotten prayers.

Love is patient, love is kind...

I gasped in wonder as the priest continued reading the beautiful testimony of love that described all of the glorious details of its beauty.

It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.

As the storm of new, warm memories provided a confirmation for each and every one of the spoken sentences

settled in my mind, I drew in a deep breath, feeling the warm stream of enlightenment rush through me. In the final act of the eye-opening revelation, Sebastian's hand brushed against mine, patiently entwining our fingers and pulling me into the disarming softness of his touch. I could sense the tenderness being replaced by a much stronger feeling that made him squeeze my hand with determination like he would never let go of it. Gasping, I gathered the courage to look into his eyes once again and what I saw was an almost unbearable glow that accentuated the words which were spoken to the newlywed couple in order to strengthen their bond, but it had an irrevocable healing effect on ours all the same. The priest continued with his preaching and our eyes remained locked on each other, giving us a chance to observe as the last clouds of darkness around us were chased away by the power of the illuminating light. All I could see was the calming green horizon in his eyes and a wide smile simultaneously teased our lips as we absorbed the words...

Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The sound of the word warmed up my heart and I subsided into oblivion that would forever remain in my memory because it marked the moment when I completely opened up my heart and my soul to the man whose diamond eyes pierced into me. Closing my eyes, I enjoyed the heat that spread through my body, making me aware of the strength I kept looking for at so many different places, but all along it had been right there, deep inside me. The crazy rhythm of my heart sped up as I peeked up at Sebastian again. At last, I had

seen the blinding light. And it was the brightest shade of green. In a careless game, every single heartbeat evoked the presence of the strongest of all emotions, synchronizing with the words that repeatedly rang in my mind. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

“I love you, Sebastian.” Rushing like there was no tomorrow, I formed the words on my lips, without actually pronouncing them but the flicker of lightning in Sebastian’s eyes told me he recognized what I had just told him.

The loud applause of the crowd interrupted our moment when the priest pronounced Jared and Amelia as husband and wife. At the same time, we both stood up and joined the celebration, clapping together with everyone around us. As Jared got the permission to kiss his bride, I saw Sebastian’s hand twitch in discomfort like he’d just remembered something. Once again, our eyes sought each other and I could see him stare at me with a stunned expression, almost like he was in a deep state of disbelief. I smiled at him innocently, confirming my admission from moments ago in an indirect manner, but he didn’t smile back. He was lost in deep thought, gaping at me like I had told him that everything was upside down; as if suddenly the sky was green and the grass was blue. I gasped because I realized he would have believed those things sooner than he would have believed I had actually fallen in love with him.

As the realization surged through me even stronger than before, that innocent smile grew wider on my face and so did the look of amazement in his eyes.

Before he got a chance to react, people started gathering to congratulate the happy couple. Contrary to my belief, both of them were down to earth people who surprised me with their kindness when we congratulated them on their wedding and wished them a lifetime of happiness. Amelia even suggested she would like for us to spend some time together so that we could get to know each other. Her proposal took me off guard and I couldn’t hide my surprise fast enough, amusing Sebastian way more than it should have.

On our way to the nearby location of the wedding reception, Sebastian remained quiet and still lost in thought, but he wouldn't stop glancing my way with what looked like a content smirk on his face. He didn't have to tell me—I knew what he was thinking about.

When we arrived, I was astonished by the sight of the beautiful castle surrounded by huge lawn and lots of colorful flowers of all shapes and sizes. As I took in the beautiful and imposing space around me, I heard the noise of the streaming water. Once I located where it was coming from, I noticed a small creek with an adorable little bridge. Interestingly enough, it was very close to the castle, but almost hidden in plain sight. Without a doubt, the location of the wedding reception was fairytale beautiful.

“Enjoying the view?” Sebastian's soft voice disrupted my dreamy thoughts.

I turned to face him. “It's breathtaking,” I whispered.

He looked at me with a pinch of something I didn't recognize. His lips twitched in a smile but it only took a moment for him to become serious again. Instead of saying something, he gently placed his hand on the small of my back and led me inside.

To my absolute dread, the moment we entered the huge hall, I noticed Sebastian's entire family was already there and the otherwise beautiful experience was ruined. The following surprise was that we didn't join their table, but were seated at the very opposite end of the hall. For some reason, Sebastian barely spared them a glance and it was more than strange. I couldn't help but feel that the reason we were separated from them had something to do with me.

As a true head of the family, Theodore vigilantly observed our every move like he wanted to prevent the possibility of jeopardizing the perfect image they had managed to preserve for so long. The mean glances that traveled my way didn't escape me when Sebastian pulled out a chair for me. When I sat down, I tensed and Sebastian had to have felt it

because he held my hand, squeezing it firmly as a sign of discreet reassurance.

Acting like I would be burned by fire, I risked a peek at his direction, being fully aware that I was followed by more than one pair of prying eyes. The moment my gaze collided with the green sea of tranquility, once again he effortlessly got me to yield to him. Forgetting about the danger that surrounded us, a light smile escaped my lips and he reciprocated the gesture, looking at me with that same expression of amazement from earlier. I could tell he had the strong need to talk to me because we'd barely shared a word since my unexpected admission at the church, but both of us knew this wasn't the right time to do it.

Convinced that we had reached a silent agreement, I reluctantly started to turn my head away from him and was caught by complete surprise when his hand twitched in mine, like he had lost some kind of an inner battle. An incredulous gasp escaped my throat when I felt his hand rising along my back with both teasing and threatening slowness until it finally reached its destination and rested on my shoulder, pulling me into a light embrace. Avoiding the shocked expressions of his family, I closed my eyes tightly, feeling that there was no coming back from this moment. Sebastian was openly demonstrating affection in front of the conceited members of his family who thought I was anything but suitable to be his wife. To make the matters worse, his minty breath started teasing my senses as my husband, who acted against every law of common sense, leaned closer and whispered in my ear.

“No more hiding, love. Open your eyes.” His breath burned the nape of my neck. “I want everyone to know how proud I am of my beautiful wife.”

As the deepest shade of red settled on my cheeks, I opened my eyes only to witness Catherine and Theodore's shocked gazes shooting daggers my way. While Helen smiled with content and winked at me, Dianne didn't even bother hiding her apparent disgust. After taking a huge sip of wine, she whispered something to Caleb but he seemed generally uninterested in whatever she was saying.

I glanced at Sebastian. “Your family isn’t happy with this,” I whispered and he immediately chuckled, glancing their way and tightening his grip around me as if he deliberately wanted to provoke them.

Then he turned towards me and a boyish smile teased his lips. “My family is going to have to accept that you’re the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with or face the consequences.” To my absolute surprise, he pulled me closer and kissed my forehead. “Simple as that, angel,” he said as he slowly moved away from me.

I kept my head down because I had no intention of seeing the dread—filled faces that condemned me from the other end of the hall. To make the matters worse, several people came to sit at our table at the very moment Sebastian was ending his sweet show and I was a bit embarrassed to face them.

Throughout the entire evening, Sebastian continued treating me with extreme care and despite the fact that many of his friends and associates tried to get his attention, he wouldn’t leave my sight. He even tried to get me involved into a boring business conversation with the people at our table but it was more than I could handle so I courteously excused myself under the pretense that I had to powder my nose, which made everybody laugh and relax a little. In reality, all I wanted to do was to get some fresh air and disappear out of Theodore’s sight. Sebastian’s eyes followed me as I made my way through the crowd and while I was walking away I heard him comment something about his wife, but the music was too loud for me to make out his exact words. Suddenly, somebody grabbed my wrist, forcing me to stop.

When I turned around, I found myself face to face with none other than Dianne who was half—drunk, which was a given at every party I’d visited so far. She smirked self-contently and sipped her wine.

“Well, look who’s here.” She smiled with revealing insincerity.

I gave her the most threatening look I could produce. “Let go of me!”

She snickered. “Is that a way to greet your sister-in-law?” She shook her head and then sighed. “Silly me. I shouldn’t be surprised at your lack of manners. When I remember where you come from, I’m surprised you have any,” she mocked me and her lips touched the glass yet another time. “I wonder...” She started the moment she looked up. “What did Sebastian tell you to make you blush like that?”

I glanced at the half filled glass in her hands. “It’s none of your business,” I said calmly and smiled, not wanting to raise suspicion because I knew people around us were listening to our conversation. “Let me go. This instant,” I demanded in a harsh whisper.

“And if I don’t?” she challenged in a condescending tone.

I rolled my eyes at her and then looked towards Sebastian who looked my way and was instantly alerted. But I didn’t want him to fight my battles. Not this time. She started laughing and I could tell she was well on her way to getting completely drunk. I pulled my arm to free myself from her grip but it had only caused her to hold me tighter.

“Hmm what could it be?” She pretended to think about it. “Maybe you have a dirty little secret.” Her eyes lit up with wickedness. “That’s the only explanation why Sebastian would ever lay his eyes on you in the first place.” She snickered and that was the final nail in her coffin.

Her words struck a nerve and before I could control myself, I took hold of the glass in her hands and turned it over, causing its content to spill all over her beautiful, and expensive, dress. In a state of complete shock, she let go of my wrist and looked at me like she was about to explode from rage.

“Oops...” I said quietly and disappeared into the crowd before she got a chance to react.

As I walked away, I couldn't help feeling content about the fact that I'd finally returned her long forgotten favor.

Since I wanted a moment of peace and quiet, I headed outside and walked straight towards that bridge that had caught my eye earlier. I rested my hands on the barrier and closed my eyes, enjoying the soothing sounds of the wind and running water. It was quite chilly and when the wind started blowing harder, I shivered from the cold. In an attempt to keep myself warm, I ended up wrapping my arms around my middle.

“Are you okay?”

I was startled when the wind carried the familiar voice in my direction.

“I'm fine.” I smiled and turned towards my husband who looked so mesmerizingly beautiful in the semi-darkness. “I just needed some fresh air.”

He shook his head in disapproval when I started shivering with more force. Smirking, he took off his jacket and pulled it over my shoulders. “There,” he said softly and then, in a light touch, removed the locks of hair that were repeatedly blown on my face. “I'm sorry about Dianne. What did she tell you?” His voice rang with worry.

I shrugged, pretending his sister's wicked attack didn't faze me in the least. “Just another one of her attempts to humiliate me.” Suddenly, I became aware that my action might not have been the smartest one. “I'm sorry I spilled wine on her. I know it wasn't an appropriate thing to do at your friend's wedding,” I apologized.

He chuckled and caressed my cheek. “It was quite funny, actually. She definitely doesn't like getting a taste of her own medicine.”

“I know that it shouldn't bother me, but I still don't understand why she hates me so much.”

His eyes narrowed. “Dianne is a very difficult person. She's always been like that, but it has gotten worse since she married that bastard.”

“He’s cheating on her?” I bit my tongue, realizing I probably shouldn’t have asked that.

Sebastian nodded. “With his secretary.”

“That’s really sad. Why doesn’t she get a divorce?”

“She trapped him in marriage just to make a point. Divorce is an option some people aren’t even willing to consider no matter how bad their marriage is.”

After he said that, we remained silent for a while. Talking about divorce was a topic neither of us found appealing in the least.

I tried to change the subject and lighten up the mood. “The wedding was beautiful,” I said in a happy voice but when Sebastian remained in a serious mood, I was hit by the realization that maybe this was an off-the-table topic as well.

“It was,” he said with a pinch of sadness in his voice and then his green eyes pierced through me, compelling me to accept their sincerity. “I’m sorry I didn’t give you the kind of wedding you deserved. I would give anything to change that. Isabelle—”

“It’s okay.” I interrupted him and then smiled softly. “Let’s not talk about it. It belongs in the past and that’s exactly where it should stay.” I observed him as the images of happy times we spent together appeared before my eyes. “There are so many beautiful memories and I don’t want to think about the bad ones anymore.”

He nodded, pulling me in a tight embrace. As he looked at me, I got lost in the sight of the moonlight that reflected in those shiny eyes. “Say it again,” he whispered achingly.

I chuckled. “There are so many beautiful memories and —”

He shook his head, looking at me with teasing accusation because I’d deliberately misunderstood him. “Not that. What I wanted to—”

“I love you, Sebastian,” I breathed as the mere sound of the words lit me up with excitement and made my heart beat in a crazy rhythm.

His eyes lit up with brightness and he swallowed like his emotions were getting the best of him.

“So long,” he murmured and kissed the edge of my lips and then leaned even closer, lowering his lips to the nape of my neck. “I’ve waited for so long.” He exhaled, kissing the sensitive skin on my shoulder. “Please, Isabelle. I need to hear —”

“I love you,” I said in a shaking voice. I shivered when he started laying soft, ticklish kisses along my collarbone “S-Sebastian.”

“Again,” he repeated.

“I... I love you...” With every caress and kiss I kept repeating the words he wanted to hear. His thumb brushed against my chin and heavy breath escaped my lips. “I love you.”

He lifted his head and kissed my forehead. “I love you,” I whispered when he kissed the bridge of my nose. “I love you.” He kissed my temple and started laying soft kisses down my cheek, marking a path to my shaky lips.

Our eyes were leveled up, his nose gently leaned against mine and his lips so close he was teasing mine with his minty breath. “I—” I started telling another exclamation of love and he laid a finger on my lips.

“Shh.” He stopped me and said the very words I’d been meaning to say. “Whatever happens, one thing will never change... *I. Love. You,*” he said, panting as his lips crushed against mine, starting a kiss that lasted for what felt like eternity.

While I got lost in the sweetness of his kiss, the sounds of the guitar coming from the inside started spreading through the silence of the dark night and he tilted up my chin, gazing at my eyes; revealing every emotion and every thought. There

were no secrets or restraints between us. We were closer than ever before.

“May I have this dance, my dear?” he whispered seductively.

Intoxicated with him, I couldn't even bring myself to say anything so I simply laid my hands on his shoulders.

Gently, almost like I was a baby in a cradle, he rocked me in his arms following the captivating melody that was both sad and romantic. The echo of the words that traveled our way described this moment and captured it in eternity. *‘Chrome my mind. Cauterize this feeling. You're my kind of something to believe in.’*

The chorus talked about learning how to love and the sole fact that I was listening to these beautiful words while being held in a strong embrace of the man I loved made my heart flutter. *‘Teach me how to dance with you. Teach me how to love’*. The male voice sang and Sebastian pulled me into an even stronger embrace, laying my head on his chest like he wanted me to feel exactly what he felt and I was overwhelmed by the sensation. All I breathed was him. All I felt was him. All I knew was him. The music ended up in the blurry background and all I could hear was the fast beating of his heart, emerging from his warm chest.

