



JENNISE K

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SOMEONE LIKE YOU

JENNISE K



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EPILOGUE

*To each and everyone of you who continues to believe in love.
To all of my readers. To myself.*

PROLOGUE

When I met him on a rainy afternoon, the air smelt like gardenias.

My black Oxford pumps were soaked from accidentally stepping on a puddle, and the tiny yellow umbrella I held up barely saved me from the chilly rain.

When I met him on a rainy afternoon, the sky was pink and blue. I was starving and almost craving to smell the stuffy scent of my closed-up home's small living room.

When I met him on a rainy afternoon, his son held my feet out of the blue and called me 'mum'. He rushed out of the restaurant only seconds later, his cheeks a pale flushed hue.

When I met him one day on a rainy afternoon, he looked into my eyes and apologized. And inside my head, I thought to myself . . . what a lovely way to meet a lovely man on such a lovely rainy afternoon.

CHAPTER ONE

One Rainy Afternoon

*She rushes through the crowd in the pouring rain.
She rushes soaking wet, closer to the scent of lilies.
Closer to his heart.*

As I walk out the front door, the light showers of rain continue to drizzle over the healthy green and prettily blossomed foliage that surrounds my plain home. The flowers I've spent hours nursing almost every weekend since I've inherited this home from a distant aunt are luckily all in bloom at the same time, and every inch of the garden is looking well-groomed.

I smile. The corner of my eyes crinkles with pleasure as I glance around my front yard while standing at the edge of my front porch, opening my bright yellow umbrella. I quickly pull it over me. It doesn't help to keep out much of the rain, but it's convenient.

Quickly, I step out on to the driveway and begin rushing towards the front gate. The quicker I get to the bus stop, the better. I really need to hand over the hard copy of the manuscripts I've just completed proofreading and editing last night. Thankfully, I still have almost four hours until the deadline.

"Where are you rushing off to, Gemma?" Mrs. Red yells as I slide the gate to a close and lock it as quickly as I can. Turning around, I smile at the old woman. My small feet hurriedly shuffle along the sidewalk. Her blatant need to pry doesn't surprise me—as much as it used to—any more. I've just come to accept that with age comes the need to satisfy one's curiosity about one's family members, neighbours, and everyone else's personal lives.

"Going to submit these manuscripts, Magenta! See you around!" I

yell back, putting my hand up in a quick wave as I almost fly past her house. I'm only three blocks away from the bus stop now, and I can almost see the bus driving its way towards the stop quicker than my two tiny feet can carry me.

Magenta Red.

I have always thought that it is a beautiful name—if not particularly hilarious in its unity. Sometimes though, I couldn't help but wonder if Mrs. Red's parents ever thought that their daughter would go on and marry a man with the surname Red when they named her Magenta. I could only laugh thinking about her parent's reactions when they first heard of their daughter's new surname.

"Oh no!" I gasp as I feel my feet step into a puddle.

Looking down, I frown as I notice that my black Oxford shoes are completely soaked. Sadly, I do not have the tiniest bit of time to stop. Instead, I push forward until I'm at the bus stop and then quickly begin shaking off the leg that had stepped into the puddle.

My eyes meet a strange woman's, and I instantly smile, embarrassed at being caught in this situation.

"Even such a beautiful day like this has its disadvantages, doesn't it?" She speaks quite clearly. Her tone is brisk but I can hear a hint of humour. I nod back sheepishly.

"You're right. It's such a shame."

Soon enough, the bus reaches the stop. After letting the current passengers get off, I join in the line for getting in.

Stepping on the bus, I look at the empty seats as I assess the best spot to sit. It doesn't take too long to realize that my usual seat is empty, and I quickly make a beeline towards it. I grin happily as I settle myself into the seat and place my bag on my lap.

The rain outside splashes against the bus's window. The bus begins to move, and I smile as I try to see through the foggy glass out into the world outside. The usual feeling of content settles into my chest as I pull my jacket closer to my neck and place on my earplugs, tapping play on my usual playlist.

I love taking bus rides, especially when it rains like this.

Sitting here, almost near the back as it rains outside, a whole new world seems to be created in the large vehicle. A whole new world that feels

safe despite being so uncertain of its passengers, that feels warm despite it raining so hard outside. It's a system that works well enough, loving bus rides and not having a car of my own.

I am not a girl from a . . . particularly rich family. In fact, my family is quite the middle class. Ever since I can remember, my mother has worked as an accountant in a large firm, and my father has been a professor for the Faculty of Agriculture in a local university back home. Their jobs never changed and neither did our financial standing.

I was always aware of the bills and expenditures of the house. Despite having a single maid that came by five days a week, I remember we would always budget and be aware of our spending. Regardless, I was always quite content with my life. I loved my moderately sized home, and it didn't matter that I didn't get a car gifted on my sixteenth birthday like the other kids or a credit card to spend my parents's money with.

Breaking me out of my thoughts, the bus comes to a stop. I check that all my manuscripts are safely placed in a plastic bag inside my bag before pulling out my umbrella and getting up. Quickly, I begin making my way towards the exit. Today is a more important day than usual. Apart from having to submit these manuscripts, it's also payday, and that means it's the day I do my grocery shopping and pay the bills.

Being a twenty-four-year-old girl taking care of my own house and expenses and doing my master's part-time at the university while working full-time as an editor for a very popular publishing company is not exactly what I had initially thought adult life to be. I had been a dreamer; in my dreams, everything was pastel and Instagram-worthy. I was living a beautiful life filled with magical multitasking and a prince charming who always stood by my side, supporting me.

Reality isn't like that though. I figured that out the very first day I moved into this house alone. Although I know my parents would love to help me out, asking them for money is probably the hardest thing I have had to do in quite a while, and so, I try to keep that off as the absolute last option. So far, it has been working well. Sometimes, in the moment of solitude, I even admit to myself how proud I am of this little world I have created for myself.

Stepping off the bus, I turn in the direction of the publishing company.

Despite life's realities, however, I still do try to find the beauty in

things. I try keeping my home and garden just as I used to dream it would be. I reckon, as long as I can get one thing right, the rest won't matter too much.

Prince Charming looks way better in my imagination anyway.

Turning around the street's corner, my eyes spot the publishing company. I let out a huff of exhausted breath, already dreading having to go up five floors of stairs. Being claustrophobic isn't exactly a quirk to celebrate sometimes.

The rain begins to get stronger, and my feet don't carry me as quick as I want them to. I tighten my grasp on the small yellow umbrella as I angle it against the direction of the pelting rain and grimace when it barely does anything to hold the icy shower of water off.

As I pass the large brightly painted building, I've come to appreciate over the past years working at the publishing company the rich scent of beef stir-fry that wafts out of the Chinese restaurant and out into the rainy street. Had it been some other time, I would have given in; however, this month, I am tight on the money and have to buy other things for the house, so Chinese take-outs will have to wait for a while.

"Gemma! It's good to finally see you in the office! Have you been well?" Alicia, the chief editor of our publishing company, smiles up at me as I enter the office and walk over, knocking on the door. I open it when she gives the green signal.

I try to ignore the secret jibe she holds in her sweet greeting and smile back at her as brightly as I can. "Hello, Alicia. Yes! I've been well. As you must know, since we report to each other every day one way or another . . ." Instantly, I smile brighter and push the sealed and tagged envelopes towards her on the table. "I've just brought over the finished editing for the three hard copies you wanted to get done."

Alicia's smile turns into a grin. I can't help but wish I had just mailed the manuscripts instead. "Thanks, Gemma, I'll get through the rest of the processes."

"How are your studies going?" Alicia asks as she always does, carefully putting the envelopes to the side. She's trying to seem like she's just showing concern and care, but I know better. Alicia only holds a post-grad. Soon, I'll hold a master's. This specific thing has caused a lot of the most boring manuscripts coming my way to edit for the past few months, and that too, most of them the old-fashioned hard copies.

“It’s going really well.” I chuckle awkwardly as I shuffle on my feet, trying to think of how I can keep myself from coming off as a show-off. In the end, I give up. Anything I do will seem like a slap in her face. Alicia has always been very brutally competitive. The main reason why she’s the chief editor and so many of the rest of us are not.

“That’s great.” Alicia nods, turning back to her large desktop screen.

“I just hope it doesn’t affect your work efficiency, Gemma. I’d hate to let you go.”

* * *

The strong smell of the rain and traffic hits me straight in my senses as I step out of the building and on to the now slightly drizzling street. Despite the rain, the skies have turned into the colour of pale pink blush, and I glance around the sky with affection before opening my umbrella and stepping out into the light drizzle.

“Take care on your way home.” One of the graphic designers in our company, Jason, waves at me as he sticks his head out of the front door and then sticks it back in.

“Thanks, Jace!” I smile at the man’s antique and dumbly wave back. Knowing the silent clash between Alicia and I very well, I always appreciate it when Jason sneaks out of the office just to come down five floors and wave me goodbye, just to make me smile after the harsh encounters.

My black Oxfords tap against the sidewalk, and I smile as I begin making my way towards the mall. After dealing with Alicia, I’m glad to be having an outlet for distraction. It’s even more stressful on days I do desk duty. Those are the worst.

My gaze roams around the somewhat busy downtown street, and I realize that the heavy rain has slowly calmed down during the time I was at the company. *It’s better this way*, I think to myself as I begin to pass the Chinese restaurant. *I mean, after all, I do have shopping to do and bills to—*

“Mum-mmy!”

I freeze. My eyes snap down to my legs where two tiny pale arms are now wrapped around my calves. Immediately twisting around slightly and kneeling down, my eyes find two large bright ones staring back at me.

Despite my shock, I smile at the little boy. I wrap my right hand

around the small boy's waist, and I craftily pull him under the protection of the umbrella.

"What's your mummy's name, little man? Have you lost her?"

"Mummy!" The child's small grubby fingers find my hair as he tries to climb on to me. I flinch awkwardly, thinking of how to handle this.

Flustered, I re-adjust my shoulder bag and pull the very mistaken, climbing boy into my arms.

Before today, I've never been quite good with kids. It's not like I dislike them. On the contrary, I love babies. It's just that they hate me. My nieces and nephews, and even random babies on buses. Well . . . maybe not this child.

A quick look into his eyes and I notice how tear-stricken his cheeks look. His large, wide eyes are staring at me in wonder and with love I don't really deserve. I can't help but envy his mother though. To have this child look at her with such devotion and love all the time, she must be a very happy woman.

I frown slowly, suddenly realising that his parents are nowhere to be seen. "Where is your mum, sweetie?"

"Mum-mmy! Have you forgot me?" the boy sobs out loudly as he begins pulling at my hair, trying his best to stick his slightly wet self closer to me.

This isn't going to work out. I sigh as I look around for an adult looking for this child.

"Okay! Okay!" I blurt out, making up my mind as I tighten my hold on the child. I've begun to notice how awkwardly the security guards at the restaurant have begun to look at me. "Where's your dad?"

"I'm so sorry!" The smooth liquid-like voice flows smoothly through the air and into my ears. Something about this soft boyish voice sends a ripple of awareness through me. I almost flinch with the awkwardness of these feelings.

My eyes snap up and my breath hitches in my throat as I stare at a man rushing towards us with a large black umbrella over his head. My eyes run over his perfectly styled hair that has fallen a bit askew with clear signs of distress as I notice him run his fingers through his hair nervously.

Reaching us, he also drops to kneel before us and our eyes meet. Something in my chest bursts and I can only blink.

Breathe, Gemma! Breathing is important! It gives carbon dioxide to plants. Plants are very important. They give oxygen to us. Basically, breathing is very, very important.

Inhale. Exhale. Inhale!

“I’m so sorry,” he says, moving his eyes from his child to me. My eyes, however, are focused on the pale pink hue on his cheeks. They remind me of the sky and I smile.

Exhale, damnit!

“Pa! Mum-mmy!” The little boy suddenly jumps in my arms. Surprised, I almost tumble back when two strong hands wrap around me, stopping me from falling on my arse. Immediately, I tighten my arms around the boys in return.

“I’m so sorry about that. Isaac is usually more well-behaved.” The man coughs, removing his hands from me as if he has been burnt.

“It’s no problem.” I shake my head awkwardly. “I’m afraid he’s gotten a bit wet. You should change him out of his clothes in case he gets sick.”

The man bristles at my words but still smiles and nods.

His arms begin to reach forward towards his child when, suddenly, the kid begins pulling at my hair, trying to get closer to me. Despite my pain, I grit my teeth together to stop myself from yelping and, instead, hold the boy close. It’s time to take a different approach.

For a second, I glance at the man awkwardly, hoping he doesn’t hate me too much for this, then I turn back towards the frantic child.

“It’s okay, sweetie. Mummy is going to be here,” I mumble into the tiny boy’s ears. I notice the man before me stiffen. I avoid his eyes, caressing the boy instead while I continue to talk to the child. “Mummy needs to grab something from the supermarket. Why don’t you go to Dad for a bit?”

“No! Mummy liar!” young Isaac whines as his tiny fingers find the material of my jacket and curls around it tightly.

My eyes snap to the man’s, and I fight the urge to just stare into the deep brown eyes that seem to penetrate into my soul.

“Your . . . your mother’s right, Isaac. She needs to grab something from the store. We’ll wait for her in the restaurant with Grandma and Grandpa. Come.” The man reaches for the child again, and I lean forward, allowing him easier access.

“No!” Isaac screams out in the—thankfully—almost empty sidewalk. My eyes avoid the passersby as I decide to pay attention to the child before me instead. He moves his small arm to my neck and tightens.

“Don’t let me go, Mummy. Pa is a liar,” he whispers into my ear, and I almost feel my heartbreak for the little guy. He moves his head back to look at me with pleading eyes. I purse my lips together, knowing exactly well that I am losing to the child. He has his father’s eyes—eyes that make me feel like they are looking into my soul.

“Don’t you trust Mummy?” I gulp and quickly whisper back, remembering to smile warmly at the child in my arms. His father stays kneeled before us, watching us quietly.

“You do, don’t you?” I can only imagine what a scene the three of us must be to the other people walking around us. Still, I keep my focus on the strong little bundle in my arms. Slowly, the child nods and my smile widens.

“Then go to Daddy. Mummy will find you both, okay?” I whisper in the child’s ears. The man stays kneeled before us, still quiet. Still observing us.

“Promise?” the child whispers as his fingers tighten around my neck.

I almost push him into his father’s arms and bolt away from this place. In my life, there are many things that I have done. I’ve lied. I’ve stolen from my mum’s makeup collection. I’ve skipped school once or twice too. I’ve even snuck out of my home once just to go meet my then best friend who had just broken up with her stupid boyfriend.

Despite all these reckless things I’ve done, I’ve never cheated on someone, and I’ve never given someone a fake promise.

“Promise?” Isaac whispers again and I turn to his father. I feel my heart jump in my chest when I see the man’s quiet eyes already watching me. The pink hue that was present only in his cheeks has now spread all over his face. Instead of looking embarrassed, he looks upset now. Still, the man watches me, waiting for what I’m about to say to the boy.

“I promise.” I smile at the big sad-eyed boy as I take my free hand away from him and quickly push it into my bag. Quickly pulling out one of the many cards I was made to make, I put one into the now relaxed child’s hand. “And in the meantime, if you miss Mummy, then you can always call me, okay?”

“Okay, Mummy,” Isaac whispers softly as he closes his small fingers

around the card. My eyes turn to the man's once again and I smile.

"If Isaac misses me, please let him talk to me," I tell the silent man as I lean forward and let him take the child into his arms.

Immediately, both of us get up on our feet, and I realize just how tall the man is compared to me.

"Again, I'm very sorry." The man nods again, looking slightly embarrassed and grateful.

"Let him call me if he wants," I reply instead. Something about the man makes me think that this will be the last thing he will do in case Isaac misses his mother.

Waving at both the teary-eyed boy and the tall man, I turn around to leave.

I don't know what it is that I'm feeling in my chest, but suddenly, something feels heavy. Is it possible to get so attached to a strange child I've never met before . . . so quickly?

"Wait! Mummy!"

I stop. Turning around, I watch the boy extending his arms towards me. I walk closer towards little Isaac with a bright smile. "Yes, sweetie?"

"I miss you," the boy whispers as if he doesn't want his father to hear.

"Isaac," the man warns. "Your mother has somewhere to go."

I glance at the man and then at the child. For a second, I just stand there under my umbrella, watching the father-and-son pair in front of me.

"I'll miss you too, Isaac," I respond finally and then on impulse and my embarrassment, I lean forward and place a kiss on both of his cheeks. "Now, be good, okay?" I smile, waving as I begin turning around and walking. The further I get, the quicker my feet begin to move.

"I miss you, Mummy!" I hear a distant yell. I feel my heart constrict. Rain begins to pour down on the city again. I quicken my steps, hoping that the distance will make me feel less of a loss for a child that isn't even mine.

Still, under the thunderous rain, I let myself have a moment of weakness. I let myself act because of my emotions. I don't think I'll ever forget this afternoon, this situation, and this child. This rainy afternoon will always be something that I'll remember every time it rains.

"I'll miss you too, Isaac. Take care of yourself. Please don't go running out of restaurants during rainy afternoons. It's dangerous. Please

don't call strange girls 'mummy'. Please be healthy and well. Maybe one day we will meet again."

CHAPTER TWO

One Peaceful Morning

As she steps outside, still feeling a bit sleepy, the morning air caresses her skin softly, greeting her lovingly. She smiles and takes a deep breath—the scent of roses. Her toes curl in the grass underneath her bare feet. She closes her eyes and just feels. Ah, what a peaceful morning.

The best time to wake up every morning is right before dawn.

The air is the clearest at the time, the morning traffic just begins to sound around the neighbourhood, and the sun is the weakest then.

The time is best to wake, best to go for a run, best to walk around one's garden, waiting to see the sun completely rise. Personally though, I find this time the best to edit manuscripts. Apart from the air, my head is always the clearest during this time as well.

Every morning, I wake up around five, brush, and shower before getting on with the editing. By seven, I can't read another page to save my life, and so, I make myself breakfast instead. By eight, I stroll around my garden, pulling away inspiration from the green beings before returning inside to my work.

That's how today finds me again, strolling in the garden, randomly glancing around the morning-dew-covered leaves and flowers starting to bloom for the day.

"Gemma! Up very early again, dear! Honestly, are you okay?" Mrs. Red calls across the fence from her own yard. One glance her way and I know she's just woken up herself. Her rough knot of a silver bun above her

head only goes to compliment the woman's sharp features.

"Good morning, Magenta!" I call out, waving at her. "No, no, everything is fine. I'm an early riser."

For a minute, Magenta just stands there on her porch, quietly contemplating me from the distance, but then she smiles and nods. "I'll believe you! There's a neighbourhood dinner at mine this Sunday evening. I'll expect to see you!"

I grin. I'm never one to miss out on free food. "Of course, I'll be there!"

"Good!" Mrs. Red beams. Mr. Red's voice calling her name sounds out in the morning, and she immediately turns towards it, turning back in my direction. She sends me a wave before rushing inside the house.

I just smile. I stand in my spot as I once again continue to gaze at the flowers, just taking in the clear scent of the morning.

I've never had such noble aspirations. I've never thought of a family outside of the one I was born into. I've never really thought about getting married, having a child of my own, and taking care of them more than I take care of myself.

Maybe it's because I had dated so much in high school. A boyfriend. A breakup. A new boyfriend. I was never promiscuous. I suppose that was the problem. I never gave them what they wanted. I suppose I can't blame anyone but myself. Being so active in the dating circle, I must have been expected to be sexually active. Maybe that was why my last boyfriend did what he did to me.

At the thought of the boy I hadn't seen since senior year, I begin feeling the same signs of anxiety I always did after the incident had occurred. After the horrible first two years of secretly meeting a counsellor, I thought I was on better terms with it . . . and myself. I guess not.

Quickly, I send one last glance at the plants before walking into the house.

I gave up on dating after that incident. I'm twenty-four now; it has been seven years since, and I've never been happier. I've never been lonelier.

My feet automatically carry me into the kitchen. I eye the electric water heater for a second before deciding to make myself another hot cup of cocoa. Since I'm free to edit all day today and have no chores to do outside, I can cut myself some slack.

The white flimsy curtains blow around the living room softly with the morning breeze as I make my way towards the pale olive sofa and settle myself on to it.

I pull my legs up and tuck it underneath me as I settle into the comfortable seat. The large open glass French door allows me to have a clear view of the backyard garden. I inhale the smell of gardenias with closed eyes and a heart filled with contentment.

“Thank you, God. I am thankful for the life you have given me.” I smile, opening my eyes and slowly bringing the cup to my lips. I take a sip and sigh happily.

My eyes wander to my tiny working nook. Out of the five manuscripts handed to me by Alicia at the last deadline, I’ve completed three already. Two of which I really did enjoy reading, so it didn’t feel like a large chore. The third one was a bit of a bore, very cliché but I couldn’t complain; it had passed the screenings and selections after all.

The fourth one, which I currently am on, looks like it’s a bit of a tragedy. A big reason why I’ve been putting this book off until now. At this stage, I deduct that if this does end like I think it is going to, and one of the main characters does die, then I’ll have the last book to bring me back. It’s a risky plan, but I’m determined to work it this way in order to get this lot finished by the deadline again. Alicia is always ready to fire me after all.

Another soft gust of wind waltzes into the living room. I straighten in my seat; my eyes snap up to the view my backyard presents just as the first showers of rain begin to fall. The scent of rain reminds me of a little boy I had met once on a rainy afternoon. The sound of the soft rain brings back his wide scared eyes staring into mine.

A sigh slips from my lips. I take another sip of the hot cocoa. A month has passed since that afternoon. *It has been thirty days today. I hope Isaac is well,* I think to myself as I remember the boy I had met that afternoon. The boy who had called me mummy . . . and the boy’s father.

I often find myself thinking about him during days when it rains like this. The sweet, sad little boy. Every time it rains, he returns to my mind again, and I once again crinkle up with guilt about not keeping my promise yet. Each time, I have to remind myself that they have my business card, and I had given him a way to reach for me. Each time that only makes me feel worse.

“I hope you’re well, little Isaac,” I speak out loud to the rain, my grip on the mug tightens but I continue, “I hope you’re not running away from your father. Please be well, little man.”

* * *

“Have you been eating well, Gem?”

A soft airy chuckle leaves my lips as I slump back on my bed, shrugging off my slippers as I shuffle under the blanket, my pyjamas already protecting me from most of the cold.

“I’m fine, Dad. Don’t worry. What did you make for dinner tonight?”

“I made the baked chicken you really like. Your mum just reached home a few minutes ago from work, so she must be digging in right now. What did you have for dinner? And breakfast? And lunch?”

I can’t help but smile. My father usually acts more like a mum than my mum does, to be honest. He’s often the one nagging me about eating more, taking care of my house more, and telling me about his best male students in college who can just be perfect for me. My mum, on the other hand, is more laid back. Her mind is usually on her work, and the last thing she wants to know about is a topic holding ‘boys’ and ‘Gemma’ together. In her brain, I’m too young to even walk with boys. It’s a little weird sometimes because she had me when she was twenty-two, which is two years younger than I am now.

“I had cereal and two cups of cocoa for breakfast, eggs and cheese for lunch, and chicken and broccoli for dinner,” I respond, carefully removing a wild strand of hair off my face. “How are you and Mum? Are you both planning on visiting soon?”

This is my way of saying ‘Please visit me. I’m missing you both.’ I know Dad must be smiling on the other side of the line. I grin with him, a shameless red flush settling itself on my cheek.

“We will come by for the weekend next week, don’t worry.” Mum’s voice sounds from somewhere in the background and my grin widens.

“Love you, Ma!” I call out loudly. Two chuckles sound from the phone and I close my eyes, happily shuffling further into the mattress.

“Love you too, sweetie. It’s really late, isn’t it? We should let you sleep,” Mum says, seemingly having gotten closer to the phone. I groan.

She's right. Like most times. It's almost twelve and tomorrow is payday. I have to go out and do grocery shopping and pay the bills. I also think I'm going to treat myself to a good movie at the theatre as well.

"Yeah, I guess," I mumble in response. "You both have work as well. Dad, you have a morning lecture, don't you?"

"Yeah, 8AM. Hate it just as much as the kids do," Dad groans, and I smile.

"Best to let you both get more sleep then. Goodnight, Ma! Goodnight, Pa!"

"Goodnight, bubba."

"Goodnight, kiddo. We love you!"

After the call ends, the room is quiet once again. The only light comes from the neighbour's brightly lit bedroom next door. For a second, I wonder if I should shift myself to one of the other rooms. Maybe the one next to Mrs. Red's house; she's usually down in bed and out by nine. I shake my head at that thought. There is no way I'm letting go of my master bedroom.

A thought I've come to being accustomed to suddenly flashes through my mind like it does once in a while, and I sigh peacefully, letting myself wonder about Isaac and his father in the privacy of my solitude.

In this solitude and silence, no one judges me for thinking of two strangers I may never hear from again. In this solitude and silence, no one berates me for my actions that day. In this solitude and silence, I am at peace to think about the two brown pools that feel like they see through my soul without anyone telling me to stop.

A small breath of contentment leaves my lips. I turn in my bed, throwing my leg on the free space. I close my eyes, feeling the first fumes of sleep beginning to cloud my eyes.

"Goodnight, little Isaac."

Goodnight, his quiet dad.

CHAPTER THREE

One Starry Night

*She stares at the sky—pitch black over the city lights.
She smiles.*

“Somewhere, there is a place where it’s starry tonight.”

Are you sure you want to see this movie?” My best friend, Saara, turns to me with an eyebrow cocked up.

I grin. “Scared to see fish-man and human-girl sex, Poofy?”

“Shut up, okay?” The tiny girl hmphs as she holds on to the bag of chips. I tighten my fingers around the bottles of water.

“I’m not scared of that! We survived that BDSM one, didn’t we?” she continues. This time, however, her voice is a hushed whisper. I, on the other hand, can’t help the snort of laughter that leaves my mouth. “Right! That was such a disappointment.”

“Let’s just hope this has a happy ending,” Saara whispers as the people beside us in the waiting lobby begin to glance at us.

“What the hell are these folks staring at us for? Watch the loud trailer playing on that wall instead, man!”

“Shhh, we’ll get told off very soon.” I chuckle along with her, my bright eyes glancing around the crowd of people casually.

I stop. My breath hitches in my throat, and I grip the bottle of water in my hand tighter.

Across the lobby, I see him seated on one of the sofas in the corner. His eyes are settled on the screen in front, a small smile is spread across his face. For a second, I almost get up on my feet and acknowledge him—ask where Isaac is, then I stop.

If he wanted to, he would have contacted me, but he didn't. Maybe he wants to ignore that embarrassing afternoon where his son called an unknown woman 'Mummy'.

My decision proves to be correct because, only a second later, a woman appears from beside him, giggling as she continues talking to him. My eyes snap to the man's face again, and I watch his small smile widen up a fraction.

"GemGem?"

"Huh?" I blink, realizing I've completely ignored my best friend because of this sudden surprise.

I blink again, turning towards Saara. "Sorry, Poofy. See that man there?" I motion her towards the man and watch as her eyes widen. She speaks before I can continue.

"Wow, he's hot! Is he Asian? What race is he?"

I sigh. "Does that matter? I don't know what he is, but remember I told you about a kid calling me his mum?"

I see her eyes widen into two saucer-like circles. "Let me guess, that's the dad?"

I nod, pursing my lips in nervousness as I wait for her reaction.

"Damn, guess the kid had a mum after all."

"I know right." I smile this time, thinking of how happy Isaac must be when his real mum finally got there. "I can't believe I actually thought she was dead or something. Guess she really was lost. No wonder the man didn't call me because of Isaac."

"GemGem, you sure you don't have a crush on him?"

I blink again. *What the hell?*

"Where did that come from? Of course not. He's married."

This time Saara scoffs, and I felt my face heat under her knowing eyes.

"You didn't know that when you met him! And I see that look you get every time it rains, but right, keep on lying to yourself, woman."

"We are now accepting tickets for the movie *The Waves of Water* screening in cinema six. Ticket holders are requested to please make your way forward. I repeat, we are now accepting tickets for the movie *The Waves of Water* screening in cinema six. Ticket holders are requested to please make your way forward."

* * *

“Wow,” I breathe out, feeling the night breeze hit me smack against my face as I step out of the cinema and into the open night.

Looking up, I’m presented with a dark sky. Not a star is in sight with all the city lights flashing around me. Still, I know in my heart that it’s probably a very starry night in some other part of the world. Maybe somewhere, someone is sleeping under these same stars I cannot see, wondering about people like me—people who can’t see what they can.

“I know right.” Saara sighs beside me, probably just as fuzzy-minded as I am. “Let’s just get home, man. I need to sleep on this one.”

“You’re right.” I nod, my mind returning to reality from my own little world. Even I need to sleep on this one . . . for a few weeks. *That was bloody brilliant.*

“Excuse me.”

I turn around and my breath hitches. “Jason.”

The sheepish grin on the boy’s face widens at my acknowledgment and he takes another step forward.

“I knew it was you! Despite the difference in clothing, that is. Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in jeans, Gem,” Jason speaks sheepishly as he scratches the back of his neck. I can only stare at him wide-eyed. I never thought I would see him with his hair down as well. He is always so proper at work—too proper.

Suddenly, something seems to make him nervous. He barely controls himself from dropping his jaw on the ground.

“Well . . .” Jason scratches his neck, awkwardly shuffling on his feet. His eyes dart behind me and he takes almost tumbles on his feet. “I’ll . . . I’ll see you at work then!”

“Ah! Oh! Okay! Bye, Jason! I’ll see you around too!” Turning around, I narrow my eyes at a suspicious-looking Saara. “You showed him your face, didn’t you?”

Saara begins whistling as she continues leaning against her Cadillac, looking everywhere but me. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You totally showed Jason your face!” I looked at her wide-eyed with a bewildered smile on my face.

“Okay! Okay!” she exclaims suddenly. “It was a mistake! I just needed a breath of fresh air, so I took off this stupid face mask and he came tumbling about!”

“Poor Jason!” I groan. “Do you know what a big fan of yours he is? He watches all your videos and buys all your songs! If only you wouldn’t have warned off your fans from not approaching you when you have your face mask on in that stupid Q&A video.”

“Well, I can’t be a famous YouTube-star-turned-worldwide-famous Canadian singer, Saara Malik, all the time now, can I? I need to be normal Saara Malik who went to primary, Uni, and graduated with her best friend and cousin Gemma Windly once in a while. Can’t I?”

She has me now. She knows she does. This always gets to me. So instead, I say what I always say to her in these situations.

“I’ll tell Isma Khala to watch that video. You just wait.” I poke my tongue out at her.

“Watch her call Irma Khala and complain for hours, then we will have both our mums up our arses.”

“Okay, never mind,” I shake my head, putting off the idea just as soon as she brings it up. “Involving the two sisters is never a good idea.”

Looking smug, Saara nudges me towards the car. “Now, get in. I’ll drop you home.”

I sigh. Mumbling incoherent words about how much I’m bullied by my rich and famous cousin, I get in.

“Hey, look! That handsome Asian dude with his wife!” Saara suddenly whispers scandalously. I snap my head towards the direction of her gaze.

We watch silently as the pair continue to walk their way past our car. The wife continues to talk animatedly with the man who is now smiling.

“They make a good pair,” I breathe just as the beautiful woman grabs on to the man’s jacket and grins up at him, obvious adoration all over her face. The man, however, turns his head towards us, almost like he knows we’re watching him. His eyes stop straight on mine. I almost have a heart attack.

“F*ck!” Saara hisses as she puts her mask back on. “Thank God he can’t see inside nicely because we’re parked in front of the light, not behind it.”

I, on the other hand, just stay there, frozen, staring right into the man's eyes as he stands there abruptly while trying to see us inside the car.

"What's wrong?" Saara blurts out suddenly, and I turn towards her. "She said that," she explains at once, nudging towards the couple. Dumbly, I turn towards the couple again only to see them walking away.

"They make a nice couple," I mumble again. I don't exactly know what to say at this point, not that I've ever been someone who is verbally eloquent when it comes to expressing my thoughts and emotions. Saara, on the other hand, has always been quite blunt in nature. Expressing herself verbally comes very easily to her. I guess that's why she's a celebrity-slash-YouTube-star, and I'm an editor at a publishing company.

"Mm-hmm, sure they do." Saara yawns as she pulls her seatbelt on and begins driving out of the cinema's driveway.

"Poofy!" I groan, breaking into a yawn myself. I don't think I'll ever understand the dynamics behind person B yawning right after person A does.

"Oh shut it. I'm tired, okay? It was a hard day today. I-I broke up with Dante," Saara mutters, finally admitting the reason why she invited herself into my movie plans without her two bodyguards.

I can't help but stare at the girl. How has she remained so calm after breaking up with her boyfriend of seven years?