He kissed the top of my head and continued swinging me in his arms. I heard him swallow and the vibration of his low voice made me shiver.

“I never told you...I didn't want to admit it back then but...You were a beautiful bride, Isabelle.” He smiled sadly. “Even then, you looked like an angel. Maybe I was oblivious to so many things but your beauty never escaped my eyes.” He made me look at him again. “I made my sweet bride cry on her wedding day, but I will be making it up to her. For the rest of my days.”

As the final chords of the guitar announced the ending of the song, his lips touched mine in a prelude of another kiss and I closed my eyes, burning the perfection of the moment in my memory.

“I love you, Isabelle,” he whispered and my throat squeezed under the power of the emotion brought about by his passionate kiss.

In slow motion, I opened my eyes and caressed his cheek, feeling his soft skin under my fingers. “I love you, Sebastian.” I wanted to say it again and again.

And I meant it. I fell head over heels in love with Sebastian. I loved him more than anything on this earth. I loved him with everything I had.

I loved him.

Chapter Forty-Eight

In the magic of the night, I dreamt that I was lying on the soft grass. I could feel the teasing breeze of the summer wind and the warmth of the sun on my skin. The light scent of daisies and the ticklish feeling on my skin urged me to open my eyes and I saw him standing above me; his eyes shining brighter than the sun, his smile wider than the horizon. My heart was filled with peaceful harmony and I knew that nothing on this world could surpass the bliss that was bestowed upon me at that moment.

As the beautiful dream faded away, I opened my eyes and met the brightness of a new day. When I noticed the empty side of the bed next to me, I frowned in disappointment because I wanted nothing more than to wake up next to him. Closing my eyes, I replayed the beautiful dream in my memory. I remembered how he picked one of the many flowers that danced with the wind around us and gently placed it in my hair. A smile returned on my face when I thought about his kisses that felt so real that I could still feel them on my lips.

“I love you.” I whispered into thin air, counting the times he repeated the words in that wonderful dream.

If this was what love felt like, I never wanted to wake up. I thought for a moment and despite myself got out of the bed, hoping that it wasn't too late and that I would still get a chance to see him.

Alas, he wasn't there when I entered the dining room. I chuckled when I noticed the wrinkled newspaper on the table—a clue that gave away that he might have been there only moments ago and I had probably just missed him. Still, it was enough for me to stay in the same space that breathed with his presence even though he wasn't there.

The sound of the steps disrupted my dreamy thoughts and I looked up, noticing that Anne walked in, carrying my breakfast. She smiled at me, but there were traces of worry on her face and I was alarmed because it was so unusual for her to fall under the influence of hysteria. Something was wrong.

My lips parted as I observed her in anticipation and I feared to ask, but I knew I had to.

“Is something wrong, Anne?”

Several seconds had passed in a quiet torture before she shook her head which should have reassured me, but didn't. I sensed that she was lying to me and it didn't matter as long as the one thing I cared about remained safe and untouched.

“Have you seen Sebastian?” The voice in which I asked the question was so small, almost inaudible.

“He's in his office but you can't—” she started in a whisper and before she could finish, I was already walking out, rushing through the hallway.

“Isabelle!” I heard Anne's voice yelling after me, but I didn't turn around.

As I was approaching his office, I heard voices. Sebastian was yelling at someone, demanding for them to leave and never return if they knew what's good for them. I stood behind the door, careful not to move or make the smallest sound. I didn't even dare to breathe.

“Sebastian, don't be a fool.” As I recognized Theodore's disapproving voice, inexplicable fear and disgust took hold of me. “You might think you're in love, but you'll get tired of her the moment she gets under your sheets.”

A shaky breath escaped my lips and I had to place my hand over my mouth to muffle the sound.

“What makes you think that you have the right—” Sebastian raged at his father, but was interrupted by Theodore's condescending laughter.

“What? You didn’t think I knew you’re singing the goddamned serenades instead of fucking her like you’re supposed to?” Theodore raged and then his voice became strangely calm and serious. “This marriage is going to end one way or another. I would hate to hear that your pretty wife suddenly *disappeared*.”

I shuddered as silence filled the room and left me in a dark space that was filled with the threat of real danger. I heard a loud punch on the table and froze.

“Touch her and I swear it will be the last thing you do. You can threaten me all you like, but I’m not giving up on her!” Sebastian said relentlessly and then yelled. “Get out! Get out both of you!”

The real panic took hold of me as I wondered about the other person in that office and I knew that Anne’s warning was real but before I got a chance to leave, Sebastian violently pushed his father out of his office and I found myself face to face with the devil.

I saw his bruised cheek and realized Sebastian had hit him. He brushed his fingers against his bleeding lip and looked up at me with consuming contempt.

“You!” he said through gritted teeth. “You witch! You might have guilt-tripped him into your filthy web of lies but you and your whore of a mother will not win this game! Over my dead body!”

Theodore made a step towards me, but Sebastian protectively stepped in and scowled at Theodore in an infuriating tone. In that moment, my eyes darted back towards the door and I saw my mother, staring at me with an ice cold expression on her face. Our eyes met and she slowly raised her arms, only to reveal a gun in her hands. I wanted to scream, but I was paralyzed. All I could do was watch as she slowly turned around and pointed the gun, aiming straight to my heart.

I winced, gathering the courage to react. “S-Sebastian,” I spoke softly at first and then screamed in panic as her fingers touched the trigger. “Sebastian!”

Just when she was about to pull the trigger, Sebastian reacted without thinking and pushed me away from my mother's reach. I screamed when I heard the explosion of the shot and all I could do was observe as the bullet ripped through Sebastian's chest and he fell to the ground.

When she realized what she had done, my mother ran towards the door like she was carried by fire and Theodore just stood there in shock before he started running, probably to ask for help, but I wasn't sure or patient enough to take that chance.

I knelt next to Sebastian, still shaking from shock. "I'll call an ambulance. Please... Please, hold on." He wanted to say something, but I stopped him. "Sebastian." I forced a smile on my face and held back tears. "You'll be fine."

I turned to leave, but he held my wrist. "D-Don't go," he pleaded and the fear I saw in his beautiful eyes destroyed the last traces of my restraint and heavy tears emerged in my eyes. His shaky hand reached towards me and caressed my wet cheek. "S- Stay."

With caution, I embraced him and offered him all the comfort of the world. There was blood everywhere and it hurt me so much to see him in this immense pain. Looking at me with eyes wide open, he started shaking with more force and I panicked when I saw that his face was as white as a sheet.

"Sebastian, please." I cried inconsolably, sobbing and gently rocking him in my arms. "Please don't fall asleep. I'm begging you... You have to fight... You have to fight for us... For me. "I kissed his forehead and his trembling, cold lips. It was more than I could handle, but I kept staring at his eyes which held onto me like I was their last hope. "I love you. You can't leave me." I kissed him again. "I can't live without a heart. I can't live without a soul. You took them both," I repeated his words, fearing that it was too late.

He smiled and took hold of my hand, squeezing it tightly. "I l-love you, Isabelle. *Forever.*" He said as the light in his gaze slowly faded away and the moment he uttered those words, he stilled in my arms.

Disbelief and unbearable pain tore through my chest as I knelt on the cold floor, holding onto Sebastian's lifeless body, caressing and kissing his motionless face.

"No!" I shrieked in pain. "Sebastian, please don't. Please no! Sebastian!" I started shaking him and calling his name, hoping he would wake up. "Sebastian! Sebastian, please..."

It didn't help. He remained silent and cold. My loud screams broke through the silence of the dark hallway as I tried to grasp the fact that he was gone.

Memories stormed my mind together with the bitter flow of unsettling tears and I was reminded of a man who used to wipe those tears away, healing my broken heart; erasing the pain and replacing all of my misery with hope. To think that I would never see him again caused my heart to crumble and I became painfully aware that there was no point in living without him. The pain was too strong but I had no intention to fight it. I let go. Falling deeper into a daze, I was fading, slowly transcending into the light.

And then... I saw his face. His beautiful bronze skin was bathed in the sunlight and we were back on that meadow from my dream. He smiled at me and I was sad because I knew he was just an apparition that was bound to disappear.

"Shh. Don't cry." The green eyes of an angel returned to haunt me as a sweet torture. "You're safe. I'm here. I'm right here, my dear," he whispered and wiped away the tear that froze on my cheek.

I didn't want to wake up. I didn't want to open my eyes because I knew that his face would fade away. Regardless of my never-ending pleas, he wouldn't respect my wish—he wouldn't let me stay.

"Isabelle, you have to open your eyes now." I started crying and he shook his head. "No... No... Listen to me, love. I promise... I promise it will be alright."

The light voice, filled with encouragement eventually convinced me to return to the frightening reality. As the

painful river of tears spilled down my cheeks, I continued daydreaming with my eyes tightly shut and I wasn't ready to open them yet because I knew that the angel with bright green eyes lied to me.

“Open your eyes, Isabelle. Please.” The voice of the green-eyed angel continued haunting me. “It's okay. I'm here,” he repeated. “It's just a bad dream. Wake up, love.”

As if I was drowning in deep, cold water and emerged to the surface at the very last moment, I took in a long, deep breath and opened my eyes only to see him peacefully lying next to me. While I observed the glow that seemed to have returned in his shiny eyes, panting and shaking from the terrible pain that still reigned my system, I realized I didn't know what was real anymore. When I looked around, it dawned on me that we were in our bedroom as if nothing had happened. *But it was so real.* It happened. I tried to speak, but my throat was so dry from all the screaming and I felt so hot.

“Shh, easy, easy.” He soothed me and I still gaped at him as if I were staring at a ghost.

With disarming tenderness, he wrapped his arms around me and I felt the painful lump in my throat melt under his warmth, causing the sting of tears in my eyes as I came to terms with the fact that it had all been a terrible nightmare. I cried my eyes out because the pain and the fear still felt very real but I couldn't stop rejoicing at the fact that he was alive. *He's here. He's safe and sound. It's not too late.*

His eyes studied my face for a long time before he said anything. “Why tears, Isabelle?” he asked and I just gazed at him while the rain of tears kept flowing, leaving me unable to speak, unable to explain how I felt.

Without delay, he offered me immediate and unconditional solace, tightening his embrace around me, repeating that everything would be okay and caressing my tired body, willing me to submit to the comfort of his touch. After a while, when he sensed that I relaxed in his arms, he tilted up my chin and confronted me with his soothing gaze. “Do you want to talk about your dream?” he asked in a gentle

and tentative voice, sighing when I shook my head again. It was just too painful for me to tell him.

He looked away for a moment and then returned his eyes on mine. “Did I hurt you that badly?” he asked in a broken whisper and I looked at him in confusion before finally realizing what he meant, but I didn’t get a chance to say anything. “Please,” he whispered. “Tell me what I did to you in your dream so that I can take it away.” He brushed his fingers along my cheek and kissed the corner of my eye that was still wet from tears. “I can make it better, Isabelle. I promise. You just have to tell me.”

Regret swept over me when I saw how much pain the thought that I dreamt of that night had caused him. I never talked to him about my nightmares, but this was different.

“You didn’t hurt me, Sebastian,” I said with a weak smile.

“Don’t lie to me. I heard you screaming my name. I heard you say—” He swallowed and closed his eyes. “You were yelling ‘please no’,” he said in a small, ashamed voice.

“Sebastian,” I started, gathering the courage to speak, but he took it the wrong way again.

“Don’t you know that I would never hurt you? Not like before, Isabelle.” He seemed to have been so shaken by the very thought that I might still be afraid of him. “Never again.” He opened his eyes and looked at me like he was in pain. “I would rather die than deliberately cause you pain.”

I swallowed when I heard him say that. “I know you wouldn’t hurt me,” I whispered and then admitted the truth. “That’s not what I dreamt about.”

He narrowed his eyes at me like he still didn’t trust me. “What did you dream about then?” he asked with caution.

“I dreamt that... that I was standing in front of your office. You were fighting with your f-father... my mother was there too.” I choked on a lump of sadness caused by the reminiscence of that scary dream.

“Shh,” Sebastian tried to soothe me. “It’s alright, sweet. Nobody can hurt you. Your mother can’t get to you now.”

I looked at him sadly. “You don’t understand... Your father saw me and called me a witch, demanding that we get a divorce.” My voice cracked and Sebastian swore silently, tightening his grip around me.

“Isabelle,” he said in a mild voice as I pushed myself to speak further.

“Then I saw my mother.” I swallowed. “I looked and I saw her standing there with a gun.” The feeling of desperation and nausea returned to my system and all I could feel were his gentle hands that tried to soothe me as I sobbed into his chest.

“It’s okay. It was just a dream,” he whispered endlessly and when I gathered the courage to look at him, I was welcomed by his warm and captivating emerald gaze.

I took a deep breath to put myself together. “She killed you, Sebastian.” Despite my efforts my voice cracked. “She wanted to shoot me, but you pushed me away and she...”

He smirked, caressing my hot cheek and I stared at him in disbelief. “It looks to me like I’m the hero who saved my damsel in distress.” He winked at me, doing his best to cheer me up, but I was so shaken that I couldn’t laugh even if I wanted to.

“It’s not funny,” I said in a light voice. “Aren’t you at least upset by the fact that you died?”

The moment I asked the question, I realized how ridiculous I was being. Sebastian started laughing so hard that his face reddened a bit.

When the laughter subsided he tried to restore his serious expression, but miserably failed since he still stared at me with teasing amusement. “I am terribly upset, sweet. I won’t rest until the justice is served. Weren’t there any dream police that arrested the perpetrator?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t dreamt long enough.” I was still quite serious.

He shook his head, that delicious smirk wouldn't leave his lips. "I was joking. Why are you still so upset?"

I blushed. "I just... I don't want to lose you."

"Shh." He started rocking me in his arms for the longest time without saying a word. "You're not going to lose me, Isabelle." He laid small kisses on my hot forehead and repeated the words I needed to hear. "I promise that you're not going to lose me. As a matter of fact, I think you might have a problem. You're stuck with me for eternity." His voice was filled with relief and happiness. "Now, since I technically saved your life, I think I deserve a little reward from my princess," he teased me.

He positioned his lips only a fraction of an inch from mine, letting me know exactly what kind of a reward he expected.

Finally, I managed to relax a little and smile. "It was just a dream, so technically—" I started speaking but he silenced me with a long kiss.

I closed my eyes, letting myself go and enjoying the connection like never before. I thought I had lost him and even though none of it had been real, I had learned a valuable lesson. Instead of taking what we had for granted, I needed to settle into each moment and enjoy it to the fullest. As the fire of the kiss subsided, he caressed my face, whispering small reassurances and laying small kisses on the residues of tears on my face. I kept my eyes closed, focusing on his touch and the silky softness of his voice.

He brought his lips to my ear and I could sense he was smiling. "Technically, princess, I love you more than words can express and I would take a bullet for you any day," he said in a firm whisper and squeezed my hand. I winced to chase away the images from the nightmare and his grip on my hand tightened as he began soothing me again. "Don't worry, love. Nobody can hurt us. Nothing can destroy what we have." He chuckled lightly. "They can try, but they will fail."

Guided by his convincing words, I opened my eyes and took in the beautiful features of his face, wondering if his skin

was as soft as it seemed. Suddenly, I longed to touch him, to feel that he was real under my fingers so I cautiously leaned my hand on his face and his lips curved into a light smile as I caressed his cheeks and ran my fingers through his thick, black hair. Instinctively, our bodies came closer and Sebastian closed his eyes and started breathing deeply as my hands slid down his muscled arms, his smooth, bronze that felt so warm, soft, and inviting. For the first time, I explored his body with the desire to get to know it. I brushed my fingers along his knuckles and then, shyly, rested my hand against his hot chest.

His mesmerizing eyes snapped open and illuminated me with their brightness. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I smiled and looked away as my hand started touching him in a circular motion; discovering all the muscles that graced his handsome body. He kissed my forehead and tilted up my chin, leveling our eyes again.

“I know this is mean, but I hope you have a bad dream every night if it makes you act this way.” He brushed his lips against mine and I tried to look down again but he wouldn’t let me. “No.” He held his hand on my face. “No shame, Isabelle.” I gasped as his hand slid down, brushing against the edge of my breast, marking a path down my abdomen until it gently rested on my hip. “There is nothing dishonest or immoral in the way you make me feel. This...” He caressed my cheek, confronting me with the brightest shade of piercing emerald green. “Nothing in this world is more right than this, love.” he whispered and kissed me again.

A smile danced on his face and although completely uncertain about what I was doing, I felt encouraged enough to continue touching him. As I guided my touch lower, I felt his skin tense under my fingers. I paused when I reached his lower abdomen and I could tell he was holding back from something. When I moved my fingers, his smile widened and he took a deep breath. Curious about his reaction, I continued brushing my fingers against his firm skin and he took me by complete surprise when he started laughing, at first suppressed and then with full force. I had just found his weak spot.

“You’re ticklish?!” I whispered excitedly and continued with the sweet torture.

Instead of replying, he just continued laughing and trying to take hold of my hands in order to restrain me but I didn’t give in that easily. Our little battle continued, until he decided to take over control and before I knew it he pulled me in a tight embrace, turning me on my back until he was victoriously lying on top of me and I stilled underneath him.

He gazed at me almost like he discovered something new. “Not so brave now, are you?” he asked in a playful voice and I shook my head, smiling at him. He chuckled and slowly lowered his head until his nose touched mine and a pleasant shiver caused by the feeling of this closeness rushed through me. “You started a war, love.” I could feel the breeze of his captivating breath that filled me with excitement.

“Did I?” I said in the smallest whisper.

“Oh, you most certainly did because now,” he smirked, enjoying this little game and keeping me in suspense, “I want to find out where you’re ticklish.”

Before I got the slightest chance to process his words, he started touching the side of my belly and I started laughing like crazy, trying to escape his decisive touch, but when I realized he had no intention of letting that happen, I started pleading with him.

“Okay, okay.” I couldn’t even speak from laughter. “Please no more. Stop! Sebastian!” I shrieked and he finally stopped when I called out his name.

Trapped in each other’s embrace, we shared one of those special moments I wanted to entirely pour myself in. His lips trembled above mine and I observed as his eyes filled with something powerful and intense. There was a lightning in his eyes and thunder in my heart. The tension neither of us could fight was rising with each passing second. Then, just as his lips brushed against mine in a prelude of another kiss, he let out a harsh breath and whispered a phrase which left me bare and defenseless. “I love you, Isabelle.” With those words, his soft lips brushed against mine with fragile tenderness,

worshipping me in a way I could not comprehend. After a while, he started deepening the kiss until my senses were taken over by the taste of mint and something sweet that pulled me closer to him, trapping me in the strangest delirium and a mental frenzy. He continued kissing me hungrily, invitingly, almost desperately—like he needed me. When the storm of his kiss subsided, I kept my eyes closed as his lips once again trembled against mine and I heard it again. A soft, aching and disarming *I love you*.

Only this time, it didn't come from his lips, it came from mine.

Never before did it feel so beautiful to fall asleep in his protective embrace because I knew he was right. *No one could touch this*.

Chapter Forty-Nine

“Time to wake up, sunshine.” I heard a soft voice whispering in my ears and when I opened my eyes I was in for a surprise.

Sebastian was sitting on the bed, dressed in casual jeans and a black sweater. He never went to work dressed like that and when I glanced at the clock, I noticed it was way past the time he would normally go to the office. It was also unusual for me to wake up that late, but because of the tormenting nightmare from the night before, I’d needed some extra sleep.

“Good morning.” Still sleepy, I stretched my arms and looked at him in confusion.

Noticing that his appearance baffled me, he smiled secretively. “Why don’t you get ready and come downstairs? I have something to show you,” he teased, adding some fuel to the fire of mystery.

The moment he was gone, I didn’t waste any time and I quickly took a shower and got dressed. The curiosity was getting the best of me, but I still took the time to apply some light make up and my favorite perfume. *You want to impress him.* The voice in my head teased but I ignored it, rushing to get downstairs. I was almost sure what the surprise was about, but I really hadn’t expected him to put much effort into it.

The moment I stepped into the dining room, I was astonished when I saw the table and the decorations on the curtains. Sebastian gazed at me with excitement, taking in my initial reaction to seeing the space he had decorated so meticulously. An incredible feeling of happiness warmed up my heart when I noticed the big plate in the middle of the table which was filled with probably a dozen of pancakes. There were two candles with numbers two and zero on the top. Tears

of joy teased my eyes when I realized Sebastian had made me a pancake birthday cake for my twentieth birthday. I was at a loss of words and all I could do was smile. Feeling grateful for all the trouble he had put into this, I approached him with the intention of telling him that nobody had ever done that for me but the display of emotions was simply too strong and it took over me.

Sebastian laughed and embraced me. Then he took a step back and looked straight into my eyes.

“Happy birthday, love,” he whispered and kissed me with so much tenderness that made me even more sentimental.

By the time the kiss ended and he looked at me again, I was an emotional mess.

“Thank you,” I said with so much power in my voice, making it clear that I was thanking him for more than just this.

He looked at me sweetly and caressed my cheek. “You didn’t think I would forget, did you?” I shook my head but my cheeks blushed, giving away the truth. “Liar,” he accused in a playful tone and I chuckled.

Instead of teasing me further, he became slightly serious and lit up the two candles.

“It’s time to make a wish.” He smiled and led me towards the table.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the incredible bliss that was gifted by his presence and I swallowed when I remembered that scary dream and the possibility that I might have to live without him. When I blew out the candles and finally made a wish, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind. I knew exactly what I wanted and needed. *I wished for him to never leave my side.*

Opening my eyes, I met his shiny green ones and he winked at me, remaining silent like he simply enjoyed the sight in front of him and I could see he was happy.

“This is a wonderful surprise, Sebastian,” I spoke from the bottom of my heart.

He smirked and something lit up in his eyes. “I’m glad you like it, sweetness, but this is only a little introduction. The real surprise is yet to come.”

And he was right. He turned the day into perfection, treating me like a princess and giving me the best birthday a girl could ask for. After we had breakfast together, he continued with his series of surprises and no matter how hard I tried to get him to let me in on his plans, his lips remained sealed.

Out of all the scenarios that were going through my mind, I wasn’t even close to discovering the real deal. Contrary to all of my expectations, he took me to the zoo and I felt like a child all over again, remembering the one and only time I went with my family. It was one of the very rare beautiful memories from my childhood.

Since it was a cold autumn day in the middle of the week, there weren’t that much visitors and it felt like we had the entire zoo to ourselves. Just like any other normal couple, we walked through the imposing park, holding hands, observing different kinds of animals and admiring their natural, yet amazing performances. I became aware that the simplicity of little magical moments such as occasional glances or small kisses that accentuated the bond we shared made me feel whole, completely carefree and happy. This was one of the most beautiful days in my life and I was going to enjoy it to the fullest.

When we entered the section with monkeys from all around the world, it turned out we came just in time for the show as two of them started jumping around the cage. They climbed the ropes with incredible speed and for a moment, it seemed they forgot who was chasing whom because both of them ran away from each other. The scene was hilarious.

“I bet they have no idea how funny they are to us,” I concluded, still laughing.

Sebastian arched his eyebrows. “Maybe that’s exactly how they feel about humans. I bet they’re making fun of us when we’re not watching.”

I chuckled at his silliness and as our gazes met, we leaned in for another kiss, but the moment was interrupted by a loud thump on the glass. Both of us turned towards the cage at the same time and we saw a little monkey looking at us and kissing the glass. Sebastian laughed with so much force that the two monkeys chasing each other stopped their little game and looked towards him. It was both cute and amusing. We started walking away but the monkey that held onto the glass continued following us and Sebastian smirked, looking at him and then at me.

“I think you have a new admirer, sweet. He seems to like you,” he said in a joking voice.

“Don’t be silly.” I playfully hit his shoulder, feeling grateful that there weren’t any people around us and if it wasn’t enough, the monkey started producing sounds which almost resembled a mocking laughter.

It was more than both Sebastian and I could take. We spent at least five minutes standing next to that cage, enjoying the spectacle. He just wouldn’t move away from that glass and my jaw already hurt from laughter, but the more I laughed, the more he goofed around.

“I think it’s best to take you away from this little Casanova before he steals you away from me,” Sebastian teased and placed his hand on the small of my back. “I’m sorry little buddy but she’s taken.” He laid a soft kiss on my forehead and I laughed again when he actually winked at the monkey who looked after us as we walked away. “Plus, she’s a bit too old for you. Just turned twenty today,” he whispered, sparing a final glance at the little confused animal that still stared after us.

“Hey.” I gave him an offended look once we were outside. “Twenty is not old, mister.”

Sebastian chuckled. “If you say so.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What’s that supposed to mean? If I’m old, you’re ancient.” I decided to tease him about the age gap of seven years between us.

As expected, he didn't take it too kindly. "Just who are you calling ancient?" He pretended to be terribly offended by my remark.

"Well I don't see anyone else standing here so..." I raised my head, defying him with a wide smile.

"That's it." He took a step towards me and smirked. "I think I'm going to have to throw you to the lions."

As I took a few steps back from him, I couldn't take my eyes away from his. I got carried away by their mesmerizing emerald glow that burst with joy.

"Very well, Mr. Everett." I was still stepping back and he smiled as if he knew what I was about to say. "But you're going to have to catch me first."

Before I even finished the sentence, I started running, but he caught up with me almost right away, wrapping me in his arms. "Who is ancient now, Mrs. Everett?" he joked, while I was still trying to catch my breath.

"I'm sorry." I looked at him sweetly and his attempt to suppress a smile was very evident. "Please, don't throw me to the lions."

"Hmm..." He narrowed his eyes. He wasn't convinced. "I don't know."

"Pretty please? I promise I'll behave." I smiled, winking at him and it seemed to have been the last straw that pushed him to lower his lips on mine.

Normally, I would have been worried with the possibility that there might be people who could see us, but at that moment my mind was vacant and the only thing I could focus on was the power of the emotion I felt for him. *Nobody else. Only him.*

"I think I'll let you off the hook." He caressed my cheek after the kiss. "Besides, you're too cute to be discarded of that easily."

I remained silent and lay my head on his chest because I wanted to enjoy his solace just for a moment. Not long after

that, it was getting dark and I thought that we headed home, but Sebastian had other plans.

We ended up in a small Greek restaurant, walking distance from the zoo. The atmosphere was very exotic with the dim lights, traditional Greek music and statues of exposed men and women posing in various revealing positions. The first word that came to mind as an association to the mysteriously romantic air that lurked in that restaurant was *aphrodisiac*. It didn't look like usual place Sebastian would visit but I had decided not to think about that.

We were seated next to the window and as I turned to look outside, the statue of a naked woman that seemed to be looking over our table caught my eye. I looked away and focused my eyes on Sebastian who gazed at me with a teasing expression on his face.

I blushed. "I've never been in a Greek restaurant before," I admitted, trying to start a conversation but it sounded almost like I wanted to justify my surprise at the surrounding.

Sebastian smiled widely. "I like their food," he looked around and returned then returned the penetrating green gaze on me, "and their culture. I think you'll like it, too." He cleared his throat. "The food, I mean." He winked, prolonging my torture.

Luckily, before I managed to say anything, the waiter approached our table, carrying a plate with two small shot glasses filled with transparent liquor.

When the waiter lit up the candle on the table and left, I was curious about the liquor in the glass. I took it in my hand and realized it was icy cold.

"What is that?" I asked curiously.

"It's called *ouzo*. Traditional Greek aperitif," Sebastian replied.

He seemed to know a lot about their culture. Maybe he did have a habit of coming in this restaurant after all.

“Do you come here often?” I asked while bringing the small glass to my nose and smelling its content.

I wondered if he ever brought girls there, but of course I wasn't going to ask him that. By the way he looked and smiled at me, I could tell that I didn't need to ask him because the devil knew exactly what was going through my mind.

“Actually, it's my first time here as well. But I've been to Greece.”

Silly me, of course he had been to Greece. “It must be beautiful there,” I said with a pinch of jealousy.

“It is,” he confirmed. “It's one of the most beautiful countries I've visited. Lots of ouzo, great food, ancient cities, the sun and the beach...beautiful girls,” he said with a wink.

“Sounds like everything a man can possibly wish for,” I interrupted him, thinking out loud.

His eyebrows arched as he smiled and there was a spark in his eyes. “I wouldn't say that. As a man who has traveled the world, I can say that there is no place I would rather be right now than right here with you,” he spoke with determination and reached for my hand.