"Let's go to your place instead of mine. Have a sleepover, like old times?" I suggest, trying to lighten the mood. I know better than to leave her alone tonight. Saara can be quite unpredictable.

"He's been sleeping around," she finally whispers after minutes of dead silence. I turn towards her when she stops the car at a red light.

"With?"

"My manager," Saara confesses, looking straight ahead into the traffic. I gulp. *Her manager . . . Robert?*

"So . . . Dante is . . . gay?"

"Guess so."

"Since when?"

"Probably forever."

Then why did the boy date you?

"Let's stop by at the convenience store that's in your neighbourhood. I need a lot of junk food to get over this one," I say instead.

"You and I both." Saara shrugs. I glance at her when she suddenly

pokes at the radio and a random number begins to play.

“Hey, at least it’s not a woman.” I try to make her feel better, but I know the more I’m opening my mouth, the more I’m messing things up. Still, I continue like an idiot. “At least it’s a guy. You know how complicated people make that. Plus, you’re a celebrity. He must have not wanted to trouble you too m—”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a girl or guy. It hurts the same. I’m still just as humiliated. It doesn’t matter if we managed to keep our relationship a secret so long. It still feels like a huge deal. Like the whole world knows I got played by a possibly homosexual fella who kept me as his cover from the society for seven bloody years. I’m so embarrassed, Gemma,” Saara spits out bitterly. Just then, the light turns green and she continues driving again.

I don’t know what to say, so instead, I close my eyes and just exhale.

“I’m so firing Rob as soon as I get home,” Saara spits out again. *This time, I can’t keep quiet.*

“Wait, you haven’t fired him yet?”

“I was too shocked to!”

“Oh boy,” I breathe out. This is going to be one hell of a night. I can already smell a very dirty fight in the air.

* * *

Waking up in someone else’s home is always the most awkward thing to me. Everything around me just feels wrong. The bed, the colour of the paint in the room, the room. It takes me more than ten minutes to settle myself into the environment again, then I get up and get myself into my usual morning routine. Brushing, peeing, sometimes pooping because I’m human and need to excrete what I eat, and always taking a shower.

Waking up in Saara’s house, however, feels quite normal. It’s something that we do most of the time, so much so that she has a dozen pairs of my clothes at hers and I have hers at mine. We usually even sleep in the same bed. Growing up, it’s become a habit.

What helps more is that she used my style to get her apartment interior decorated. Her excuse is that she likes the peaceful, calm taste I have when it comes to interior decoration, and it helps her calm down after a busy day at work.

“Good morning,” Saara’s croaky morning voice echoes around the walls of the condo in the quiet morning. I glance over to see her making her way down the stairs in her short shorts and a tank top. Her hair is a mess, her face is tear-stained, and her eyes are so puffy that I don’t think she will be able to go out in public today without her shades on.

I was right about last night; it was a complete disaster.

“Why, don’t you look like a darling.” I smile at the princess.

“Shut it. What’s for breakfast? I need to pop in some painkillers ASAP,” Saara groans as she enters the kitchen and settles herself on the highchair in front of the kitchen island.

“Mashed avocado, toast, and milk tea,” I reply, popping in another pair of sliced bread into the toaster before turning towards the girl again.

“Go upstairs and freshen up. Isma Khala called. Dante called her at two in the morning, he was drunk. She’s coming over by lunch.”

“The hell?” Saara exclaims, looking around the kitchen in panic but clearly not seeing a thing.

“Have you tried checking your phone? Dante called you all night. So did Khala, after two.”

“You have to be sh*tting me,” Saara blurts out before turning around and rushing up the stairs.

Still, in the kitchen, I let out a sigh as the toaster pops out the toasted slices behind me. My mind wanders on the couple I saw yesterday, just for a second, before I quickly turn towards the just-made toasts and begin working on preparing breakfast. There are more important matters to attend to rather than thinking about a happy couple I barely know.

Just then, the doorbell blares around the apartment. I quickly make my way towards the door. Gritting my teeth when the doorbell rings again, screaming straight into my ears, I swing the door open.

“Hey, Gem. Is she there?” I blink. *Oh Lord. No way.*

“Dante!” I blurt out dumbly.

“Yeah.” He smiles at me. The tall man I’ve known for eight years stands in front of me, towering over me with his six feet three inches height. His sweat-coated light-brown hair is falling over his forehead, and I can see that he’s just come here from working out or something. Noticing my eyes analysing him, the handsome man smiles and the two pits on his cheeks deepens. My eyes snap from his dimples to his brown pools. The familiarity

in those dimples makes me take a shaky step back.

“Is Saara in?” he repeats.

I can see it; he’s tired. He probably hasn’t slept all night. Still, he’s trying to maintain a positive façade.

Immediately, I close the door behind me.

“Look, I understand that it must have been hard to be in a situation you were, but for God’s sake, you hurt Saara in the process of protecting yourself,” I whisper as I stand in front of the door and cross my arms in front of me.

Dante sighs. “I know. I-I was just so insecure because Saara wanted to keep me a secret. She couldn’t acknowledge me in public. She couldn’t acknowledge *us* in public. We had to meet in secret like we were illegal or something. Since her career hit off four years ago, Rob was just always there. It just happened.”

I feel the fire that I’ve built since last night—watching my cousin bawl her eyes out—shrivel a little.

“Do you even know how much of an effort and preparation it takes to come to the decision that you’re going to cheat on someone you’ve been with for seven years? I don’t, but I’m sure it mustn’t have happened in just a second. I know it must have been hard, being with her but not being able to really be with her, but, Dan, you still had each other, didn’t you? If you were so insecure, you could have told her nicely or told her off. Instead, you acted like you were completely okay with everything and then just hurt her like this out of nowhere. Get yourself together, man.”

“Gem, please.”

“No, you, please.” I shake my head. “Go sort out your emotions and priorities. When you find yourself stuck between two people, Dan, pick the one that came second because if you really loved the first person, the second person wouldn’t even be a question. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes.” Dante grits his teeth together. “You’re telling me to f*ck off and leave your cousin alone since I let Robert suck my dick a couple of times.”

I nod. “Basically.”

“Is this what your cousin wants? Don’t you think you’re making her decision for her?” Dante challenges me and I flinch. *He’s right. I might be making Saara’s decision for her.*

I snap my gaze to the man towering in front of me. “You’re right. Maybe I’m making this decision for her, but there is no way I’m letting you meet her today, so let’s do it this way, go sort out your emotions and then come back after two weeks or something. Really, really think about this. You slept with someone else when you were with my cousin. That’s a big deal.”

“I’m not going to listen to you,” Dante snaps back, and I almost smile. I’ve been waiting for his short temper to show its ugly head ever since I walked out of the apartment and shut the door behind me.

“You better listen to her!” Saara’s cold voice yells from the other side of the door. Both Dante and I stiffen.

“Oh, and tell Robert he’s fired!” Saara yells again. This time, her voice is louder. I feel myself cringe.

“What she said.” I shrug, just standing there and looking at him. I’m not an idiot. There is no way I’m opening the door when he’s standing here. Compared to Saara and I’s five feet height, he’s a friggin’ giant. There is no way I’ll be able to stop him if he wants to force his way inside.

“You’re not going in?” He cocks an eyebrow up and I smile.

So he really is thinking about pushing his way inside. “Not until you leave, Dan.” I smile sadly.

“GemGem, please let me just talk to her. Just once,” Dante whispers pleadingly as he takes a step closer, leaning in to be more at my height. Those eyes. The familiarity. I take a step back, pressing myself against the door.

I take a shaky breath before looking up, and I stare straight into his eyes.

There is nothing more I can do. There are no more comforting and calm speeches that I can give him, so I just stand there and speak as clearly as I can, hoping it gets through the giant’s thick skull.

“No. Go away.”

CHAPTER FOUR

One Stormy Evening

The rain pelts down on her, bringing along its two friends—loud thunder and silent lightning. She greets them with a yellow umbrella and says, “I apologize. I don’t have much time today. I’m late! I have to meet the start of my own love story!”

“What do you mean you’re moving over?”

Outside, in the backyard, the screeching sound of the clothesline spinning around in the wind alerts us of the rain beginning to rage once again.

“Dan bought the apartment next to mine. He doesn’t know where you live. My new manager thinks it’s a good idea.” Saara shrugs as she jumps on my sofa, bringing her legs up and tucking it in beneath her just as I do.

I shake my head. “I can’t believe he’s doing this.”

“We’re meeting tomorrow to try to end this clearly once and for all. My manager thinks it’s a good idea to stamp a restraining order on his face if he doesn’t want to negotiate.”

“Are you really going to stamp a restraining order on his face?” I ask, eyeing her skeptically. I know she won’t do anything of that sort. Not after seven years with the guy.

Seven years can’t just be broken, forgotten, and gotten over in a week.

Saara glares at me for a second or two before her harsh expression slowly melts, and she sighs. “No. I don’t think I can.”

A sigh of my own slips from my lips and I nod. I can see it—the love she still has for the giant. Love is such a funny thing. Like uninvited guests

who come and leave at their own will. You never get to invite them, and you never get to decide when they leave. Granted, with guests, we can't tell them when to leave out of common courtesy, but regardless, the essence for both is the same. I know.

"Who is this new manager of yours anyway? Sounds like a stuck-up." I eye my cousin, the hot cup of Ramyun I hold in my hand begins to burn, and I lean forward and quickly put it on the coffee table.

"No idea." Saara shrugs. "The agency said that he's on vacation right now, so the only way I've been contacting him is through email."

"So this manager of yours won't be there when you meet Dan? What the hell is he thinking of sending you there without his supervision?" I blurt out, immediately having a dislike for Saara's new manager. It's a shame how everything played out; I really liked Robert. He's a nice guy, then he goes and blows it all away. Literally.

"I'm not a kid, PenPen," Saara snaps as she rolls her eyes at me, taking the cup of Ramyun I had set on the coffee table.

"No. You're a young woman who has the world's eyes on her almost all the time," I reply, blandly dragging every word like a broken and damaged poem.

"Shut it," Saara groans. "Clear half of your bed. I'm staying here."

I grin. I've definitely won this round.

"Oh! Can we use our room for my videos? I really like the aesthetics," Saara asks, suddenly turning to face me with her big brown eyes and pouty lips.

I nod, knowing she's probably already thought where to place her camera and which spot in the room to capture.

She's just won another round.

"Anyway . . ." I turn the topic back to where I want it.

Knowing how extreme Dante can get, I think it's important to know what's planned for tomorrow. I can't let her meet him without a witness and just two bodyguards. "Is your manager really letting you meet Dan without him? Do you think it's safe? What does Dan want now anyway?"

"August, my new and very straight manager, is coming back tomorrow. He'll pick me up from here and we'll meet Dan. Afterward, the course of action is still unclear, but I think I'm scheduled for gym and dance practice."

“August, huh?” I cock an eyebrow up. All the previous worry about her and Dan melts away at the admission of this new manager being there as well, and instead, my mind focuses on other things.

“Watch this turn into a manager-singer forbidden love affair.” I wink at my best friend. “Maybe you’ll let me write a novel on you two.”

“PenPen . . . shut it!” Saara groans when I begin wiggling my eyebrows in a very suggestive manner.

“I thought he was flirting with me once when we first began emailing each other. I, being an idiot, called him out. He told me he already has a girl he’s very interested in and for me to relax. I’ve never been so embarrassed, Gem!”

For a second, I just stare at the rosy-cheeked girl in front of me, then it tumbles out. At first, a bit abruptly, then in full swing. Soon, I’m laughing my arse off at the expense of my cousin. It stops when a cushion slams on my head.

Immediately, I look at my best friend with my tear-stained face, then I frown. That manager could have meant anything!

“Hold on, that girl could be you, Poofy!”

“Just as much of a chance as it being you. No thanks, GemGem. I can’t handle a bloody relationship so soon after Dan.”

She’s right, of course. Even I know she can’t start a serious relationship so soon. Saara hasn’t even started to heal yet. Hell, she’s still in love with Dante. At the back of my mind, I can’t help but wish things had turned out differently. If only Dante hadn’t been so fickle with his pop-sickle.

“You, on the other hand,” she continues, and this time, it captures my whole attention, almost immediately blaring red lights all over my head.

“You need to date already. You’re going around having crushes on married men whose sons accidentally call you ‘Mum’.”

“I do not have a crush on any married man!” It’s my time to snap at her.

“Oh pssh! I saw the way you were looking at him and his wife. You might as have just cried your eyes out there instead of waiting until I started crying about my trash-like situation and then joining in,” Saara retorts undeterred. “Let me do you a service today and tell you something you probably don’t know about yourself, Pen. It’s difficult for you to fall just for anyone. You hardly find anyone compatible after all. However, when a

certain person comes along that is remotely compatible with you, it takes the smallest of things. You're as good as gone."

I can't help but roll my eyes at my best friend's enlightening revelation. Despite the bitter feeling at the back of my head telling me how right she is, I can't help but act like she isn't.

"There is no way I have a crush on any married man. I think they make a great couple," I assure myself silently. "I was just shocked because I thought Isaac's mum was dead, and I was worried about him so much."

"Don't admit it if you don't want to. I'm still right anyway." Saara shrugs, sloppily taking a large sip of the hot Ramyun soup. "Oh this is so good!"

"Wait till I tell your new manager you ate Ramyun when you're supposed to be watching what you're eating." I shrug as well, poking my tongue out at a suddenly scandalized-looking Saara.

She pouts, handing over the cup to me. "You're an evil, evil woman."

* * *

Five o'clock the next morning finds me out of bed and freshened up, in the living room, reading away at the fifth and last manuscript I am to complete. This manuscript seems better than the previous four I had worked on. It has fewer grammatical errors and the story seems to flow quite easily. The only sad thing about this one is that it's sad. Heartbreaking. It's a heartbreaking story with a definite heartbreaking ending. I can almost taste the tears of the main characters as I read along. Or maybe they are all just mine.

Reaching for my face, I confirm my fears. *Yes, they are all just my tears.*

"Oh whatever," I sniffle as I pull the box of Kleenex closer and pull out a tissue or two, then I get back to work.

Laughter or tears . . . I'm going to get through this book even if it dries up my tear glands.

When it turns seven, I have no idea, but soon enough, my arse and head both start to hurt and I stand up, stretching until I'm standing on my tiptoes before beginning to walk towards the front door. It's time I make a round around the garden.

The fresh breeze that I've come to deeply appreciate touches me in a welcome. I inhale the morning air happily, closing my eyes as I stretch once again. I disregard the fact that my large long-sleeved shirt is almost falling off my shoulders, leaving my tiny home wear in full view for the neighbours.

"When I'm within the boundary of my own house, then the problem isn't in my clothes, it's in their mind," I mumble softly, reminding myself this like I usually do as I step off the porch and on to the grass. My toes curl into the wet grass, and I smile as I step further into the garden, just taking in the smell and feel of the morning.

"Ah!" I sigh happily, feeling the strands of hair on my hand becoming alive when a gust of chilly wind breezes against me. "It's good to be alive."

Suddenly, there is a knock on the front gate and my eyes snap open. I glance towards the gate with honest curiosity. *Who could possibly be here so early? Saara's manager? Do they really start their day so early?*

Opening the gate enough to peek my head through the gap, my suspicions prove correct as I come face to chest with another tall giant. Tilting my head up until I can see the man, I take the well-built man in for a few seconds. He's dressed in a white long-sleeved shirt that's covered with his navy-blue jacket suit. His pants that end an inch above his ankle is of the same colour as his jacket. I cock an eyebrow up at his choice of shoes though—a plain white Adidas Superstar.

"Okay," I admit to myself. "Saara's manager is a very, very good-looking man. Watch this really turn into a manager-superstar love story!"

"Good morning. I'm August, Saara's manager. I've texted her and she said she's getting ready. May I come in?" He has an easy smile on his face as he looks down at me. Staring up at the man blankly, I almost step back and let him in.

Almost. At the end of the temporary loss of my mental competency, my sanity wins.

"May I please see your identification?" I ask instead, extending my hand through the tiny gap. To my surprise, the man immediately nods and reaches for his pocket.

Bringing out his wallet, he hands it over to me. I look over his driver's license very carefully before handing it back to him.

"Okay, come in." I shrug as I step back and then press the button,

letting the gate slowly slide open. I step aside when the man walks back towards his Jeep and then gets in and drives it into my driveway.

“Shall we?” August turns towards me as he gets out of the parked vehicle. I nod awkwardly.

“Ah . . . come in.” I cough awkwardly as I step into the living room and hold the door open for the man to walk in through.

August smiles at me as he steps into the house, closes the door behind him securely and takes off his shoes at the doorway.

“Tea, coffee, or juice?” I ask, moving into the kitchen and feeling him follow behind me.

Moving behind the island, I turn around just in time to watch his large frame settle on one of the highchairs.

Looking like even more of a giant now.

“Whatever is fine by you, thank you,” August replies politely and I nod, not knowing what else to do in such a situation.

As much as I am disappointed with Robert, at least he’s easier to talk to. If he hadn’t messed up, right now, we would have been laughing our brains away while talking about some stupid thing. Now, instead of a very peppy Rob, I have to deal with a very tall and handsome August who can pass for a celebrity himself.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I caught your name.” August breaks the silence, his deep but soft voice melts through the silence like butter on a pan. I almost fear sliding and landing right on my ass in front of him. The fear that I’ll embarrass myself in front of this high-shot manager slowly begins to show me its ugly face, and so, I turn my attention to what I know I can do well. I’ve done this a thousand times before anyway—making breakfast.

Still, I make an effort to maintain the conversation. “I’m Gemma.” I smile, cracking four eggs into a bowl one after the other. “It’s nice to meet you, August.”

“Gemma.”

My eyes snap up as August breathes out my name and our eyes meet. My breath hitches in my throat and I clear my throat awkwardly. August, on the other hand, only smiles at me. “You have a nice name, Gemma.”

I smile at his compliment. “Thanks, August, so do you.”

“Oh god, can you both please stop being so formal? I’m about to have a breakdown hearing all this small talk and baseless pleasantries.” Saara

makes a puking sign with her hand and mouth as she walks in and settles herself beside August, then she turns towards August and cocks an eyebrow up in suspicion. “Are you sure you’re my manager? You could be a model or something yourself, you know? You’re very handsome.” Saara cringes. “Too handsome. What’s your skincare routine?”

I watch wide-eyed as August grins and his whole face changes into one with childlike innocence.

“Just lots of water and soap.” He chuckles.

Saara scoffs. “Bullsh*t.”

I agree. There is no way someone can look like that just by chucking down water and using soap.

“Honest.” August laughs harder. “Okay, maybe good genes as well.”

I really surprise myself when I find myself replying to him instead.

“Yeah, really, really good genes.”

August’s surprised eyes find mine, and I immediately get back to preparing breakfast.

Maybe I spoke out of line.

* * *

I ask her, “Do you believe in love at first sight? The sort of love that hits you like a broom to the head? The sort of love that splashes into your life like a bucket of cold water to the face on a sleepy morning? Do you believe in love at first sight? The sort of love that makes you question why you weren’t in love with that person in the first place? The sort of love that isn’t at first sight after all, but a slow simmering manifestation of emotions that just explodes into a blunt realisation one fortunate day? A love like the combustion of the emotions? A love like life and death at the same time? Do you believe in that type of a love at first sight?”

She smiles and replies, “No. I do not.”

“That’s really cold,” Wendy—a friend doing master’s with me—exclaims as she looks down at the page from where I am reading from.

“The girl’s dying. Of course, she’ll hurt him in order to drive him away,” I reply as a matter-of-factly as I flip the page and mark the first grammatical error I see on the page.

“Or she can just tell him.” Wendy rolls her eyes as she stretches in

her seat.

A glance at the wall clock in front of us. It tells me that it's almost six in the evening. Wendy and I are currently seated in an almost empty lecture theatre, waiting for the lecture to begin soon. This is going to be the last lecture before our one-week mid-semester break, and after doing a mid-semester exam for this unit last week on this very same day, I'm just ready to have a holiday. Working full time and studying part-time isn't as easy as it seems from an audience's perspective. It's actually very shite like.

"That too." I nod.

"Professor Swool is here," Wendy whispers just as our lecturer walks in, and the tiny population of us students straighten in our seat, waiting for the professor to begin the lecture.

It doesn't take the professor much time before he rolls out the slides on the projector and begins.

* * *

"I'm so glad we have a week's worth of break." Wendy stifles a yawn as she hurls her bag over her shoulder and gets up, stretching until I hear a bone or two cracks in her back.

"You really need a good massage," I tell the girl. My wide eyes remain on the sheepishly smiling girl as I get up and hang my bag on my shoulder and begin to walk out of the theatre right behind her.

"Catching the bus again?" Wendy asks me with a frown on her face, and this time, I'm the one to hand her a sheepish smile.

"Yeah," I admit, walking towards the Uni's exit with her.

Wendy's really lucky; she just lives a few blocks away from the campus. I, on the other hand, travel almost forty minutes to and from Uni every day.

"Well, take care, okay?" Wendy's frown deepens with what feels like concern, and I reach over and give her a side hug out of impulse.

"I will. You take care on your way home too." I smile at the woman, patting her back awkwardly in comfort before we both part ways. She quickly begins to cross the road, and I turn towards the buses waiting at the university's bus bay. Jogging over to the one I need, I hurriedly tap my traveling card and settle myself in my spot. Plugging in my iPod, I once again

tune down the rest of the world as I press the volume up on Lana Del Rey.

“Goodnight, Gemma.” Margret, the bus driver, smiles at me as I walk out of the exit like she always does. I turn around and give her a large grin like I always do. “Goodnight, Margret. Have a safe night!”

As I slowly begin walking towards my home, I realize it’s not that dark yet. Above my head, the skies still remain an exotic mixture of purple and orange in some places while the rest of the sky remains almost already consumed by the night’s darkness.

“How beautiful.” I smile as I walk towards my house’s front gate and quickly seeing that it is unlocked, I slide it open before getting in and sliding it closed again.

“Honey, I’m home,” I call out to Saara teasingly as I step into the house and push the front door to a close behind me. I’m replied with silence, and I frown.

The house does seem kind of quiet tonight. That’s a rarity whenever Saara’s over. She’s always talking about things and discussing things most of the time. Kneeling down, I remove my shoes before slipping into my home slippers and begin walking further into the house.

I’m sure Saara’s home; seeing the Jeep parked outside with her Cadillac, I’m sure, and so is August. So why is everything so quiet? I gasp. *Can it be? Can they be having . . . sex?* I stop walking, and I begin contemplating. *Should I let them have . . . sex?*

Immediately, I shake my head and increase my pace. I won’t deny, August is an above-average man. To associate with him every day without having any sort of attraction towards him must be hard, but Saara is just not ready. It’s too soon. This is the rebound stage. Everything she does now will never last long. No pun intended.

My almost silent footsteps lead me upstairs to my bedroom quicker than I expect. My mind goes on overdrive when I notice that the door is left a bit ajar. *How could she . . . on my bed! Even I’ve never done anything on my bed!*

As soon as I reach the door, I push it open without a thought. I’m definitely not ready for the scene that awaits me on the other side. Saara is stationed in a corner of my bedroom, a fraction of her skincare collection is placed right in front of her and the video recording equipment are set up a couple of steps away. August peeks his head up to look at me from behind

the camera.

“Welcome home, GemGem!” Saara beams at me widely before turning to the camera. “Gemma’s home, guys! Not that that will make a difference with Gemma’s quiet personality and all.”

“Gemma!” She turns towards me again, and I blanch this time knowing exactly what she’s about to say next. “Say hi to everyone!”

Immediately, August turns the camera towards me, and I stare into his curiously amused eyes instead. I almost burn a hole in his head while staring at him, hoping he realizes that I’m begging him to turn the thing away, but he doesn’t, so my gaze flickers to the camera and I smile demurely instead.

“Hi!” I acknowledge Saara’s 9.25 million viewers on YouTube with a small wave. My eyes turn to August’s unreadable ones again, and this time, I say it out loud. “Turn back to Poofy!” I whisper hurriedly. “I’m camera shy!”

“Oh! Sorry!” August mouths as he immediately turns the camera’s focus back on an amused-looking Saara.

“Isn’t she cute, you all?” she coos into the camera, and I take it as my cue to quickly run off.

Heading towards the second room where I keep all the unfolded laundry, I quickly grab on to random pieces of clothing before walking out of the room and into the main bathroom.

Under the showers, I allow myself to feel embarrassed openly. *How could I have thought that Saara and August were doing the dirty? Oh God, when did I turn into such a dirty-minded little turnip?* Despite the coldness of the shower, I feel my cheeks begin to burn again. I quickly shake the thoughts away and begin belting out into a random song instead.

The night air feels warmer on my skin after the cold shower. Giving myself a once-over, I make sure my short shorts and my favourite white T-shirt that I inherited from my dad’s closet look appropriate enough before I nod and begin wrapping a dry towel around my wet hair. Humming along to the song playing in my head, I pull open the bathroom’s door and step out.

My almost silent footsteps lead me towards the kitchen.

I’m starving. It’s already nine, and I usually have my dinner by this time. In fact, I usually have my dinner before six. I’m pretty sure Saara’s already had her dinner. She never has anything after six.

“What to eat? What to eat?” I ask myself out loud as I take a round around the small space, looking at the spices aimlessly.

I give up.

Reaching for the large bottle that contains the cereal, I pull a bowl forward and dump in some milk before putting in the cereal above it. The tiny yellow floating stars make me grin, and I dig in.

“That’s your dinner?”

Looking up, I see Saara standing in the living room looking at me with wide eyes. Beside her, August also looks at me with concern.

“Yes!”

“Cereal? At nine? At night?” August speaks up this time and I shrug happily.

“Cereal with milk is a timeless meal.”

“We’ll need to monitor her meals.” Saara turns towards August and says it in a manner that seems quite serious.

I scoff. “I’m a twenty-four-year-old lady. Monitor your own meals, Mother.”

“I bet you wouldn’t be able to say that to Irma Khala,” Saara retorts immediately, and I shove a spoonful of cereal in my mouth because she’s right.

“Do you want me to cook you something?” August suddenly speaks up again and my eyes snap up to his.

His shimmering golden-speckled brown eyes stare at me with sincere concern, and I gulp down the cereal before quickly shoving another spoonful into my mouth, shaking my head at the tall man before me. His hair is dyed the same colour as his eyes. Falling against his tanned skin as casually as August has styled it today, he looks like a sun-kissed model.

Suddenly, I understand why Saara thought he was into her. August treats everyone with such care. Like they are special. It’s really appealing, but it’s kind of weird.

“I’m cool, really.” I smile when I see him cock an eyebrow up at my previous reply, then I shove another spoonful of cereal into my mouth. It’s better I keep my mouth full in case I embarrass myself.

August blinks.

“Okay.” He shrugs, falling back into my sofa again.

This time, I find myself wondering if he has a house of his own, and

when exactly he's planning on going there.

CHAPTER FIVE

One Quiet Night

With eyes closed, she listens as the strong winds outside continue to sing.

“It’s quiet tonight,” she thinks. The winds outside sing louder.

“How did it go with Dante?”

It’s past 12AM, but Saara and I are both wide awake. August ended up leaving around eleven, and we’ve been in bed ever since, just talking.

“It’s a very quiet night tonight, isn’t it?” Saara says instead. I turn my head towards her in bed. I know I can’t see anything in this darkness, so I turn until my back is pressed against the mattress and close my eyes.

“It’s not quiet when we’re actually talking. You don’t want to talk about it?” I ask softly. I know Dante is a soft topic for Saara right now, so I don’t want to push her.

“How do you think it went, Pen?” Saara sighs, turning in the darkness as she speaks.

“It probably didn’t work, huh?” I reply.

Dante’s not one of the most sought-after lawyers in our city for nothing. I should have known that it would go this way. Actually, apart from moving in front of Saara’s apartment, he hasn’t done any other thing that can implicate him as a stalker. Dante’s always been a very smart man after all.

“No.” Saara groans, twisting again on her side of the bed. “He completely ignored everyone else and treated it like we were still dating. It’s obviously hard for him to let go of the seven years he’s spent with me.”

“What about Rob?” I ask instead of pushing the conversation to where Saara wants to take it to—to giving Dante another chance. “What’s his status with Rob?”

I hear her sharp intake of breath and I purse my lips. This confirms it. She’s been ignoring this aspect of the situation. She’s completely ignoring Robert.

“I don’t know,” Saara admits and I nod. I’m sure Dante wouldn’t be that much of an idiot to go around talking about him with Saara anymore.

“Well, that’s that then,” I reply lamely. I don’t know what else to say anymore.

“What do you think that little kid who mistook you for his mum must be doing right now?” Saara giggles suddenly, completely trying to change the topic. I find myself letting her.

“I’m sure he must be asleep.” I smile, thinking of the small boy with sad big brown eyes.

“What about his dad?” Saara teases, and this time, I’m the one taking in a sharp breath.

I can’t help it. The man comes to my mind like a soft breeze. His dark eyes and his deep velvety voice.

“Probably with his wife.” My voice is quiet. Too quiet. It’s probably giving away too much, but in the darkness of the night, I let Saara see my real feelings.

“Do you really think that was his wife?” she asks, her voice is quiet too. Too quiet. *When did this get so serious?*

“You don’t think that that’s his wife?” I ask her instead of answering her. A question for a question.

“I don’t know.”

I feel her attempt a shrug and I can’t help but smile. “Just go to sleep, Poofy.” I grin at my best friend in the darkness.

“Alright, Mum.” I hear the laughter in her voice and my grin widens.

“Night, Poofy.”

“Night, PenPen.”

* * *

“Oi, where are you rushing to?” Saara’s groggy voice calls out from

behind me as I rush towards the gate.

It's twelve noon and the girl has just woken up now. Still, I let her sleep because I know she spends her nights secretly crying. She thinks I can't hear her when she snuffles under her blanket, but it doesn't take much to catch the drift when we're only a few inches away from each other.

"Going to the company!" I call out behind me as I hurriedly slide the gate open and, just as quickly, close it behind me. "There's a staff announcement and I'm wanted!"

"Oh! Oh! Okay. What do you want for dinner?" Saara yells from the front door as I begin rushing towards the bus stop.

"Whatever you like!" I yell back, sending a hasty wave her way before breaking into a lame excuse of a sprint.

I'll admit, I never participated in any of the sports day activities during my primary education life. High school? Yeah, P.E. classes were never a priority. My sole purpose in that class was to not fail, and that was the only reason why I even showed up and jumped around aimlessly.

Regardless, those choices have already been made, and all I can do now is live with it, so I continue to huff as I rush towards the bus now waiting for me at the stop.

"Thank you," I pant as I get on to the bus and find any random seat. The bus is quite full today and so the only seat I find empty is the seat directly behind the driver. I shuffle to the corner, making space for the next person who gets in.

We reach my stop sooner than I expect, and I quickly reach up and press the bell. Immediately, the bus comes to a stop at the next bus stop.

"Excuse me." I smile at the young girl sitting beside me as I begin making my way towards the exit.

Stepping off the bus, I straighten the invisible wrinkles off my navy-blue dress and begin walking my way towards the company, hearing my white sneakers squeaking against the city sidewalks.

* * *

"When are you going to start acting like a full-time employee, Gemma?" Alicia snaps at me as she stands over my desk while I sit in my chair with my head down. The office is silent, probably listening to Alicia

having her dig at me again.

“It is in my contract that I can work from both home and the office,” I reply back as kindly as I can, which isn’t much. I really am on the verge of resigning and finding a new job in some other publishing company.

“And this so-called contract is getting renewed today, isn’t it? Are you sure you’re eligible to be employed in this publishing company?” Alicia smirks down at me and my eyes harden as I stare up at the woman.

This is it. I’m not busting my arse doing my master’s degree to be questioned on whether I’m qualified enough. No matter how many times I’ve lowered myself just to let her feel secure about her status and position, all she does is try to push me further and further down. If I let this carry on, I don’t think I will have any confidence left in me.

“I have a double major bachelor’s degree, a post grad, and I’m doing my master’s right now, Alicia. I’m also an honours student. And I get all my work done on time. I think it’s better if we do not talk about qualifications. Please.”

“Are you trying to insult me by saying you’re more qualified than I am?” Alicia’s sharp voice cracks through the silence of the office. I stand up, tilting my chin up in defiance. The woman is taller than I am by a few inches; however, I ignore that as I look right into her eyes. I’m not going to let her have her satisfaction today.

“You’ve brought that up yourself,” I reply calmly, shrugging.

“Listen here, Gemma! I’m your superi—”

“Good afternoon, everyone!” The CEO of this branch of the company, Mr. Archinson, strolls in the office, but then, stops as he spots Alicia and me. “Is there a problem here?”

“Yes,” Alicia responds firmly. “I was just firing Miss Gemma for work incompetency.”

Mr. Archinson turns towards me with wide eyes. “Miss Windly?”

It feels like the world is crashing down on me. All the hard work I’ve given to this company for the past two years feels like it means nothing. Still, I smile. I can’t afford to do anything else because I treasure my pride too much.

“Alicia thinks that I am incompetent with my work because I don’t come to the office every day like she does, but instead, I work from both home and the office as agreed in my contract. Which, sir, I’m sure you know

about since you were the one who got it drafted.”

“Was it not stated in the contract that you must be in attendance at the office of at least thirty-five percent every month?” Mr. Archinson frowns. “Have you been complying with that clause?”

I nod. “Yes, sir. I have.”

Shaking his head, Mr. Archinson begins walking towards his office. “Come to my office, both of you.”

“Please sit.” He motions towards the chairs as Mr. Archinson steps into his office and we follow behind him.

“What’s going on, Alicia?” Mr. Archinson asks as he settles himself on his large chair. Beside me, Alicia grits her teeth, and I just keep my eyes trained on my hand.

“Sir, she’s working in a well-reputed company. How can she stay at home most of her days while everyone else shows up like normal desk-job holders?”

“Alicia, her job allows her to be flexible with her workstation. She requested that she be allowed to work from her home as well and the company agreed. You’ve known that since she joined your team, haven’t you? Then what’s the problem?”

When Alicia doesn’t reply, Mr. Archinson turns to me instead. “Gemma? Why don’t you explain?”

“Alicia says I’m not qualified enough for this company,” I reply simply, not caring at all if I’m whistle-blowing right now or horn-blowing. It doesn’t even matter if everyone else will call me a snitch for the rest of my working period here because, at this moment, I’m happy not protecting Alicia and being upfront and honest about what she actually did say. I’ve watched enough life and television to know that she will not feel a single ounce of gratitude if I keep her taunts a secret.

“Nonsense,” Mr. Archinson admonishes me. “Your contract has been renewed for another three years so get back to what you do best, Miss Windly, and don’t even think about resigning.”

Despite the harsh reprimand, I can’t help but smile a little. I nod. “Yes, sir.”

“Alicia, I cannot believe that you, someone who has worked under me for twelve years, could behave so harshly.” Mr. Archinson sighs disappointedly. I shuffle in my seat, suddenly uncomfortable. Of course,

despite my honest confessions, I'm starting to feel guilty for getting Alicia told off by the CEO, regardless of whether she deserves it or not. The stupid kindness complex I have once again shows me it's a red arse, and I almost give in and apologise to Alicia just to get out of this situation. I really dislike this flaw in me; I'm too weak.

"Anyway, the staff announcement is that your transfer has been approved for the main branch in New York," Mr. Archinson continues, breaking me out of my internal battle, and I immediately turn towards Alicia. "Congratulations, Alicia."

"Thank you, sir," Alicia beams at Mr. Archinson, completely ignoring me. The former irritation that she was carrying is completely forgotten now though, so I'm quite content.

Now, to start praying that the next chief editor is much nicer.

* * *

"I was so scared when she started yelling," Jason whispers as we both walked out of the company's main entrance.

It is almost six-thirty in the evening—exactly two hours after office hours end—but the two of us are still one of the first ones out. Everyone else seems to be planning overtime.

I grin at the young man. "You? Scared? I was pissed off though! I was about to smack a mouthful and a resignation on her face!"

"Yes. Scared. Even men get scared, okay?" Jason huffs, pulling the strap of his backpack tighter over his chest. "I'm glad she's transferring to be quite honest. She never liked any of my cover ideas."

"I'm just glad I won't have someone attacking me all the time," I admit sheepishly. "Hey, do you think we should throw her a farewell party?"

"It is customary," Jason replies awkwardly, and I nod, understanding how the plans for the party are already halfway underway somewhere amongst the group do people that really like Alicia. After all, Alicia isn't really evil with everyone in the office.

"Will you attend?" He cocks an eyebrow up, looking at me skeptically.

"That would be the right thing to do." I shrug. "I guess we should get going now, aye?"

Jason's grin widens and he rubs the back of his neck sheepishly. "Yeah, I guess. Hey . . . er, Gemma, could you . . . you know get this picture autographed by you-know-who?" Jason asks me shyly as he hands me a picture of Saara sitting in the middle of a field of lavender flowers.

"Sure!" I laugh as I grasp the picture out of his hand and carefully place between the pages of a book in my bag. "I'll get it to you in a week, okay?"

"Okay, Cool! Thanks, Gem!" Jason grins sheepishly before he turns around and waves. "See you then!"

I can't help but let out a loud snort of laughter.

Jason trying to act cool after asking me for the favour makes me feel a lot better than I have the whole day.

"See you, Jason!" I call out as I, myself, turn around and begin walking away.

The air is chillier now than it was during the day. With the sun setting, the skies are now a tangy mixture of pink and orange. The night is falling quickly; it'll be dark soon. A soft smile settles on my lips as I continue walking slowly towards the bus stop, enjoying the pleasant change.

Disregarding the argument with Alicia, today isn't exactly such a day. My contract has successfully been renewed today after all. That should stand for some sort of celebration.

Wow, what a day it has been. A soft chuckle leaves my lips randomly and I shake my head.

The sound of the passing traffic buzzes around me as I slowly continue strolling, thinking of ways on how to celebrate my contract renewal.

Takeaway? Pizza? A random movie?

"Excuse me." I stop in my steps.

I turn my head towards the velvet-like voice and the sound of the traffic behind us turns into a blurry muffle. Staring at him, I can only blink as I feel my mouth go dry.

"Hi." Isaac's father smiles uncomfortably as he stands in front of me. His deep eyes that usually make me feel like they are reading my soul gazes into my eyes today with a strange sort of emotion.

"Hi," I repeat his greeting, handing it back to him dumbly. *What do I ask him? What does one say in a situation like this? Why am I so tongue tied? Why is he acknowledging me?*

“I don’t think I’ve introduced myself. I’m William Noo.” He extends a hand forward and I turn my gaze to it. His perfectly clipped nails complement his long and steady fingers. I gaze over the variety of veins that run from his hand up to his arm and feel myself get apprehensive. If this guy decides to hit someone, they’ll surely have a very solid blow coming at them.

Slowly, however, I move my own hand up and grasp his extended one as casually as I can, giving it a shake.

Once again, I’m left surprised. Despite the image of roughness, his hands exude at first glance. When touching it, I notice that it’s actually very soft . . . and squishy.

I smile.

“Gemma,” I introduce myself. “Gemma Windly.”

CHAPTER SIX

One Risky Evening

“It is not rational. There is a high chance of failure,” her brain states confidently.

“But it will make you truly happy while it lasts.” Her heart’s soft whisper echoes around her.

She turns towards the fading footfalls.

“Remember, only while it lasts. Why risk it? You’re safe right now.” Her brain scoffs.

“You can’t always find true happiness by keeping yourself safe. Why not risk it?” Her heart smiles at her encouragingly.

“You will hurt in the end,” her brain warns her.

“But you will never wonder ‘what if,’” her heart encourages.

She begins to run.

“Gemma,” I introduce myself. “Gemma Windly.”

“Gemma,” William repeats my name, and I just stare at him, liking how my name rolls off his lips.

As if approving how my name sounds on his tongue, he nods, then suddenly begins looking uncomfortable again.

I frown. My mind immediately flutters to little Isaac. “Is everything alright, Mr. Noo?”

“William, please,” he replies plainly. I realize that his accent is not quite Canadian-like but a bit more like an Australian accent mixed with a

Canadian accent. It makes me more curious about this man whom I've found myself wondering about at odd times of the day during the past month. This is not good though. Definitely not good. He's married. This curiosity can lead me nowhere happy.

"Actually, I wanted to thank you for that afternoon. Isaac was very happy . . . until we went home, and he realized you weren't coming."

What?

"I'm sorry? What about his mum? Aren't you married?" I blurt out tactlessly. *I really am confused. Didn't I see him and his wife at the theatre?*

William stiffens under my questions for a few seconds before he seems to collect his wits again and hastily clears his throat. "Should we find a coffee shop?"

This confuses me even more. Why exactly does he want to go to a coffee shop with me? What could he want from me after a month? Is something really wrong with Isaac?

I nod, holding my bag tighter against me. "Sure. Let's find a coffee shop."

* * *

"Thank you for agreeing to talk to me, Gemma," William speaks simply as he tucks my chair in and then walking around the small round table, settles on his own right across me.

The coffee shop we find is a quaint beautifully decorated little café situated just a five-minute walk away from the publishing company. I'm a little surprised, despite thinking that I know these streets fairly well, I had no clue of this shop's existence.

"It's no problem, really." I shake my head, feeling my face heat under William's gaze. "I am a bit confused though."

"Hello! What would you two like to drink?"

I turn my head towards the server, and I smile at the pretty girl when I see her looking at me. Her light hair creates a halo under the chandelier we have over our heads. I smile when I notice her smile carrying a hint of amused warmth.

"A cup of hot chocolate, please," I reply before turning towards William.

“Americano, thank you,” he tells the server. His eyes, however, remain on mine.

“What about?” he asks me, tilting his head to his side. It takes me a second to realize that he’s talking about the comment I just made before the server arrived. There’s something in those eyes of his. That and the look he carries; it makes me feel like he’s peering right into my soul. I admit . . . I’m unsettled.

Still, I dare to speak.

“At first, and I mean, no offense in whatever I am about to say, when I met Isaac, I thought his mum was lost and he had mistaken me for her because I simply must have dressed like her or something, but then, I let him have a closer look at me and he still insisted I’m his mum. When you came after him but alone, I thought that I must look like her and she must be . . . you know . . . deceased.” I stop. I glance at William to see if he’s offended yet or not, and I find the man regarding me with his quiet, unreadable eyes.

Oh God, someone tell him to look away.

Now, completely unsettled under his observant gaze, I clear my throat and quickly continue. “Then I saw you once at a theatre with your wife so—”

“She isn’t my wife. She’s my best friend’s younger sister. Like my younger sister.”

“Oh.” I nod dumbly, trying to understand what he’s just placed in front of me.

“I’m divorced,” William states bluntly.

I can’t believe it. He just put it out there like it’s nothing. Like it’s the weather. Suddenly, I see this man in a very new light. There’s more to him than that innocent-looking smile.

“I’m sorry,” I reply automatically. I don’t know if I should feel embarrassed for admitting that I analysed his life, or that I assumed his wife was dead and his best friend’s sister was his dead wife returned to the living, or be shocked how he just acknowledged his divorce without a hint of emotion.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” William speaks dismissively. His voice is devoid of any emotion like he’s talking about someone else’s failed marriage and not his.

No, actually, I’m sure people have more emotion when talking about

someone else's divorce than he does talking about his.

"Isaac is almost five. His mother and I got divorced when he was three. I won custody. It worked out because his mother didn't want anything to do with the both of us." William's eyes blaze with something I can't put my finger on, and I just sit there, waiting to see if he will continue or not.

"It's hard to tell a child that his mother doesn't want to have anything to do with him," he admits after a moment's silence. He's still emotionless. Still as unreadable as ever, but somehow that's okay. At this moment, I'm sure I feel enough pain for little Isaac to make up for both of us.

"Why did he think I was his mum?" I ask, suddenly puzzled about the little boy's misunderstanding.

"Your yellow umbrella. Isaac and his mother never really spent too much time together. After she left, I got rid of all her things, but he still remembers her yellow umbrella. It was like yours. She used it a lot."

"Oh." I frown, then immediately smile when the pretty server arrives with our drink.

"Thank you!" I smile at the girl looking at me.

"Any day." She grins as she sends a wink my way before turning around and leaving. Immediately, I find myself blushing.

Looking down, I turn my tissue paper around, and just as I thought, her number is written on it in very neat handwriting.

"Ohh," I exclaim under my breath as realization hits me.

"You seem flattered."

Immediately, I'm brought back to reality. My eyes snap to a quiet William, and I smile. "Of course I am. A woman thinks I'm nice enough to give me her number."

William's lips quirk around the edges. I smile, feeling quite proud of almost making this silent man smile, then the reminder of why we're actually here hits and I straighten in my seat.

"By the way, why did you approach me today?"

William straightens in his seat. "I realized I never thanked you for consoling my son that day. I thought I'd meet you to thank you properly. So thank you, Gemma."

I stare at him. *Am I supposed to be doing something else?* At this moment, it doesn't seem to feel that way. I watch as he reaches for his cup and slowly brings it to his lips. I look away.

“Oh, don’t mention it.” I let out a little laugh as I wave my hand in front of me dismissively. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to meet Isaac sometime. Maybe he’d like that?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” William responds immediately. My eyes snap to his, and I blink, suddenly confused. *Did I say something wrong?*

“He’ll get very attached to you. It’ll be troublesome for you in the future,” William adds.

“Has he been okay for the past month?” I ask the tall dark-haired man. I’m suddenly not sure the boy has been okay for the past month.

“He’s very spoilt.”

Despite not answering directly, his answer confirms my suspicions. I watch as William’s eyes harden before he continues. “He’s also very stubborn.”

“Regardless . . .” William suddenly straightens. “I will be lying if I told you that I lost your business card and that is why I did not contact you when Isaac threw his tantrums. I did not contact you whenever Isaac insisted because I simply did not want to, but I’ve noticed that the card has disappeared from my study yesterday, and I’m afraid Isaac will be contacting you one way or the other very soon. I do not want my son to bring you any inconvenience, so that is why I decided to seek you out today and thank you and apologize in advance.”

Oh.

“Oh,” I breathe, and William’s eyes snap to my face. “I understand, Mr. Noo.” I nod, biting my lip as a small smile mercifully presents itself on my face, saving me from exposing the humiliation I’m feeling inside. I don’t know why I’m feeling humiliated though. This feeling, it’s very odd.

“Don’t worry, I won’t get upset if he calls me. Each time, I’ll just talk to him until he’s had enough of me and hangs up. Will that be okay?”

William’s expression closes up before he nods. “Yes. That will be fine.”

Just then, the sound of his phone’s ringtone begins blaring in the silent café, and immediately, he slips it out. His eyes find mine. “Excuse me.”

I nod and he accepts the call, placing it against his ear.

I watch as William’s face goes blank, something akin to anger flashes into his eyes, and he grits out his next words. “Put him on the phone.”

“Isaac, go have your bath, please.” William’s voice is quiet—quiet

and cold. Nothing like the tone I usually see parents speaking to their children in. He doesn't even seem frustrated. Just distant and cold.

There's a minute of silence where I'm sure Isaac is handing out his excuses to his father. I can only stare at William's face, taking in every expression that graces his face. The way his double eyelids open and close while he talks, the way his nose flares as he probably hears something that upsets him, the way he presses his lips into a straight line.

"Isaac, you're covered in mud. Stop ruining the house and let the nanny give you a bath!" William snaps suddenly, and I jump in my seat, shocked and terrified at how deep his voice has gotten with anger.

I think I hear a loud "NO!" from the other side of the line, and William's jaw tightens across the table.

"Susan," William says as Isaac's nanny probably comes to the line.

"That would be violating your contract, Susan. You can't quit without a one-month notice," William grits out, looking more and more furious by the minute.

As if done talking, he slams his iPhone on the table. This time, a woman across the café also jumps in her seat. His blank dark eyes find mine, and I find myself shuddering under his cold gaze.

"I believe this is where we say goodbye, Gemma. I have to go home." He tries to smile. I can see it. Unfortunately, it doesn't come out right, and he looks like he's grimacing instead.

* * *

William insists on paying the bill. In the end, when his warm hand wraps around mine and carefully pushes it back until it's pressed against me, I let him.

"The night air feels so good," I sigh contentedly as we step out of the café. Instantly, I'm hit by the chilly night breeze. I let myself close my eyes and inhale the clearer air.

Opening my eyes with a smile on my lips, I turn towards William and his dark eyes and freeze under his gaze for the nth time today.

"Thank you again. And take care, Gemma," William speaks quietly as we stand facing each other. I frown when I feel a slow pang sit in my chest.

It's the craziest thing I can feel standing in front of the man, but I want to help him. I want to get inconvenienced. I want to meet his son and get to know him—they.

"William . . ." I take a step forward, then stop when his eyes flash with something akin to a warning. I let my head drop.

Despite logic telling me that we would be better off and less confused if we just say goodbye tonight, there is so much I want to say to this terrifying stranger in front of me. So much of my time that I stupidly want to offer, but instead, I retreat.

"Goodbye, William."

A clipped smile settles on William's face and he nods. "Bye, Gemma."

I turn around. I'm walking away. I'm moving my feet, one step at a time. One step at a time, away from William. We've said goodbye. I'm going home. This isn't a television drama. Our fates aren't intertwined. I cannot walk into their life.

This isn't a television drama. It won't have a happy ending, but why doesn't this feel right? Why doesn't the concern that I have for Isaac move further away from me like I am from William? Why do I want to help this family that I barely know anything about?

I stop moving and I curl my hands into fists as I just . . . stand there and think. Do I really want to help them? Do I really want to? Despite the consequences? All the consequences?

It's hard. I don't exactly know what consequences lie ahead. I can't think. Maybe I'll have to pretend to be Isaac's mum for quite some time. Maybe I'll have to give him a big part of my own world. These seem like possible outcomes, but at this moment . . . I can't think of whether I can handle it.

I clench my fists tighter and I turn around to face William's back as he slowly walks away. Watching him walk away, I suddenly nod to myself and take a definite step forward. I don't know if I'm making one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made in my life right now, but the rush of knowing that I'm going to help someone I want to. That I'm going to see someone I like to; at this moment, that's enough.

When my legs break into a jog, I'm not exactly sure, but soon, I've reached William, and I immediately slow down my pace to walk beside him.

I can feel his shock. I think I can also feel his reluctance, but he doesn't stop walking and neither do I.

"What are you doing?" William asks as we walk towards whatever he is walking towards.

"I'm going to help you calm Isaac down," I reply honestly. There isn't much to it than this. I'm going to make a very sad boy smile.

"Gemma," William says as we reach a grey Tesla SUV. He stops and turns towards me. Immediately, I take a step back. "I don't want to pull you into my problem."

"He's not your problem, William. He's your son and seeing me makes him happy. I want to make him happy." Truthfully, I'm frightened. I'm actually terrified that William will tell me to get lost, and I will because he has complete right to not accept my offer to help, but I smile. I smile as brightly as I can at a man I barely know but want to.

"Gemma, I can't let you—"

"Let's go?" I smile at the man as I tilt my head to one side playfully. I'm being an idiot, I'm trying to act cute and at ease. Like that will work on a grown man I barely know.

Still, in my foolishness, I give this a try as well. Inside though, I'm terrified, just waiting for his verdict has me almost having chest palpitations.

It seems like a while with William, and I just stand there, not doing a single thing. The sound of the traffic pass us by is the only thing that keeps me grounded as I stand in front of the man, losing my mind thinking about his next course of action, then he speaks.

"Get in."

* * *

I find that the drive to William's house is a mere fifteen minutes from the café. William ends up living in a very posh, urban neighbourhood.

As he turns the car into a well-maintained-looking driveway, I find myself staring at the large house that lies beyond the tall gates. I want to slap myself across my head. I really should have known that he's probably filthy rich.

I find myself flinching when the security guard finally opens the gate and William begins driving in. "This man even has a security guard?" I think,

bewildered as I find myself immersing further and further into William's world. The gates swing to a close loudly behind us, and I suddenly realize that this is it. My fates have now been sealed.

"William, what do you do for a living?" I shift in my seat awkwardly as he parks the car in the garage and turns off the ignition.

"I'm a neurosurgeon resident. This is my fifth year," William replies while we just sit in the car. He turns to look at me just as I do the same. I find my eyes instantly stuck on his.

"Is there a problem?"

A problem . . . yes. Suddenly, I feel inadequate and a great candidate for all sorts of allegations. Like me trying to associate myself with William just because of his wealth.

"Yes," I blurt out. "I thought you were a normal middle-class man with a great car just by chance. I didn't expect you to be so—"

"You have an issue with my wealth?" William cuts me off dryly.

I sigh. "Yes. It makes me uncomfortable." It's best to be honest here. I know it is.

"Does that change your decision?" William asks quietly as he turns back to the front, looking out of the car with hard eyes.

I'm not sure. Maybe I'm just analysing things too much.

Ah, I want to hit myself. Why do I have to be so unfiltered with this man and embarrass myself like this?

I let out a slow simmering breath of nervous air. *Let it all out so that there is none of the nervousness left.* I've already decided to butt into this family's life like a fool. I'm not going to act a bigger fool and not go through with it.

"May we go in?"

As we get out of the car and make a move into the house from the door in the garage, I can almost smell the sweet scent of gardenias teasing my senses. Taking off my shoes and slipping into a spare pair of slippers William gives me, we begin walking towards where I believe Isaac is.

As we step into his luxuriously built large kitchen, I can only walk a step behind William deliberately because I barely know where we are going to go next. Even though I'm usually a fast walker, it's easier to follow him when we're in such a situation, then stop every five minutes because I don't know where to go.

Our tastes are blatantly unlike. Although William's home, like mine, has an open concept. Where I'm more of a flowing morning breeze by the sea or an open field, he's the glitz and glamour of the city.

We make our way from the kitchen to his immaculate living room. I can see my own face on the polished floor. I'm almost too afraid to accidentally touch anything in case it becomes dirty because of me. Everything looks just out of a magazine.

"Are you okay?" William asks suddenly while we begin walking up the stairs. He doesn't turn back.

I smile helplessly as I look up and at his back. "I'm scared of accidentally touching something and breaking it. Your employees take their work seriously."

"Thanks." William's voice sounds like he's probably smiling. It's a shame I can't see for sure since I am behind him, so instead, I smile with him.

"Mr. Noo, you're home." The male help standing in front of a door turns towards us. At first, his eyes touch William's, then when I step out from behind William, it reaches me and he frowns. He's curious. I know. I try not to shrivel under his curiosity.

"I'm home." William nods at the man. "You can retire for today, Ren. Thank you."

By the way, the man is guarding the door, I can only assume that this is Isaac's room. I feel the excitement of seeing the little boy again bubble in my chest. I don't think I'll admit it so freely to everyone, but I missed the sad little boy.

I watch as William's hand wraps around the doorknob. He breathes in and out before twisting the door open and walking in. He leaves the door ajar but I stay outside. The man, Ren, is still standing beside the door, sizing me up.

It feels like opening the door opens up a whole new world. Only after the door's opened, the dozens of voices of people requesting the little kid floats out of the bedroom.

"Daddy!" I hear Isaac's moody voice wail at William, and I turn to glance at Ren, who is still sizing me up. Despite his slightly guarded expression, I smile at the man.

"Isaac, get off the bed right now!" William scolds his child. It's not like he's shouting, but his words are cold and harsh; his tone is as hard as a

rock, so he might as well be shouting.

“No! Daddy is liar! Daddy don’t love me! I want Mummy! Where is Mummy? She said she will find me! Where is Mummy?”

I stiffen outside the room. *How could such a little child believe that his father doesn’t love him?*

A gasp leaves my lips when suddenly William’s standing in the doorway. His dark eyes meet mine and our eyes remain on each other as he extends his hand towards me. My eyes snap between his smooth-looking palm, to his clean, unreadable face.

Slowly reaching forward, I put my hand over William’s. I almost gasp again when he closes his fingers around my hand tightly. The tall man pulls me close, and my eyes widen when he moves closer. His unreadable eyes look into mine. The scent of gardenias gets stronger in the air.

“Thank you.”

I blink. He doesn’t. We’re too close. We’re touching. I can almost taste his exotic smelling cologne. I can see the pores and a fading pimple scar on his flawless skin. We’re really close. His eyes are peering into my soul.

“Paaa!” Isaac wails from inside the room, and this time, I find myself moving in response instead. I tighten my fingers around William’s hand, and I walk into the room, leading him in behind me. I stop, and instantly, his hand leaves mine. Mine falls to my side.

It seems like Isaac freezes on the bed as his eyes fall on me. The five very distressed-looking women around his bed let out a sigh of relief before turning to me. I can feel them begin to size me up as well.

The absolutely filthy-looking child suddenly jumps to his feet and takes a few unsteady steps towards the edge of his large queen-sized bed, as if he’s trying to make sure that it’s really me. Suddenly, he jumps. “Mummy!”

A number of gasps echo around the room. I beam at the child.

“I told you I’ll find you.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

One Good Night

*His bright, innocent eyes stare at her lovingly
& she begins to do the one thing she shouldn't.
She begins to secretly wonder . . . "Can I keep him?"*

"I told you I'll find you."

"Mummy! Mummyyy!"

Isaac screams as he jumps off the bed—causing all of us women to gasp or yelp—and runs up to me. Reaching me, the adorable, mud-coated child jumps up, trying to cling to me like a monkey while he does.

As I kneel down to scoop the child up into my arms, for a second, my mind worries about what I will do with my soiled self, then the little boy's arms wrap around my neck and he leans his tiny head on my chest. I decide to worry about myself later.

"I missed you too." I chuckle as I feel the child squeeze me, peppering small muddy kisses all over my cheeks before resting his head on my shoulder. At my words, the little boy lifts his head up and moves it away from my face. He frowns with a cute little pout on his face.

"Mummy's a liar! You didn't come home with us!"

I turn towards William for a little help, only to see him watching me silently.

He won't be of any help, I tell myself silently before turning back to Isaac.

"Mummy had to do something, sweetie." It isn't technically a lie. I did have to go home and live my life.

"Do something? For sooo long?" Isaac whines as he hides his face

into the crook of my neck again, not ready to let go of the argument so easily.

Isaac doesn't seem like he's going to let me off so easily. I sigh. Instead of answering him, I get up on my feet again. Turning to give William a glance, I begin walking towards what I pray is the bathroom.

"Mummy will let you scold her all you want, but after you're clean, okay?" I hold the light boy closer to me as we get closer towards the door I'm aiming for. A twist of my hand and I breathe out in relief. *It's the bathroom. Success!*

"I don't want to s-scold Mummy," Isaac grumbles almost incoherently. I can't help but grin at the tiny little cupcake. This tiny boy is taking my heart away quicker than I'm ready to give. The consequences of this façade will come back and bite me in the face one day—someday when this little boy is old enough to understand everything. I know that. I know that, and that is why I should feel scared now, but instead, I can't help but grin and hold him close.

"I will bath myself, Mummy," Isaac suddenly declares shyly as I place him down on the bathroom tile. One look at his chubby pink cheeks and I can't help but grin harder. The little guy is shy.

"Are you sure?" I ask, still. I'm not sure whether he is still bathed by someone or if he showers on his own. The look of confidence on the boy's face when he nods vigorously tells me that he must be used to cleaning his own self, so I give in.

"Okay." I nod, walking towards the shower's knob I feel is too high for him to reach, I twist it open as I put my hand under the water to check if it's an okay temperature for a kid before stepping back towards the entrance of the bathroom.

"Should I leave a bit of the door open?" I ask as I hold the open door, looking back at the child standing in the middle of the large bathroom. It doesn't take him much to think about before he nods. I smile. "Okay! I'm stepping out!" I tell the child before slowly beginning to pull the door closer and closer to a close.

"He ruined your clothes. I apologize." When I turn towards the velvety voice, William is still standing on his exact spot. The maids, however, are now quickly clearing up Isaac's bedsheets and cleaning the room. I wonder for a moment when they get to go home. It's already past seven-thirty.

My eyes move down my own attire slowly. I cringe when I spot my once blue dress now having large patches of brown. A closer look and I notice even my hands and skin are now smeared with mud.

“It’s alright.” I smile at William lamely, almost feeling like a mischievous child myself. “It’s just mud. It’ll come off after a spin in the washing machine.”

“Mummy!” Isaac’s voice has me turning towards the bathroom, alert.

“Yes?” I ask him loudly. I don’t want to freak out. I don’t want to let the hundreds of thoughts—saying that if something has happened to him, it’s my fault since I left him in there alone—begin scream in my head.

William begins to stride towards the door when Isaac yells again. “C-can you scrub my back?”

William doesn’t stop and slips into the bathroom. I quickly follow in after, a breath of relief leaving my lips.

Inside the bathroom, the little guy stands beside the running shower. Clouds of foam cover everything but his face. I can only chuckle at the bright-eyed naked child as he looks at me with a wide toothy smile, his hands extending a sponge in my direction.

“Come here you!” I beam at the child as I reach him and take the sponge from his tiny hands. I try to stay away from the water as I turn little Isaac around and bend forward to scrub his back. I realize bending forward isn’t a great idea when my hair falls forward on both sides of my face.

Ah well, I might as well go all out. I let a sigh slip out of my lips and continue scrubbing the little boy’s shoulder.

“I’ll just grab a ca—” My hands stop in their movement. I freeze and my breath hitches in my throat. At this moment, the only thing I’m focused on is the fingers now softly brushing against my skin, raking my hair back.

“Ah!” I blink—surprised—as William silently wraps his fingers around my hair and pulls it back, holding it securely away from my face.

“Mummy?” Isaac sounds confused. Probably about why I’ve stopped scrubbing him.

“S-sorry. I’m sorry,” I stutter, carefully turning the boy around again before I continue to scrub his skin as gently as I can.

By the time Isaac’s bathed, I’m also feeling the dire need of having one myself. I can’t complain though; I’ve known I was a lost cause ever since I let little Isaac cling to me like a monkey.

We get out of the bathroom with a very happy and clean Isaac wrapped around in a large white towel. Turning towards us, the little dumpling beams before rushing off towards the clothes laid on his freshly made bed, making cute little tip-tapping sounds against the floor from his small adorable feet.

“I can dress, Mummy. You and Daddy take a bath now.” Isaac grins as he turns towards us, and I feel myself visibly blanch at the thought of how we’re going to handle the child now that he is bathed and everything is clean. I mean, I need to go home. Saara must be freaking out by now.

“I’ll wait till he’s dressed to explain things to him and then go home,” I whisper as quietly as I can while William walks out and closes the bedroom door behind us.

“You’re drenched,” William replies instead. It’s a simple statement, but it makes me realize just how immodest this modest dress gets once it’s wet.

Immediately, I look down towards my chest; I want to cry. I want the earth to split open and swallow me alive. My cheeks begin to burn, and I quickly slam my handbag on my chest. My mind is in overdrive. *This just can not be happening.*

“I’m so sorry!” I whisper, quickly beginning to walk away from the man. I’m so embarrassed, this is the loudest I can bring myself to speak.

I don’t even take a step forward when a pair of large hands clasp around my shoulder, holding me back.

“Do you want to take a shower?”

Of course, I want to take a shower, but somewhere where I have actually have clothes! Still, I don’t exactly want to seem like I’m filthy.

“It’s fine. My clothes are dirty and it’ll be too much of an inconvenience. I’ll just take a cab straight home.” I bite my lip. I can feel the heat curling up from my neck up to my face. I don’t know why but I feel really embarrassed about my outfit situation now that I’m all alone with William.

“It’s not an inconvenience,” William counters bluntly.

Not explaining further, I can only move as I’m softly steered away from Isaac’s room.

William stops us in front of another door that looks almost identical to Isaac’s and opens it. He walks in, leaving me standing outside the door.

“Come in,” I hear his voice call out, and I hesitatingly take a step in, nervously taking a look around the large—very large—bedroom.

Looking around the white-and-green themed room, my eyes land on the clean white desk placed on the side of the room. My attention zooms to a cross-sectioned brain’s model that is placed on it, and I instantly know who this room belongs to.

Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!

“Here.” I meekly grasp on to the set of shirt and sweatpants that is handed towards me. I’m no genius, but of course, I know who these belong to as well. It’s perverted of me to think this, but wow, William has worn these clothes before.

“They’re new. I’ve never worn them, don’t worry.”

I feel myself blush shamelessly. “Thanks,” I murmur, nibbling on my lower lip like I always do when I’m nervous.

“The bathroom’s behind that door.” I turn to the direction in which he is pointing at.

“Fresh towels are in the bathroom.” William clears his throat, and I feel my blush deepen. “Take your time. I’ll be outside.”

I watch as the man turns around sharply and swiftly leaves the room. *He must feel as awkward as I did.* I sigh to myself dejectedly. *Oh well.* I slowly turn towards the bathroom. “Thank you.”

* * *

Taking a shower really is a luxury I decide as I walk out of the bathroom finally feeling like a human being again. William’s sweatpants hang loosely around my hips, held only by the strings I pulled and tied in the middle as nicely as I could. His shirt, on the other hand, is the only thing that assures me that I will be able to survive in this outfit. On me, it’s almost a mid-thigh dress. That’s assuring because even if the pants fail me, my dignity will still be saved by William’s shirt-dress.

Tucking the plastic bag—which usually carries my umbrella but right now carries my soiled clothes—into my bag, I open the door of the bedroom and step out.

“I’m done,” I mumble. I can feel his eyes on me, giving me a once-over as I stand before him in his clothes. *Is he too shocked to see my bare*

face? I don't apply that much makeup though?