I blushed and swallowed, trying to steady the sudden fast beating of my heart. “Not even Greece?” I teased.

“Not even Greece.” He kept looking straight into my eyes and I melted under his burning gaze. “Now, I would like to make a toast for my birthday girl,” he said in a cheerful tone and reached for his own glass of ouzo. “For many more beautiful birthdays to come.”

We raised our glasses and made a toast. Deciding to block my still very present resentment towards alcohol, I closed my eyes and drank the entire small glass at once. *Big mistake!* I grimaced and my throat burned from the strong liquor. When I looked at Sebastian, I saw that he was trying to suppress his laughter. What surprised me even more was that his glass remained almost full.

“You're supposed to drink it slowly,” he whispered and managed to get serious after a while. “Are you okay?” He had

to have noticed that the grimace on my face was getting worse by the second.

I nodded even though I still wasn't feeling the best. "I thought that..." I started explaining but the waiter appeared at our table, ready to take our order.

Since I still hadn't look at the menu and even if I had it wouldn't have helped because I didn't know anything about their food, I allowed Sebastian to make the decision for me. He ordered a special meat platter for two, some extra *tzatziki* sauce, two glasses of wine and then, he glanced at me with a smile and added that the lady would also like to have a glass of water.

I returned his smile, still feeling a bit angry with him because he hadn't warned me just how nasty ouzo could be. When the food arrived at our table with the promised glass of water, all was forgiven. The meat and vegetable combination, as well as the sauce, was delicious and I really enjoyed the meal. After we finished eating, we praised the food and slowly sipped the wine. Sebastian seemed a bit lost in thought and just when I was preparing to ask him if something was wrong, he reached into his blazer and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen. *Probably some work obligations.*

I looked at him in confusion. "I thought you had a day off."

"I do," he replied in a quiet, hesitant voice. "This has nothing to do with business."

"What is it then?" I was even more taken aback.

He looked at me with a warm, yet serious expression and it was only adding to my confusion. "It's just something I would like you to sign." He pushed the document to my side of the table and I noticed most of its content was hidden under some kind of a foil.

The only visible part was the part that I needed to sign. When I reached to remove the layer of foil that covered the text that revealed the nature of the document he wanted me to sign, he took hold of my hand, preventing me from reading it.

My eyes darted towards his and suddenly there was tension between us.

“Why won’t you let me read it?”

We still cautiously held our gaze on each other. “There is no need to read it,” he said self - confidently. “I just want you to sign at the bottom of the page.” He pointed towards the spot where my signature needed to be placed.

Surprised, I drew in a harsh breath, thinking that he must have lost his mind if he expected me to follow his instructions. “Sebastian, I’m sorry but I won’t sign something I haven’t read.” I gave him a challenging look. “I’ve learned that the hard way.”

He sighed and looked at me with so much power, almost like he was silently willing me to do as I was told. “Isabelle, do you trust me?”

“I do,” I said and then stopped in frustration. “I do, but...”

“Yes or no, Isabelle?” He asked in a serious voice and I had no choice but to tell him the truth.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Then sign the document,” he encouraged me in a light voice that had an undertone of desperation.

He really wanted me to place my signature on that piece of paper.

“I won’t read it.” I noticed a sign of relief in his eyes but he didn’t know I wasn’t going to let it go that easily. “But I want you to tell me what it is,” I demanded.

“It’s just a gift, Isabelle,” he whispered with a sad smile. “Just another birthday gift.”

I don’t know if it was the vulnerability in his eyes, or the sweetness in his smile, but once again I fell under his spell and before I realized what I was doing, my hand was taking hold of that pen and signed the straight line at the bottom of the page.

“Now will you tell me what it is?” I asked when returning the document to him.

He smirked, some of the tension gone from his stare. “You’ll find out soon enough,” he said, adding to the mystery and I wanted to react but he cut me off. “Very soon, love... A lot sooner than you think.”

It was clear that there was no point in insisting on the matter, so I decided to let it go and the moment I did, the light mood magically reappeared at our table. Sebastian paid for the meal, once again praising how tasty everything had been and the waiter seemed to be so happy with the generous tip that he decided to give us a whole bottle of ouzo as a gift on the house. I rolled my eyes when Sebastian rewarded me with one of his childish and teasing glances. Luckily, it was enough to get him to sustain himself from prolonging my embarrassment so he thanked the waiter and we left the restaurant on a happy note.

Once outside, we walked towards the car, still talking about the delicious food and the little incident with *ouzo*. Sebastian was so amused that he just wouldn’t let it go. There was also something that I wasn’t ready to let go but mentioning that document would only ruin the mood so I did my best to hold back the annoying curiosity that consumed me.

At some point, we reached a small square with the fountain in the middle. There were a few people who made a wish before throwing a nickel in the water. I thought it would be fun to try, so I rushed to the fountain and Sebastian followed after me. Small droplets of water that jumped from the fountain sprinkled my face and I sensed he was behind me. When his arms embraced me, I turned my head and my nose touched his chin.

“Got a nickel?”

“What for?” he deliberately teased.

“To make a wish, silly.”

I could tell he was smiling. “I didn’t know you had to pay for wishes.”

“Well, you do. Don’t you want to make one, too?” I slowly turned to face him and I saw that he held that same distant expression like when he asked me to sign that document in the office.

Suddenly, he swallowed; making a visible effort to ignore whatever it was that tortured him. “That depends. Can we use the same nickel?” He tried to joke but I could tell he wasn’t in the mood for fun at the moment.

Neither was I. Still, I decided to play along. “Of course we can’t. That’s not how the wish system works.”

“How does it work then?” His voice was almost brittle.

“Everybody pays for their own wish,” I breathed.

“Well, if that’s the case, I think I have a better idea about the means of payment we should use.” He took hold of my hand. “Close your eyes, Isabelle,” he whispered and I listened to him. “Now make your wish, sweet.” His voice was even softer. “And I’m going to make mine.”

As we both stood there with eyes closed, making a wish at the same time, I wondered about what he wanted because I still wanted the same. *I wished for him to never leave my side.*

Our eyes snapped open at the same time and I looked at him expectantly. “Ready?” he asked for a confirmation and I nodded, suddenly remembering that he mentioned something about using the appropriate means of payment. “I hope it comes true, love,” he said softly and squeezed my hand even tighter.

To my absolute shock, Sebastian took the wedding ring off my finger and before I got a chance to react, he threw it in the fountain together with his own. For a moment, I just stood there with my lips parted, gaping at him in complete confusion.

“Congratulations, Miss Walsh.” He fought to say the words and I still stared at him stupidly, wondering what kind

of a mind game he was playing with me this time.

“Sebastian, what have you done? I have absolutely no idea what yo—”

“I’m talking about your birthday present,” he interrupted me and then took a deep breath, finally shedding some light onto the mystery. “Isabelle, I am giving you your freedom. The document I made you sign was the final conclusion of our divorce papers,” he muttered nervously, waiting for my reaction.

I was paralyzed when I heard those words and after the initial shock worked its way out of my system, I started feeling something completely different - boiling anger.

“Isabelle—” he started saying something but I cut him off with a big fat slap on his face.

He covered his hand over his swollen cheek for a moment and then looked at me with a baffled expression on his face. “What was that for?” he asked like he really didn’t understand.

“Are you kidding me?” I raised my voice and started walking away but he followed right after me. I stopped and turned towards him. “Sebastian, stay the hell away from me because I swear right now I could slap the life out of you!”

It was the first time I talked to him like that and I really meant it. I couldn’t believe his audacity. There was so much frustration inside of me at that moment that I felt like I could seriously hurt him. On the other hand, the sudden smile on his face told me he didn’t take my tantrum or my threats seriously at all. He found it rather amusing. But I had no intention of staying for the show. I continued walking away from him as fast as I could.

“Isabelle!” He kept calling my name and he wouldn’t stop following me. “For the love of God, please wait.” He was so strangely calm and it made me more upset.

I ignored him, but he caught up with me and took hold of my elbow, preventing me from getting away. “Sebastian, let go of me!” I demanded, but of course he wouldn’t listen to me.

I remembered the scene with Dianne. *Where is a glass of wine when you need one?*

“You stubborn girl!” He said with playfulness, completely oblivious to the anger that seethed in my blood. “Why won’t you let me explain?”

“What is there to explain?” I glared at him with sheer menace. “You’ve just divorced me without even telling me. Without even asking me. On my birthday!” I remembered the Rosemont rule, the contract and Colin Everett’s will. “How... How is that even possible?” I spoke incoherently and he just kept smiling. “What the hell is wrong with you, Sebastian?”

“Isabelle, there is a reason why I’ve done this,” he started cautiously and when he noticed that I didn’t run away from him, he continued. “I just wanted—”

“Roses for the beautiful lady?”

The sound of a gruff voice interrupted him in the very crucial moment he was about to spill the truth and both Sebastian and I turned in the direction the voice came from and we saw an old man with a basket filled with bouquets of red roses. *Talk about wrong timing.*

The man waited for our reply and finally both Sebastian and I spoke at the same time. “Yes, of course,” Sebastian said pleasantly while I almost screamed, “Absolutely not!”

The man already held out the roses and stared at us, confused, while Sebastian sighed in apparent frustration.

“Isabelle, don’t be a child. Just take the roses,” he said gently, but I sure as hell wasn’t accepting flowers from him that night.

I glared at him. “I don’t want them. Besides, buying me flowers with thorns might not be the best idea right now if you care about your safety,” I added defiantly.

“You’ve become dangerous,” he teased but I was in no mood for his sweet talk.

“I don’t want the roses!” I repeated.

“How much?” Sebastian ignored my refusal and decided to buy them anyway.

“Oh no, you don’t have to pay. I wanted to give them for free.” The man looked at my hand, looking for a confirmation about the status of our relationship and when he noticed there wasn’t a ring on my finger, he continued. “Your girlfriend is very beautiful,” he told Sebastian and I almost burst into sarcastic laughter but managed to hold it back. “And you seem to need a bit of help right now,” he whispered the words that were meant for Sebastian’s ears only, but I had heard them.

I touched the finger where the ring had been placed only minutes ago and suddenly I felt empty, alone and abandoned. The reality struck in, replacing the anger. I wasn’t Mrs. Everett anymore. I wasn’t his wife. *Isn’t this exactly what you asked him for not that long ago?* The little voice in my head tortured me. “Not now... Not anymore,” I mumbled to myself and started walking.

“Is this some kind of a trick?” Sebastian interrogated the man and gave it up when he noticed I was walking away from him again in resign.

“Here.” He gave him the money and took the bouquet of roses.

The man protested but Sebastian asked him to take the money because he didn’t have the time for discussion. As he ran to catch up to me, I didn’t try to run away from him. I was tired and I just wanted the day to end.

“Isabelle, wait!” he yelled and I stopped.

By the time he reached me, I looked at him miserably, without any anger or resentment.

He gazed at me, still unfazed by the reality. Maybe that was what he wanted all along as well. *Freedom. Freedom from me.* The thought was killing me inside and I swallowed in pain.

“We have to talk. I want you to understand why,” he said calmly and I shook my head.

“Please, just take me home,” I said and then remembered I wasn’t his wife anymore. “Or take me somewhere...” I exhaled and surrendered, falling right into his arms that soothed me with their magical power.

I bet he expected me to cry. I wanted to. But there was no point in crying, was there?

“Everything will be okay.” He kissed the top of my head. “Come, let’s take a walk.” I looked up at him, preparing to decline his offer, but he softly pressed his finger on my lips, silencing me. “Please,” he murmured.

For a short while, we walked in complete silence and the tension was so great that it could have been cut with a knife. Sebastian still carried the bouquet in his hands without making the smallest attempt of giving it to me. *Maybe he was really afraid I would use it as a weapon.* The thought came as a funny distraction and I even smiled for the shortest second but he noticed and it made him look at me with a sense of light relief. Finally, we ended up in a calm street where not so many people walked by and he ushered me towards a small bench.

As we sat down, I felt the weight of the entire world pressing down on me, but he still appeared to be calm. The fact bothered me. It bothered me so much that I felt the sparkle of anger returning to my system. That was the reason why I turned my head away from him when he decided to hand me the roses almost like he was trying to make a peace treaty.

He sighed, laying the bouquet back onto his lap.

“Isabelle, I understand that you’re confused.” I gave him a look of fury. “And angry,” he concluded.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I was visibly upset.

“I didn’t tell you because I knew you would react like this. I thought that it would be better to finalize all of the formalities before we had this conversation.”

“Formalities?” I arched my eyebrows. “I... Sebastian I can’t believe you would do this after everything. I trusted you.” I couldn’t wrap my mind around the fact we were

actually divorced. “Why? Why would you do this?” I asked in resignation.

He came closer and looked at me, his green eyes boring into mine. He shook his head. “Isabelle, I couldn’t stay married to you with the existence of that contract.” I gasped and he raised his voice, pleading me to give him a chance to explain. “Believe me, if there was any other way, I would have chosen it because taking the risk of losing you was the last thing I wanted to do, but it wasn’t fair to keep you in that prison anymore.”

“I don’t understand you. I thought—”

“Isabelle, would you really want to stay in that kind of a marriage for the rest of your life?” He caressed my cheek. I didn’t move away from him.

“Of course I would. I...” I exhaled to ease the pain and looked at him with sincerity. “I love you, Sebastian. I—”

“Isabelle, sooner or later that contract would become a menace. It would create fights and insecurities, leaving us trapped in a cycle because the only way out would be fulfilling those dreadful terms,” he said in a firm voice.

I gazed at him for a long time, processing what he had told me and I knew he was right. Once again, he demonstrated the level of his maturity. Unlike him, I didn’t think about the complications we might have in the future. All I thought about was that we were happy right now and that it would be enough for the rest of our lives. He sensed I relaxed and he even pulled me into a light embrace while I mentally scowled at myself. My gaze traveled to the roses and he smirked, handing them over to me and this time I accepted them.

“So,” I looked at him with fear in my eyes, “what happens next?”

“It’s up to you to decide if you want to stay or go, but I would really like you to stay,” he accentuated the last words almost like it hurt him to say them.

I looked at the bouquet in my lap and raised it to feel the soothing scent of my favorite flowers.

“Why give me the choice if you don’t want me to leave?” I asked softly, talking more to myself, than him.