Still, I can't find the courage to look up into his eyes. "I've kept the towel in your hamper. I hope that's okay?" I add, shuffling awkwardly on my feet when he doesn't reply. *What? Is he upset?*

I can't help it. Curiosity burns in the back of my mind, and I slowly lift my gaze until I meet William's. As my eyes meet his, I feel my breath hitch in my throat. His dark eyes are peering into my soul again, seeing my deepest secrets, reading my most private fears.

"Mummy!"

Isaac's wail catches me off guard, but it's a welcomed distraction because I quickly turn towards the maid rushing towards us, carrying him in her arms. I was about to die under William's soul-reading gaze.

"Now, we're both clean." I grin at the little boy as I take him from the maid's arms. Immediately, Isaac jumps in my arms, tightening his hold around my neck.

"You smell just like Daddy." The little guy giggles, pulling his face away to show me his toothy smile, and for the nth time tonight, I feel myself blush profusely.

"That's because Mummy used Daddy's shower gel," I whisper into the boy's ears making him giggle loudly. "Don't tell him though." I wink at him playfully, strangely proud that I'm the reason behind his laughter.

"I'm going to have a bath," William announces all of a sudden. Both Isaac and I turn towards him in surprise.

Thankfully, this time, his eyes are on Isaac instead. "Isaac, be good."

I can feel as Isaac slumps against me at his father's words. He's disappointed.

Wanting to distract him, I quickly twirl the boy around until he's giggling again.

"Have you had your dinner, sweetie?" I ask the little boy, making sure that he's fed before I try to put him to sleep.

Behind us, William's bedroom door shuts close.

"Really? What did you have for dinner?" I pry, turning towards the maid who is still standing there.

"Chicken and mashed potatoes," she mouths just as Isaac replies the same. I smile at the maid as I mouth a "thank you", and she quickly begins to retreat.

Looking back at Isaac, I smile. “That sounds yummy! So you’re not hungry right now, right? Do you want to eat something?”

“Uh-uh,” Isaac immediately shakes his head, and I nod to myself. *Okay, he’s not hungry.*

“Do you want to drink something?” I ask softly instead.

“Hot chocolate!” he yells and I shake my head.

“It’s too late for that. How about you have that tomorrow for lunch or breakfast?”

“Okay, Mummy,” Isaac whispers immediately. Something in the way he’s talking makes me uncomfortable. I realize that the little boy agrees to almost whatever I say, that too almost immediately—like he’s afraid of upsetting me. Like upsetting me will make me leave.

I tighten my hold on the kid and I hold him close to my chest.

“Isaac, I need a little favour from you. Will you promise?”

“Yes, Mummy!” Isaac almost jumps into my arms, eager to help. I cringe. Somehow, his sweet behaviour makes me want to cry instead of smile.

Still, I hand the beautiful child the brightest smile I can afford. I make him move a little back so I can look into his tiny eyes before I speak.

“Mummy wants you to promise me that you will always be honest with Mummy. If you don’t like something, tell me. If you want something, tell me. Don’t lie to me because you don’t want me to get upset, okay?”

Little Isaac looks at me for a little while, his round perceptive eyes stay on mine before he nods, then he lets his head fall. “I don’t want Mummy to leave again.”

It’s a mere whisper. I never thought a whisper could break my heart, but this one does.

The child doesn’t want to upset me because he doesn’t want his mother to leave again.

“I won’t leave you, Isaac.” I dig my own grave. “I will always be with you.” And put a wreath on it.

The door pulls open behind us. “You’re both still here?”

We turn towards the voice, and I drop my head, blinking hard. Looking up, my eyes widen when I see William’s narrowed eyes on me.

“Was Mummy crying?” he asks his son. Immediately, Isaac pulls back and looks at me, placing both his hands on either side of my face to stop

me from looking away. Despite my misting eyes, I smile at the child brightly.

I don't know why I'm behaving like this—like an idiot who can't control her emotions, but I can't stop the tears. Just feeling Isaac's small arms holding on to me tightly, thinking that I'm his mother, thinking that I'm his mother who's come back to him, who loves him, who's thankful he's in this world . . . his mother . . . it all just makes me want to cry. The poor child. The poor child.

The two boys suddenly become dead silent.

"What did you do?" both boys ask each other at the same time.

"Did Pa fight with Mummy again?" Isaac's small chubby fingers find my cheeks, and he carefully wipes the tears I'm so foolishly weeping. This only makes me want to weep harder. It's so embarrassing. I can't even stop. I try harder to stop.

"No, I didn't!" William snaps, suddenly looking slightly offended. "You did something, didn't you?"

"Both of you didn't do anything," I sniffle, bouncing Isaac in my arm to bring his attention back on me. "Mummy's just crying because she had a bug in her eye."

"A bug?"

I nod, smiling at the boy weakly. "But it's okay. Mummy's removed it. See?" I widen my eyes into two circle saucers. "Mummy's not crying anymore."

Isaac looks skeptical for a bit, but then, he gives in. "Okay, muaahhmmmyy." He breaks into a yawn, and I giggle as I tap his tiny chin with my finger. Isaac ends with a giggle of his own.

Turning towards William, I ignore his curious eyes.

"The little prince is sleepy." I chuckle as convincingly as I can while I stare at the grey material of his shirt instead of his face.

"Let's get you to sleep." William decides to play along as he steps forward and lifts a yawning but otherwise completely awake Isaac from my arms and into his.

I'm thankful for his ignorance. I don't know how I would be able to explain myself if he demanded me to. The humiliation would also be quite real.

We walk together to Isaac's room, and for the first time, I realize how far away from William's room it is. How does William know when Isaac has

nightmares? Does he keep those camera things? I frown. Still, how can he keep his child in a separate room? Doesn't Isaac get scared?

The sound of my phone beginning to blare in the corridors of this large house almost gives me and the other two boys a mini heart attack.

"Sorry," I quickly apologize before shuffling through my bag and pulling out my iPhone.

"Hello? Gemma?" *It's August.*

"Hey, August," I reply sheepishly as I follow William into Isaac's room. William turns to glance at me before he slowly places an almost asleep Isaac on his bed and begins patting his forehead.

"Where are you?" Saara comes to the line and I find myself flinching at her shrill voice.

"I'm okay," I reply instead, being careful of not saying the wrong things in front of the child.

"That's not what I asked!" Saara demands loudly from the other side of the line and I find myself flinching again.

"Don't you trust me? I'm a law-abiding citizen," I sigh, giving her my best response.

"Where are you? August will come get you!"

"August?" I make a face, wondering exactly why he has to stay over with her for so late at a time. "Okay, look, don't okay? I'm texting you."

I cut the line in record time.

"Daddy, Mummy's pants are falling. Go tie it like you tie mine!" Isaac yells suddenly, looking very much awake now. I blink at Isaac before my head snaps to William. By now, it's not even a surprise. His expression is just as unreadable as ever as he sits on Isaac's bed, looking into his own phone. At Isaac's yell, his eyes lazily move to me and I cringe.

"Daddy's bigger in size than I am so that's why it's falling, sweetie. But it's fine, don't worry! Let's get you to sleep, okay?" I try to console the child as I pull on to the falling disaster of a pants and begin walking towards him.

Moving around the bed to his side, I quickly settle myself on the bed and watch with a strange warmth in my chest when Isaac scoots over to me instantly, snuggling into me like he wants to fuse us together.

"Mummy will sleep with me tonight?" Isaac mumbles the quiet question. The rational part of me is telling me to refuse. That I shouldn't

sleep in basically still a stranger's house. So what if he's a neurosurgeon in the making? A person with one of the most respectable jobs. So what if his son pulls at my heartstrings? Who's to say neurosurgeons can't be serial killers? Or just dangerous?

The rational part of me wants to put a limit on how much of myself I offer this little boy. It's just the second time, and I'm already doing things I've never thought I'd do, just to make this child smile. It's all and well for him, but for me? What if this leaves me with nothing in the end?

Some anonymous intellectual somewhere once said:

You can do everything in your power for someone, but one day when they turn around saying, "Did I ask you to do it?", you won't be able to complain because they'll be right.

One day, this boy will turn around and ask me if he ever asked me to do this for him, lie for him, pretend to be his mother for him, bathe him, put him to sleep, maybe even raise him for a while. Will I be able to complain?

"Mummy?"

"Hmm?" I hum, breaking away from my internal battle as I focus on little Isaac again. I'll set some boundaries here, I'm sure the child isn't too little to reason with.

"Will you sleep with me tonight?"

"Isaac, you and Mummy need to have a serious talk tomorrow morning, okay?" I mumble sweetly to the child snuggled beside me.

"Are you leaving again?" Isaac's voice croaks, and he tilts his head back to look at me. The mop of dark hair over his forehead sweeps over his eyes at that moment, and I carefully caress his hair away from his forehead.

"No. No. I will stay with you until you absolutely get tired of me and tell me to leave," I assure the child. I'm being honest. Despite all the questions I might face from Isaac when he realizes I'm not his mother, I'll be here for him while he needs me. Right now, he's too little to be so sad and heartbroken. Too little for me to turn away from.

"I will never tell Mummy to leave!" Isaac announces adamantly as he looks at me with his creased tiny forehead.

I can't help but smile at the little child. So innocent of how the world works.

"Okay," I say loudly, placing a kiss on his forehead. "I believe you."

"Now, sleep." My breath hitches in my chest in shock at the sound of

a third voice in the room. I'd completely forgotten that William's still in the room.

"Daddy will sleep with us too?" Isaac bursts out excitedly as he jumps on his bed towards his father. I begin to panic. This was not something I was expecting! How can William sleep in the same bed as me? We're not even friends!

"No. Mummy will sleep with you tonight. Daddy will sleep in his own bed," William tells his child clearly. His phone rings again and my eyes snap to his and then his phone.

Girlfriend?

Right. Judging by his looks, he should definitely have one, but it must be hard with his profession. Right, of course, he must have a girlfriend. Does he want some alone time with his girlfriend? I must help him.

"Yes, sweetie. Mummy doesn't want to sleep with Daddy. He's no fun. Mummy wants to sleep with you and tell you stories and hear your stories too. Let Daddy sleep in his own bedroom, okay?"

"But Tammy says her mummy and daddy love each other and they always sleep together. Daddy doesn't love Mummy?"

I almost choke on my saliva. William's phone pings again.

"I'm so pretty, of course Daddy loves me!" I blurt out hurriedly. Isaac giggles as he snuggles closer to me, and I wrap my arm around him, motioning a wide-eyed William to quickly move out. This time, my phone pings. I turn my head towards it.

"On second thought, Tammy is right, Isaac. Daddy will sleep with you tonight." I almost choke on my saliva for real this time.

My wide eyes snap to William and I mouth, "What are you doing?"

The quiet man shrugs at me this time, and I watch him with his jaw slack as he settles on to the bed, keeping himself almost at the edge.

"Daddy, let's snuggle," Isaac's sleepy voice mumbles. *I die.*

"I-I need to use the bathroom!" I almost yell as I shoot out of bed. "Snuggle with Dad in the meantime!"

I rush towards the washroom.

CHAPTER EIGHT

One Rushed Morning

She strolls around her garden in the morning just as she always does.

“Are you really so nice or are you secretly selfish?” a pink rose asks her.

She smiles. “Seeing him smile makes me happy,”

To her right, a white dahlia squeals, its bright green leaves sway with the morning breeze.

“Such a pretty fairytale!” Suddenly, she shoots up to her feet.

“Oh no! I’m late!”

When I finally decide to leave the bathroom—which seems like hours later—I pray to God that Isaac has fallen asleep and his dad is one out of two turns to be right.

Walking into the dimly lit room, Isaac definitely seems to have fallen asleep. William, on the other hand, is still on the bed beside his son. It’s closer now, the moment where I decide on whether I’m going home or not. My heart begins to beat like it’s in a marathon, and I gulp nervously as I take shaky steps towards the father and son.

A loud sigh leaves my lips when walking closer to the bed, I realize that William’s asleep too. Just then a sharp, loud ping sounds around the silent room. I rush towards the stand that’s housing my cell phone, screaming a million scoldings to myself for forgetting my phone here when I had to rush into the bathroom for so long.

I wrap my fingers around the iPhone and I bring it closer, clicking on the unseen messages.

“Oh god,” I groan under my breath as I settle down on the edge of the bed tiredly. My mind’s all over the place right now. I just need to sit in one place and talk to Saara. To let it out. See what she says.

It doesn’t take a second before Saara’s reply comes pinging back. Immediately, I put the phone on silent. In all that has happened tonight, my brain is too tired to function properly. I tap on the message pop-up.

I frown. Although her second text message makes me scoff humorously, I still can’t help but wonder about the serious topic at hand. I don’t know if I should stay. It isn’t appropriate. Where would I sleep if I stayed here? With a man and his child on their bed? I should just go home.

I press send and shuffle back anxiously until my back touches the headboard. A glance in Isaac’s direction brings a smile to my face. I reach forward and caress his hair back slowly, away from his eyes. Maybe he needs a haircut. A few seconds later, another message.

That’s right. Isaac will probably create a fuss if I’m not here in the morning. Maybe I should just stay until I can explain my living issue in the morning. I could just take Isaac home whenever he wants. I turn to my phone’s screen again. I don’t know why, but I need Saara telling me that I’m not stupid for doing this because no matter how much I try to question myself about how I feel . . . I’m still content.

I sigh. This is it. This is the part where I have to explain myself as much as I can to a cousin who’s ready to smack me on my head in case I’m messing up.

Another second and another reply.

Glancing at Isaac, my gaze touches his father’s, and I watch him for a second. The man doesn’t have very sharp features except for his piercing eyes and his nose, but even in his sleep, he still looks as forbidden as he does when he’s awake. I turn back to my phone.

My eyes widen. *Why does she want to send me off to bed so early? Is she busy? With who? August? Are they . . .* I quickly shake my head, dismissing the horrible thought, and begin stabbing in a reply.

A few seconds later, I let out a sigh of relief, then sigh tiredly as I get to the last sentence.

I can’t help but grin. It’s funny, both Saara and I are in a very

complicated place in our lives again. At the same time. Again.

Saara and I usually have most of our great days at the same time. When she flourishes in her life, I'm usually doing great at the company and in school, but mostly, when she messes up, I usually mess up somewhere too. It's kind of fun if I think about it. That way, we're never really alone.

Especially when we mess up.

"I realize I don't know much about you, Gemma." I almost get a heart attack. My eyes snap towards the direction of the voice, and there he lies, completely awake!

"Have you . . . have you been awake since I walked out of the bathroom?" I gasp, looking into the unreadable dark eyes of the man still lying beside Isaac.

"I'm a light sleeper," he replies simply. "I woke up when your messages pinged."

"Oh no," I groan, trying to keep my voice as low as I can. I didn't want Isaac awake as well. "I'm so sorry. You must be tired after work."

"That's fine. I have odd hours when I'm sleepy and when I'm not, because of the hospital," William replies, his piercing dark eyes once again peering into my soul . . . or trying to read my mind.

"My full name is Gemma Windly. I was born on the ninth of March, 1994, in Cambridge," I inform him instead, trying to get back into topic. I can understand how he must feel about an unknown woman who's suddenly willing to pretend to be his son's mum. Ridiculously skeptical.

"We migrated to Canada during my ninth year because my mother got a promotion. My mother is the head accounts officer at a bank in Vancouver, and my dad is an agriculture professor. I'm a literary editor at Dreamcloud Publishing.

"Ah . . . I went to a local primary and secondary school in Cambridge and then to a private high school in Vancouver. I studied at the University of British Columbia for my degree. I'm currently doing my master's here in Toronto. I live in Greenwood Coxwell. Right now, my cousin, Saara, is also staying over. She's the one who has been texting me since I'm not home yet. If you're interested in seeing the documentation for confirmation then, for now, I have my employee identification card, my driver's license, my health insurance card, and my passport," I finish as gracefully as I can. This is the most talking I've done in one go for a while. That, too, about myself.

“Thorough,” William comments, slowly setting himself up on the bed. At his movement, Isaac groans and turns around, and we both stay still until he settles back down. Still asleep. Content with his child’s conscious status, William extends his hand forward, and I blanch, realizing he really does want to see my identification cards.

There is nothing else I can do, so I reach to my left and pull my bag towards me. Opening up my wallet, I slide out the cards and then hand it over to William.

“Miss,” he mumbles to himself, making my eyes snap to his. He, on the other hand, continues to analyse my cards.

“Are you married?” he asks blandly. It’s not a surprise when I can’t figure out in what context he’s asking me this. I can never make out this man’s emotions from his face. He’s always so detached and unreadable.

“No,” I answer.

“Divorced?”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “No.”

“Widowed?” he asks as he turns to look at me. My cards are still in his hands.

I blink, wondering if he’s being serious right now. “No.”

“Engaged?” he continues asking as if he’s checking every question out from a list.

“Negatory,” I reply this time. My mouth has begun hurting just by saying no so much.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” William asks me, his deep voice sending a chill down my back.

Now, this is a question I’ve answered a million times before. “ I don’t.”

Usually, after that question, I get asked why I’m single. “Are you straight?”

I feel my jaw go slack. I can’t help but stare at a very serious-looking William. *Is this man serious?*

“What do you think?” I smile at him brightly, deciding that I don’t want to be straightforward this time.

“You didn’t ask for my identification. Still . . .” William announces as he turns around and hands me an envelope and a name tag. My cards are still with him.

“This man is very strange,” I decide, turning away from his face to look down at whatever he is handing me. I take it from his hands and begin looking over it.

First comes his medical license. His name tag. I don’t dwell much on that, so I put it aside and open the envelope, carefully pulling out the papers inside. The first is his divorce paper. Next, Isaac’s birth certificate.

“You’re twenty-nine then,” I mumble as I glance at the papers for the last time before slipping them into the envelope. Looking at William, I extend his things towards him.

“I am,” he admits indifferently, taking his things and handing me mine.

“You look a lot younger.” I shrug, slipping my cards into my wallet’s cardholders. “Isaac’s asleep, so I think I should go home now. What time does he wake up? I’ll be back before he does.”

“You’re going home. How?” William asks as he places his things on his side of the nightstand.

“I’ll catch a taxi.”

“A taxi?” He sounds unconvinced. It’s a miracle I’m able to make out this emotion from him, I realize.

Still, I frown at the man in confusion. “Yes?”

Why does he sound so unconvinced? Maybe he thinks I like to spend a lot since taxis charge a lot.

“I’ve troubled you a lot today, and it is quite late. I’ll drop you home.” William makes a move to stand, but I immediately shake my head. I’m not going to make him drop me home when Isaac’s asleep in the house, all alone.

“It’s completely fine. I don’t think Isaac should be home alone. It’s fine. I’ll catch a taxi.”

William’s lips thin as he looks at me speak, and all the air of confidence washes away from me. *How can a man look so foreboding and absolute just by . . . being! Why can’t he smile at least a little? Like . . . like he was doing that night at the theatre. With that girl.*

“I’ll ask Mrs. Xi to stay here while I am gone. It’s very late at night. I’m driving you home.”

I know William’s not going to have it any other way except dropping me home. Amongst the many qualities he possesses, he seems to also possess

a very strong knack for stubbornness.

My attention focuses on the man in front of me. “Do you have a girlfriend? You’re straight, right?”

William’s expression goes blank with shock. “Excuse me?”

“Do you have a girlfriend? Are you straight?” I repeat my question dumbly, looking more confident than I feel. Inside, I’m swearing at myself for being so stupid! I don’t even want to know these things! Well, sort of.

“I’m divorced. I don’t have a girlfriend or a fiancé. As for being straight or not—” He motion towards Isaac with his eyes. “What do you think?”

I, however, remain stunned. My eyes stay frozen on the man’s mouth. The mouth that is smirking. Seeing William smirk opens up my eyes to how different he looks when he smiles—almost innocent and childlike.

“Are you sure Mrs. Xi is still available? You really should stay here. I’ll call for a taxi. I know a driver or two.”

It’s like I’ve not spoken at all. Carefully getting off the bed, he tucks the blanket nicely over Isaac and begins walking towards the bedroom door.

“Let’s go.”

* * *

The car ride is silent, save the sounds of the traffic outside and the directions from the GPA. I realize it must just be one of the most awkward rides I’ve taken for a while as we finally stop in front of my house and the sound of the car’s engine dies down.

There’s the awkward silence again while we both sit in the car. I don’t know how much pleasantries to offer the man right now. *Do I invite him in for tea? Would that be too much? Do I ask him for his number? Would that be way too much? What will he think of me when I invite him in for tea? Will he think I’m easy? Or trying to get into his bank account?* I shake my head, ridding myself of these thoughts.

“Would you like to come in for tea?” I ask softly, albeit a bit meekly while I try not to look at the man.

“It’s too late to have tea,” William comments. “And you must be tired after all the trouble Isaac has put you through.”

My eyes snap to the man. Why does he keep telling me that I’ve been

troubled? I don't feel troubled. Just a bit overwhelmed for the future, I admit.

"Could you message me what Isaac likes and dislikes? Like food and other things?" I ask instead, changing the topic is always safer than pushing the old one. He is so reserved. I don't know this man too clearly to know how he reacts when he is upset.

"I'll have Mrs. Xi give you a list of things Isaac likes and dislikes," William answers calmly. I wonder for a second if he even knows what his son likes or doesn't. I suddenly realize we've been sitting in the car for more than five minutes now.

"Okay." I turn towards Isaac's dad and smile as I find the door's handle and pull it. Pushing the door open, I swiftly get out of the SUV and lift on my toes until I can see William's observant eyes very nicely.

"Thank you for driving me home, I appreciate it. I'll see you tomorrow then. Goodnight." I smile at the man brightly. I reckon if I have to be Isaac's mother for however long, I'll have to get along with his dad as well.

I think I see a hint of a smile on his face when he nods, turning the SUV back on. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I repeat in my head as I nod to the man and close the door of the SUV.

Watching the man drive away allows me to think about how different he is—so quiet and reserved, always so observant and just kind enough. I can't call him kind but kind enough seems fine.

Soon, his SUV seems like a tiny dot on the street and I let out a sigh as I turn around, walking slowly towards the opening gate. Quickly moving in, I lock it.

It's been a very eventful day today and an even more eventful night. So much has happened. Many life-altering things that I don't think I'd ever even been able to imagine on my own. Still, as I walk towards the front door right now, the silent calm of the night, the chilly breeze, and the smell of flowers around me. I can't help but feel the happiest I've ever been.

Yes. Right now, I'm happy.

* * *

It's another one of the usual mornings. I am up by five and ready to

pour myself into the new manuscript I've been eyeing ever since I was handed the stapled bulk of paper.

Each of the points in my morning routine goes by, and by six, I can't help but smile as the sun's cool rays begin to shine through the living room.

As the sun's rays hit my pale skin, so does the memories of yesterday. The memories of yesterday with William. With Isaac.

Isaac . . .

My eyes widen. ISAAC!

"Oh no! I have to be *there* before he wakes up!" I yelp as I jump out of the couch and bolt towards the bedroom in a matter of seconds.

"Oye! Shut it!" Saara growls as she shoves her head under her pillow. Had it been any other day, I would have shut up, but today, I am extremely late. I don't want Isaac to throw another fit.

"What are you yelling for?" Saara's sleep-coated voice asks, breaking the ticking silence.

"I'm so bleeding late! I have to be there before Isaac gets up!" I rush as I pull my yoga pants on and then pull my large grey sweater over my white tank top.

"Ohh yes." Saara's gruff voice fills the room again. "My nephew."

I don't say this out loud, but I'm completely sure that Saara has no idea what she's talking about right now, so I ignore her and continue my task at the fastest pace.

"I'm locking the gate and doors on my way out. I'll call you, okay," I call out behind me as I glance towards Saara. One glance and I'm pretty sure there are two eyes under the darkness of the pillow—looking at me.

"Unnn," Saara replies loudly as she puts her hand up and motions me to leave.

I laugh all the way out of the house and the yard, hoping my best friend has been feeling better. I feel a little guilty, not being able to help her through getting over this breakup as much as I want to. I just hope she doesn't keep it against me.

My eyes analyse the busy morning street and I sigh. It's obvious I will not be able to catch the bus and get there on time, so instead, after I lock the gate behind me, I quickly begin hailing a taxi, silently praying that I get a driver with good enough tolerance and character.

Thankfully, a taxi comes to a stop only moments later, and I quickly

get in.

“Twenty-fifth Edmund Avenue, please,” I breathe as my eyes meet the female driver’s eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Got it.” She nods before driving back on to the main lane.

CHAPTER NINE

One Different Day

She walks through the tall open gates into a world she should not belong in.

*“Such a different day today,” the sun beams down at her.
She agrees.*

We reach William’s home quicker than I thought we would. Having my eyes on the meter all throughout the drive proves to be a good idea as soon as the taxi stops. I quickly hand the driver the fare and scream a ‘thank you’, jump out of the cab and towards the large, closed gates for the house.

I’m not sure if I press the bell at the gate or I very well near destroy it with my index finger as I push it for the second time.

I’m freaking out. I won’t lie. The last thing I want this morning is to see Isaac panic just because he thinks his mother has left him again. *I don’t abandon people. I’ve never abandoned anyone.*

“Oh! Miss, it’s you,” a sarcastic-sounding voice says, and I turn towards the speaker with surprise. It’s the male help who was sizing me up last night.

“Yes, it’s me. Can you please open the gate?” I reply as kindly as I can, deciding to ignore his tone. I really don’t have time to ask him why he’s upset with me so soon. He’s just met me last night after all!

“Sure,” Ren replies, unlocking the gate and dragging it open. Feeling grateful, I step inside immediately.

“We just thought that you had run away again,” the boy adds bitterly as soon I take a step in.

I’m surprised. The maids think that I’m Isaac’s real mum.

The one that abandoned him. Instantly, I understand why I'm being treated this way. The help must hate my guts!

"Hurry in then. The son you left again last night is still asleep."

For a second, as I begin to contemplate if I should just tell him the truth or just let him hate me for the rest of my life in place of someone else, I sigh.

"I'm sorry. That decision was wrong. Isaac won't be let down this time."

I nod to myself silently. Yes, that sounds about right. I'm neither lying about assuming William's ex-wife's identity nor am I lying about anything I am saying. I don't have any intention of letting Isaac down after all.

"Hmph!" Ren makes an expression of snotty dislike. "We'll see."

"Miss! Good morning! Isaac is still asleep." Another woman approaches me as we enter the large house. I remember her from last night; she was one of the women near the bed.

"Hello," I reply softly, taking in her thickly accented English. I wonder which part of Asia she is from.

As I begin walking behind her, I take in the way she's dressed. The elegant-looking woman is dressed in a knee-length dark blue dress and her slightly graying hair is pinned back carefully away from her face. I can't help but want to treat her with the utmost respect.

"I was just preparing little Isaac's breakfast," she informs me as she continues to lead me towards the kitchen.

In the light of the day, the house looks even more fragile and immaculate. The grey, neutral, and golden colour tones sprinkle the sense of fortune and taste into the whole house, and I begin to wonder how Isaac feels at home in a house that does not even have a single plant.

Still, I focus on the more important things—deciding that I could always get a plant or two for Isaac's room later.

"Erm, I'm sorry, ma'am. I don't think I caught your name?"

The woman lets out a bark of laughter. "Ma'am? Please! Call me Mary! I'm little Isaac's nan."

"Oh." I felt myself blush, a foolish grin on my face. I should have known the moment she said that she was cooking for Isaac.

"Well . . . erm, Mary, can you please tell me more about Isaac?" I ask

softly, trying to keep my voice as low as possible in case the other maids hear and decide to hate me even more.

“You want to know what he likes and dislikes?” Mary looks up at me with an eyebrow cocked up, her hand still chopping away at the onion. “You’re already more attentive than his mother was.”

I feel my heart jolt in my chest. There is actually someone in the household that knows I’m not his actual mother?

“Why don’t the others know I’m not his mum?” I ask, again in a hushed tone, as I take a seat on the high stool and lean forward on the beautiful white and grey granite island.

“She was always out before six in the morning and only came back home after midnight after they left.”

Then how does she know her? I begin to wonder as I look at the woman carefully, contemplating if it would be appropriate to ask her this.

I don’t have to.

“I know you’re not her because I’m her mother.”

I think I’m about to puke. I marched in here yesterday, pretending to be Isaac’s mother in front of his maternal grandmother.

“I apologize, I’m not trying to in—”

“Take my daughter’s place? Oh, it’s alright. She’s done this to herself.” Mary shrugs softly as she begins slicing the chicken now.

“I’m so sorry.” I don’t know what else to say. I don’t even know what’s happened in this house exactly, but I can’t bring myself to ask because it feels like it’s none of my business.

“Shirley has always been a wild spirit. She likes adventure and fun and luxury. When she met William in college, she was doing her bachelor’s in nutrition and he was studying medicine. She quickly fell in love. He was everything she hoped for. He came from an extremely rich family, he had a steady career in the future, he’s also very good-looking, and he spoilt her because he was smitten by her. They got engaged after graduation. Everything was fine for a couple of years. They were happy, but then, she got pregnant. I think it all began when she got pregnant.

“Suddenly, they had to get married and Shirley wasn’t as happy as she was before. She began feeling . . . trapped. Her passion for seeing the world began eating her. That’s when the fights began.”

“Oh,” I dumbly reply, finding myself suddenly tongue-tied. I don’t

know who to blame in this situation. I don't even think I have a right to keep an opinion about this situation.

"I've pushed too much information on to you, haven't I?" The older woman chuckles nervously as she brings up a large wok and turns on the stove.

"No, no, I'm sure you need to share your feelings with someone. You must be very sad as well," I reply hurriedly, not giving my reply too much of a thought as I spill out whatever I'm actually thinking of.

"I miss my daughter," Mary admits, standing still for a second before she visibly shakes herself and begins pouring the oil into the wok. "But I know she's made some unforgivable mistakes. She will never be able to make up for what she's done to William and Isaac. I'll admit, I wasn't happy to see you yesterday. It felt like you're replacing my daughter, but I thought about it all night, I'm . . . I'm happy you're here. Both William and Isaac are very taken by you."

My heart jumps in my chest.

"I'm sorry. I think you misunderstand." I shake my head as I bring my hands forward to wave them in a no. "William and I—"

"It's fine, dear. William has been divorced for almost two years now. He deserves to find someone else who can make him happier."

Oh my god . . . give me strength.

I give up. Deciding to get the topic back to things that I actually should be concentrating on.

"Could you please tell me what Isaac likes to eat and stuff? Are there things he likes to do a lot? Like going to the movies? Is he . . . is he allergic to something? Or is scared of something? Like heights?"

"Don't worry, dear. I've prepared that list over there for you. It will help you. It has information for both Isaac and William."

I want to disappear as I feel my cheeks grow hot for the nth time since sitting on this highchair. My head turns towards the paper I hadn't noticed before now, and I hesitantly reach towards it.

My fingers fumble with the folded piece of paper for a bit before I finally manage to unfold it successfully. The contents of the paper spill out in abundance, but the first thing I notice is the clean handwriting Mary possesses.

"You have a very pretty handwriting," I compliment the older woman

shyly, remembering my own filthy scribbling.

“Thank you, dear. I like to do calligraphy in my spare time.” Mary smiles back, visibly looking quite flattered.

My eyes drop to the rough-textured paper I have in my hand.

“Is it okay if I read this right now?” I ask out of politeness. I suppose it would be impolite to break the conversation with the elderly woman just to read this right here.

“Of course, dear! That is what I wrote it for after all—for you to read this.” Mary’s bright, twinkling eyes crinkle. Again, my eyes find the paper. This time I begin reading.

Isaac:

- *He’s a Vietnamese (Mum & Dad) & Chinese (Dad).*
- *He was born on 9th March 2012, Friday, 8:01PM.*
- *He knows roughly three languages (English, Mandarin, and Vietnamese). Although he’s still learning.*
- *He goes to preschool.*
- *His teacher says he’s very serious in school, but at home, he’s an idiot.*
- *He has two best friends, Jai and Liam.*
- *He loves Power Rangers and Pokémon.*
- *His favorite cartoon is Spongebob.*
- *He loves rice and noodles.*
- *He hates taking sandwiches to school. He likes heavy meals with meat.*
- *He really likes Indian food.*
- *He likes having rain baths. Even when he is not allowed.*
- *He’s a bit spoilt and fussy. He gets really upset when he doesn’t get what he wants.*
- *He’s allergic to cat fur and peanuts.*
- *He likes numbers a lot.*
- *He eats everything that has chicken or beef in it.*
- *He doesn’t like fish, pork, octopus, squid, etc.*
- *He has a sweet tooth.*
- *He’s scared of the darkness. He thinks Slender man will get him.*

- *He's not a morning person*
- *He really likes the color blue.*
- *He's very protective of his things. He doesn't really share.*
- *He listens to a lot of Vietnamese music because of me. He actually likes it.*
- *Apart from having a sweet tooth, he really really loves trifles.*
- *He has a doctor's and dentist's checkup every six months.*
- *He's strictly not allowed soda of any sort.*
- *He gets running stomach when he eats something hot.*
- *He likes to listen to nursery rhymes before bed.*
- *Even though he won't admit it, he likes to be told fairytales as well.*
- *He thinks his father doesn't like him & tries to avoid William.*
- *He's afraid of spiders, lizards, and heights.*
- *When he gets angry, he starts speaking gibberish. It's a mixture of English, Vietnamese, and Chinese.*

I blink, taking all the information in the paper with a soft smile on my face.

"He likes Indian food?" I ask, chuckling as I lift my eyes to Mary's. I'm secretly happy to be partially brown right now. To know that I can make something that can make the little man happy, makes me feel happy too.

"His best friend Jai shared his lunch with him once. He's wanted to eat biryani again ever since," Mary answers, shaking her head as she lets out a soft chuckle of her own.

"I'll make it for him then." I nod, quite pleased with the arrangement.

"I've been meaning to ask you, my dear. You do look a bit exotic. What ethnicity are you?" Mary asks softly. It's clear she's trying her best to sound as gentle as possible. I suppose I can't blame her, a lot of people are very touchy about other people asking about their ethnicity. I don't mind though. I am what I am.

"My mother is brown. She was born in Kashmir before my grandparents migrated to the UK when she was three. And my father is a pure

Brit. Born and raised.” I smile at the elder woman.

“Well, no wonder you have such beautiful eyes! And an accent as well,” Mary exclaims wide-eyed.

“Do you really think so? Thank you!” I feel myself blush under the woman’s compliment.

“Of course! You have very large dark, mysterious-looking eyes. The sort that seems like they’re holding the world’s secrets in them.”

Her words can’t help but make me wonder. *Is that why William looks at me like he’s peering into my soul? To see the world’s secrets?*

“Thank you, Mary. No one has complimented my eyes like that.” I let out a small embarrassed laugh as I feel my cheeks blush. I know I’m completely red right now. It’s not an attractive colour on me.

“It’s only the truth.” Mary smiles before going back to the breakfast preparation for Isaac.

“Aren’t you doing to read the next part?” she asks softly, catching me off guard as I find myself admiring her while she cooks. Whatever it is that she is cooking, it smells bloody delicious!

I don’t think my blush can get any deeper, but it does.

My cheeks feel like they are on fire. “Er.” I clear my throat. “Right.” I look back at the list and gulp.

William:

- *He’s half Vietnamese (Mum) & Chinese (Dad).*
- *He was born on the 18th of February 1989.*
- *It was a Saturday. An unusual time too—11:11PM.*
- *He’s the only child.*
- *He has an IQ of 157.*
- *He knows four languages (English, Mandarin, Cantonese, and Vietnamese).*
- *He was born in Beijing but moved to Hong Kong with his mother for four years. His father stayed back because of his business empire. They moved back to Beijing when he was ten.*
- *He completed his high school in a private boarding school in Australia.*
- *Then he came to Canada to study in Uni, and he has been here ever since. PR and everything.*

- *He's usually very quiet and withdrawn.*
- *Very polite and respectful*
- *However, you may find him to be very, very difficult.*
- *Still, he's kind. He let me stay here despite what*

Shirley did.

- *He has a best friend, Kris Zhao. He's also a surgeon.*
- *I think his sister, Cecelia, is interested in William. Bad*

match.

- *His favorite shows are . . . he watches nothing except occasional crime investigation shows.*

He swims every Saturday and goes to the gym three times a week.

- *He likes collecting watches. It's a habit passed down by his father, he says.*
- *He loves all sorts of meat but avoids most sweet things—especially tea and white chocolate . . . and squid.*
- *Every morning, he likes having sausages and eggs with a cup of coffee.*
- *I've never seen or heard him listening to music.*
- *He's a bit boring.*
- *He's happier during winter than summer.*
- *He really likes onions. Eats them raw with soy sauce.*
- *When he was in high school, he was on the swimming team. He was also selected for the nationals, I think.*
- *He's very close to his mother and father, who often fly from Beijing just to visit him.*
- *He'll have to move back to Beijing someday because he's the only heir to his dad's empire.*
- *Shirley was his first girlfriend and his first wife. He hasn't dated after the divorce.*
- *He doesn't like carrots or peas or pumpkin and pawpaw in food. He doesn't eat the meal when it has one or more of those. Or just separates the carrots and peas to one side.*
- *William is left-handed.*
- *William loves Isaac very very much. Poor boy just does*

not know how to answer the child's questions, so he works a lot to avoid it.

- *He is an insomniac. I've seen him walking around at night.*

- *He's afraid of the sea.*

“Why will I find him difficult?” I look up at Mary curiously.

I can see a small smile tugging at Mary's lips as she lifts her head.

“Although he is always quiet and thoughtful and kind, William was born to a very rich household, as an only son too. He has a fair share of issues with his personality that you may find difficult to deal with.”

For a second, my mind randomly wanders to the little boy and I wonder if he's still sleeping, then my attention returns to the woman in front of me. My curiosity has piqued, I'll admit. Despite trying not to be, I have to admit, Isaac's father makes me curious—very much so.

“For instance?” I ask the woman, hoping she won't read too much into this. For a split second, I wonder why I'm so scared of her thinking too much of my curiosity. Why should I be scared of her thinking of something that's not true?

“William is very kind . . . but he is intolerant to sharing whatever he begins to like. Isaac gets that quality from his dad. He also has a tendency of being a leader—it's hard to explain—you'll see, but let's just say that even though he's quiet, he's secretly very fierce. He also has a quick and dangerous temper.”

I blink. “I don't understand? He's been so—”

“Cautious and polite?” Mary supplies, smiling at me kindly. I nod, watching her carefully roll the egg omelette.

“He is cautious and polite, but that doesn't mean he isn't those other qualities as well. For example, once, a group of girls posted drunk pictures of Shirley and her friend all over the campus. William spent half a day going around the campus and removing every picture himself. He burnt them all in front of the entire campus, then got the girls reported to their faculty heads. He didn't stop until they were suspended for an entire semester.”

I blink. “What?”

“MUMMMYYY? MUMMMYY? MUUMM . . . Mummy!”

My heart jumps in my chest at the sudden sound of a clearly distressed Isaac blasting around the house. Twirling around, I'm only able to

get off the high stool before the crying, scared-looking boy leaps on to me. All surprise about William is already forgotten.

At this moment, I don't know what to say to the upset child. The next few minutes go by in silence and muffled sobs, and I can only pull the little boy up close in my embrace and hold him until his sniffles slowly come to a halt.

"I was just chatting with Gran, bubba," I whisper to him lovingly as I place a kiss on his jet-black hair, rubbing his back comfortingly.

"I got scared! I thought—" Isaac's voice cracked, and I knew the exact moment he began crying again. "I thought I had a dream, Mummy! You were a dream!"

"It's okay." I hurriedly pull him closer. "It's okay. Mummy's sorry. Mummy will always be there when you wake up, okay?" I try to assure him.

"P-promise?" Isaac sniffles, hiccupping just after asking the question.

I want to slap myself. *Why did I have to say something like that? Didn't I know that a promise was going to come next?*

You don't break your promises, I remind myself sadly. If you promise him this, you'll have to fulfill it.

"Mummmmy?"

"Yes?" I twirl him around. Panicking, my eyes find a concerned-looking Mary, and I look at her with wide pleading eyes.

"It's just a promise," she mouths, encouraging me to just make it.

"Have you brushed yet, young man?" I ask Isaac instead, changing the topic. The child buys it immediately. I feel as his tiny body freezes in my embrace and his forehead falls against my chest.

"No," he mumbles slowly.

"Then let's get you freshened up first, okay?"

"No," Isaac huffs suddenly, his tiny fingers fist my sweater and I let out a sigh. Is this a trait he's inherited from his father as well? Stubbornness?

I think back to Mary's encouragement. *It's just a promise. It isn't just a promise. It's his trust in me.*

"Mummy has something to discuss with you first, Isaac. After you tell Mummy what you think, then we can talk about the promise. Okay?"

"Talk about what?" Isaac's head shoots up, his big bright, dark eyes blink at me curiously and I can't help but smile. He's such a beautiful child.

Turning towards Mary, I tilt my head towards the stairs, letting her

know that I'm going to take him up to freshen up. When she smiles at me with a nod, I turn around and begin walking towards the stairs, deciding to just jump into it.

"Mummy has another house where she lives," I begin explaining as softly as I can. We begin to climb the stairs.

"Mummy doesn't want to be with me?" Isaac's voice turns into a croaky whisper, and I know he's about to cry again. Immediately, I hold him away from me until we're face to face.

"I want to be with you," I reply firmly, looking the child in his beautifully shaped eyes.

Isaac tilts his head to his side.

"Mummy doesn't want to be with daddy?" He snuffles and his bright red nose becomes a little redder when he rubs his small hands against his nose next.

This leaves me speechless. What do I say to the child now?

Just lie!

"I want to be with your daddy very much." I smile instead, crossing my fingers behind Isaac's small form. "But my other home is close to my work, so it's easier to travel in the mornings."

I wonder how much of my explanation the little boy is able to understand. Still, I decide to talk to him as an equal right now. This way he will learn.

"Oh." Isaac frowns, seemingly thinking very hard, then his eyes glance at something behind me and they instantly brighten. He takes me by surprise when he suddenly jumps in my arms.

"Paaa!"

I want the earth to split open and swallow me alive. I want Hagrid to crash into this house through the roof, tell me I'm a witch, and whisk me away on his magical motorbike! I want Aladdin to suddenly show up on his magic carpet and say, "I can show you the world!", because I bleeding would love to see any part of the world right now than the one behind me.

"Mummy, you and Daddy not talking?" Isaac whispers, blinking at me expectingly.

Oh god, give me strength!

Turning around slowly, I almost want to put Isaac on the floor and run away. Away from the expression, his father must have on his face after

hearing me say such an embarrassing thing.

My eyes find his chest first. The muscles under his bleach-white long-sleeved shirt are clearly apparent now in the light of the day. My eyes travel over his body, and I watch the bag and blue jacket hanging from his hand. I gulp. He's going to the hospital, I realize. My eyes hesitantly lift until they meet his dark, piercing ones.

"M-morning," I stutter. I grit my teeth at that. I usually stutter when I'm nervous or excited. It's annoying, but it can't be helped.

Still regarding me with those unreadable eyes, the tall man tilts his head, and I grit my teeth again, fighting to keep my feet from running away.

"Mummy, you and Daddy fight?"

I believe this is the first time I've heard Isaac make a mistake. I decide to teach him the correct tense if I'm able to survive his father's piercing gaze right now.

"No, we are not fighting." I smile at the boy. On impulse, I quickly peck him on his cheeks as well. "Let's go get you freshened up, alright?"

"Mummy kisses me. Why not Daddy?"

Oh god, this would be a great time to turn me into a pot plant!

"ISAAC!" William's loud voice seers through the air and I flinch at the warning it holds.

"See," Isaac mumbles, ignoring his father. "Mummy and Daddy fight! Paa's angry at me!"

I stop and then take a deep breath. *This is honestly not going to help.*

"No, we aren't." I smile brightly at William as I tighten my hold on Isaac and begin moving towards him. Reaching the tall man, I lean forward a little until my fingers find his soft hand. As if it's the most natural thing to do, I curl my fingers through the spaces of his. Avoiding his eyes now like the plague, I bring both our hands up and show it to Isaac.

"See! We're fine!"

"Mummy lies! That's why Mummy has another house! Mummy and Daddy fight, and Mummy doesn't want me, right?"

"ISAAC! STOP SPEAKING RIGHT NOW!"

I flinch at the harshness in William's voice. Suddenly, Mary's list makes sense.

In my arms, Isaac flinches too. Still, he hmphs and crosses his arms in front of him, looking away from his father and me.

I think about the possibilities with the courses of action I can take now. I can avoid all this and leave Isaac with his suspicions. After all, how long can a five-year-old remember to be suspicious?

I cringe. Who am I kidding? Five-year-olds now aren't how five-year-olds were like back in the days, plus Isaac seems just as intelligent as his father. Of course, he will remember.

"Let's go shower, Mummy!" Isaac declares haughtily, his tiny voice filled with rebellion.

"Isaac, look, your Daddy and I really are fine." I sigh, waiting until Isaac finally looks up at me with a large frown.

There is only one way left.

Realising I'm still holding William's hand, I tug on it until William stiffly bends to my height. Immediately, I shoot forward and place a kiss on his surprisingly smooth cheeks. I feel as his jaw tighten under my lips while his breath catches in his throat, and I immediately shoot back. Sensing that it's time to get as far away from the man as possible. I begin rushing away.

"See! I am so pretty. How could Daddy fight with me, huh?" I chuckle at Isaac as I whisk both of us further and further away from his father. Or I hope so.

Isaac giggles at my self-praise, and I finally smile in relief, already planning on meeting William privately and begging for forgiveness.

"Mummy?"

"Yes, sweetie?" I'm still smiling.

"For before . . . you promise?"

My smile drops a little. He's not letting it go.

I sigh, giving up. Deciding I'll work something out eventually, I beam at the child.

"Okay, Mummy promises . . . BUT when I'm out for work, then I will call you every morning when you wake up and we can video chat, okay?" I add in hurriedly, not being able to not try to compromise.

"No."

"Isaaacc." I groan as we enter his room and I push the door close. Dropping my head on his shoulder, I sigh.

"Can we please discuss this some other day? Please?"

Isaac seems to think about it for a while, then his eyes find mine again. "Mummy."

I tense. I'm already thinking of what to say to his next possible question. "Yes, sweetie?"

Isaac frowns, his lips move silently as if he's recalling whatever it is that he wants to say, then he stops.

"What's . . . bubba?"

I blink for a second or two, before my head tips back and I let out a bark of laughter.

* * *

"What work does Mummy do now?"

I smile at the sleepy little boy's groggy question. His attempt to keep himself awake while maintaining a conversation even though he's clearly sleepy makes me feel more sad than happy.

Such a young soul shouldn't be scared of being abandoned. Such a young soul shouldn't be scared of anything except maybe the boogeyman. Definitely not scared of being left behind.

A long sigh leaves me as I continue to pat his back, trying to make him fall asleep. His small frame is almost completely covering me as he lies, spread on top of me. Although I notice that he's not heavy at all.

"I make sure that books are as nice as they can be before they are sold in stores." I try to give him an easier version of the answer. Despite being so intelligent, Isaac still is only six. Plus he's also sleepy at the moment. Lord knows if my current answer even made sense to him.

We had a very eventful day today. Getting Isaac ready for the day is a completely new experience for me. Well, obviously, since I've never had a younger sibling nor do I have kids of my own. It got to be an even newer sort of experience when he began running around the room stark naked, refusing to get dressed just so I would run around after him. At that time, I was secretly thankful William wasn't in the house and had probably left for the hospital already, Lord knows he would have been yelling at Isaac if he were home.

After getting Isaac finally ready, we went downstairs where he had his breakfast. Mary and I prepared something for ourselves after seeing that Isaac had completely finished his meal.

While we ate, Isaac decided it was a great idea to watch Pokémon. It

actually was, seeing the little peanut completely silent for an hour was very pleasing. Putting aside the fact that I had to remind him to move back and away from the TV screen a couple of times, that is.

As soon as we were done, Pokémon was definitely not forgotten. Instead, Isaac made me watch the next couple of episodes with him.

When he had enough, he asked if he could be taken out. Mary and I thought it wasn't such a bad idea. She and I took Isaac to the city for lunch. I think he liked the chocolate mint ice cream he got afterwards much more than he liked lunch. Of course, he made us promise not to tell William when we got him a second serving after a lot of begging and pouting.

Isaac isn't aware though, but I've been sneaking pictures of him all day. I told myself that when everything was over and I was by myself again, that they would stand as a confirmation that this actually did happen. That I really did meet this lovely boy.

We returned home around four in the afternoon. I could tell that Isaac was already tired after having a day out and not having a mid-day nap. Still, I insisted that he should take a shower and eat his dinner before he jumps into bed.

A shower and dinner later, here we are currently—me trying to make him sleep and very well on my way to succeeding.

“That sounds too hard.” Isaac lets out a little yawn, stopping for a while to recover himself before he continues. “Isn't Mummy tired?”

“Mummy likes doing it,” I reply to the little peanut lovingly. “So she even if she gets tired. She likes it.”

“Mummy's weird,” Isaac yawns again, almost dozing off by the end. I caress his hair lovingly before continuing to pat his back, humming a tune I know my mum used to sing to me every night. I'm a pretty ridiculous singer compared to Saara, but I suppose I'm not that bad because Isaac isn't telling me to shut up yet.

I wonder what time it is right now. Ten? “Isaac?”

My arm slides around the now softly snoring little boy lying on top of me as I continue to pat him. My eyes, however, snaps to the door when it begins to open.

I watch as William walks into the room and stops in his steps, realizing that Isaac is asleep. His eyes snap from his son to mine and I smile at him sheepishly as I try turning Isaac over to place him nicely on the bed.

“Mummy?” Isaac croaks just as his back touches the mattress. I cringe when he begins to snuffle. “You leaving, Mummy?”

I’m an idiot. I have no tact. And I don’t want to see him cry. So instead of making up an excuse that would allow me to successfully run away from his father, I wrap my arm around him and pull him closer until his back is snuggled against me.

“No, I wasn’t. Your dad’s home and I just wanted you to be more comfortable,” I mumble softly, caressing his hair lovingly.

Isaac hiccups and shuffles closer, wrapping his smaller arms over mine. “Oh . . . okay.”

“Can you take care of him for a minute?” I mouth at a silently observing William. I need to let Saara know that I won’t be able to make it today. I’m kinda thankful that some foreseeing bug bit me in my head, and I brought spares over today just in case. That reminds me to give William his washed and good-as-new clothes.

Still, I kind of feel weird staying over for the night here, but then, I really don’t want to have Isaac crying in the morning, thinking his mother has left him again.

After a second of just looking between me and Isaac, William slowly nods and moves further into the room. I gulp when he gets into the bed himself and I slowly begin to unwrap my arms from around the little boy. His father’s arm wraps around him instead, and I smile when he caresses his child lovingly.

Ah, so he does love him regardless of the awful behaviour he always has towards Isaac.

“Thanks,” I whisper before slipping out of the bed and grabbing my phone. Quickly, I walk out of the bedroom and close the door behind me.

I hurriedly tap on “call” beside my cousin’s name. Saara picks up on the second ring.

“Staying with the son tonight?” she asks in a bland tone.

I know what’s coming. She’s going to give me a long speech about my life choices and where I’m going. I clear my throat nervously. “Yeah.”

“Gemma, what are you thinking exactly?” Saara sighs tiredly. Her tone, however, I notice, has softened.

“Don’t be mad.” I groan.

“You’re going to have to bend your life over a lot just go straighten

that kid's. And when his real mother comes back, you'll be thrown out. You're not the mother he's hurting for, Gem. Remember that."

It hurts. It cuts right through my weak spot, and I snuffle back until I'm leaning against the wall.

"You think I don't know that?" I breathe emotionlessly. "You think I didn't take into account all these things before jumping into this?"

"I'm sure you did but taking into account and being prepared are two different things. Were you prepared for it? No . . . Are you prepared for it?"

"No," I admit. "No, I'm not prepared for it, but this isn't about me. It's about the little child. I really care for him, Saara. And I'll keep him happy for as long as he lets me. When the end comes and I'm no longer needed, I'll move back into my own life knowing he'll be fine. I'll have done my part."

"You're being very stupid," Saara points out.

"I know," I admit. I mean, it's true. Which self-preserving woman would do what I'm doing? I'm being utterly reckless. Maybe when all this ends, initially, I'll regret being so reckless and investing so much of my emotions, but I don't think I'll ever regret making Isaac smile. At least I'll be assured that he won't be abandoned.

"Just be here for me. You know I need you, don't you?" I ask, shuffling on my feet as I begin to turn around nervously.

I stop when I come face to chest with William. At once, my head tilts up until I'm looking into his eyes.

His expression is unreadable but I stay rooted on my feet for some reason.

"Secret boyfriend?" His voice sounds lower than it usually is. This, for some reason, sends warning bells all over my brain. Immediately, I find myself tapping on the speaker.

I can't help but think about Mary's words again.

Even though he's quiet, he's secretly very fierce. He also has a quick and dangerous temper.

Then Saara speaks.

"Hey, is that my nephew's father? Wow, he sounds jealous." Saara's soft chuckle echoes around the hallway, and I instantly click on the loudspeaker again before turning back around, mortified at my decision to ever put her on speaker.

"Yeah, it was William. And no, he isn't! He's just concerned I have a

boyfriend who must be finding this arrangement awkward.” I try to pour out as much bullsh*t as I can think of.

“No, I’m pretty sure he sounded jealous, to me,” Saara scoffs, sounding excited suddenly.

“Hey, why don’t you seduce the father so you can keep the son forever?” she whispers cunningly and I want to swear at her.

“Poofy, next time you audition for a role, make sure it’s for a negative one. You’ll get it,”

“I’ll still think he sounded jealous,” Saara retorts stubbornly.

I groan. *She’s being a delusional idiot.*

“Saara Malik, I’m going to disconnect the line now! I’ll see you at home!” I mutter back as quickly as I can before pressing on the disconnect.

Turning around, I’m left facing an empty hallway. William is nowhere to be seen.

CHAPTER TEN

One Cold Morning

“What are you to me?” the morning breeze asks.

“A lover you’ve touched and passed by a countless number of times.”

“What am I to you?” she asks.

The morning breeze smiles sadly. “My moment’s worth of happy ending.”

Waking up in the Noo residence is just as I initially expected it to be. It is weird. I won’t lie, the first few minutes after waking up, I really miss my home. I wonder how the hell I’m in this room that doesn’t have the scent of citrus my whole home carries. For the first few minutes, I miss the normality that my life had just three days ago. I miss how structured my days always are.

Then I turn around and my eyes lands on the drooling little boy snuggled beside me. When I think about it seriously, it’s definitely weird. Isaac is essentially a stranger—a strange kid I could pass by any day in the city. I’ve barely known him personally for two days, yet there he was, asleep as comfortable as anyone could be . . . right beside me.

For a second, I remain frozen, just watching the puffy sleeping face of the child barely an inch away in alarm. *What am I doing here? What am I doing here lying to him?*

Pretending to be someone I clearly am not? How dare I receive the love he is so unconditionally giving me, the wrong person? An impostor?

For the first few minutes, I want to run. How could I get myself into such a mess? How can I ever explain all of this to my parents? My co-

workers?

To think clearly suddenly feels like such a big burden. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know anything, so I grab the thing that makes the most sense—my phone.

It doesn't have me too surprised when I notice a text already on there.

For a second, I wonder about the question, then I frown. *What sort of a question is this? Of course, I'm feeling like sh*t right now!*

A second later, my phone pings and I instantly tap on the new notification.

To be honest, there's a lot of things I'm worried about at this moment. So many things that I don't know what to tell her first.

Still, I find my fingers already beginning to tap on the screen furiously. The urge to vent is incredibly strong as I let out anything and everything I'm feeling.

Another minute. Another message.

I blink. I realize that Saara's psychology major is really showing its head right now. Of course, she's not satisfied with my word fart. So with a sigh, I begin typing again. This time, trying to be a little more understandable.

The phone's screen lights up and I let my eyes drop towards it. My heart falls when I look down at the newly received message.

I glance towards a sleeping Isaac and feel my chest constrict with hope. Can I really do this without facing the brunt of this carelessness?

That hits me like a tonne of bricks to my chest. She's right . . . I'm not accountable to anyone but my parents. Still, all this lack of accountability sounds best in books and motivational quotes. Real life doesn't work this way.

A full minute passes before my phone lights up again.

I glance at Isaac again and find my hand reaching for the sleeping child. Wrapping my fingers around his tiny thumb, I slowly pull it out of his mouth. Immediately, Isaac's face contorts into a crying expression, and I reach for him, patting him back to sleep when the phone lights up again.

Isaac's arms tighten around me as he snuggles closer into me, and I rub the child's back. It's better when he's like this—unguarded and asleep. When he's awake, he's constantly aware, constantly on guard about me and my whereabouts.

It's not a lie. I don't exactly know what I want right now, that's true., but I'm definitely sure of what I do not want; I really don't want Isaac looking as devastated and lost as he did on that rainy afternoon we first met.

Right. She's right. A soft smile of resolution settles on my lips and I turn and I let out a breath of relief when the heavy feeling I've had ever since waking up, slowly begins to dissipate.

Instantly, I feel the tickling feeling of nervousness blossom in my chest when I realize that I didn't discuss bringing Isaac over to my home with Saara. Biting my lip, I type in a reply, and after staring at the three words for a while, I press send.

* * *

"Good morning, would you like some more juice?" I ask the surprised-looking man seated at the kitchen table a few steps away when I enter the kitchen, freshly bathed and brushed. I glance at his almost-empty glass and then back at him.

Having a conversation with Saara really did clear my head quite a lot. Afterwards, it takes a couple of minutes of lazing in bed with a sleeping Isaac before I find myself getting up to start a new day.

Still, the secret nervousness of Isaac freaking out again and creating a scene when he'll wake up alone today is a bit more strong than usual since William is home today as well. I don't know how the man will react to his child's clear showcase of nerves.

Moving behind the kitchen island, I smile at the silent man as I reach back and begin pulling my hair back up into a knot. William tilts his head to his side, observing me.

"You don't have to serve me things, Miss Windly. You're not the help. I can serve myself," he says dismissively.

I blanch under his gaze. Maybe he thinks I should just take care of his son's tantrums and not integrate myself into the kitchen? Maybe he thinks I'm trying to seduce him? Get into his bank account?

Oh no, no!

"I'm trying to apologize for last night," I mumble quickly. "About what my cousin said."

"What did she say?" William picks up his fork and knife again,

seemingly accepting my answer.

I almost turn around and walk out of the kitchen. He wants me to say it out loud. Does he not know how embarrassing that is?

Still, I dare to speak.

“For assuming you were jealous last night,” I mumble awkwardly, feeling my cheeks warm with every word I say.

“What do you think?”

My eyes snap to his. “Excuse me?”

“Do you think I was jealous, Gemma?” William asks dryly, cutting his sausage and toast before plopping it into his mouth. I watch as a small smile tugs at the corner of his lip, then he takes another bite.

Is he being serious right now? I can’t help but wonder as I stare at the man before me. Suddenly, William’s eyes snap to mine and I watch as his face turns blank. Just like it always is . . . completely unreadable. A frown flutters on my face, and for the first time, I realize that maybe William doesn’t exactly like me and my barging into his life.

“I have no opinion on something that’s not even possible.” I smile awkwardly at the man in front of me softly before grabbing some eggs and cracking them into a bowl.

“By the way, Mr. Noo . . .” I clear my throat, feeling the nerves washing over me again as I begin speaking. “I think we need to talk about something.”

I really need to discuss this . . . arrangement . . . we have going on. I think it’s only best if I know how William also feels about this. If I am freaking out, maybe he is too.

“If we’re going to have a serious conversation, can I ask you to sit with me somewhere and discuss it, please?”

For a second, I’m surprised by his request. I had initially planned on just getting this conversation over with while cooking Isaac his breakfast. It would have been a great distraction, and it wouldn’t feel like we’re having an extremely serious conversation at the same time. Now . . . I suppose I’ll have to face this head-on.

“Okay.” I nod as I place to let my fork lean on the glass bowl, placing it back on the kitchen island.

“It’s alright, dears. You two go on and talk. I’ll make Isaac’s breakfast.”

Both my and William's head darts towards the kitchen entrance where Mrs. Xi now stands, watching us with a smile on a face with her hands folded in front of her.

"Ma," William blurts out as shoots to his feet, and my eyes snap to him instead. A guilty look flutters across William's face and my eyes widen when I realize he's feeling guilty about having this situation happening in front of his mother-in-law.

Turning towards Mrs. Xi, my eyes widen even more when she chuckles sadly and shakes her head, then she says something to William in Vietnamese that makes me wish I had known Vietnamese or Mandarin instead of English, Hindi, and a laughable amount of Arabic. The older woman's eyes turn to me, and I immediately find myself looking down at my feet like a child who's done something naughty.

Immediately, Mrs. Xi's chuckle echoes around the kitchen, and I almost jump when her cold fingers curl around my arm. "Go on. I'll take over." She smiles at me as she brings my hand up to hold them.

I blink as I look at the woman before turning towards a silent William only to find his eyes already studying me.

"Thank you," I mumble when I turn back to Mrs. Xi and smile at her sadly. Squeezing her hand thankfully, I almost wish there will be a day I could share everything I feel right now with this woman. Maybe she would be able to help me with my nerves, but I can't; she's Shirley's mother, and as much as she trying to remain supportive, I know the absence of her daughter must be very hurting. I don't want to hurt her even more.

Slowly, I turn towards William and nod when he motions for me to follow him. This is it. I can feel it. We're going to have a confrontation and it'll probably be easier to see how we should move from here. Looking back to give Mrs. Xi one last smile, I begin walking behind William.

Before me, William slowly moves across the living room and on to the stairs. I follow him slowly, trailing behind him as we walk up the stairs.

A lot of things cross my mind as we walk. Him in front of me and me in his shadows. I recall the first time I had seen him. His flustered, apologetic face flutters before my eyes on that wet afternoon. I recall how we had first met—Isaac's insistent crying and his first apologies. A smile shadows my lips when I think about the days that follow after I met him and his son, the times I spent carefree and happy before it rained. My lips curl up sadly like it

always does when the thoughts of a sad boy and his quiet father brush through my memories.

As we continue to walk, I wonder where he's taking us.

Of course, the corridor seems familiar, but there is no way that I know the house nicely yet. It's barely been three days after all. I look around the pristine-looking decor around the house as I continue to follow William, then our destination suddenly becomes starkly clear and I stop in my steps. Right in front of William's bedroom door.

Opening his bedroom's door, William turns towards me when he realizes I'm not following him in.

"You want to talk there?" I blurt out when he turns towards me.

"Yes. Is there a problem?" William frowns at me.

"In your bedroom?" I try not to gape at the man.

"It's a place with the most privacy, Gemma. I don't think you want Isaac to hear us, do you?"

Right. He has a point.

"Yeah." I feel my face flush as I nod in agreement. I still hesitate for a second, glancing between William's, the bedroom, and the open door he's holding on to.

"It's okay. We can talk somewhere else if you're really uncomfortable?" William begins to walk out, and I instantly find myself moving forward. Reaching out my fingers wrap around his arm—stopping him from closing the door—and I walk into the room. For a second, I wonder if I should let go of William's hand. I loosen my grip as we walk in, waiting for him to break away or drop his hand, but he doesn't. I glance back at the tall man curiously when we stop inside the room. My eyes snap towards our joined limbs before moving up to his face.

"Sorry," I mumble, uncurling my fingers from around his arm until it now remains open underneath his resting limb. "You can take your arm back."

For a second or two, the man leaves his hand on my open palm, and I feel as my heart begins to thump harder inside my chest. My eyes snap up to his again.

"Thank you." William nods just then, removing his arm from my grasp before turning back around and closing the door.

The click of the door shut close makes me realize how small this

large bedroom can actually feel like. I hold my breath as I watch William turn and begin walking around me towards the large black couch.

“So what did you want to talk about?” William looks up at me expectantly, and I hesitantly drag myself towards the couch and settle myself on it, turning so that I’m facing the man.

“Firstly, I’m sorry. I don’t want to make you feel like you’re obligated to or have to share my views. Frankly speaking, I’m too confused to expect you to have a specific plan for how we are going to continue this. I know, you must feel like I’m some reckless young lady who’s foolish enough to do something when it’s not even her business. I agreed to this even when you didn’t ask. If it messes up, it’s completely my fault. I’ll admit, I wasn’t thinking of anything except Isaac. I really hadn’t thought of the consequences. I mean, I had, but not really, you know?” I sigh, giving up. “Please tell me at least you know what we should do now?”

For a few minutes, we just sit there in silence. Neither he nor I know what to say. I’m not sure what’s going on in his mind, but inside my mind, there’s a whole carnival going on.

I wonder if I’ve done the wrong thing. I wonder if he’s going to throw me out now that I’ve told him about not being so confident. I wonder if I should just stand up and escape before he tells me to leave, then I wonder why I’m trying to escape that situation.

“I’d be more surprised if you didn’t feel nervous, Miss Windly,” William finally replies, his tone lower than I expect it to be.

“I’m sorry,” I let my head fall. It’s shameful. I’ve gotten myself into this situation. I barely know how to react in any other way.

“So you want to back out now?” His question takes me by surprise. I feel myself shiver under the deepness of his tone and instantly clench my hands so that it isn’t so visible. I don’t plan on making a fool out of myself.