He snorted and even though he was already threateningly close, he leaned even closer, consuming me with his presence. Our breaths collided, forming a hot mist in the cold autumn night and as if we couldn’t fight it, our lips glued to each other like magnets. In a moment of mental frenzy, it felt like I exploded into million little pieces and poured myself into him. And he accepted the gift, drinking, taking—devouring me.

When he broke the kiss, we were both panting for air and I couldn’t stop shivering. “I love you, Isabelle,” he said in a shaky voice and gently cupped my face between his hands, forcing me to look solely at him. “And I want you to stay because I need you almost like I need the air to breathe. But I can’t expect you to stay because you have to, love. I want you to stay because you want to.”

His words brought me to tears and I looked away from him because it shamed me to cry, but it was so hard to ignore all the emotions that barged in with the power of a tsunami. Searching for something that would help me calm down before I gave him a reply that was crystal clear because there was only once choice I could make, I leaned down to smell the beautiful roses and indeed, their scent had an immediate healing effect. For a few moments, I meticulously observed them and something inside the bouquet caught my eye. When I looked at Sebastian, revealing my curiosity, he smiled almost like he encouraged me to see what was hidden between the roses.

I reached for the mysterious object, pulled it out and raised it towards the light of the street lamp. In surprise, I started breathing harshly as I realized I was holding a small box in my hand.

“What is this?” I turned towards him, waiting for an explanation.

A smile of genuine happiness widened on his face and those green eyes burned with affection. “I started to think

you'd never find it," he whispered and reached for the box in my hands.

A heavy lump formed in my throat as tears reappeared in my eyes without any chances of holding them back and my legs turned to jelly when I realized what was about to happen.

Sebastian stretched out his hand and I laid my palm into his, letting him pull me up on my feet. I felt utterly exposed in front of his vigilant gaze that held mine with powerful intensity.

"I know—" he started, and then sighed as if he needed time to compose himself.

If I didn't know better, I would have sworn there was a flicker of fear in his eyes. He took a deep breath, announcing that he was about to speak again.

"I know there was pain and I know that I hurt you," he whispered and looked away for a moment like he was fighting something. When he looked back at me, his eyes reflected the crystal green light of painful regret. "No matter how much I try to make you forget, I'm well aware that some things might be unforgettable...and inexcusable. Which is why I probably don't deserve the privilege to ask what I'm about to ask, but I think you realized by now that I'm a very selfish man."

A contour of a smile appeared on his face but it disappeared so fast as if it was carried by the speed of light.

"Sebastian," I muttered his name, extending my hand towards him and caressing his face.

It pained me to see him in such a fragile state of mind and I was willing to do whatever it takes to offer him comfort, but I was carried by the power of emotions myself. As if he knew, he closed his eyes and reached for my hand which was frozen on his cheek. The beating of my heart picked up a fast rhythm as he laid a soft kiss on my knuckles and kept his stare on my hand.

"I wish I could tell you that I'm willing to let you go, but I'm afraid that would be a lie," he breathed and looked up, locking his gaze with mine. "If you're prepared to ignore the

laws of common sense one last time and put your trust in the flawed man who is willing to do whatever it takes to keep you by his side, I promise I will cherish that gift for the rest of my life.”

He swallowed, taking a step towards me. In a light touch, he brushed his thumb along my lips and leaned over to steal a small kiss. As our lips trembled against each other, both of us closed our eyes and savored the moment of bliss. Instantly, I realized that he wasn't the only one who couldn't let go. Yes, there had been pain. A lot of pain. But there had also been so much beauty that emerged from the ashes of the hurt that created the initial bond between us. Essentially, the consequences of the tragedy that happened on that cold, dark night brought us together, and the only way we could survive was in each other's arms. His eyelids lifted up, like curtains that uncovered the green light of his gaze which was fully focused on my expectant eyes.

“I love you more than anything on this earth, Isabelle,” he whispered achingly. “And I am powerless in this matter because nothing will ever make these feelings go away.”

The lump that squeezed my throat overpowered me at last and a tear escaped my eyes, rolling down my cheek. Smiling sadly, he wiped it away and squeezed my hand between his warm palms.

“I love you too.” I breathed as he kissed the top of my hand once more.

“No more tears, love,” he said decisively. “If you stay by my side, I promise you nothing but happiness, until we take our last breaths.”

It started to rain and more than a few raindrops fell on the ground, soaping it with wetness but Sebastian didn't mind. Like the Prince Charming I had always dreamt of meeting, he replayed the scene from my fantasy and got down on one knee, looking up at me with sheer affection gleaming from his deep emerald gaze.

I tried not to look at the little box in his hand and pretend I was calm, but the nervous fidgeting of my fingers as

well as the constant shifting of my eyes, gave me away.

“Please, let me take care of you and continue making amends.” His words made me look straight into his eyes again. “Every day, every hour, every minute, I’ll show you all the ways in which you’ve captured my heart,” he said in a shaky, pleading voice and I couldn’t speak.

One by one, tears left my eyes, forming a stream of immense blessedness when he opened the box, revealing a small ring that shone with the brightness of hope.

“There is no greater honor than the honor of having you as my companion through all the good and the bad in this life.”

My heart broke a little at the sight of this breathtaking, yet wounded man who spoke to me with so much beauty in his words. I knew that nobody would ever repeat them and even if they did, it wouldn’t be the same.

“Will you marry me, Isabelle?”

After uttering the question with silky softness that left me bewildered, his face held an expectant expression, almost like he didn’t dare to breathe. Sebastian. The Sebastian I loved. *My* Sebastian had just proposed. He’d proposed because he wanted to spend a lifetime with me. I gasped a smile, trying to grasp that this was reality. If it had been a dream, I knew that I never wanted to wake up from it.

“I love you,” I whispered in a small, rushed voice, fighting the river of tears and hoping none of this had been a product of my vivid imagination. “Yes,” I raised my voice in excitement and then lowered it down. “Yes, I will marry you, Sebastian.”

His eyes were filled with the same emotion and there was a wet trace on his face but it didn’t come from the rain. Without removing his gaze from mine, he took the ring out of the box, taking hold of my hand and gently placing it on my finger.

As the cold metal frame of the ring came into contact with my skin, the warmth embraced my heart and I felt like I

had been given something priceless that made me feel whole again.

Without letting go of my hand, he got up and now I could clearly see the reflection of tears in his eyes. Then, he smiled. At first, it was small and barely noticeable but gradually it turned into a suppressed laughter. I wasn't prepared for what was going to happen next. Sebastian seemed to be so energetic and happy that he lifted me up and spun me around in his arms, repeating sweet exclamations of love. By the time he put me down, I was feeling dizzy and he had to hold me by the shoulders or I would have lost my balance.

"I love you," he spoke softly and smiled without end. "Isabelle, you've just made me the happiest man in the world."

I smiled genuinely, still finding a way to control the dizziness. "The feeling is entirely mutual."

His eyes followed mine when I diverted them to look at the ring. It was simple, yet special and beautiful. In the middle of it, there was a sign that looked like an eight, only turned around. I ran my index finger over it.

"Do you know what it means?" he asked and I shook my head.

"It looks like a small bow." I decided to take a guess anyways but Sebastian's chuckle revealed it might not have been the best of ideas.

"It's a symbol." He smiled. "It represents the time we're going to spend together." A flicker of light woke in his eyes as he whispered a single word. "Infinity."

As if we were connected by some invisible strings, we couldn't look away from each other. He pulled me into a tight embrace and I couldn't help but thinking that my form fell into his arms perfectly. I didn't know how long we remained in that position. It was raining and we were soaking wet, but neither of us seemed to be prepared to move just yet. We didn't speak. We didn't need words. Instead, we focused on the sounds that broke the silence of the night around us and we kissed on the rain for a long time.

“Beautiful moments and red roses.” I heard the voice of that old man who had given us the bouquet.

By the time we broke our kiss and turned to face him, he was already disappearing out of our sight.

Baffled, I looked at Sebastian. “How did you manage to get him to deliver you the ring in the roses?”

He arched his eyebrows. “I didn’t. His interference was entirely coincidental,” he said and his gaze darted towards the sky.

“Are you trying to tell me that the man simply appeared with the roses and the hidden ring and you knew nothing about it?”

“What if that’s exactly what I’m trying to tell you?” After a short break of silence in which I stared at him thinking he had gone mad, he chuckled. “Don’t worry, I already had the ring. I slipped it in the bouquet when I was chasing you on the street. I didn’t think it would be that difficult but you really made me earn it.” He winked. “I’m glad the roses came to my aid.”

I couldn’t wipe away the smile from my face. “The roses were nice but you shouldn’t underestimate your charms.” I tilted up my head. “Though I have to say you’re lucky you made it alive after telling me about the divorce.”

He smirked. “Oh, I’m lucky.”

As his lips gently brushed against mine, his bright gaze told me the words held a double meaning. A small smile teased my lips and his gaze roamed along the features of my face, making it appear as though he observed me with adoration.

“Thanks to you, love, I’m the luckiest man alive,” he breathed and kissed me gently while I shivered at the sound of his endearments, knowing that I would remember this moment for the rest of my life.

Sebastian. Love. Infinity.

Chapter Fifty

In the darkness of the night, they were looking at the stars, trying to guess the meaning of their ill-shaped patterns and sizes. She thought she saw the contours of a familiar face on the sky because it looked just like the one she had once imagined, but she wasn't sure. He didn't see it, but told her he did anyway because he knew it would draw a smile to her face. She knew he lied, but appreciated it all the same.

They looked at each other and she read the letters that were right there, written on his face. He loved her. He...loved her. And even though she thought she would never rise up from the pain; there she was loving him all the same.

And there they were...two missing pieces of the dusty, old, broken puzzle...mending their edges, finding a way to hold on without looking back...without thinking about the hurt and the pain.

He saw her. Not just her mesmerizing eyes, her smooth skin and curly, brown hair. He saw beyond that. Way beyond, inside her soul. Inside where he could reach and touch the pieces of the heart he had broken. Some of the pieces were so badly damaged that they could never be fixed again, but he didn't care about that because they were his broken pieces—his to cherish, his to love, his to bring back to life.

And nobody could love her the way he did because he was the only one who knew. In a strange way, he was the only one who could understand and he recognized she was aware of that, but he didn't dare to hope that she would ever...

And yet, when he looked at her, he saw it, right there, written on her face. She loved him. She...loved him.

At that moment, he finally acknowledged the existence of angels and heaven because they gave him this miracle. And

he knew it would be okay. With the awakening of the first sparkle in those eyes that had appeared to be dead for so long, he knew they would survive this because they had the only thing that mattered.

He loved her.

She loved him.

Love would take away the pain.

The End

“Now will you let me read it?” Sebastian’s impatient voice startled me just as I was finishing the last words that marked the ending of the story I had been working on the past few months.

I took one last glance at my notebook and closed its covers before slowly turning to face him. The moment my eyes landed on his graceful shape, I couldn’t help but smile.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to see the two words I’ve been waiting for,” he said in a light voice and I narrowed my eyes, feigning confusion but he wouldn’t let me get away with it.

As he stared at me expectantly, I stole a moment for myself—a moment to reflect on what I had just written. The dark, sad story was over and now I was ready for a new one. It wouldn’t be about heartache though. I didn’t have an exact idea yet, but I knew I wanted to write about beauty, love and happiness.

My gaze roamed around the garden that was gradually surrendering its beauty to the approaching winter and I was surprised that Sebastian had come to look for me by the swing chair because he almost never went out into the garden. He must have known I was writing and he had to have been terribly eager to read the rest of the story.

“A promise is a promise, I guess.” I shrugged and reluctantly handed him the notebook, already feeling nervous that he would read it. He accepted the gift with a smile on his face.

“You’re right.” He sat down next to me and something flickered in his eyes when they landed on my engagement ring. “A promise is a promise,” he repeated, his eyes still frozen on my finger.

His eyes traveled to mine and they locked together in a tender gaze. I brushed my fingers along the surface of the ring, circling around that symbol that represented how special our bond was to him. *Infinity*. But that infinity had to have come with an expensive price and even though I had spent days wondering about it, I didn’t dare to ask. Sebastian filled our time with so much happiness and precious moments, almost as if he wanted to make sure to keep his sacrifice a secret, but I didn’t want secrets between us. I had to know.

“You never told me.” I started, taking the time to phrase my question.

“Told you what, sweet?”

“What did you have to sacrifice for all of this?”

He sighed. “Nothing important.”

“Sebastian, Goliath means the world to you. I would never forgive myself if—” I swallowed because the thought alone troubled me.

On the other hand, he wasn’t even mildly upset. “Designing buildings means the world to me, Isabelle. I don’t have to be the head of The Goliath Holdings to do that.”

“But what will happen to The Goliath if you leave?”

“Not if I leave, Isabelle. I have already left,” he revealed and continued when I urged him to answer my question. “The Goliath will be owned by my family for as long as my father is alive. Then, it goes in the hands of the city of Rosemont, just like the will of my demented great-grandfather predicted.”

“I feel so guilty. All those employees...”

“You don’t need to feel guilty. Most of my employees as well as clients have decided to follow me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked with a dose of fear.

He smirked. “I wasn’t about to jeopardize our future, Isabelle. I’ve started a new company,” he said calmly, as if opening a business was the easiest thing in the world.

“A new company?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“Yes. You’re going to love the name.” His face held a mysterious, teasing expression as he prolonged the anticipation and then revealed it at last. “*Paradise Constructions.*”

I frowned when I heard the name. It was beautiful, but didn’t have a ring that could be associated with architecture like The Goliath.

“Why would you call it that?” I had to ask.

“Because it’s run by an angel,” he stated in a voice that rang with pride and I couldn’t make out if he was for real or joking.

“Wow, calling yourself an angel?” I laughed and proceeded teasing him. “Not at all conceited, Sebastian.”

He gazed at me, constantly smiling. “Who says I’m referring to myself?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. This was getting weird. “Didn’t you just say it was run by an angel and since you’re at the head of it—”

“I never said I was at the head of that company.”

I chuckled. “Then who is this mysterious angel of yours?” I asked and before he said anything it dawned on me.

He leaned really close and kissed my lips. *No, that couldn’t be.*

“I’m glad you asked,” he said in a light whisper that teased my lips. “It’s you.”

I was sure he was playing tricks on me. “Sebastian, that’s not funny.”

“I’m not joking. I wouldn’t dare to get on the boss’s bad side.” He winked at me.

“I don’t believe you. One doesn’t just become a CEO over the night. I haven’t even signed anything.”

“Oh, but you have, *angel*,” he accentuated the word, visibly enjoying the look of horror that settled over my face.

“The divorce papers?” I mumbled in shock. “You wouldn’t...”

He shrugged. “I’m afraid I would.”

I was confused, surprised and furious... mostly furious. “But I know nothing about architecture and running companies, and—”

“Shh, shh.” He gently stopped my angry rumbling with a small kiss. “It’s okay, love. I’ll take care of that. You don’t have to do anything. You’re not the CEO of anything; you simply own a lot of shares. “

“Why did you do it?” I was more astonished than ever.

He took a deep breath. “It’s a gesture, Isabelle. I want you to know how much I cherish the gift of your light.” Bright, green eyes bored into mine as he whispered softly. “No amount of your purity will ever wash away my sin, but despite that, you chose to stay by my side. And for that, I am sharing with you everything I have—my business, my soul, my heart.”

“Sebastian, you don’t have to.”

“But I do, Isabelle.” He smiled sadly and ran his hand through my hair. “You don’t realize how special you are, do you angel?”

Our breaths collided and my throat squeezed into a heavy lump that was filled with sentiment.

“Of course you don’t,” he whispered, “but that makes you even more special.” He smiled and wrapped his arm around me protectively. “We should head back inside. It’s getting cold and dark out here.”

His impatient gaze told me he expected me to take his advice, but I remained sitting on the chair, getting lost in the sight of the transcending interlude of the dimming light and the approaching darkness on the sky. The round shape of the

moon revealed itself behind the thick clouds and its companions, the shiny, glittered diamonds followed only moments after.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Sebastian pleaded. “I don’t want you to catch a cold.”

I shook my head. “I want to stay here. I want to look at the stars.” I turned to him and smiled. “Besides, it’s never cold when you’re around.”

His arms embraced me even tighter, making me feel blessed and complete. Thank you, God, I thought to myself and looked towards the sky. Then, it appeared; the little fraction of blinding light, a shivering ornament of the black night. I had never seen anything like it.

“Sebastian, can you see it?”

“What?” he asked in a quiet, tender voice.

“That ball of light on the sky?”

For a long time, his eyes roamed along the darkness above, trying to catch a glimpse of the light I was talking about. I knew he wouldn’t be able to see it since it was already gone, but I was amused by his persistence to find it.

“Yes, I can see it. It’s beautiful, love,” he lied.

Smiling, I turned to face him and I saw it, right there written on his beautiful face. Behind all the murky clouds that hid him from me for so long, I saw a man who would do whatever it takes just to draw a smile to my face. And there was no greater gift than the emotion that blissfully reflected itself in those green eyes. *He loved me. He... loved me.*

Chapter Fifty-One

Nearly two months after Sebastian's proposal, we got married in a small chapel, in secrecy and away from all the prying eyes. The Everetts knew about his actions and plans. Although they disagreed with everything and Theodore had even gone to great lengths to convince him to change his mind, Sebastian stood his ground and remained relentless in his decision to remarry me. The wedding took place in a very intimate atmosphere, in the presence of three people, two of which had been Jared and Helen who played their parts as best man and maid of honor. When compared to our first wedding, there hadn't been tons of guests, a grandiose limousine ride or a fancy reception, but we had the one thing that had been missing that first time. *Love*. Love we expressed in the vows that were sprinkled with so many words of hope and affection. Once again, Sebastian swore that he would cherish me like his most prized possession until the end of our days. And I swore that I would always love him the same. When we said our '*I do's*', we couldn't look away from each other and we smiled as if we had an inside joke nobody else could understand. In a moment when his hand brushed against mine and gently placed a ring on my finger, an uninvited, distant memory found its way in. But instead of evoking the feeling of sadness or doubt like before, it had only managed to pull me towards him even stronger. While leaving the dark tunnel of the past and entering the light of the new beginning, I knew we would be happy because we'd been through hell and made it out alive. And when I was putting the ring on his finger, I had never been more sure of anything in my life. I loved him.

"You may kiss your bride," the marriage officiant said after proclaiming us husband and wife.

As a final act that erased the last remains of the painful memory, Sebastian removed my veil and just like it had back

then, the scent of mint teased my senses. Only this time, instead of looking at me with cold contempt, there was nothing but warmth in his deep, mesmerizing emerald eyes. He leaned in for a kiss without breaking the gaze we shared and as he was about to lower his lips on mine, something flickered in his eyes and he smiled a wide smile.

“My beautiful bride,” he whispered in a hot breath and finally sealed the beautiful moment with a passionate kiss that literally swept me off my feet.

We got completely carried away with each other and only when Helen cleared her throat, reminding us that we weren't alone, did he reluctantly break the kiss.

“There'll be plenty of time for this, love birds. Now it's time to celebrate,” she teased us and then hugged me tightly. “Congratulations, sweetie. I'm so happy for you!”

She was on the verge of crying and she tried to camouflage it, but by the time she got to Sebastian she was drowning in tears. Sebastian glanced towards me and we both chuckled at the fact that Helen was so deeply moved. She was truly an angel and without her, I certainly wouldn't have gotten as far as I had.

After Jared and Amelia wished us nothing but happiness, we headed to a small restaurant where we had dinner and though both Helen and Jared tried to convince us to prolong the evening, Sebastian seemed so impatient and eager to leave that he simply ignored their request and told them we had to take care of something important. As we were walking outside, I caught a glimpse of Helen who was smirking and winking at me. I blushed, but I had no time to contemplate on Sebastian's words because before apprehension could get the best of me, he reassured me by treating me like a true gentleman, with so much affection that defeated the slightest thought that there was anything for me to be nervous about. When we got to the car, he wouldn't stop smiling and he pulled something out of his pocket. When I realized it was a blindfold, I looked at him in confusion.

He shook his head. “I don’t even want to know what you’re thinking,” he said in a light, teasing voice and smiled with reassuring tenderness. “I have something to show you and I want to make sure you don’t see it before I ask you to.”

I chuckled at his blunt demand and reminded him that he was supposed to trust me in all matters, but he wouldn’t give in and I ended up sitting in the car with the blindfold tightly pressed against my eyes. I tried to get him to reveal something, but he silenced me with a light kiss and started the engine, letting me know that he couldn’t be manipulated into giving away his little secret.

During the ride to the mysterious place, he gently held my hand and I was getting more excited as the time went on. I wondered where he was taking me and it was hard to resist the urge to peek through the blindfold. Sebastian had to warn me several times to keep it on my eyes. Even though I couldn’t see him, I sensed that he constantly smiled at me and I could picture the glowing warmth that radiated from his mesmerizing green eyes. Suddenly, the road changed and it felt as though we were driving on gravel and not asphalt. The car came to a halt and Sebastian warned that I wasn’t allowed to take off the blindfold yet. He opened the door of the car for me and led me outside. I had to hold his hand and let him lead me. Even though he held my hand firmly and tried to warn me about my steps and direction, I was still staggering along the way like I was drunk. Both of us were laughing at my desperate loss of orientation. He held me by my shoulders to steady me and he told me that I could open my eyes now. When the soft fabric of the blindfold slipped from my face, I found myself standing in front of one of the most beautiful houses I’d ever seen. Taken aback by the breathtaking sight in front of me, I looked around in awe and then settled my curious eyes on Sebastian.

“Do you like it?” he asked like he was dying to hear my answer.

“I love it. It’s beautiful. It reminds me of a fairytale castle.” I smiled.

“It’s yours, princess.” He smiled back at me.

“What do you mean?”

“This is our new home. I hope you like it.”

“New home?” I was confused. “But...but we already have a home.”

“No, Isabelle. We have a house that’s filled with bad memories. That place cannot be a home to us and I don’t even want to think about trying to turn it into that. This is our home and safe haven. This is where we’ll build our lives based on love, respect and care for one another.” He looked towards the magnificent building in front of us and then settled his eyes on me.

“Thank you,” I whispered to show my gratitude for everything he had just said.

A long, warm smile grazed his lips as he picked me up into his arms.

“What are you doing?” I started giggling as I put my arms around his neck.

He gently kissed the bridge of my nose and continued gazing and smiling at me. After a while, he gave up and told me about his plan. “I’m carrying my beautiful bride over the threshold.”

I didn’t need to say anything. Immense happiness was visible on my face and I closed my eyes, enjoying being held tightly in his arms. When unlocking the door turned out to be a big struggle for him, I slowly slipped from his arms and he lowered me back to the ground. He unlocked the door and I wanted to step inside, but he stopped me and picked me into his arms again. When we entered the house, he put me down gently and I gazed at the general splendor that surrounded me. It was breathtaking, so warm and inviting. I couldn’t believe that the house was actually ours.

“Welcome home, Mrs. Everett,” he murmured.

“It’s so beautiful.” I breathed.

He cupped my face and gazed at me. “Nothing is more beautiful than you, princess.”

“If Prince Charming says so, then who am I to disagree?” I teased him.

“Am I your Prince Charming?” he asked with a trace of curiosity in his voice.

I closed my eyes and savored the beauty of the moment. “Yes, you are. I waited for a long time to meet you, but now you’re finally here. And I was even lucky enough to have you come with a full package. You know—beautiful castle, white horse and all.” I smiled at him.

“Well, it’s more of a black jaguar.” At first, I didn’t know what he meant, but when it finally dawned on me, we both burst into laughter.

As the laughing subsided, we remained gazing at each other and Sebastian brushed his knuckles along my cheek. That simple action made my entire body shiver and I blushed because of the reaction he evoked in me.

“I love to see you laugh...and blush,” he said softly and continued watching me in amazement. “Come, I want to show you around.” He took hold of my hand and I happily followed his lead.

The house was wonderful, just as I thought it would be. Sebastian really did his homework and he told me all about the history of the place. There were so many facts he shared with enthusiasm that I pretended to yawn a few times to let him know he could get on with the tour. We laughed at that and it felt wonderful. It was like magic in the air that made me careless and happy. When we arrived in front of the last doors on the ground floor I wanted to open it, but Sebastian’s hand stopped me.

“I want you to close your eyes again.”

“Why?” I pouted and then chuckled at my ridiculous reaction.

“I have another surprise for you, beautiful.” He winked at me.

“Another surprise? What could possibly surprise me more than this?”

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see.” He smiled mysteriously.

I closed my eyes and he placed his hands over them and leaned over to me. “I want to make sure you don’t cheat.” His breath traveled to the nape of my neck and it spread fire over my body. The smell of his cologne claimed the space around me and I felt my knees becoming weak from the powerful sensation that took hold of me.

Since I could barely move, he had to gently push me towards the door and lead me into the room. I loved letting myself go into the safety of his arms. I knew he’d always catch me if I fall. When he finally removed his hands from my face and told me to open my eyes, my reaction didn’t fall short and I squeaked when I discovered the space around me. We were in a beautiful library. Everything looked exactly the same like in our old house. My eyes sent him a thrilled as well as a puzzled look and he knew what I was wondering about.

“I had all of the books transferred here and I decorated it exactly the same like the old library. I knew you loved that place so I thought you might like to take it with you,” he explained warmly.

“I must be dreaming. This can’t be possible, can it?” I raised the obvious question since it had been only two days since my last visit to the library.

“You’re not dreaming, Isabelle.” He chuckled. “Would you like to look around?”

I nodded and walked around, admiring the fact that every book stood in its old place. Without a doubt, that library was the biggest proof of Sebastian’s perfectionism yet. As I took in the huge space around me, I noticed a nice reading corner with beautiful leather sofas and a large table in the middle. When I took a closer look on the table, I noticed there was a book laying on it. Already from afar, I observed the beautiful picture of the kissing couple that graced its covers. My curiosity got the best of me and I walked towards the table and took the book with the beautiful covers in my hand. The title of the book said *Virtue & Vanity*. As I lowered my gaze I

was suddenly speechless, paralyzed as I read the name of the author. *Written by Isabelle Everett*. Shocked and with tears of joy in my eyes, I turned towards Sebastian who was smiling at me.

“I forgot to tell you that there was one more surprise lying around” he whispered.

“How? How did you...?” I was at loss of words as I skimmed the pages that had every word I had written printed on them.

“It’s a long story. One day I will tell you, but for now, I’d like to keep it a secret. I hope you don’t mind the title. They thought it would fit.”

I loved the title. I loved what he did for me. I loved him.

“I like it. But the book. I don’t understand.” I was stunned.

“It has been edited and published by one of the most prominent publishing companies. They love your work and this copy is one of the few they printed to give you an impression of what it would look like when it reached the bookstore shelves. The final decision about the publishing depends on you, of course.”

“Sebastian...I...I...” I felt a lump forming in my throat. “Thank you.” I was so touched by his gesture that I started crying.

The sound of Sebastian’s light laughter filled the room as he pulled me close and kissed away my tears.

“They loved your book, honey. All I had to do was send them a copy and that was enough for them to decide they wanted to publish it. So you see, it was you, Isabelle. Not me.” His soft whisper made me look up to him and smile in appreciation for his encouraging words.

He placed his hand on the small of my back and we continued our tour around the house. We climbed the stairs in silence because my thoughts were consumed by Sebastian’s wonderful gesture. Nobody had ever done something so

beautiful for me. It meant the world. The world he created for us. The world I would cherish with everything I was until I took my last breath.

After we walked through numerous rooms on the first floor, there was only one room left and I knew what it was. It was our second wedding night and it felt so much different than the first one. That dreadful night had been miles away, almost entirely faded from our lives. Tonight would be different. Whatever happened, I trusted Sebastian, I had faith in the man I loved and there was no fear or doubt in my mind. Still, I was getting a bit nervous because I was so inexperienced and the only experience I'd had... No. I wouldn't think about that night. I wouldn't let it continue ruining my life.

"Isabelle," Sebastian muttered my name and I turned to face him.

The expression on my face probably made him think I was afraid because he approached me like I was made of glass, exactly like he used to when I was terrified of him.

"There is nothing scary in that room, sweetheart. No need to be nervous. I swear." He kissed my forehead and gave me another reassuring look.