“No, of course not.” I shake my head before finally managing to muster enough courage to sneak a peek at the man.

My breath hitches in my throat when I find him already looking down at me, his unreadable expression back in place. Any sort of familiarity I had thought I saw in the morning is now gone.

“I never said that.” I find myself mumbling as look up at him.

“Then what do you wa—”

“I’m asking you if you’ve been better prepared than I am.” I broke

him off, looking away from him. Something in William's voice won't settle well with me. It feels like he's chastising me. I slump at that thought. It's not wrong if he is, to be honest . . . I am an idiot after all.

"I have decided not to inform anyone of who you are until absolutely necessary. If it is absolutely needed, I will just tell people you're William's godmother and that's why he calls you 'mum'," William replies, the calmness his voice holds catches me by surprise, and I find my eyes widening at the sincerity on his face.

Actually, come to think of it, his idea is quite clever as well. It wouldn't be too weird to call one's godmother 'mum'. Lots of kids call their mum's mother, older sister or friend 'big-mum' amongst other things. Granted, I'm none of the three. Still, no one else needs to know that.

"Okay! I agree! Thank you!" I nod enthusiastically as I begin standing up and making a move towards the closed bedroom door.

"Where are you going?" William's voice asks from behind me, and I find myself stopping in my steps. Turning around, my wide eyes meet his piercing dark ones and I find myself letting out a nervous chuckle.

"I was going to check up on Isaac and see if he's up yet or not."

"He would have found you if he was awake, don't you think?"

That's true. Isaac would have already marched in here, shouting at the top of his lungs to find me.

"You're right," I admit, not being able to help but give the man a sheepish smile.

William nods and I watch as he glances down at the spot I was just occupying a minute ago. "Could you come here and talk to me for a minute, please?"

As bubbles of unsureness erupt in my chest, I turn towards the spot beside him and bite my lip nervously. I'm pretty sure I'm turning scarlet by the second as well.

For a second, I ponder on whether I should just walk out while I can, then I wonder how rude that would be.

"It's fine if yo—" William begins to stand, his cheeks flushed pink. He looks visibly embarrassed and I instantly find myself feeling guilty.

"Sure! What do you want to talk about?" I beam, cutting him off as I stride forward and settle myself beside him—a little closer than I had initially wanted to be honest.

“You touch me quite freely in front of Isaac.” I feel a flush creep up my face and I nod.

“I’ve noticed you let Isaac think we’re actually a couple.”

I nod again, feeling my face begin to heat now. “Why?”

I blink, surprised. Looking up, I find William’s eyes already on me. Studying me.

I look away. “I’m sorry if that’s been uncomfortable to you in any sort of way. I didn’t mean to make you feel harassed or anything. I’m not trying to infiltrate into your personal life, I promise. It’s just that I’m afraid he’ll throw a tantrum otherwise. Since I’m supposed to be his mum, you and I are supposed to be together, right?”

There is a moment of silence that follows my reply. A moment’s silence I don’t particularly find myself enjoying. I know holding his hand and pecking him on the cheeks is pushing it; the man didn’t sign up for this. The humiliation and nervousness burning in my chest doesn’t help as well.

“So you expect us to behave like a couple in front of Isaac?”

“No, no, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.” By this time, my humiliation is out and dancing on my red face, I’m sure.

“I’m sorry. I realize how intrusive that was. It won’t be repeated.” I shake my head, trying to turn away from him when, suddenly, his hand reaches forward and grasps my arm, stopping me. My eyes dart towards him and I flinch as my breath hitches in my throat. He’s watching me again.

Like he’s looking into my soul. I find this so unnerving.

“We need to be more comfortable with each other if you expect Isaac to believe that we’re together. Holding hands when he demands it isn’t very believable.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

One Wet Noon

*The morning dew glides down the thin leaf blade,
plop on to the leaf below.*

The leaves bend and sway as their flowers bloom in content.

With the soft breeze, a slow waltz show.

She sits amongst the flowers, wondering about today.

Her toes curl into the wet grass. She accepts her due.

*Spots of her white night dress stuck against her skin, wet
from the morning dew.*

*Her deep brown hair shines under the sun, ruffled from the
sleep that still lingers under her warm coffee-coloured eyes.*

With a soft sigh, she pulls her hair up into a bun;

Delicate fingers brush against the wet green blades below.

*Throwing her head back, she smiles up at the blue sky
wondering what he must be thinking of this certain girl she
knows.*

Her bright eyes search for a familiar face in the clouds.

*The heavy grey fluffs hover over the girl, covering her from
the overzealous sun,*

Just as she lets out a huff.

“It’s going to rain today,” she mumbles slowly.

The clouds smile down at her sadly, she knows them well.

*“Are you feeling quite sad today?” the girl asks the clouds
softly.*

Her melodious voice blends with the breeze, almost a

*whisper when it reaches their ears
They send down a sigh.
A gust of wind blows, touching her with love as the sad girl
frowns.
“Are you really not raining but crying down your sorrow?”
she asks them again.
It is true, they are sad, but the clouds worry.
The sweet girl is sad; she’s often sad.
And that has to end.
“Angel eyes, don’t be sad. At noon today, we shall dance.
Come outside then, and you will see. Every drop that I let
fall, I shall drop for thee;
For every drop is a tiny kiss, and when you are drenched,
sweet angel eyes, the dream must end, but don’t be sad, we
shall meet again;
When the skies are blue, but I am grey, and the sun is
shining without a care, I will rain down on you with the hot
noon’s breeze.
I will hold you once again And you shall hold me.”*

“We need to be more comfortable with each other if you expect Isaac to believe that we’re together. Holding hands every time he demands it isn’t very believable.”

I’m speechless. I’m sure plain confusion is now dangling in front of my face, right there with humiliation. “I’m sorry?”

“Parents do not just meet by circumstance in their own household and hold hands only when the child demands it, Miss Windly.” William clears his throat. I notice though that his grasp on my arm isn’t getting any looser.

“I apologize, am I in your personal space?” William suddenly asks, I’m sure he’s reading my bright red face as a sign of suffocation and not embarrassment. I feel his fingers begin to glide on my skin, unwrapping themselves from my arm.

“No, no, it’s not that!” I squeak, shocked when I realize that I don’t want his touch gone. My wide eyes snap up to William’s quiet ones, and I feel his fingers completely unwrap from my arm. I let my head drop and watch as he pulls his hand back on to his lap.

The rush of disappointment hits me square in the chest, but I gulp down the emotion and looking up into his eyes again, I smile. “I’m just embarrassed because I realize that I am the one who has been barging into your personal space.”

“I will not lie, I was surprised the first time,” William admits, and I feel my cheeks getting warm again. “But I understand that you are doing all this in my son’s interest. Everything that is to be gained by this arrangement is for my son and me. I do realize that you have nothing to gain in the end. That makes me quite indebted to you, Miss Windly.”

“You can call me Gemma, you know?” I smile. He’s right and he’s wrong; I’m sure I will not gain as much as Isaac and his dad will, but I’m still gaining something. I’m gaining sweet memories—memories that will help me smile whenever I’ll have a bad day.

“I suppose so—”

“MUMMYYY!”

My eyes widen and I turn towards the door and back at William, almost ready to jump a hundred feet away from him.

“Isaac’s up! I should go!” I whisper, panicking as I curl my fingers around the bedspread before I begin getting up.

“MUMMYYY! MUMMYYY, ARE YOU IN HERE?” Isaac yells from outside William’s door, and I freeze for a second. My heart has started to drum inside my chest with a rhythm some of only explain from rushing gallops from a horse race.

“Y-yes I am! Hold on, I’m c—” I’m cut off when the door’s knob begins turning and strong fingers curl around my arm once again, pulling me close beside him.

“I’m sorry,” William whispers, and I gasp as I feel his arm snake around my waist and pull me closer. Automatically, as I find myself turning into him, my hand finds his chest in support.

“Oh my god, I’m sorry!” I whisper urgently, making sure to not look at him when I feel my nose brush against his jaw.

Just then the door flies open, and Isaac barges in. Both my and William’s head snaps towards him. He stops. His eyes slowly moving between William and I for a few seconds before he starts running again.

All three of us collide with a rush when the tiny boy’s body meets ours. Both my and William’s arm wraps around the now giggling child as we

find ourselves falling back onto the bed with the impact.

“Morningggg!” Isaac giggles from against my chest as he lays sprawled over William and I.

“Good morning, young man!” I chuckle as I rub his back lovingly.

“What were you and Pa doing?” Isaac suddenly asks, pulling his head away to look at both his father and me. Embarrassment sinks into my chest again, and I find myself glancing at the man beside me from the corner of my eyes. The sudden realization of our proximity hits me with a warm minty breath against my cheek, and I feel the heat in my cheeks begin to bubble again.

“I was just hugging your mum, Isaac,” William explains before I can. I don’t know why but the softness in his voice surprises me. I think this is the first time I’ve heard him talk softly with Isaac. Isaac, on the other hand, seems to bask in his father’s sudden sweetness without any question.

“But . . . but Mummy only hugs me. Why did Pa hug Mummy?” Isaac surprises me by pouting. I didn’t expect him to react this way. I thought he would be happy.

“You don’t like Daddy hugging me, Isaac?” I ask, surprise almost dripping from my words. Beside me, I also feel William stiffen.

“But . . . but Mummy hugs me, and I hug Mummy, not Daddy.” Isaac glances from William and me, and I feel my heart pick up its pace. Turning towards William, I silently beg him to say something to Isaac . . . anything because right now, I’m truly out of words.

“Why can’t I hug her?” William asks Isaac quietly. I instantly notice the change in his demeanour, the bright glow of carefreeness is gone. Instead, there is a sense of seriousness—almost like he’s a doctor now instead of a father. The thought irks me for some reason. I mean, although this does seem awkward . . . what can possibly be wrong?

Instead of answering his father, Isaac instead turns to me with his already misty, large eyes.

“Mum . . . Mummyyyy,” Isaac whimpers, crawling off his father and on to me. I find myself sitting up to hold him properly. “Mummy loves me, right?”

“I do,” I answer truthfully. This should feel weird, telling a kid whose name you had not known a week ago that you love him, but I really mean it. As weird as that is—I do.

“Mu . . . you loves me more than Pa, right?”

‘Yes’ almost rolls out of my tongue instantly in an answer, but I find myself biting my tongue down just in time when William sits up as well and I feel him inch away from me—as if expecting the rejection in front of his son.

Sneaking a peek at him, I find him looking at the bedroom walls now instead of Isaac and I. Any traces of smile has disappeared from his face and he looks almost like his usual self now—the silent, distant man.

I don’t know why, but suddenly, I feel guilty. The guilt splashes at my face, wakening me up to reality. In reality, Isaac is William’s son. Isaac isn’t my son. I am no one. Absolutely no one. Then why should William have to see his child be closer to some random woman than his own self?

My mind convulses with thoughts, ideas on how to keep the father-and-son duo close together begin storming around my mind. There must be a way I can slowly make myself the bad cop and William the good cop while keeping the child still loved in general . . . in this dynamic of three.

My mind flutters close to him and I find myself sitting straighter. Of course, Mum and Isma Khala have always been the bad cop. And I’ve thought that because they have always been stricter and more serious than our dad’s.

I cannot be as strict and serious as them because I truly can’t hurt the sweet boy after what he’s been through, but I can try to at least be a little stern so that he seeks favour from his father instead.

Of course, that could work, Gem! What a genius!

Immediately, I reach my hand to my side, barely covering William’s large hands with my own as I grasp on to it.

Making sure I see that Isaac is following what I am doing, I slowly drag my hand up and hooking my arm around William’s and pulling him closer to us.

The shock in Isaac’s quiet dad’s system is apparent in his stillness. So much so that I quickly shoot him a glance, which he meets, I smile comfortingly at him then, just till he relaxes in my arms and smiles back.

“Do you know why your daddy and I were hugging Isaac? You see, I asked your father who he loves more. Mummy loves your dad and you the same, but your dad told me that he loves you more than me. So I got upset.”

“Mummy lie,” Isaac huffs, turning his head down under my neck. I smile when he begins rubbing his hair against my skin moodily. “Mummy

won't hug Pa because she's mad. You threw things. You lies, mummy."

I tactfully ignored the sad information, filling it in my memory for future knowledge.

So Isaac's real mum got violent, and Isaac was exposed to this. Wow.

"I was just teasing him until he admitted to liking me just as much as he loves you."

This seems to grab Isaac's attention and he stops moving. "Did Mummy win?"

"No, I didn't." I giggle with the excitement of my plan working.

"Really?" Isaac asks, his voice suddenly squeaky and hopeful. I glance at William and smile. There is that feeling again, the feeling that he's watching me. His piercing eyes searing into my soul, but I ignore it and, instead, move my arm around Isaac. I carefully lift him up a little and transfer him on to his father's lap.

"Yes," the quiet dad mumbles this time. I almost 'aww' when I see him hesitantly wrap his arm around the tense little boy.

"Pa will always love you more than your mother," the man mumbles quietly melding the slightly scared-looking child into his chest until Isaac, too, wraps his arm around his father, grasping the rare warmth his father is exuding towards him right now. Somehow, I feel like he isn't speaking about me now. That he's speaking about Isaac's real mum.

A soft sad smile settles on my lips and I begin to get up and discreetly leave the two alone at this moment. To let them enjoy the comfort of each other as a family. I am not family. My role here is to make Isaac happy. My smile brightens at the thought of Isaac finally seeing that his dad does love him.

With my eyes trained on the front door, I begin to take a stand when I find myself being pulled back. A gasp slips from my lips and I snap my face back, my wide eyes now on the hand gripping my wrist. For a second, I marvel at the difference in our skin tones. His milky white fingers wrapped around my olive, tanned wrist. For a second or two, I just stand there, staring at the part where our skin meets, then my eyes snap up. To him.

His eyes remind me of the colour of the earth after a fresh soak from the summer rain—calming and yet strong in resolution. It tells me to stay. It tells me not to leave and I do not know why. I feel his hand tighten around my hand, and he softly tugs me forward, back towards him. Back on to the

bed.

“Where is Mummy going?” Isaac suddenly asks and my eyes turn towards him before returning back to William’s dark orbs.

“Er . . .” I hesitate before quickly dropping down beside William again, noticing that his hand does not leave mine still. I feel a blush rise on my face and dip my head low until my hair curtains my embarrassment away from William’s silent gaze. “Errr . . . nowhere. I just wanted to stretch a little.”

“Sta-rech? What’s that?” Isaac scrunches up his nose in confusion, and I find myself at a loss of words as to what I should reply to him. Thankfully, William decides to save the day . . . again.

“You haven’t brushed your teeth have you, young man?”

Immediately, I notice as Isaac stiffens in his father’s hold, and he shrinks, totally giving away that he hasn’t brushed or washed up. Secretly, I’m more relieved that he’s distracted now because of his father’s question.

“No,” the child whispers meekly, almost as if he is suddenly afraid. I find myself wanting to grab him and quickly whisk him away to his room. Instead, though, I just sit there. This isn’t the time to intervene between father and son. William hasn’t even been rude yet.

“Well, off you go, young man. Your nanny must be waiting for you. I want to see you downstairs in less than half an hour, alright?”

“But I . . . but I want Mummy!” Isaac pouts, turning to me with his large, begging eyes. Under his spell, I find myself moving forward to grasp him.

“Then we have a problem, son.” William frowns, and I almost smile at his playful approach, suppressing the weird jolt of electricity that runs through my body when he looks up and his eyes touch mine.

“What prob . . . lem?” Isaac frowns hard at his father’s words.

“I’m going to the hospital in a bit, and I want your mummy right now too.” William carries on his façade of being disturbed. I, on the other hand, find my palm beginning to sweat with a feeling I can’t really describe. *Am I nervous? Or excited? Why is he insisting on keeping me with him? Can’t I just go with Isaac?*

“For what?” Isaac folds his arms in front of his chest, tilting his head to the side like an older person. I smile at his antics.

Turning towards William, I nudge an eyebrow up in the same but

silent question.

Strangely, William looks away, back to Isaac, and I find myself even more confused. *What exactly is going here?*

“Pa needs to talk to your mother, Isaac. Please go to your nanny and I’ll send your mother over when we are done.”

“Please go to your nanny, Isaac. I’ll be there soon, okay? I just need to talk to your dad for a bit,” I say sweetly to the child as I pull him out of his dad’s lap and on to mine before pulling him into a hug. I find his small fingers clutching my clothes and sigh sadly as I run my hands on his back comfortingly. “I’ll be there in no time, okay?”

It takes a couple of seconds of silence before Isaac’s low voice whispers out. “Okay.”

I watch as the sweet boy climbs off my lap and waddles his way towards the door, then I watch with barely suppressed humour when he goes on his tiptoe and begins trying to turn the doorknob.

“What’s wrong?” I turn towards William awkwardly when the door finally clicks closed and we are once again alone in this suddenly smaller feeling bedroom.

“I have a favour to ask you.” William turns away from me, looking back to the bare walls that suddenly seem more interesting to him.

“Yeah? What’s wrong?” I ask once again. The sudden nervousness leads me to suddenly start debating between turning his face around until he is looking at me or settling myself down in front of him on my knees. I need to see his face, to see his expression to gauge the intensity of this problem.

What could possibly be wrong? Is he going to do longer hours at the hospital and needs me to stay here? Does he want me to take Isaac back home? Does he want me to stay as secretive as possible? Do—

“My friend, Kris’s, parents have brought up a marriage alliance between their daughter and me.”

My heart drops inside my chest. I don’t know why I’m feeling this way. Sad. I don’t know why I’m feeling sad. Is it because I might never get to see Isaac again? Or is it because I might never get to see his dad? Maybe both?

“That is why we were at the restaurant that day when Isaac grabbed you,” William continues, oblivious to my strange devastating reaction. “They were proposing marriage.”

“Oh,” I whisper. William’s eyes snap up to mine, and I instantly plaster a smile on my face for the sake of my tattered dignity.

I watch as William’s face dulls and his eyes drop back to his lap.

What am I supposed to say right now? Congratulations? Why did you let me do this when you’re getting married soon? What now?

We sit here in silence for a while. Seconds pass and then minutes, but no one dares to speak. The only thing that drifts within the walls of his bright bedroom’s interior are the steady rhythms of our breathing.

I know he won’t speak first. I don’t know why I know this, but I do. So instead, I grasp on to the first thing I can and blurt it out.

“When is the wedding?”

CHAPTER TWELVE

One Simple Day

*The air is clear today.
She takes in a deep breath.
The charm of a 5AM breeze, the charm of the silence, the
peace.
She inhales and exhales till the sun rises.
Her eyes on the leaves the winds are dancing with.
She sighs.
Why can't the morning breeze blow away her pain?*

I want to slap myself for asking this question. Instead, I straighten myself and try to look as unaffected as I can.

I'm not unaffected. The throbbing ache between my eyes suddenly spreads to my temples. I cringe with the knowledge of an impending headache. *I'm totally going to get a killer one soon.*

For a second, I almost see the hesitance on William's face—a small brush of emotions in his eyes, but then they are gone. Instead, I am left to stare at the same blank-faced man I am slowly getting accustomed to seeing.

“If I agree, then by the end of the year—”

So . . . what do I say now? Didn't he tell me he thinks of her as his sister? Do brothers get married to their sisters? I think to myself as I stare at the man before me.

“Congratulations?” I try to smile at him, but I know it probably looks like a grimace instead. For a moment, I wonder why . . . why am I even grimacing? Why am I even upset? This is not supposed to have any strings attached.

I watch as William's blank expression suddenly hardens, and he stares at me with hard orbs that remind me of thick, sweet molasses. *Is this not the response he wanted?*

"I do not want to marry Cecelia." *Oh.*

The words echo around the walls of the bedroom, and I drop my gaze to the first button on his shirt. It's safer to look there than to look into his eyes. Unlike him, I am aware that my face is a traitor. It is expressive. I try to hide the strange swirl of happiness I feel in my chest at his words.

It takes me a while to realize that the silence between us is spreading. William is still silent, waiting for my response, but I am too busy silently feeling relief.

"Oh," I mumble finally, not knowing what else to say suddenly. Sometimes, it is really irritating not being skilled at vocalisation. During times like these, I wish I had Saara's skill at expressing herself verbally.

"Oh? That's it?" William's question makes my eyes suddenly dart up to his. A shiver runs through my chest as soon as my eyes lands on him. The way he is looking at me with his eyes, then the vulnerability disappears, and he is once again looking at me with the blank mask his face usually is set up as.

But I can't forget it. The way his eyes looked at me a moment ago . . . with disappointment and disbelief, the clenching of his jaws, and this other emotion . . . something I had never seen before. Has anyone ever looked at me the way he just did? I cannot tell.

"Should I marry Cecelia, Gemma?" Again, my eyes snap up to his, and this time, I am the one who lets emotions slip. I stare at him with fear and disbelief.

"Don't you want to marry her?" I ask him, somehow angered by his question. I don't understand why he has to ask me this question. *What am I? His advisor?*

"Isaac needs a mother's presence in his life." A small smile threatens to pull the edges of William's lips, but I grimace at his words.

I want to say, "He has me", but I don't. I'm not his mother. I can never be. I'm just a stranger who is taking care of him voluntarily.

"Does Isaac like Cecelia?" I ask instead.

At this point, I know that William is reading me like an open book. I hate myself for being so vulnerable in front of people, for not being strong

enough to hide my emotions, but I have no choice, so despite not being able to hide the fear, the anger, the hurt, and the confusion that flashes across my face, I try my best to pull on a calm expression and help him through this logically.

“No, he does not.” William shakes his head, the little glint of humour flashes across his eyes. I grit my teeth, realizing he is having fun riling me up right now.

“Do you?” I shrug, staring at him straight in the eyes this time. I don’t want to miss any emotion that might come and go within a split second.

William looks at me for a while, straight in the eyes before he finally answers, “No, I do not.”

“There you have it.”

“Do you think Isaac likes you?” William surprises me by asking me this. My wide eyes snap up to his, and for a second, I just stare at him.

No, I want to say. Of course, he does not. He loves his real mum, I am just a shadow.

This time, I say what’s on my mind.

“No, he doesn’t. He loves his mother—his real mother. I am only an illusion.”

William’s eyes harden again, and I wonder what mistake I’ve made this time.

“Who does he run about calling Mum?” he asks me.

I gulp. “Me.”

“Who does he get jealous for? Even with his father?” I look away, thinking about a few minutes ago.

“Me.”

“Who is here, right now, in his life trying to give him all the love and more to compensate for the amount he has lost since he was born? Who is here sacrificing her time, just so he does not have to be sad anymore? Who is here holding his father’s hands just so he can smile and believe that he, too, has a happy family?”

I blink, and the traitor tears I didn’t know the origin of drops on to my lap.

Drip.

“Me,” I whisper.

“There you have it.”

“William, dear!” Just then, a series of knocks follow the voice, making my head snap in its direction. I gasp and quickly turn towards William. Immediately, the smooth pad of his thumb finds my cheek and rubs itself against it, softly wiping away the tears.

Our eyes hold each other’s, and I stare as his eyes remain on mine, completely ignoring Mary’s voice from outside the room.

“Don’t cry again.”

Then he turns towards the door and the spell is broken. “Yes, Ma?”

Looking down, I stare at my chest when I realize how crazy fast my heart is beating. Unconsciously, I pull my palm up to press it against my chest.

“I’m opening the door!” Mary yells from the other side, making me immediately begin to jump off from the bed when, once again, his hand finds my wrist and pulls me back down, flush right beside him.

Unlike the last time, I don’t even turn towards William this time, and instead, just stick myself quietly on the bed instead.

The door opens just as I am pulled back down on to the bed. For a moment, Mary just stands there and smiles at us before she walks in with the door still open.

“Kris and Cecelia are coming over for dinner tonight. Kris just called to ask if that was okay. He said it has been a while since you all got time off at the same time and just relaxed and drank a couple of bottles. He couldn’t get your phone,” Mary asks. I smile at her softly, knowing quite well that my cheeks are resembling a tomato.

Somehow, I find that this is a great time to tell him about me wanting to take Isaac home tonight, and so, I do not waste time. “Ah, I kinda also promised Isaac that I’d show him my place today, and we’d spend the night over there. So if you don’t mind, may I take him?”

William’s grip tightens around my wrist. I jump with the shocking realization that he’s still holding my hand . . . in front of Mary. His ex-mother-in-law. Immediately, I glance up at Mary to find her gaze on the spot our skins touch and slowly begin pulling my arm from William’s grasp. I feel the need to remove all physical contact in front of Mary. This is disrespectful and not a true representation of my and William’s relationship. Heck, we don’t even have a relationship. At first, William doesn’t budge, but then I notice as his grip loosens around my wrist. Still, I realize that it’s just there,

loose around my wrist but not completely off. Like he's waiting for me to pull my wrist back.

I begin to remove my wrist, but suddenly, his grip tightens around my hand. My eyes snap up to his.

What is going on here?

"William, please stop acting like a Neanderthal." Mary's sweet voice timidly echoes around the room, but William doesn't give a slight bit of impression that he has heard his ex-mother-in-law because his fingers still remain and so does his eyes on mine.

"Why are you upset?" I find myself whispering as I stare at him with wide eyes. Looking at him, one would find it hard to conclude that he's upset—his face is a beautiful blank mask, devoid of any emotions, good or bad—but he's holding me, and I can tell by the way he's holding my wrist. *He's upset.*

"You didn't tell me earlier," William replies quietly, ignoring my question altogether, or maybe answering it in his way. I can't tell.

"We woke up just a couple hours ago, William, and I forgot," I admit, letting go of the slight shocked irritation of a reaction by the end.

"Is August going to be there?"

I frown. *How does he know A—*

My mind wanders back to the phone calls during my first night here, and I still, realizing just how much interest William was paying then.

Oh.

"Oh, my cousin's manager, sure he might be there," I reply, shrugging. There is no use in lying. Lying never gets me anywhere positive. I realize I miss the warmth his hands brought to my skin when I feel him remove his fingers from my skin and pull it back towards him.

William nods. "When do you plan on leaving?"

I smile. "By noon."

* * *

"This is your other home, Mummy?" Isaac asks excitedly as William stops the car in front of my house. "I see bright flowers!"

I turn towards Isaac and smile at the child brightly. "Yes, it is. Do you like flowers, bubba?"

At my question, Isaac crinkles his nose as his lips set in a pout. “No, they are girly!”

“No, they aren’t.” I chuckle, undoing my seatbelt before getting out of the vehicle and opening Isaac’s door.

Glancing at William, I silently motion him to do the same when I see him watching me.

“Yes, they are!” Isaac insists, his lips still slightly out in a pout. My heart warms at the sight of the adorable little child, and I quickly pick him up into my arms.

“No, sweetie, they aren’t. Do you know what a gardener is?” I ask him patiently as William opens the boot of the vehicle and pulls out Isaac’s backpack before turning towards us as the boot shuts close and the vehicle beeps to let us know that everything is locked.

In my arms, Isaac frowns and drops his head against my chest with a thump. It hurts a little bit, but I press the child tighter against me.

“Hmm?” I encourage the child to answer.

“No,” he finally mumbles, sounding disappointed in not knowing what a gardener is.

“What’s a . . . a ga-ard-ner, Pa?” Isaac turns towards his father. I watch as William’s eyes snap to Isaac’s in surprise, as if he is surprised he is being included in the conversation.

I smile at the pair and decide it’s time Isaac gets closer to his dad. Literally.

Taking a step forward, I lean against William. Immediately, Isaac climbs into his arm just as William wraps his arms around his little boy.

“Gardeners are very important people, Isaac. They plant flowers, water them, mow the lawn, and plenty of other fun stuff.”

“Oh! Like Mr. Brown? He cuts the grass in school!”

“Yes, like Mr. Brown. He must take care of the flowers too, you know?”

“See! Mr. Brown is a man. How can flowers just be for girls then? You can like whatever you want to, Isaac. It never has to be not girly and boyish for you to like doing something. There is no such thing.” I smile at the child before I turn my attention towards my bag and pull out my home’s keys.

“Gemma! I see you have visitors! Never seen them around before!”

I still. This is really not the time I would have liked to be caught by Mrs. Red's evergreen curiosity. As I turn around to face Mrs. Red, I glance at William and find him already looking at me with those quiet eyes of his.

What do I tell her? Hey, Mrs. Red! This is my God-gifted son, Isaac, who I love too much, which is very weird because I've barely known him for a week, and this is his father, William, who has awoken the hibernating butterflies in my stomach and now they won't stop fluttering?

I take the easy way out. "Hey, Mrs. Red! Yes, you haven't! We have a lot to catch up on! I'll tell you over tea someday!" I yell back politely, mentally patting myself when I see the excitement in Mrs. Red's face before quickly unlocking the door and almost leaping inside.

"Mummy, remove shoes?" Isaac asks me when we stop right beside the door.

"Yes, bubba." I nod, turning to grin at the proud-looking child. "Just like at home. You're very smart!"

It's cute seeing him look proud of being such a quick thinker. I remind myself to keep complimenting him when he does something good. That way, his low self-esteem may slowly improve and so will his fear of not being good enough. Surely, the child must have a thousand things he must pinpoint about himself after his mother left him.

Secretly, I'm also thankful for him taking my mind off the rapidly beating heart in my chest.

Mrs. Red is officially the first person in my 'society' to have spotted my secret life. This feels like the carefully constructed ice statue that William, Isaac, and I have created for the past days has finally been hit with a hammer. I have a feeling our privacy isn't going to last much longer. Explanations are just about to begin being asked.

I hear as William pulls the door close behind us before we begin moving towards the living room.

"Everything is so . . . white," Isaac marvels as he comes to stand beside me and grasps on to the hem of my dress.

I turn to look around my home. I realize Isaac's right. Now that I'm looking at it after a day, it does seem quite white or near to it. I smile as I look around the living room and feel the warmth of my warm embrace me in welcome. *I've missed my home.*

"It is." I giggle in reply as I play with Isaac's hair, guiding him and

his father towards the living room. “I like the colour white, and I love flowers too, so you’ll see them around a lot.”

“That flower looks weird,” Isaac mumbles, pointing towards the small pot placed behind the sofa. Glancing towards it, I turn back to the little boy and smile. “That’s a cactus. It’s a lovely thing, but it hurts when you touch it so promise me you won’t touch it.”

“How is it lovely when it hurts you?”

The asker of the question catches me off guard, and my brown eyes shoot to him, realizing that he’s still standing at the entrance of the living room, leaning against the white wall.

“Everything you find lovely has the power to hurt you. Someone’s smile or this cactus, it makes no difference.”

“Mummy, I wanna go explore the house!” Isaac suddenly jumps on my lap. I gasp as I hold on to him just as we begin to fall back on to the sofa. My back lands on the cushions of the sofa and Isaac’s head collides with my mouth as he falls on me.

It hurts. My lips. I know it’s bleeding. I can almost smell the iron in the putrid red substance oozing from my lips.

“ISAAC!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

One Bleeding Afternoon

*What is this feeling?
Her blood singing to his touch.
She cannot help but shudder.
When the red liquid trickles down her lips and his fingers
find her skin, she cannot help but shudder.
When his skin and hers touch,
what is this feeling?
These butterflies in her chest, they haven't fluttered.
How long has it been?
He leans in,
the butterflies waltz to his fragrant melody, basking in the
warmth of his breath against her cheeks.
What is this feeling?
Has she ever felt this before?
She cannot recall.
Only the scent of his cologne now lingers in her dreams.
She knows,
she knows it is wrong;
He is not hers to keep a borrowed moonlight's fantasy.
She knows,
she knows she should stop,
Then he leans in, and her heart beats.
She wishes,
she wishes that it would just stop.*

ISAAC!”

Immediately, William is before us, picking up a terrified child and putting him on the fluffy white rugs before turning towards me and lifting me up in his arms. I can only watch with painful lips and wide eyes as he slowly lowers me back on to the sofa in a sitting position and tilts my chin down.

“Stay like that, I’ll be back. Where is the first aid?” William questions angrily as he stands up and begins moving towards the kitchen.

“On the cabinet beside the refrigerator,” I mumble, fighting the urge to lick my lips or look at the damage. My worried eyes instead find a silently crying Isaac, and I immediately shuffle forward on the sofa, opening my arms and stretching them towards him.

“Come here,” I mouth to the small distressed boy. I feel my heart break when he shakes his head as fresh streams of tears trail down his cheeks.

“I can’t find it!” William yells. I glance in the kitchen’s direction.

“It’s in the upper cabinet, right beside the flower pot on top of the refrigerator. On the right!” I call back, hissing when my lips hurt with the movements, then I turn back towards Isaac and motion him towards me again.

“Pa will be angry,” Isaac whimpers when I shake my head and stretch towards him until my fingers clasps around his hand before softly pulling him closer.

As soon as the child moves on to my lap, his small arms fly around my waist and he begins sobbing loudly. “I’m sorry, Mummy! I’m sorry!”

“Shhh,” I comfort the child as I cradle him slowly in my lap. “Shhh. It was my mistake. I slipped.”

“Mummy, I’m sorry,” the child continues whimpering. I feel the spot of my dress where he has pressed his face against begin to get wet. I rub his back as comfortingly as I can, ignoring the liquid that slowly continues to move down my lips and on to my chin. *What do mothers do in these situations? What should I do?*

I curse my body’s significantly almost useless coagulation ability. I can never stop bleeding as quickly as I should. “You could have been badly injured too, Isaac. I’m glad it’s me. It’s just a small cut. I’ll be fine in no time!” I whisper as I spot William walking out of the kitchen. His eyes narrow at my mouth and blazes when it darts to mine.

“I told you to stay still,” he hisses as he reaches me. Instantly, Isaac

begins to move out of my lap. Instead of letting the frightened boy go, I wrap my arms around him tighter and rub his back comfortingly.

“I’m sorry,” I reply simply to the child’s father. William’s eyes narrow into crinkled slits. I’m thankful when he chooses to ignore me and begins wearing a glove on his right hand.

“This will burn,” he mumbles before dabbing the cotton wool drenched with hydrogen peroxide on to my lips and begins cleaning it. I flinch at the initial contact but stay put when his stern eyes meet mine in a warning.

“Isaac, hold your mother still,” William says to his son. I want to smile when I feel Isaac relax in my arms instead, the tension of having his father upset at him probably completely gone.

I sit patiently as he works his fingers over my lips, carefully cleaning it and then applying an antiseptic cream on it. His fingers work quickly and efficiently. Before I can even begin getting impatient, he is done and moving back towards the kitchen with the closed first aid kit.

“Mummy . . . I want to watch *Spongebob*,” Isaac whispers, suddenly finding my TV exciting. Pulling back, I watch the kid look at me shyly. I can’t help but laugh when he even goes ahead and bats his long lashes at me innocently. For a second, I wonder if he’s gotten those lashes from his mother; William doesn’t have eyelashes like these.

“Go ahead, sweetie. Just keep yourself at a distance from the screen. You know the drill, right?” I hand him the remote control before walking over to the large TV screen and turning it on.

Just then William walks back into the living room and his eyes meet mine. “What’re you doing up?”

“Am I not supposed to get up?”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t move,” William replies coolly as he begins walking towards me. His tone seems like he is relaxed, so does his words, but I don’t fail to catch the edge laced in both his cool tone and his casual words.

“I didn’t know a simple lip cut impaired my locomotion, Dr.” I roll my eyes but comply, moving to sit down on the white fluffy rugs and sinking my toes in.

“I should go now.”

Both my and Isaac’s eyes move to William. I suddenly find myself getting on my feet again. “So soon?”

I expect an answer. Possibly a 'yes'.

"You . . . want me to stay?" William asks me instead.

"Stay, Pa!" Isaac replies instead. I nod, I want him to feel included. To feel like he is on the inside. Not the outside.

I've seen him look like he's on the outside one too many times.

"Okay, but Uncle Kris is coming over by six, so I'll have to leave in four to six hours, okay?" William asks, his eyes on Isaac.

"Yes!" Isaac jumps excitedly. I watch William move forward, moving into our space before dropping down to the floor, to the spot that's beside me, then he wraps his hand around mine and pulls me down beside him.

"You okay?" I whisper, suddenly wondering if he is excited or nervous about seeing Cecelia tonight.

"Your lips are swollen," William whispers instead. This time, I find myself getting irritated. *Why can't this man answer my question for once?*

"Yes, they are," I sigh instead, almost wanting to roll my eyes at the obvious statement.

"It's irritating."

"What? Swollen lips?" I ask, glancing at William with wide incredulous eyes. *Has he never kissed someone and meant it?*

"Mummy, who's your favourite character in *Spongebob*?" Isaac asks suddenly, once again unknowingly breaking the tension between his dad and me.

"Squidward," I reply honestly. I feel both boys turn towards me in curiosity.

"What? Why?" Isaac stumbles out and I turn towards William.

Truthfully, I've always liked Squidward growing up because he reminds me of me. I could relate to his level of "done with everything." At that time, all I wanted to do was paint, listen to music, and take warm baths as well, but where he had a lame job and Spongebob to irritate him, I had school and a horribly tiring job at this local diner where the owner's son liked me. I still think that was why I got the job. That always ruins my mood.

Looking at William, who is looking back at me expectedly, I can't help but be sassy.

"Because he reminds me of your dad," I answer simply, then freeze when I realize the other implications of this. Isaac is already laughing,

seemingly taking the answer at face value, but William seems to be looking at me with a serious glint in his eyes.

So quickly, I add, “He looks a lot like your dad.”

“I look more like Larry but thanks,” William scoffs, and I can’t help but burst out in laughter at that. By the end, I’m teary-eyed and grinning.

“Thanks,” I breathe. “I needed that.”

William’s eyes shoot me a glance, a whisper of his own mirth lingers in them. “Yeah, me too,” he whispers.

Just then, a tiny huff sounds behind us and we both turn in time to see Isaac’s displeased frown before he grumbles, “You’re both so noisy.”

This time, we both begin laughing.

* * *

“It’s almost four, I should leave.”

Both Isaac and I get up when he does, moving behind him as he slowly begins walking towards the front door. When we reach the door, he turns towards Isaac first and leans down, picking him up.

“Be good. Don’t trouble Gemma, okay?” he mumbles before he places a kiss on his son’s cheeks. I watch as Isaac blushes bright red under his father’s affection and grasps on to William’s shirt. “I miss you, Pa.”

“I haven’t even left yet.” William chuckles and sways with Isaac in his arms. His eyes are looking down at his little boy.

Hearing his father’s reply, Isaac pulls his head back and pouts. “I still miss you.”

“I’ll FaceTime you tonight. How about that?” William speaks after a moment of stunned silence. Appeased but still sulking, Isaac slowly nods in agreement.

I begin to stiffen when William bends to place Isaac back down. Somehow, something tells me that it’s my turn. I don’t know how to react this time. I’m not the one initiating the fake affection after all.

It doesn’t take William long to wear his shoes, and when he finally begins to straighten, I realize once again how much taller he is than me.

William’s gaze brushes past me and straight to the door. His fingers slip around the knob and he quickly pulls the door open, letting the gust of chilly wind into the home. I shudder from the sudden chill I feel. From the

weather or the man, I'm not sure.

I don't know why, but I find myself slipping out on to the small verandah after him. I feel as a sniffing Isaac shuffles behind me, grasping on to the hem of my dress.

I just want to make sure if he locks the gate or not, I tell myself but I know the wounded feeling in my chest is trying to tell me otherwise. I don't want a fake hug goodbye, but it hurts that he didn't even acknowledge me. My fingers find Isaac's hair, and I softly pat him in comfort as I turn towards my left. I can clearly see Mrs. Red on her verandah, trying not to seem too obvious. Her attention is still on us. I know. William's almost at his car when he stops and suddenly turns around, then . . . he's striding towards us.

My eyes widen when his eyes find mine and stay there. I watch as he gets closer . . . closer . . . close enough, and his right arm slips around my waist first before he pulls me the remaining distance closer to him. My hands automatically find themselves clutching his shirt to steady me, and I can only gasp when I feel his cold lips on my cheeks.

"Take care of yourself, Isaac's mum."

It seems like a normal greeting on the outside, but I know he's trying to politely apologize and remind me that he's just doing what we had decided on—to act more married couple-like in front of Isaac.

So in return, I find my arms slipping around his neck. I find myself standing on my tiptoes to hug him closer. "Take care, Isaac's dad."

When I feel his arms tighten around my waist and keep me there for a few seconds, I wonder if this is still fake. The way his cologne's scent will stay with me tonight, will my perfume linger on his clothes?

And then he's gone, striding towards his car again without a glance back. Not even when he gets into his car and drives out of the driveway, not even when he gets out to lock the gate does he glance back.

"Gemma, that your boyfriend and his kid?" Expectedly, I turn towards Mrs. Red and stare at her.

Glancing around me, I realize Isaac's already rushed back inside to his TV program.

Well, at least, he's not here to hear my reply, I think before turning back to Mrs. Red.

"OH DEAR LORD! WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR MOUTH, CHILD!"

“Oh it’s nothing, Mrs. Red. Isaac and I were playing and he hit his head on my lips. And yes, that’s William and that’s our son, Isaac,” I find myself yelling back. I know I’ve lost it. The fast thumping of my heart alerts me that this is the first explanation being handed towards someone in my social circle. The first explanation being handed out into the tiny world I have created over the years for myself.

Mrs. Red catches me by surprise though when, instead of seeming scandalized at calling Isaac my son, she nods and continues with her interrogation. “Take care of yourself more, sweetie! How old is he? What does he do? How old is the child?”

I’m starting to feel awkward now. Is this something my mum will ask? Is this something Isma Khala will ask? William’s name and profession? Will they ask about Isaac too? My friends at work? Will they ask this as well?

“He’s twenty-nine. Er . . . he’s a neurosurgeon resident right now. Isaac is five.” I try to smile, I really do, but I fear Mrs. Red verbally passing her harsh opinions even more. Not that I’m not ready for it, no, I’ve prepared myself to the various opinions everyone else is going to keep. I’ve said them under my breath myself, and I’ve rehearsed my replies. I’ve planned how I will smile when someone looks at us with judgment, but I’m frightened for Isaac. I don’t want him to hear—to face—the judgment with me.

No, I’m a big girl now. I’ve grown up learning and my tree’s trunk has hardened well. I can protect us both, I remind myself for the hundredth time. Once again focusing on the words like a silent mantra.

“A neurosurgeon? Like a brain doctor? Oh, Gemma, that’s such a wonderful catch!” Mrs. Red exclaims, clapping her hands together in excitement.

I smile a soft bitter smile. “I’m more proud of catching Isaac, to be honest.”

It is true. I have nothing to do with his father’s profession. Even though I cannot deny that something happens to my heart whenever William is around. Isaac’s smile is more important than anything. It is the reason why we are here. As if on cue, Isaac runs out calling out to me.

“Mummy!” Isaac yells. I turn around just in time to catch him and bring him up to settle on my hip. I turn us towards Mrs. Red.

“Isaac, that’s Mrs. Red. She’s Mummy’s friend. Say hello!”

“Hello!” Isaac greets Mrs. Red shyly with a wave, then he suddenly cozies up to the idea of socializing with the older woman. “I like your name. I like the colour red!”

Mrs. Red exclaims in delight.

“He’s such a beautiful boy, Gemma.” She laughs. “So charming too!”

“Thank you!” Isaac beams at the older woman, clearly more open towards her now after she’s complimented him so much.

“Oh, you’re very welcome, my boy! Come over for some tea and cookies the next time you come around and visit, alright?”

This seems to make Isaac even happier. “I will!”

9PM tonight finds us snuggled in front of the TV watching *The Emperor’s New Groove*. Saara still isn’t home, but I know to expect her soon. Isaac and I have already bathed and had our dinner. Now, Isaac is dressed in his pyjamas and I in my usual bedclothes—cotton short shorts and a tank. He’s sitting before the TV, wrapped around with my blanket. It is only a matter till it turns ten o’clock, and I will have an excuse to make Isaac sleep because that’s his bedtime during the weekends. He is refusing to go to bed before his dad FaceTimes him.

I, on the other hand, have a heavy feeling William might be drunk and in bed with Cecelia already. Instantly, that thought sends a secret jolt of self-inflicted irritation through me. I turn my attention towards the child watching cartoons beside me.

When the sound of the door opening and closing sounds around the home, I feel Isaac stiffen against me and shuffle closer.

“Hey, Saara! We’re in the living room!” I yell, silently hoping that it indirectly lets Isaac know that it’s only my cousin and everything is okay.

“Oye! You’re lucky I made August go home early tonight or you would have a lot of explaining to do! Is my nephew there?”

“Yeah, he is!” I reply before turning towards the child.

“Don’t worry, bubba. It’s just Auntie Saara,” I whisper as I feel him crawling over my lap and snuggling his face against the cushion on my lap.

“Hello, my nephew! Won’t you turn around and say hello to your mother’s cous—”

Saara stops when Isaac looks up from my lap and to her. Her eyes widen and she glances at me, blinking, before beginning to move closer—her wide eyes on Isaac.

“Gem, he’s absolutely precious!” Saara squeals suddenly as she rushes towards us and drops down beside me.

“Hi!” She waves at Isaac brightly and pulls the bags she’s holding in front and on her lap. “I’ve brought lots of peace offerings! And Gemma told me that you love biryani so I’ve picked up some from my favourite Indian restaurant. I’ve also got you chocolates. Do you want some? Are you hungry?” Immediately, Isaac looks up at me as if wanting me to tell him what to do or give him a green signal.

Instead, I ask, “Yes, bubba? Do you want something?”

“Mummy, can I . . . can I have some bilani?”

I think Saara’s and my heart melt simultaneously until they are nothing but a puddle of goo in our intestines.

“Oh my God, Gem, he is so precious! I can totally see why you did what you did! Look at those beautiful eyes!” Saara can’t help but coo as she looks at Isaac with a look people give to kittens or puppies.

“Yes, you can, sweetie. Hold on, I’ll bring a plate and a spoon for you. Do you want me to feed you?” I ask him as I carefully manoeuvre him up on to the sofa as I stand up and turn towards the kitchen.

“No, mummy. I’ll use my hands! Yash told me he uses his hands when he eats bilani!”

I can’t help but chuckle, feeling proud of him for being so appreciative of his friends’s culture and ways.

“Damn . . . suddenly, I want to be a mum now,” I hear Saara grumble. I can’t help the laugh that leaves my lips at that. “Wait, Gem what the heck happened to your face?”

William finally messages by eleven. It’s definitely way past Isaac’s bedtime, but the child refuses to sleep without speaking to his dad, even though he’s already half asleep. So far, we have waited for the past few hours for him to call like he said he would.

In this meantime, I’ve thought about sending him a secret text as a reminder or maybe a call, but somehow, even I was curious to know if he would remember.

Tapping on the message notification, I open his message and smile.

William: How’s Isaac?

Gemma: He’s fine. He was eating biryani a while ago. Saara found out he likes it a lot, so she got him some. Just

trying to get him to bed now but he won't sleep unless you FaceTime him.

Gemma: <Image of Isaac> See? He's wide awake and waiting.

I press send and turn the phone to Isaac to show him the picture.

“You look so cute,” Saara coos at the little boy. He blushes, rubbing his head against my arm as he tries to hide his suddenly pink face.

Saara's a complete goner for Isaac's charms. From the moment Isaac blinked those innocent eyes at her, she got shot with the arrow with his charms. It makes me feel lighter somehow. Knowing Saara, I can tell that she would definitely do what I have done had she been me. That's reassuring.

What's a little frightening though is that I can see a very spoiled future for Isaac now. Saara's completely wrapped around his pinky finger.

Eventually, the room pings with another notification, and I open it with a frown. I can tell that Saara's reading the texts because she's sitting beside me on the bed, and I turn towards her with a frown.

William: I'll call him in 5 mins. Are you okay?

“Something seems off,” she mouths to me and I nod. *Something does seem odd . . . is he upset?*

Still, I type back a polite reply, but then my curiosity gets the best of me and I type out the question I am really curious about.

Gemma: I'm fine, William. Are you okay? How's everything there?

Throughout the night, I've found myself wondering what William must be up to and then chastising myself for feeling afraid when I have no reason to be.

William: We're having a few bottles of beer here. With Kris and Cece.

“Ceeceeee.” Saara rolls her eyes as she sneers the beautiful girl's name under her breath. This seems to catch Isaac's attention.

“Cece, Aunty? I don't like her, Mummy! She kisses Pa on the cheeks,” Isaac grumbles sleepily, although suddenly sounding irritated. I feel the beginnings of fear wash over my chest once again.

Quickly, I begin typing out a reply.

If he's not going to call right now, then I'd rather focus on Isaac and myself until he does call. Besides, Isaac suddenly doesn't seem to be in the

best of moods, and I find myself wanting to push the phone away and distract the child until he's in a better mood.

Gemma: Okay! Well, have fun! Call Isaac soon. :)

William: It's not fun.

William's reply makes me frown. Only minutes ago I had been wondering if he was upset, now, I suddenly find myself wondering if he's drunk. So I ask him.

"I bet that smiley face totally freaked him out." I scoff. "I don't think anything freaks him out."

Gemma: Are you drunk?

My mind wanders to him rushing into the bathroom when Isaac had called out to me on my first night, to his wide eyes on mine while I cried on the first night like an idiot and then to him rushing over when I had burst my lip today. I bite my tongue knowing what a big lie I had just spoken.

The reply comes almost instantly.

William: I have a high tolerance level, Gemma.

"Right," Saara drawls sarcastically, and I find myself smirking at her sarcastic responses to William's texts.

Gemma: I believe you, William.

Another second and another ping.

William: I hope you don't mind today.

"What did he do today?" Saara demands as soon as I open the message. I begin regretting shuffling beside her earlier in search of warmth.

Now, I have to explain all that to her. The hibernating butterflies in my chest once again awaken and begin fluttering wildly.

Gemma: Which part?

Pressing send, I chuckle awkwardly when I notice Isaac beginning to close his eyes as he lays spread on my lap.

"I don't know what he's talking about." I feign ignorance to my cousin and try to shuffle away when her hand wraps around my arm and keeps me put.

"Tell me!"

Another ping sounds around the room and I tap on the notification widely, ignoring my cousin completely.

William: The part before I drove away . . .

Gemma: Oh.

William: Oh?

“What was that part? What happened in that part? Did you two kiss? Is he good?”

I sigh. There is no winning here.

“He hugged me and kissed my cheek before he left. Like the ‘father of my child’ should do. Mrs. Red saw everything, by the way.”

Gemma: I don’t know what to say. Don’t worry, we had decided on behaving like a normal couple in front of Isaac anyway.

“Those emojis will totally tell him you’re salty.”

“I’m not salty, Poofy.” I sigh.

Saara scoffs. “No, you’re delusional.”

William: Gemma, I won’t be able to call tonight.

Gemma: Is everything okay?

As I press send, I feel my heart sink further. I look down to the now sleeping boy on my lap. Something has begun eating at me now.

“I don’t feel good about this.”

William: Everything is under control, but I’m a little caught up with something. Is Isaac awake? I can voice call him for a minute to explain.

“Caught up with something? Like what?” Saara scoffs. *Caught up with something . . . caught up . . . something . . .*

I don’t want to think about it, but a dozen possibilities flash before my eyes. One glaringly bright. Him. Cecelia. A bed.

“Gemma,” Saara breathes suddenly. I glance up at her to see her looking at me with wide eyes. “You really do like him.”

I don’t. I really, really don’t. It has just been a week! I can’t like anyone in a week! I don’t like him at all!

“I do.” I shrug at my admission for a feeling even I didn’t know I had. When did I start liking William? Today when he took care of my burst lip? The first night when he let me shower in his bathroom and lent me his clothes? The day when I met him, that rainy afternoon?

“Oh, PenPen . . .” Saara sighs softly as she moves closer until she has her arms around me.

I release a sad sigh of my own as I take comfort from her small dainty hands rubbing circles on my back. “I’ll just type back my reply, I

guess.”

“What will you say?” Saara asks sadly. I shrug. I don’t know yet.

Gemma: Don’t worry about it, he’s already half asleep. I’ll put him to bed. You take care of what you have to. ^^

When I press send, I feel a lot more in control. Isaac is already asleep, so there really isn’t a reason to disturb his sleep. Maybe it’s better this way.

“Pen, he’s replied.”

My eyes snap to the phone’s screen. I gulp before I tap on the new message’s notification.

William: I’ll call Isaac tomorrow morning. When do I have to pick you two up?

“You’re not going back there, are you? You can’t hurt yourself living under the same roof with him and his girlfriend . . . while being his kid’s mum!”

I cringe. I know she’s coming from a good place. Saara has always been very protective of me for as long as I can remember, as have I. So I know it must be hard for her to even think of me in that house if William likes Cecelia. It’s hard for me, too, to be honest. Suddenly, I wish I could take her along, but I can’t. It’s also harder to make Isaac understand that I now have to be at my place, and he can only come around during the weekends if he wants to meet me. I had signed myself up for a mother’s role. And my mother would never do that to me.

So I type.

Gemma: Okay. Around 5?

“Okay, that’s it for today,” Saara mumbles immediately, grabbing my phone from me before shoving it away. “You’re going to stay there now? What about your home here?”

I find myself sighing again.

Honestly, I don’t know, but as I start speaking, I begin to formulate a timetable while I go—improvising so that my cousin feels more at ease.

“I’ll stay there on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, then I’ll come around here from Thursday to Sunday. Isaac can stay over from Friday night to Sunday afternoon. How does that sound? Can I have my phone back?”

“It sounds like you’re an idiot, and no!”

“This is so unrealistic.” I groan as I let my head drop on to my hands.

“Colliding with Isaac and then voluntarily deciding to overturn my entire life into this.” I motion between a sleeping Isaac and me before continuing, “I don’t regret this. Even though it’s only been a few days, I have Isaac now and I don’t regret it at all! But today, Mrs. Red got to ‘know’ the first person in my little world, and it was so hard to lie, to come up with a perfect cover-up, and now, these new stupid feelings for William. This is so unrealistic!” I mumble sadly, leaning forward as I pull my blanket gently over the sleeping boy.

“How do you know what’s unrealistic?” Saara retorts immediately making me look up at her in surprise. “There are almost eight billion people in this world. How can you be accountable for each and every one of their realities?”

She continues, “I don’t agree. These things happen in real life. Single women meet divorced men with kids and make a family! What’s new about your story? You’re single. William is divorced. You and Isaac love each other. Even though it’s not official right now. What’s wrong if you become a real family?”

“That’s the thing, Poofy, it’s fake. It’s fake right now. Everything that I will be titled, am being titled is fake. It’s not me—”

“But it will be! Just shut up and let it happen, okay? William is into you, trust me. Even though he’s too serious and quiet and a jerk, but he’s into you. I can tell.”

The butterflies in my chest glide. I, on the other hand, groan, running my fingers across Isaac’s thick straight hair to calm myself.

“And you said I’m an idiot.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

One Frank Day

*The gentle breeze blows lovingly,
The world is blue right now,
The golden sun hasn't arrived yet;
Morning has barely begun.
A silent girl,
she sits in her garden;
Her white dress flaring on the green carpet made of grass.
Her fingers twirl around the hems of her dress.
A sigh leaves her worried heart.
"What is it about him that draws me so near?"
"What is about him that makes me care?"
"Is it him or is it I? Should I leave before my heart, he
steals?" the girl whispers to the white gardenias before her.
They smile to each other before turning to her. "What is it
about him that draws you near?"
"Oh why, his heart, my dear."
"What is about him that makes you care?"
"Sweet child, it's love, don't fear."
"Is him or is it you? It's a bit of both, don't fret you,"
"Should you leave before your heart he steals? You can't
steal what is freely given. Now please, wipe away those
tears."*

The world is blue right now. At this moment, just before the darkness and light meet once again, the light wins over. The period before dawn, it's

blue today.

I take a sip of my warm chocolate as I stand outside, on my back patio. A shawl is wrapped around me while I watch my foggy garden slowly fill up with light. The sun is slowly beginning to rise, and I wonder if the little boy in my room will get frightened not seeing me in bed like he usually does, or if my cousin will wake up after one today like she usually does.

I close my eyes and take in a deep breath. The air is so much clearer today; the breezy fragrance of the flowers in my garden touches my senses every time I take a breath, and I realize once again just how much I love this moment. Just being able to be pure and raw with my own self. Amongst these beautiful flowers. Nature.

I turn around and walk back into my home, remembering to slide the patio door to a close since Isaac feels cold really easily, and so does Saara. I remind myself softly that I'm not the only one here anymore.

As I move towards my kitchen and pull out ingredients to cook everyone breakfast, I wonder if August will come around today. I wonder what I will tell him when Isaac acknowledges me as 'Mummy'. How will I explain? I wonder if he will even require an explanation, then I smile. Knowing him, I'm sure he will. People are generally quite curious creatures; he is too.

As I pull out some rolled oats, I glance towards the mess I've made on my sofa. The latest manuscript I'm working on lies on the sofa with my dictionary, markers, pen, and laptop. I hope Isaac won't go about scribbling on it when he wakes up. I remind myself to let him know not to. I also remind myself my deadline is in another three weeks.

The house inside is warmer so I pull off my shawl until I'm left with the simple thin-strapped knee-length white dress I had decided to wear after waking up and bathing today. I've loved this dress for a while now. I've had it since my sixteenth birthday when my grandma Merilyn gifted it to me. She told me I looked so pure and innocent every time I wore it—like an angel. Especially when I had my hair down. This is one of the last things I have gotten from my grandma. She passed away fifteen days after my birthday.

When a rogue tear slips down my cheeks, I quickly wipe it away and pull my hair up into a high ponytail as I return to my task—making breakfast. My grandma wouldn't have wanted to see me this way, crying; she would want me to be happy, smiling, so I smile.

By 7AM, I am done and wiping the kitchen counters. The house is still quiet., so that's a good thing. I turn back to grab my bowl of porridge and grab a spoon, moving towards the sofa. I decide eating breakfast while editing my latest manuscript will be a lot more productive than doing both tasks separately.

This manuscript is a lot more different than I've gotten before. So far it's light and refreshing, about a girl from a fishing community finding self-love after being married off and widowed at a young age. I suppose I should thank the new chief editor at the publishing company who doesn't corner me as Alicia did.

A smile settles on to my lips, and I take a bite of my porridge before continuing where I had left off earlier this morning.

It is around nine when the muffled sounds begin stirring around the quiet house, and I glance up just in time to see a sleepy Isaac wobble towards me while rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

"Mama?" he croaks sleepily as he looks around the house until he spots me. He begins walking towards me, still unsteady on his feet. I'm a little surprised that he isn't yelling today like he always does when I leave the bed before he wakes up. He seems a lot more calm. Maybe it's my home decor?

"Mama?" Isaac croaks again, this time, reaching me as he licks his lips. His round eyes look at me with something I can't explain. No one has looked at me like this before. Like I'm the most important thing to them. Like they need me to keep them close to them all the time. He's never called me 'Mama' before too.

So I put aside my manuscript, pick him up, and place him on to my lap, wrapping my arms around the small boy.

"Good morning, my handsome young man!" I greet him cheerily, placing a kiss on his thick black hair.

"I had a bad dream," Isaac whispers suddenly, filling up the silence with his voice.

I frown at the child, worried if he's acting so differently because of that. "What did you see?"

I feel as Isaac stiffens underneath me, grasping my dress. "I can't tell."

I'm almost about to ask him to tell me when he adds in quickly, "I-I

don't remember.”

My eyes widen at that, and I nod. I don't remember my dreams after I wake up 99.99% of the time so I decide to drop it. Instead, I wrap my arms around the boy tighter and feel myself get up on my feet and begin walking towards the bedroom.

“Just remember that there is a reason it is called a dream. It won't happen in real life, Isaac. Dreams you see with your eyes closed never come true,” I say softly to the child and feel him nodding against my chest. “Good. Now, let's get you freshened up. I've made porridge, eggs, and chicken sandwiches. You like those, don't you?”

“Yeah,” Isaac mumbles quietly. I hear his stomach suddenly growling. A soft chuckle leaves my lips at that. My little boy is hungry.

* * *

William calls around nine in the morning. I'm in the garden when I hear Isaac yelling from the living room that his father is calling.

“It's okay, I'll keep him inside the living room just in case William's friends are still there,” Saara whispers as she leans forward, pulling the hair tie from my hair and beginning to put hers up in a bun.

I can only chuckle at her old antic as I turn back towards the bougainvilleas that have now begun to crawl all over the fence, completely in bloom today morning. Bright pinks and whites and purples.

It's no use chastising Saara about this. She always does this anyway—steals the hair tie from me just to secure her hair. That's often why I leave my hair open whenever I'm around her; she'll steal my hair tie anyway otherwise.

But she doesn't seem to get too far when Isaac comes running outside. “Mummy! Look, Pa's called!”

My eyes widen and my head snaps towards Isaac when he reaches me and turns my phone so that I'm staring at an equally surprised-looking William.

“Wait . . . Mummy? Man, you're back with Shirley?” a voice suddenly exclaims. I cringe and William notices.

“Isaac, baby, go inside with Poofy and talk to your dad. You'll see him clearer inside. I'm coming in a bit, okay?” I whisper hurriedly as Saara

catches her cue and pulls a confused Isaac up into her arms before hurriedly walking into the house.

“Oi man, that’s Saara Malik! You’re secretly dating her?” I hear the man yell as Isaac and Saara enter the house.

I sigh and turn back to the flowers.

I guess I’ve lived a pretty boring life the past six years, huh? That’s why this is happening, isn’t it? Life is a balance and all. I’m scared though. If I become happy, I’m scared I’ll be hurt. Life being a balance of everything scares me.

I turn up to look at the skies. *What do I do?*

“Oh man, you won’t be happy about this,” Saara whispers when I finally enter the living room after a while. My eyes dart to an excited-looking Isaac doing something on my phone, probably playing games before I turn back to Saara.

“What happened?” I ask quietly.

“William’s on his way over. With his best friend.” My heart drops.

“Oh no.”

“I knew you’d say that.”

“I’m going to die. This can’t be happening! I was only prepared to tell August today! How can so many people know already! It’s only been a week!”

“Calm down. Kris is his best friend and colleague, he had to find out soon anyway. And August isn’t coming over today! He will be out of the country for some business for two weeks so relax.”

“I’m . . . oh my God, I’m freaking out!”

“William firmly told him that he’s not going back to Shirley and that you’re not her.”

“What about . . . Cecelia?”

At this, Saara scoffs and my eyes widen further. “Apparently, she got very drunk last night and is still asleep. She’s not coming, don’t worry.”

“Mummy, Pa’s coming over!” Isaac, having suddenly spotted me, giggles excitedly as he begins running towards me, wailing my phone in his hand as he does.

“I know, I heard.” I smile at the boy as I pick him up and carry him to the sofa before dropping down unceremoniously with him.

“I’m ek—” Isaac frowns, trying hard to remember how to say

excited. “Ek . . . happy!” I laugh at his improvisation.

“He’s so cute!” Saara squeals again, and Isaac blushes under the sudden attention. I chuckle at the pair.

Just then, the sound of a vehicle driving into the driveway sounds and I feel myself stiffen.

“They are here,” Saara whispers as she turns towards the door with bright eyes.

This is it, he’s here, we’re officially going to introduce me to his circle of friends. This is crazy. Isaac lets out a little yell of excitement and gets up, shooting towards the door where Saara already stands holding the doorknob, waiting for a knock.

It comes quickly, and Saara waits a few seconds before opening the door. Isaac almost vibrates with excitement behind her. I, on the other hand, find myself rooted to my spot, not believing my legs not to give away under pressure if I stand.

First enters an attractive-looking man who I can only place to be Kris, then enters William.

It will be a lie if I say I don’t compare the two men when they stepped into the house. I do. Kris looks the more orthodox handsome of the two; his hair is styled messily as it falls over his forehead. I reckon that it suits his beauty. He has an easy-going face, something that strangely suits the casual T-shirt and trainer pants he is wearing right now. I would never pin him to be a surgeon. Beside him, William stands a couple of inches taller. He, too, is wearing casual clothing, and his hair is down on his forehead today too.

Somehow, I find my eyes widening at how different he looks. A lot more casual, a lot younger. His facial features aren’t as striking as his best friend though; I realize that as I watch them stand side by side, but somehow, my eyes find themselves going back to him. Kris may be the more handsome friend, but William is definitely more attractive.

I watch as William’s piercing gaze sweeps around the room until they find mine before instantly dipping themselves into my soul. I gulp.

Isaac runs and jumps on the first man.

“Hey there, champ! I missed you too.” Kris chuckles before turning towards Saara.

“It’s nice to finally meet you! I’m Kris Zhao, Will’s best friend since

med school. I'm currently doing my residency in cardiothoracic surgery in the same hospital as Will. I listen to your music, by the way. I really like your new single 'Jasmine Heart.'" Kris smiles at Saara and she beams back, seeming genuinely flattered by his compliment. I know 'Jasmine Heart' is very close to Saara.

"Thank you so much! I'm glad William has a friend with a good taste in music." Saara grins at Kris, making him let out a laugh.

"You're beautiful and witty! I didn't know you and my best friend were dating but no wonder. He always used to like the artistically inclined ones." Kris grins at a suddenly mortified looking Saara before he turns and his eyes find mine as well. He stops.

"Oh wow." From the sudden flashes of mortification that flashes across his face, I can tell he didn't mean to say it out loud, but I realize that he adapts well when he smiles. Letting Isaac down, he moves forward.