I nodded and a weak smile danced on my lips as he opened the door and let me in. Out of all surprises, this was the biggest one. Somehow, my intuition warned me that I would probably be welcomed by the romantic sight of candles, wine, chocolate and rose petals which would oblige me to give myself to him. However, none of these things were there when we went inside. It was just a room; exquisitely beautiful and beyond luxurious, but still, just an ordinary room. No surprises there, at least not the ones I was almost sure I would find. I looked around, allowing my eyes to linger on the breathtaking furniture and works of art that hung on the wall. When my gaze settled on the bed, I swallowed loudly and looked at Sebastian in anticipation. Both of us held an intense, serious expression on our face, there was no more laughter. He approached me and lifted up my chin. I wasn't afraid. I didn't tremble. There were no scary flashbacks torturing my mind, no

tears forming in my eyes. I wasn't sad, but I wasn't smiling either. I was really nervous because I didn't know what his expectations were and what bothered me even more was that I didn't know if I could meet them. With everything in me, I wanted to please him and make him happy. I wanted us to be happy.

“Isabelle...” He brushed his thumb along my jaw and that tingling, electric feeling caused by his touch started dancing on my skin again. “I understand if you're not ready. We don't have to make love tonight. We have our whole lives and thousands of nights ahead of us to do it. There is only one thing I expect of you tonight, and that is to see you smile.”

He said that we would *make love* and the sound of the phrase rolling off of his lips sent a pleasant shiver through me. I looked into his expecting eyes and smiled, just like he said he wanted me to. The bright green eyes lit up with fire and he pulled me into his strong embrace, resting his head on mine and inhaling the scent of my hair. He started whispering to me.

“From all the things that God gave me in this life, you are the most precious one and I will never let you slip from my embrace.” He took my hand and pressed it against his chest. “My heart belongs to you. It beats for you. *Forever.*” His voice rang with certainty that made me look up at him.

I led his hand towards my chest and let him feel the fast beating of my heart. “And my heart belongs to you. *Forever.*” I was swept away by the power of emotion building inside of me. One glance at him and I could tell he felt the same.

Our eyes locked as we were simultaneously hit by the realization that we wouldn't be able to stay away. The force that was pulling us together was magnetic, undeniable and overwhelming. I came even closer to him and I felt the shivers running through his body. He felt it too.

“I love you, Isabelle,” he said with burning need and crushed his lips against mine in a kiss that blew away my mind and everything I thought I knew about the man in front of me.

Though only moments ago, I thought it was impossible to feel more than I felt, the kiss we shared took me to a whole new level of consciousness until I was nothing but sensation. Everything was color. Everything was filled with beautiful flowers and the smell of roses. Everything was sheer joy.

“Sebastian.” I tried to break our kiss because I had to tell him, but he was reluctant to take his lips away from mine.

He continued kissing me gently and with so much passionate hunger like he was a thirsty man who just found a drop of water in the driest desert.

“Sebastian.” I finally managed to get away from the kiss and I held my hand on his chest to get his attention and to avoid him kissing me again.

Both of us were still panting for air, crushed by the feelings. We just stared at each other for a few moments, unable to speak.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” he said with painful honesty as his mind settled back into reality.

“No.” I smiled weakly and then tried to say as convincingly as I could because I didn’t want him to doubt my words. “I want this. I want you,” I whispered.

He looked at me with surprise and admiration in his eyes. An identical weak smile appeared on his lips as he laid his finger on mine.

“Shh. Not tonight, love.” He looked at me tenderly, letting me know he had already made this decision before we even entered the room.

I had to make him understand. He had to have thought I gave my consent only to please him. I had to let him know how I truly felt.

“Please, I need you. I want to be close to you. As close as possible.” I looked at him with sheer sincerity that couldn’t be mistaken for anything else than what it was. “Make love to me, Sebastian.”

A blush spread over my face when I bravely said the words that came straight from my heart and he observed me with amusement.

“You are so adorable. So perfect. So uncorrupted. You’re an angel, Isabelle.” He smiled at me, but then the light from his eyes suddenly got replaced by a sad undertone. “And I’m scared to touch you because I know you’re breakable. I would never forgive myself if...” There was so much sadness in his voice.

I looked at him and I was at the verge of crying. “You’re not going to break me, Sebastian. You can’t.” I shook my head. “Not after you’ve spent so much time putting me back together.”

“Isabelle—” he wanted to say something, but for the first time I wouldn’t allow him to speak.

“I had no hope, but now I have you. And I don’t care what anyone says. *You* make sense. *This*...makes sense.”

He looked at me like my words took him by the biggest surprise yet.

“God, I want you,” he said with striking sincerity like he had lost all control and then he kissed me again.

This time, he tenderly deepened the kiss even more than the first one. As I was succumbing to the emotions his kiss evoked in me, I felt his touch everywhere and I knew it was different because it was only a prelude of what was to come. The force of the kiss eventually subsided and his lips started spreading soft kisses along my cheeks and neck like he ached for me, like it would be painful for him to breathe without me. He needed me and I needed him. We were aching for each other. He suddenly stopped kissing and touching me. Instead of continuing our love game, he lifted up my chin and gazed at my face for a while. There was lust in his eyes, but he was noticeably keeping it at bay. He didn’t have to say anything. I knew what he wanted to ask. He wanted the confirmation that I was sure, that I really wanted this. I blinked and smiled a wide smile. Then I did something I never thought I would do again in my life. I undid the zipper on my wedding

dress and let it slide down to the floor. My eyes followed it as it fell and for a moment, I was reminded of a bitter memory, but Sebastian quickly leveled my eyes with his again, chasing the demons of the past away. His eyes remained focused on mine even though my body was exposed for his gaze and he smiled when he noticed the deep blush on my cheeks. Not allowing myself to have second thoughts about this, I reached for his shirt and slowly undid the buttons, one by one. The look on his face was priceless, as he observed me in amazement, allowing me to take over control. Then I let the shirt slide down his shoulders and I rested my palm against his bare chest, touching his soft and warm skin. A lightning of burning desire and emotion flickered in his eyes and he gave me a light kiss, before carefully picking me up in his arms and carrying me to bed all the while looking at me with reassuring tenderness.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Our eyes locked in an expectant glare as he gently placed my body on the soft mattress. Turning to his side, he climbed into the bed and I followed his movement. We were facing each other, our breaths colliding and mixing into one magical substance that lurked in the air. I waited for him to take over complete control and wondered what it would be like, but he didn't rush things. Instead, he took his time to soothe me and allow me to get used to the idea of closeness that was about to take place between us. At first, he only held me in his arms, stroking my hair, and laying occasional light kisses on my sensitive skin. Even the smallest threat of fear that would try to creep up my mind was instantly defeated by his overwhelming tranquility and gentleness.

I looked up at him and he took hold of my hand, leaning it on his hot chest. He didn't have to say a word, because his soft gaze told me there were no limits to his patience and the revelation eased. Imitating his soft movements, I let my hand gently slid down and just like he had, I explored his body, memorizing the soft feel of his skin under my fingers. Eventually, he closed his eyes and the look on his face was breathtakingly beautiful.

There wasn't even a slight trace of hesitation, but when my hand traveled to his waist, I paused and my eyes froze on the edge of his pants. Suddenly, I wasn't so brave anymore, but more than fear, it was inexperience that troubled my mind. I wasn't ready to take control over this. I didn't know what to do. When I cautiously looked up at Sebastian, he smiled reassuringly like he could feel my discomfort.

He tugged me on my back and leaned over me, propping up on his elbow. Our eyes and lips were leveled up and I gazed at him in anticipation. His stare glittered with traces of desire and I knew he was about to take the next step. The look in those eyes should have scared me, but before I got

the chance to think what it actually meant, he exhaled and hot air grazed my lips announcing a kiss which became a reminder that he meant to cause me no harm. His lips explored mine unapologetically and he deepened the kiss, demanding entrance with his tongue. Our panted breaths entwined and I felt hot and flustered all over, wondering if he would ever stop and miraculously praying that he wouldn't. While he kissed me, his hands continued exploring my body, simultaneously undoing the buttons on his pants with cautious slowness as if he didn't want to scare me. I was aware of what was about to happen and I knew there should have been at least light traces of fear troubling my mind, but at that moment, there weren't.

The only thing I felt was this building heat and the small tingling need for something, but I didn't know what. All I knew was that having him this close to me felt amazingly good, better than I ever thought it would and I wanted more—more of this, more of him. He let go of my lips and ran the tip of his nose down my chin, tilting it up to kiss my neck and my collarbones. When his gaze paused on my bra, he exhaled harshly and looked back at me. Green eyes on fire, at the verge of losing control gazed at me with intensity, searching for reassurance that it was okay for him to continue. A shy smile on my lips was all the confirmation he needed. His hand brushed against my back as he undid my bra and pulled it off with teasing slowness.

I felt exposed and ashamed, so I instinctively tried to cover myself with my hands. Seeing my discomfort, he returned his gaze to my face and I was overwhelmed by the affection that gleamed from his piercing stare.

He closed his eyes and whispered softly as he kissed my temple. "So sweet." He continued caressing my hair and spreading small kisses along the contours of my face. "So beautiful."

I gasped from the sudden burning fire of his touch on my skin.

"An angel without a single flaw." He lowered his lips and they were almost touching mine as his breath grazed their

delicate skin. “Please, tell me you’re real. Tell me you’re mine.” He placed a soft kiss on my lips.

“I’m yours,” I whispered and just like that, I eased the grip of my hands from my body and exposed myself to him.

He propped up on his elbow until he was leaning above me and his eyes roamed my length. When he looked at me again, I looked away because I felt self-conscious and fighting the embarrassment turned out to be harder than I thought.

“Look at me, angel,” he murmured and my eyes gradually met his.

He smiled and caressed my flushed cheek. “Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?” I shook my head and he smiled. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen—inside and out.”

I looked at him in awe, smitten by him and the overpowering sentiment he evoked deep within me. Parting my lips, I leaned closer and draw in a breath before he accepted my invitation and kissed me slowly, achingly, lovingly. The sweetness of his lips, the tenderness of his touch and the calming green horizon in his eyes were almost too much to bear; too much to be true.

“Let me show you.” I heard his silent whisper as he kissed my chin. “Let me love you.” Fire burned against my neck and started trailing down my body. “Let me take you back to paradise where you came from.”

The touching and kissing game continued for a long time and I dreamily sunk into it, until his lips brushed against the top of my panties. His eyes snapped open and looked at mine, reminding me it was him, the man I loved, who asked for my surrender.

“It’s okay, dear. Nothing’s going to hurt you,” he mused. “I just want to give you something. You will like it, but if you don’t all you have to do is tell me and I promise I’ll stop.”

Not hiding the weariness on my face, I nodded, mentally deciding if he had assured me it would be okay, I

would believe him, but when he pulled the edge of my panties, I winced in light apprehension. The moment his gaze landed back on my face, his lips touched me with the attention that brought inexplicable shame.

“Don’t be ashamed,” he whispered in that soft, gentle voice that could always bring me down to my knees. “There is nothing disgraceful about this. These feelings are nothing but pure. Isabelle, my love for you is nothing but pure.”

Without breaking eye contact, he spread small, loving touches along my lower belly, trying to get me to relax while he slowly took off my panties. Refusing to give me the time to become aware of my nakedness, he took hold of my hand, accentuating the approaching experience as something personal that would only bring us closer to each other.

Then, his lips traveled lower and he attempted to kiss me there, causing my legs to instinctively clench together.

“Easy, love. It’s okay. It’s okay,” he repeated over and over again.

All the while he caressed my legs, belly, hips and almost every other place except for the one where I was still reluctant to let him. But soon I felt the ticklish sensation right there where he hadn’t touched me at all and eventually, taken over by sheer instinct that defeated the voice of reason, my legs slowly started opening for him, naturally, as if there really hadn’t been anything wrong or shameful in all of this.

Sebastian smiled and he didn’t waste any time in taking advantage of my surrender. When his lips came to contact with my skin, I felt the expected uneasiness, but there was also a flicker of feverish warmth that rushed through me with such force that I couldn’t suppress a gasp that revealed I wasn’t as reluctant to let him do this as I appeared to be.

“I was right. You are the sweetest thing,” he said in a teasing voice and then he did it again.

At first with light caution, then deepening the kiss just like when he was kissing my lips. The evidence of shame still burned my cheeks, but there was also something that made me

both curious and bold enough to let him continue. The feeling of uneasiness had completely faded away, until I was left shivering and panting for air while trying to deal with the pleasure that he managed to evoke with so much skill that I melted under the smallest touch.

“Sebastian, please... don’t...” I whispered in delirium and he stilled, making the torture even more unbearable. It took me a second to realize he thought I had asked him to stop, but I wanted exactly the opposite. “Don’t stop,” I muttered in one hot breath and the undertone of begging that was evident in my voice took me by surprise.

He smirked, my reply seemed to have satisfied him and the moment he returned his lips there, a rushing wave of warm current swept over me and I transcended right where he promised he would take me—paradise.

While I gasped for air, still captured in the world of dreamy reality where he sent me, I heard the tearing sound of the foil and a flashback vividly appeared before my eyes, but I pushed it back.

Like a man approaching a wounded animal, he slowly moved towards me, while I watchfully followed his movements, keeping my eyes on his. He leaned his forehead on mine and only then, was I struck by the realization that he was completely naked, lying on top of me. I swallowed, doing my best to stay calm and telling myself that I could do this.

“Do you want to stop?” His question caught me off guard and I was ashamed that he noticed.

“No,” I said in a vague whisper, not allowing myself to think.

He brushed his finger against my lips. “It’s okay if you do. I won’t get mad, angel. I told you that I’d understand if you’re not ready for this.”

The expression on his face told me that it took him a lot of effort to say those words and I could tell he didn’t like the idea at all, but he would honor his word. Even in a state of

delirium, he paid attention to my feelings and more than ever, I wanted to return the favor.

“I’m ready, Sebastian,” I said in a clear, brave voice and he confirmed his acceptance of my honest words with a small nod.

Patiently, he allowed me to have a few moments of mental preparation and he didn’t do anything but stare at my eyes, exploring their depths as if he wanted to compel them to give away the emotions I tried to hide from him. The compassion that radiated from his glare prolonged the feeling of warmth he spread through my entire body only moments ago and it made me think that it might not be as bad as I thought it would. I tightly squeezed his shoulders, letting him know that it was okay, but when he settled his weight on me, I felt the proof of his excitement, and before I could rationalize that it was only normal for that to happen, the dreamy apparition of paradise was over and I winced, fearing that the sweetness and pleasure would now have to be replaced by pain and distress.

“Isabelle, sweetheart.” His humble voice broke through the silent room and my eyes snapped open, looking at his shiny green ones.

The desire that both tempted and scared me was still there, but there was also the soothing light and comfort that reflected in those loving, green jewels.

“Please, relax. There is no need to be nervous.” A weak smile teased his lips.

The troubling pressure of guilt pushed me to speak, and I parted my lips, wanting to offer an explanation that would account for my cowardly behavior, but Sebastian wouldn’t let me go through such torture.

“Shh,” he whispered in a tender voice and slowly pulled me back towards him, accounting for my part instead. “Don’t be afraid.” He gently caressed my flushed cheeks and smiled to offer an additional reassurance. “I’m not going to hurt you, love.” He gazed at me with compassion and whispered. “I would never hurt my angel.”

His promise echoed in my mind and the raspy tone of his voice was overwhelmingly revealing, letting me know he truly meant what he said, but the expectation of hurt and shame was still there. I held my breath, expecting that it would hurt and in preparation for the pain, I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth so that I wouldn't make a sound. He lowered his lips on my forehead and instead of moving, he completely stilled on top of me, that scary part of him only an inch from entering me.

“No, Isabelle.” The warm breeze of a tender whisper teased the sensitive skin of my neck. “Let me see your beautiful eyes.”

Despite the strong need to indulge him, I kept my eyes closed. I might have been nervous, but he didn't have to know it. I didn't want to disappoint him.

“Don't fear this. I promise there will be no pain. I'll be gentle.” Weightless, soft lips nudged against mine, silently pleading for me to believe him. “I'll make it perfect, love.”

A hot breath ignited by the spark of his words escaped my lips. Even though I was about to travel into mysterious depths of the unknown, I knew I had to trust him and the gaze in his eyes that reflected nothing but the light of love, told me he was worthy of that trust.

“I'm not afraid of you, Sebastian,” I repeated the words in my mind and suddenly I felt the need to let him know how strongly I was connected to him. “I'm not afraid, love.”

The lightning of emotion flickered in his eyes and he took hold of my hand, squeezing it under his palm. Then, he leaned down to kiss me and while my mind got distracted by his soft lips, he gently pushed inside me, maybe only for a fracture of an inch. I was trembling, more because of my fearful expectation, than because of the actual experience.

“Shh,” he soothed, moving away the lock of hair from my face. “My sweet Isabelle.” He continued in such a slow pace that beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, revealing the level of his restraint. “You don't know how much I love you.”

As I took in deep breaths, grasping the fact that this was happening and that it didn't hurt like I had expected, his admission of love chased away the last traces of fear. Together with my body, I gave him my heart and my soul—all of me; and he accepted the gift, creating a slow, gentle and patient interlude of affection.

“I love you too,” I muttered in a shaky breath and he smiled, the bright reflection in his eyes showing how much the words meant to him.

He was inside me completely, but he didn't move. I could tell it took a lot of self-control for him to stay still above me because his muscles were flexing, trying not to move until I got used to his presence. I was overwhelmed by the full feeling and only mild discomfort, but there wasn't any pain.

He kept whispering to me, laying small kisses and caresses on my forehead, cheeks and neck, until the feeling of light discomfort entirely disappeared and I relaxed in his arms. Sensing the undeniable influence he had on me, he leaned really close, his scent possessing the space around me and putting me under a spell I never wanted to wake up from.

Disarmed by his captivating endearments, I uncovered my anticipating gaze and my cheeks flushed deeply when I met his knowing emerald stare. He ran his fingers along my hot cheek and smiled at me, once again showing that he had the patience of a saint.

“I've never laid my eyes on someone as perfect as you. You're a work of art,” he whispered in a silky soft voice that dripped with affection and then he slowly started moving inside me, never taking his eyes away from mine. “I dreamed of this. I dreamed of you, my dear.”

I clenched on to him and drank from the spring of the captivating green sea that soothed me with its own tranquility. For a moment, I expected the return of discomfort, but what I felt instead was the feeling of pleasure that grew like a bubble that was about to burst one more time. In accord to his harsh breaths, my own breathing had become more intense as I

forgot about the pain and savored the reappearance of heaven he offered so selflessly and freely.

Almost like he desired to blend our bodies together into one being, he pulled me closer and closer to him, until our skin was glued together, the beating of our hearts intertwined into a beautiful symphony that picked up on the rhythm of what had to have been the ultimate act of love.

His touch was everywhere. Embracing me, touching the most hidden parts of me, inviting the experience of nirvana I never knew existed. I was shaking in his arms, waiting, wanting and burning.

Stronger than ever before, I felt that I belonged to this man with everything I was. Only he could make me feel; only he could create fire with his burning touch. Only he could take my body and see into my soul because he was an essential part of me. He was like water, sun and air. He was everything.

“I’ll never get enough of this. I’ll never get enough of you.” He was trembling above me, squeezing my hand even tighter and spreading electric shivers through my fingers. “My sweet, adorable angel.” His shaky lips trembled against mine as he drove deep inside me and then kept me in his strong embrace, continuing his never ending kisses and sweet, whispered endearments like he was reaching out for me in this state of grace. “Now we are one. Forever.”

“Forever,” I repeated as the shivering explosion brought me to the edge of madness one more time.

All I could do was call his name, convinced that nothing could surpass the beauty of this divine experience. Displayed in front of my eyes was the highest demonstration of love that brought back all the meaning in the world. *My world. Sebastian.*

After a long time, when our breaths finally returned to normal, he kissed my forehead and then lay next to me, turning me to my side, closer and closer to him, until we ended up in the very same position from the beginning.

He took a strand of my hair in his hand and looked at me warmly, like he was inspecting every single part of my face and simultaneously burned its impression in his memory. Despite the fact that a mixture of sweat and hot panting breaths remained lurking in the air like opium that hypnotized us and made us still in each other's arms, it had indeed felt pure, just like he said it would and the revelation brought tears to my eyes.

“Hey,” he muttered, kissing away my tears and then he frowned as if he was startled by an unnerving realization. “Did I—” he hesitated and his expression turned to worry. “Are you okay, love?”

“I’m okay, Sebastian.” I smiled and caressed his cheek. “I’m okay now.”

Pleased by my reply, he gently kissed the bridge of my nose and pulled me into his strong embrace. As we spent the rest of the night, peacefully lying in each other's arms until we were greeted by the slow sunrise, it felt as if there was a new beginning after a long period of darkness that resurrected together with the sun. Our eyes opened to greet the new day and we felt it in the energy that was shared between us.

He loved me.

I loved him.

Love took away the pain.

Epilogue

7 years later

“Would you agree that your book is rather... controversial?” The reporter narrowed her eyes at me while she spoke in a rich, British accent.

I crossed my legs and smiled politely, pretending that I didn't notice her question had a slightly condescending tone to it. Over the years, I had learned to hide my emotions very well, especially to the outside world. Ever since the book Sebastian helped me publish achieved unexpected success, I had to deal with a lot of attention and publicity. It was a burden that would toughen up even the most fragile person.

“Yes, I would agree, As a matter of fact, I think that's exactly why so many people have liked it,” I said in a cheerful tone, although I felt like ending the conversation.

The journalist scribbled something with a pen, and then glanced at the other paper in her hands which probably held scripted questions she was supposed to ask me. She lowered her glasses and the moment her eyes returned to me, she folded the document, putting it aside.

“And what in the God's name possessed you to write such a story?”

People had asked that question before and many times, but never with such straightforward bluntness that managed to catch me off guard.

“What *inspired* me,” I corrected in a calm voice, “to write this book was a spur of the moment feeling and once I started writing, I just couldn't stop. There's really nothing much more to it.”

“Has your husband read the book?” she asked in a quick, flat voice.

I took a deep breath and kept a composed act, even though I was starting to get annoyed.

“I think you already know the answer to your question, but yes, he has read it.”

“Personal involvement, perhaps?”

I arched my eyebrows, making a mental decision that was the first and last time I had conducted an interview in my home. I had a good hunch the interviewer wanted to get some juicy details about my personal life, rather than discuss my book.

“I don’t think I understand where you’re—”

The screech of the large door interrupted me and I turned towards the direction of the noise. The boiling anger I was about to spill on the rude woman in front of me, receded the moment I saw my little angel.

“Mommy, Mommy.” My daughter ran straight into my arms and I hugged her tightly, pulling her up on my lap and turning her towards me.

“Hey, sweetie.” I brushed off the locks of light, curly blond hair from her eyes and kissed her forehead. “Where is Aunt Ashley? She was supposed to look after you.”

Adorable little eyes with the unmistakable, beautiful shade of green widened as she started laughing and I knew there was trouble.

“Shh,” she put her tiny finger on my lips and started whispering. “We’re playing hide and seek. Daddy told me to hide here.”

“Oh, did he?” I rolled my eyes and thought about Sebastian’s never-ending pranks.

He loved spending time with his daughter so he worked from home most days, but the two of them were always coming up with different ways to play tricks on everybody around them. I was lucky to have Ashley around

because at times it seemed she was the only person who could keep them at bay. Over the years, she had turned into a wonderful young woman and I was really proud of her. She was studying at the dance academy in New York and lived with us since she'd turned eighteen.

The reporter cleared her throat to remind us she was still there. "This is your daughter Hope?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly, feeling bad about having my daughter present during an interview even I wanted to get away from.

The moment she heard the woman's voice, Hope started squirming in my lap and turning to face the woman. Her curious eyes took in her fancy appearance before she addressed her.

"What is your name?" she asked in a sweet voice.

The woman smiled dryly. "My name is Elizabeth. What is yours?"

"You know my name." Hope giggled. "You said it. It's Hoope Emerett."

The playfulness in her voice and the fact that she still couldn't pronounce her last name correctly made us all laugh.

"Everett," I whispered to her softly.

"Em-Emerett," she repeated the wrong name again.

It was adorable.

"That's a pretty name. And how old are you, Hope?" The reporter finally seemed to relax.

She became shy and sought refuge in my embrace. I pulled her closer and whispered in her ear. "Come on, Hope. Tell the lady how old you are."

I stroked her pretty hair and she became lively again.

"I'm—" She counted on her small fingers and then proudly raised her hand. "This old."

"Four years?" The woman asked.

“Uh-hmm.” Hope nodded.

“You’re very smart for your age.” The British accent seemed to have become even more apparent in her voice.

“You talk funny,” my bright little girl concluded. “Where you come from?” I could barely suppress a chuckle because as it turned out, suddenly the reporter herself was the one who was being interrogated.

“I am from England,” the woman replied.

“My auntie Jane lives there,” Hope offered and I nudged her softly.

If there was one thing Hope wasn’t shy about, it was talking to people, even if they were strangers. It was a habit that was impossible to break.

“Your youngest sister?” The reporter returned to our interview.

“That’s right,” I admitted with reluctance.

When our mother died from a heart attack, not shortly after Hope was born, Jane was offered the same privilege as Ashley, but she declined, opting for a private school in England instead.

“Talking about your family members, some of them didn’t respond too kindly on your aspirations to become an author. Your sister-in-law has been spreading rumors that might reveal the true motives behind your book.”

I knew what she was doing. She was trying to provoke me again and get me to talk about Dianne whose public attempts to humiliate me had gotten only worse since Caleb divorced her.

“I’m not sure what you mean, but just like everything else, liking a book is a personal preference.” I opted for a diplomatic reply.

“A girl from Rosemont married to a New York millionaire—” The reporter cleared her throat and smiled slyly. “One of us wasn’t born yesterday.”

“Hey,” my daughter raised her voice and started fidgeting in my lap. “You can’t talk to my mommy like that!”

Apart from her distinctive emerald eyes, the one thing Hope inherited exclusively from her father was his unyielding temper and sophisticated attitude that demanded respect and obedience.

Suppressed laughter sounded through the room and I didn’t have to look to know that Sebastian and Ashley were standing by the door, enjoying Hope’s little show. The interview turned out to be a complete disaster, but I didn’t mind. It was kind of refreshing to see Elizabeth squirm because of the trouble Hope gave her.

The second she spotted him, Hope jumped from my lap and ran straight into Sebastian’s hug, sweetly scowling at him for letting Ashley find her when he’d promised he wouldn’t tell. One adorable apology was enough to make her forgive him. My eyes froze on the sight of my two angels who hugged each other lovingly. I looked towards Ashley and we smiled at the beautiful scene in front of us.

They whispered something and Hope giggled as Sebastian tickled her tummy. Suddenly, she turned towards Elizabeth and pointed a finger at her.

“Daddy, she was being rude to mommy! She said...She said—”

“Shh,” Sebastian gently warned her to be quiet and then he narrowed his interrogating gaze at Elizabeth.

I knew he was joking, but Elizabeth seemed unnerved all the same. It was a trait Sebastian would probably never lose—the ability to intimidate people. I shook my head and giggled at the memory of times I used to be scared of him. Now, he could glare at me impatiently all he wanted, but he was always the one who ended up giving in. I enjoyed those moments, knowing exactly how special they were because only I and our little Hope could get him to act that way.

“Well, I think we’re done here, Mrs. Everett. It was a pleasure to talk to you,” she blushed and offered me her hand

before she headed outside.

She nodded at Sebastian and smiled at Hope, then hurried towards the front door together with Ashley who was seeing her out.

Sebastian looked my way and we laughed simultaneously at the unusual scene that had taken place only moments ago. Hope joined our laughter and Sebastian picked her up in his arms and then walked towards me. Every time I met the depths of his mesmerizing eyes I saw that sparkle of light. I saw love that was so strong it could never die.

“Here’s your little assistant.”

Sebastian slowly placed her back on my lap and then knelt next to me, embracing us with his wide arms and all the beauty of the world poured itself into this moment we shared with our little angel. I was at ease because I knew that nothing could ever touch the perfection of our life. It was built on foundations of love and trust. In the seven years we’d been married, Sebastian had continued showing what a sweet and caring man he was. Just like he had said, he was filling my days with countless moments of love and happiness. There was no other place I would rather be than right there, in that beautiful house surrounded by the people I loved more than anything in the world. And it wasn’t just a house. This was a place where I belonged. This was my home. *This was paradise.*

About the author...

Astrid Jane Ray is an author who likes writing anything from poems to short stories and novels. Being a hopeless dreamer, she isn't limited to any particular genres, although she is desperately addicted to dark romance novels.

Her style is best described as a mixture of dark, angst filled drama which is followed by the slow development of love and redemption.

More than writing, she likes to read and her idea of a perfect day is a good book combined with a cup of hot tea and preferably rain. Currently, she resides in The Netherlands but dreams of moving near the sea, where she could spend her days writing and taking pleasure in the joys of a never-ending summer.