"Hello, you must be the Auntie Poofy that Isaac was talking about."

Isaac turns towards his father who quickly picks him up into his arms, then Kris turns towards William and whispers something neither I nor Saara can seem to hear from her expression, but William hears it just fine because I notice his eyes flashing before he smiles at his best friend. Isaac seems to suddenly stare at Kris with narrowed eyes.

Both Saara and I, on the other hand, just frown.

I decide it's time I speak so I get up slowly and extend a hand towards him.

"Hello, I'm Gemma." I smile at him softly, waiting for him to grasp my hand. He does, and I realize how soft his hand is. My eyes snap up in surprise just as his does to me.

"I'm Kris. Your hand is very soft." Kris smiles kindly and I find myself blushing under his compliment that mirrors my silent one. I've never heard that one before.

"Thank you," I mumble back nervously. "Yours too."

This time, Kris blushes and my eyes widen as his neck turns a bright shade of pink. William moves behind him then, and I find my attention darting to him. I freeze.

His blazing eyes are focused on mine while my eyes glance from his to a suddenly very amused-looking Saara and then back to him. I notice Kris and I are still holding hands and gently pull my hand back towards me before

extending it towards William.

I watch as his hand darts out and grasps on to mine without hesitation. Kris's eyes widen at this, and I'm sure he's silently figuring out his mistake. He turns towards William just as William steps around his best friend and stands beside me, his hand now sliding around my shoulders.

"This one is mine, not that one." William smiles at his best friend. "But you're right. She does look like an angel in white."

"Yeah, I almost had a heart attack, man." Saara moves forward, chuckling awkwardly.

Isaac finds this moment to exert himself back into my range of attention and leans towards me until I have him in my arms.

"It's completely normal, you saw Saara during the video call and not me anyway." I try to relax the embarrassed-looking man. He smiles at me at this, appreciation gracing his expressions.

"I will wait for William to mess up."

Then he looks around the room with a sad, sheepish smile. "I guess my sister is going to have to deal with a bit of a heartbreak, huh?"

I feel as William stiffens beside me and wonder which part he's offended about—messing up or an upset Cecelia.

But Saara saves the day once again when she says, "Let's get the guests something to drink, Gemma?"

She then pulls Isaac and I towards the kitchen, leaving the two men to silently talk and fix the tension between them.

* * *

"When are you going to tell Cecelia?" Kris asks William casually before he takes a sip of his coffee and smiles appreciatively at Saara and me before placing it on the kitchen island.

We give the men some time to sort things over while Saara made coffee in the kitchen, and I give a suddenly very hungry Isaac what he has been looking at—his chicken sandwiches.

When we come out, both men are smiling and discussing something that seems like hospital politics. I find myself wondering if all the power play that happened in this Chinese drama I once saw called *Surgeons* really does happen in real life.

Now, we're all in the tiny kitchen. The men are drinking coffee and cutting the vegetables by some turn of events, and Saara and I preparing lunch. I'm a little distracted, to be honest. I'm still wondering about the connection between dramas and reality. Their current topic of conversation seems way intimidating, to be honest. I'd rather take Isaac up to bed for his early nap or something. I glance towards Isaac on his spot on the rugs in that living room where we have laid a small mattress for him to play on. I find him reading Saara's first-grade prize for coming first in her class, a fairy tale book she has treasured since little. Even I never got to hold it for more than two minutes. When she realizes what I'm looking at, I give her a grateful smile for valuing Isaac so much.

"I don't want to make a big deal out of this. I'll tell her when she finds out naturally." William shrugs across the island from me. Sitting on a stool beside Kris, he seems casual about this reply, but I can tell by the whitening of his knuckles around the kitchen knife that he's stressed.

"I think it's a big deal already, man. I mean, and no offense, your son calls her 'mum' and they seem inseparable! You're better off putting a ring on her finger at this point."

I freeze. My wide eyes dart towards William and I frown.

His face is void of any expressions and he's still looking at his best friend, then he suddenly looks up at me. I almost jump up in surprise. The look in his eyes doesn't escape my attention. I know he's about to say something sarcastic. Still, I could never be able to guess the question he asks next.

"Do you want to marry me?"

"I refuse!" Saara yells her response even before I get to open my mouth to do so. I flinch when I notice William's eyes blazing at Saara's reply. I know he was just being sarcastic, I know he was just making a point to his best friend. Still, I couldn't help myself from reacting this way. This stunned . . . silent way.

William, on the other hand, seems completely composed. Still, the blank-faced being, he continues to look at me, ignoring Saara. I glance at Isaac nervously, and relief floods me when I see that he's still busy with the book and hasn't heard a thing. My eyes then flutter towards Kris, too, but his time, I find him looking at William with something soft akin to surprise in his eyes.

Slowly, my gaze returns to William. For a second, I just watch the man before me. There are days when he seems tan, shining almost slightly golden, and there are days when he's as fair as milk. Today, as he sits before me, his skin is a bit of both. The vast tone of his skin almost meshes against his white shirt, reflecting the light from the room while some spots still reflect his tan—slightly golden. Like milk and honey.

I don't know how to approach this. Should I question him? And if so, about what? Will he even answer if I do? Should I just let this be? Play it off like a joke? The butterflies in my chest are soaring, and my heart all of a sudden is playing the drum. I'm breathless and I know there is no need to be. He doesn't mean it. He barely knows me. He doesn't like me. Like I like him. Like I . . . like him.

When no question lends me an answer, I find myself slowly turning towards Saara and Kris before sparing them an apologetic smile, hoping they will understand my unspoken request. It's best to not have an audience when I embarrass myself completely.

"Let's give the couple some privacy." Kris nods, understanding me, as if naturally, when he turns towards Saara and smiles. Saara, however, glances at me in hopes for confirmation and only begins moving when I give her my thankful nod.

"Thanks," I mumble as the two moves out of the kitchen and towards an occupied Isaac.

For a second or two, there is silence in the kitchen. None of us say a word. Neither of us moves. Neither of us seems to have the courage to look the other in the eye. I wonder what I should do now. Should I begin speaking? My eyes lower on to my empty hands, and I slowly move my fingers, watching my fingers flexing under my gaze.

The tingling feeling behind the back of my head has me held. *Held*. My heart blooms at the thought that word produces. My newly realized liking for the man before me does nothing but lead me towards complete vulnerability. When I realize that I am walking, I know what I want to do.

I want to touch him. I want to touch William just because I want to, and not because I have to—for show.

The soles of my naked feet barely let a small tap escape my movements as I move closer and closer to him. I see no hostility in his eyes, no expression of disgust, hatred, or fear. His usual blank expression gives

nothing away. No, his face gives nothing away and his eyes refuse to give in. They are egging me on, waiting to see what I do. This makes me wonder even more. Should I really touch him? Should I hold him and blame the people outside the kitchen? Blame the stupid need to hold a façade? Will he know? Will he know how I feel?

I find myself moving around the island, surprising myself when I realize that I'm really just about to touch him. He will probably know how I feel. Does he already know? I'm about to touch him. Even when there is no one in the kitchen to show right now. Have I ever hugged him before? My jumping heartbeats neither confirm nor deny anything.

When my feet reach him, he silently turns so that he is facing me. I watch as he turns until he and I are looking at each other straight in the eyes while just standing there. Stagnant. I have no idea how many minutes pass, or if only seconds as we continue to face each other but remain completely silent.

When his fingers move against the dark material of his pants and slowly reach towards me, I find my arms move around his neck automatically. As if this is a sign I am waiting for. I want to cringe thinking about how out of character this is for me. When was the last time I had just walked forward and hugged a crush? I can't tell, but my newly realized feelings do nothing but add coal into the blazing pits of my stupidity. When I feel his thighs separate, I find myself manoeuvring myself between them, tightening my arm around the slightly stiff man.

"Are you feeling okay?" I whisper into his ears instead. I realize even he has had to tell the first person in his own world about me today. Concern seeps into my mind. He must be really guilty of lying to his best friend.

"Why do you ask?" William asks me, his voice a bit lower than mine. My eyes widen at the sudden deep tone in his low voice, but he gives me no space to think about it when his hands suddenly begin to slide around my waist.

His actions can't help but make me wonder what is happening right now. Is this for show? Is he doing this because he doesn't want me to be embarrassed? Is he doing this because he doesn't want me to escape and not answer?

"It must be hard to lie to your best friend," I whisper softly, then I feel guilty. "I'm sorry I pulled you into this."

“I’m a grown man, Gemma, not a child. You cannot make me do anything I do not want to,” William replies simply and I nod, finding comfort in his blunt words, then I stiffen.

“Thanks for wanting to hug me then.” I chuckle, trying to lighten the mood. The feeling of his arm tightening around me leaves me almost breathless, but he doesn’t do anything other than that. He remains silent.

“Why did you ask me that question?” I ask after a minute or two of silence. I realize he isn’t going to speak on my previous comment, so I decide to ask him what I really have to.

“I was curious about your answer,” William replies simply, but I can’t help as my breath hitches in my chest when I feel his palm pull me tighter against him. I can’t see the entrance of the kitchen right now, so I can’t be too sure. Is someone trying to peek?

“Why the curiosity?” I ask then. Isn’t my answer supposed to be obvious? We have known each other for merely a week, and although I have proved to be quite spontaneous so far, I’m sure no sane girl would marry a strange they have . . . I stop. Oh wait, some people marry people they don’t even know until their wedding day. A sigh slips from my lips and I shamelessly slump against the man holding me. *Oh well.*

“I was jealous.” The words come rolling out of his tongue like a chilly breeze during a cold stormy night, giving me goose bumps all along my arm. The world is suddenly rotating quite quickly around me—orbiting around us until my vision quickly begins to become blurry.

“I’m sorry?” I blurt out, not knowing what else to say. He was jealous? Of what? Kris? My mind rolls back to a few days ago and what Saara said over the phone. Was he jealous then too?

“I don’t—” William stops, seeming hesitant for a few seconds as he frowns to himself before he finally speaks again. “Like the idea of men touching you. I don’t like thinking of them looking at you like that.”

“But why?” I whisper, suddenly wondering how to formulate loud enough words that can be heard properly . . . how to find my voice.

“It’s too soon to be able to know.” William shrugs, catching me off guard once again. Is he hinting that he might have feelings for me too? Is he hinting that he might like me too?

“Why are you telling me all this?” I blink, the state of confusion and exhilaration begins to take over me.

Everything makes sense and yet absolutely nothing does.

Something outside in the back garden drops and I hear Saara groan a moment later. I almost roll my eyes against a stiff William. Of course, she would try to listen.

“She was spying.” William nods almost to himself, and I blink albeit a little embarrassed on my cousin’s behalf as I observe the man in whose arms I am in right now. He smiles a little. “Would you like it better if I lied to you?”

“Of course not,” I sigh. No one really loves the way anyone lies. All that only sounds best in the lyrics of songs.

“Would you like it better if I am not transparent with you?” he asks again.

I frown, confused between letting myself feel the small sharp whiskers of William’s almost invisible regrowing beard brush against my temple or taking a step back and letting the cold air wrap around me with its cold invisible arms. “No . . . I don’t.”

“I like frank, clear communication, Gemma.”

I pull my head back until I can look up at him. “I don’t mind that too.”

Looking down, William blinks with his usual blank expression and nods. “Is there anything else you wanted to ask me?”

“Why didn’t you tell Kris about our situation, as I did with Saara?”

For a moment, his gaze hardens and I almost think he’s going to walk away.

“Because you are his type.”

I frown. “I’m sorry?”

He sighs when he catches me looking at him expectedly. I can’t lie, I suddenly do want to know. “You’re his type, Gemma. The type of woman that catches his eyes, that he would want to settle down with.”

“And . . . you don’t want that?” I bite my lip, knowing that there is a high chance I have blown it now. The feeling of all this almost being over hits me and runs me over, squishing my brains out.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs, and I feel myself moving with him. Surprisingly, this feels comfortable—being in his arms. Surprisingly, neither one of us moves away. *And William’s admissions . . . does this mean . . . does it mean he likes me too?*

“Do you want to marry me?” he asks suddenly, taking me completely by surprise once again. The feeling of light-headedness hits me straight across my chest. I take a deep breath, trying to clear the fogginess in my mind. The waft of William’s cologne flutters into my nostrils and I groan. Frustrated, I let my head drop on William’s shoulder without much thought.

What sort of a question is this? How does he expect me to reply?

“It’s too soon to say. We don’t know each other enough,” I finally reply, silently proud of my answer. Of course, I like him. Of course, I don’t think marrying him so soon is even a question. Or smart. I don’t want to marry him right now, but it’s not like I think I’d not want to marry him forever. No one knows the future. So isn’t it easier to say this instead of no? Or maybe it’s too soon to say?

“What about you?” I ask, moving my head back until I can see his face. His eyes are on my shoulder right now.

With my question, William’s eyes shoot up to mine, and I feel my legs give away a little. “When you love me.”

Once again, I feel the world orbiting around us quickly. The feeling of light-headedness hits me straight across my chest and my heart starts hammering against my chest. I can’t help but desperately start grasping for any reminder on how to breathe. How to keep myself from fainting.

His answer takes me completely by surprise. He hasn’t said no. He said when I will love him. Does that mean he wants to marry me eventually? Does that mean he likes me? My legs give away and his arms tighten around me instantly.

“Why?” I ask, a little breathless, considering for the first time to move out of his embrace. The realisation slowly washes over me like a cold wave, and I find myself completely unprepared for this. His straightforwardness scares me.

“Why what?” William asks quietly. I notice at this moment the slow swirls of circle his thumb is tracing against my upper back. This makes my heart feel warm; he’s trying to calm me down.

“Why ‘when you love me’ instead of ‘it’s too soon’?”

“How about, ‘It’s too soon when you love me’?” William asks instead, joining both the words together. This makes me frown even harder. Is he indirectly telling me he likes me too?

“Why ‘when you love me’? Why not ‘when I love you’?” I ask

instead.

“Do you want to marry me?” William asks instead, disregarding my previous question altogether.

We stare into each other’s eyes for a while. I try to find the silent answers to my questions, and he tries to find something I may never figure out.

We stand here in the kitchen with my arms around his neck and his around my back. The places where our hearts beat against each other. I let my eyes wander. I let my eyes trace his dark eyebrows, the light scar on the left side of his forehead, almost shadowed by his thick hairline. I let my eyes shamelessly caress the slightly tall bridge of his nose, the soft crease between his double eyelids, the dark orbs that desperately remind me of the moonless nights—sometimes pitch black and sometimes with the swirl of something.

The man standing before me, the man holding me, he isn’t the most handsome of men but I like him. He hardly speaks unless it is needed. His eyes constantly make me feel like they are seeing into my soul. He’s too straightforward that it’s almost unhealthy for my heart, and he’s incredibly intelligent. Far more intelligent than me. Still, I like him. I really, really like him.

He says he’ll marry me when I love him, and I’m afraid I may be well on my way. To be able to be this comfortable in someone’s arms, to be so comfortable in his arms, to have Isaac in my life—I can disregard sense, I can disregard social acceptability, but for me, that’s not enough. This one week is enough, yet it isn’t. It’s just not enough.

My gaze finally moves back to his, and I feel as his fingers move slightly against my back.

Finally, I answer.

“When you love me then.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

One Misty Midnight

Nine weeks later. One exciting morning.

Bloomington Publishing Inc.

“It’s so cold tonight,” she mumbles.

The pads of her thin fingers, softly running along the closed window seals of her room.

“It’s misty too,” she observes.

A small smile settles on her lips.

She sighs.

“Oh what a wonderful night to be utterly alone, just like the dark moonless sky.”

There is something in the air today. A strange sort of electricity that seems to have charged the entire office. It has been here since the morning; as soon as I had taken a step in, I felt it. My stomach fluttered, and my skin strangely buzzed under the charged-up atmosphere.

Everyone else seems different too. The heavy silence that carried through every corner of the office under the watchful eyes of Alicia seems to be completely gone. Instead, now, I sit here and witness the unguarded conversations and laughter all around me.

I suppose it has something to do with the new chief editor, who I have still not had the opportunity to meet. I frown. Wasn’t last week his first official week in the office after being appointed? I look around the loud and happy room once again and tilt my head in curiosity. Maybe this new energy

around the room is because of the new boss.

Nodding, I turn back to the manuscript before me with a satisfied mind. This explanation definitely makes sense.

“Hey, Gemma?”

At the sound of the soft voice speaking my name, my head snaps up and I smile when my eyes find Jennie’s.

Jennie Dsena, two years my senior in the company, has always been a great colleague ever since I first joined. She had been out of the office for the past couple of months on maternity leave for her first child and had just come back to work today.

“Yeah?” I whisper back, imitating her tone as I pull my chair closer to her. I suppose she’s also feeling awkward about the change in the atmosphere around here.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you . . .” The woman’s eyes sparkle with excitement and I find myself getting nervous. It’s never great when Jennie’s excited. It means lots of rule-breaking ideas or lots of blushing. Jennie can be quite shameless. I wonder which one it is today.

“Have you seen the chief editor yet?” The question comes out a little louder than both she and I had expected, and instantly, the entire office quiets down. I can feel it as my entire face turns red, my eyes now twice its normal size while I stare at the still excited and slightly guilty-looking woman beside me. I don’t even want to look at all the people silently waiting for my reply. It’s weird. Why are they even so interested in my answer?

“No, I haven’t. Why?” I ask Jennie instead of only answering her. At the back of my mind, I know why she’s asking me, the editor is probably hot.

“He’s so hot!” Jennie whispers this time around, and I sense a couple of heads nodding in agreement around us.

“True,” Sean agrees, nodding from the cubicle in front of me.

“Yeah, he’s really good looking . . . and single!” Wendina whispers as loudly she can without being obvious.

“Back off, ladies! He’s mine!” Tuliana huffs as she struts over in her high heel. Turning towards her, I smile, noticing the widening of her bright blue eyes immediately.

“Is he that hot?” I ask her curiously. Knowing Tully and from her habit of heavily publicizing her past relationships, we all know she has always dated models or people who could be models. Her standards are

higher than my paycheck.

“An absolute feast!”

“Even his name is beautiful!” Sean sighs, coming to stand beside Tully with a sheepish smile on his face.

“Nathan Jinda seems like a normal name to me though.” I frown, completely confused where they are seeing the wow factor here.

“How dare you say that?” Tully gasps, placing her palm over her chest. I roll my eyes at that.

“Yeah! Take it back!” Sean follows her, staring at me with his wide, shocked eyes.

“When did you get to see him?” I ignore the two and, instead, turn my attention to Jennie. How has she been able to see him when this is both our first time in the office since he’s been here?

“I met him in the elevator in the morning.” Jennie shrugs. “He’s very well-mannered.”

“Ah.” I nod. “Okay.”

“Anyway! I know that we are the only two single women in this office and I’ve just come here to tell you—back off. He’s mine,” Tully huffs again, folding her arms in front of her.

“Don’t worry, Tully. I’m not interested,” I assure the girl without a second thought and turn back to the desktop before me.

“Good, I won’t have to be mean to you then.” Sean grins at me and then turns to Tully. “Watch me get him first, b*tch.”

“Over my dead body,” Tully hisses at Sean. Turning, her gaze lands on me for a second before she finally turns around and marches back to her cubicle.

“B*tch gonna end up dead soon.” I hear Sean mumbling under his breath while turning towards his own cubicle.

“You’re going to regret that,” Jennie whispers when it’s just the two of us again, thankfully managing to keep her voice low this time.

“Regret what?” I frown.

“Saying you’re not interested. He really is hot. Six feet three inches of delicious milk chocolate, eyes like the Pacific Ocean. I even checked his hands, and girl, no ring!” Jennie whispers excitedly, wiggling her fingers.

My eyes catch her wedding and engagement rings and I smile. “I really am not interested, Jen.”

Jennie stills. “What?” She blinks. “Why?”

Grinning now, I pull my own hand up from my lap and reach for my cell phone, then I turn the phone towards her, watching as her eyes widen when she sees my wallpaper.

A smile of my own flutters on my lips while I recall the wallpaper in my own mind. William had clicked the picture three weeks ago when we had gone to the park. I can’t help but let the blush wash over my cheeks whenever I think about William.

Things had changed since we had that talk in my kitchen nine weeks ago. Nine. Time has flown by so quickly. It feels just like last week, and yet it has been a little more than two months since that afternoon. So much has changed since then . . . and yet nothing has changed at all.

Isaac has slowly grown more confident in me. Now, he also throws tantrums once in a while. Although I must admit he’s gotten more and more protective too. I can’t count the number of times he has yelled at his father, Kris, Saara, or the housekeepers because he thought they had upset me. He has also gained a bit of weight. Mary and I have been very happy about that; I can now feel it when I pick him in my arms. He just looks healthier now. He’s a lot less afraid of William as well. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. I suppose it’s a good thing. Their relationship has improved tremendously too. I suppose it’s because William is a lot less awkward with Isaac.

William. My blush deepens when I think about Isaac’s father. After the talk in my kitchen, I wasn’t sure how things are going to be between us. Had we both expressed our feelings? Did he know I like him? Was that enough? What would happen next? Would we date? Would things be more solid now?

We don’t. It isn’t.

The next day, things go back to normal with William and I. Granted, yes, things aren’t as awkward when it comes to skin-ship. Like, now, we are comfortable falling asleep on the same bed if Isaac is in the middle. We have ended up falling asleep while watching movies a lot of times. I’m also okay sitting beside him with his arm around my shoulder, or hugging him, or him hugging me or holding hands. William pecks me on my cheeks a lot too. Never in private, but always quite often when we are in public. Just randomly. Sometimes, I wonder if he is just mirroring Isaac’s actions. I do

feel that they have some sort of unspoken competition going on.

Still, there hasn't been a sudden tag placed on us. After that day, William has not tried to assert himself in my lifestyle unless necessary and neither have I. We don't text each other until needed; there are no calls until one has something regarding Isaac to say. There isn't any vast difference in the way we interact face to face while we are not in front of Isaac. Surprisingly, no one except for Saara, Kris, and Mrs. Red in our immediate circle of people have gotten to know about William and me so far, which is as nice a feeling as it is uncomfortable. Although I must admit, he often does get jealous of men. I don't think that's going to change. It's an observation I have made. Mary was right; William is quite a jealous person.

"Gemma! Is he yours?" Jennie gapes, bringing me back to our conversation, as she reaches for my phone and pulls it closer to her face.

"It's complicated but yes. That's Isaac, he's almost five."

It seems like minutes before Jennie finally rips her gaze from my phone's screen and looks up to me. "You have to tell me everything!"

"What about his father?" Jennie asks quietly after a few minutes of silence when I finish telling her the entire story. "It seems like he likes you too, Gemma. Why don't you two just make everything real? You guys won't have to lie then."

"We're just taking things slowly, Jennie. Plus I'm afraid he's still not over his wife."

"Ex-wife," Jennie emphasizes 'ex', and I flinch, wondering when I'm going to stop unconsciously thinking of William as a married man. As a taken man. Maybe then I'll stop feeling guilty every time he touches me and I like it.

"Can I see a picture of him?"

"Ah." I blush and then quickly nod, finding a picture of Kris and William and shoving my phone towards Jennie.

"Let me guess, it's this one." She points at William and I blink.

"How did you know?" I ask her, genuinely curious.

"He just seems like your type. Grounded."

"Is that his house?"

"Yeah." I nod, wondering if she will think I'm a gold digger now.

"Seems rich. Not surprised, they both look very rich." Jennie nods, looking analytical now.

“Yeah, William and Kris are both surgeons.”

“Ah! Doctors! No wonder, they look smart too!” Jennie nods again, her eyes snap to mine and she grins. “I can’t wait to see the look on Alicia’s face when she gets to know you’ve scored yourself a surgeon.”

I gape at the woman before me. “How would she even know?”

“Tully and she are tight, don’t you remember?”

“Oh.” I sigh, remembering their infamous friendship.

“Yeah, I remember. How’s little Vivian, by the way?” I ask her quickly, deciding it’s time to change the topic. She takes the bait.

“Oh, he’s wonderful! You know he just never lets me sleep! I’m a walking zombie! His father helps a lot too though—”

We talk about her baby for an hour.

* * *

A glance at the wall clock’s direction, and it tells me that it’s almost four in the afternoon. A content sigh leaves my lips and I lean back on to my chair, smiling. Today has surprisingly been one of the best days I’ve had in this office. Somehow, although I am more used to being alone when working, being in this new environment today isn’t half as bad. When so much time has been spent, and it is already the afternoon, I don’t even know. I also managed to get two chapters thoroughly down. Yes, today has been a good day.

Another glance at the wall clock’s direction and I wonder what Isaac must be doing right now. On a normal day for the past few weeks, he has been having naps around one, after lunch. He’s usually awake by now, but is he bathing or having tea today?

I reach for my phone for the fifth time today, and I quickly open my and Mary’s message thread.

Typing a quick message asking about Isaac’s health and current activities—one that resembles the first four—I press send and wait for Mary to admonish me about worrying too much.

A minute or two later, her text arrives. My hand quickly reaches for my phone and I smile when I read that Isaac is still asleep, then I smile harder when she tells me to leave everything to her and focus on my work or she’s telling William.

A chuckle leaves my lips when I think about the threat again. What will William even do? Glare at me nonstop like he usually does when he's jealous? Or seclude himself until someone comes banging on his door when he's upset about something?

"It's almost four-thirty, he's going to come out of his office! I'm so excited!" Sean whispers giddily, already beginning to pack his stuff.

"How do you be sure that he comes out at four-thirty sharp?" Jennie asks the giddy man curiously, even I feel myself perk up with the sudden curiosity bubbling in me. *Just who exactly is this man they are all so crazy about?*

For a second, Sean looks at Jennie with a look of disbelief, then he speaks. "That's because he has always been coming out at four-thirty. Sharp!"

I roll my eyes, all the balloons of curiosity deflating and falling down at my feet. What an obvious answer. How had I not thought of that?

"Five minutes left!" Tully whispers excitedly as she walks past us and towards the printer in the corner of the office.

"Okay, let me know when this chief editor of ours comes out of the office. I want to see his face, too, now."

"Don't even think about it, Gemma!" Sean hisses at me at that, and I immediately put my hands before me in a dismissive gesture.

"I'm not interested. Trust me. I won't ever be."

"You'll regret saying that," the very beautiful and workaholic Wendina speaks up for the second time today, and I turn towards her just as Jennie echoes her agreement.

I stop, taking a moment to breathe and assess how I am feeling, if my curiosity really is curiosity and not shielded interest. I feel nothing.

"I won't," I assure everyone, confident in my answer. Sean looks pleased, Wendina looks disappointed, and Jennie looks excited. I wonder what she's so excited about? Is she excited about watching me possibly fall for the boss? As if knowing what I'm thinking about, Jennie's eyes find mine and she wiggles her eyebrows mischievously. I shake my head at the woman. This is just too much. Just how hot is this man?

"Any minute now!" Tully sighs dreamily as she passes us again, this time with a stack of papers in her arms.

I begin packing my things. To be honest, I would have stayed back

just to see how hot our new chief editor is, but the excitement to get back home is far greater than spending more than my discussed office hours here waiting for my boss to come out of his office. It's not like he's running away, and even though I'm curious about how he looks, I'm not desperate. I can see him any day.

"It's four-thirty!" Wendina chuckles under her breath, and I pick up my bag, already getting up on my feet.

"Oi! Where are you going?" Jennie hisses at my movement.

Turning towards her, I smile. "I'll just see him during office hours someday. I need to go back home now."

"You're a crazy b*tch passing on this opportunity!" Sean chuckles at me, looking secretly impressed. I almost smile. Almost.

"Keep the opportunity as a gift from me to you. I have to go now. Gotta catch a cab quickly," I say instead, already devising ways on how to catch a cab the fastest way possible.

"Why don't you buy a car already, Gemma?" Jennie sighs, looking a bit exasperated at me.

I shrug. "Yeah, I'm thinking of getting one for myself. I didn't really feel the need for it until recently, but right now, it feels like a staple."

"Why? What's changed?" Wendina asks, being the ever-curious being she is.

Getting out of my chair, I push it into its place. Tucking it against the table, I look at Wendina and smile. "I have commitments now."

I begin walking away, ignoring the stunned silence I am leaving behind around my cubicle.

When I reach the ground floor, I'm almost dead. I wonder why I ever decided to take the stairs whenever I come to work as a form of exercise. I almost always end up nearly dead by the end of it.

"Bye, Gemma!"

I turn around and ceremonially wave brightly at a bright-looking Jason.

"Bye, Jace!"

I don't exactly know why he always comes downstairs to say goodbye but I never question it. Saying goodbye doesn't hurt. I suppose he's only trying to get on my good books because of Saara. I giggle at that thought.

Jason and Saara, sitting on a tree. K.I.S.S.I.N.G?

I shudder all the former signs of giggling gone. Yeah, better not. It's too early for her after the breakup anyway.

Shaking my head to get rid of all the stupid thoughts suddenly dancing around my head, I walk towards the street and quickly begin my disastrous attempt at hailing cabs.

Finally, one good empty cab feels pity for me and decides to stop before me. Instantly, I find myself getting in and giving the cab driver William's address. Today being Monday, it's my day to stay over at his.

"We're here," the driver speaks up after a few minutes of silent driving. I lift my head up from my phone to see that he's right, we're really have arrived.

"Thank you," I thank the driver as I check the amount on the meter and pay him as quickly as I can without fumbling.

The fear of him wanting to quickly leave and find a new job hits me right in my chest as I hurriedly try to pay him and get out.

"Have a nice day," the driver exchanges pleasantries, and I smile at the kind-looking man.

"You too, sir."

"Good evening, Gemma!" Olly, William's bodyguard, greets me happily as I walk through the open gates. Oliver is a very good-looking man, with six feet four inches worth of pure height and muscle. Even being in his early thirties, the Romanian man who William's father had strangely hired to be his bodyguard only three weeks ago still looked to be in his twenties instead, and he had quickly become the centre of all the housekeepers's attention.

"Hey, Olly! Thank you!" I grin at the tall, humble giant and wave at the security guards as I walk through the gate and instantly feel my bag being snatched from me.

"You don't have to do that, you know?" I sigh as I let the man hold my bag and guide me towards the house as if I'm a very important person.

When he first arrived, he hadn't even so much as looked at anyone except William. However, when he realized that William has absolutely no intention of taking me him to work with him, he began interacting slowly with Isaac instead, trying to find another person to protect.

Somehow, that intention had extended to me as well. I suppose

maybe it was the day after I requested him to sit down and have lunch with us when we were out at a restaurant. Just Isaac, Olly, and I.

And well, now, here we are.

“It’s nothing, Gem. You must be tired after your day at work.”

“Still, it’s just a bag.” I sigh at the tall man, having to crane my head up just to look at him.

“Just let me feel useful please, Gemma. It helps me feel like I’m at least doing something to get the paycheck Mr. Noo Sr. shoves in my bank account.”

This shuts me up. Just as it does every time he says it. “Is William home by chance?” I ask him instead. Olly drives him around now, so if Olly is home, there is a high chance that so is he.

“No, he isn’t. He just sent me early. He’s staying back for an emergency.”

“Oh.” I nod, not knowing what else to say. Over time, I’ve come to realize how different William’s working hours are from mine.

While I get more flexible hours that let me stay at home and then have desk time per month accordingly, he’s at the hospital for more than ten hours, six days per week and that’s not even taking the on-call days. Not to mention he gets called in regardless of being on-call or not. This month, he’s been on-call on Fridays, and so, it’s hardly ever until Sunday when he gets to relax completely. That is unless he is needed at the hospital again.

Sometimes, I still find myself wondering that if William had not been a doctor, if William had been something else, maybe if William had even been taking over his father’s companies, would he and Shirley have lasted then? Would she have not fallen out of love with William? If they had more time for themselves and Isaac had not arrived so soon, would they still be together? Love is about the perfect timing and circumstances after all.

A part of me believes that anyone can fall in love with just about anyone. It all depends on what time it is in both those people’s lives. The perfect time to collide, the perfect time to profess, the perfect time to progress. So much can be lost by missing the right timing, to give an entry for goodbyes to walk in.

Isn’t it like this in the novels too? The second male protagonist always decides to love and support the female lead from the sidelines without expressing their hearts.

Even when they are so much better for the female protagonists, even when everything would be so much better if the two formed a couple, the second male protagonists remain silent in hopes for a natural reciprocation . . . right until the male protagonists express themselves too, and the game is over. The male lead protagonist has shot and has already scored.

Maybe if the timing and circumstances had been right, Shirley would be here right now instead.

* * *

“Mummy.”

“Yes, love?” I smile at the whispering child lying down beside me. It’s almost midnight now, and even though it’s almost midnight, tonight, Isaac refuses to sleep until his father gets home. Lying on the right side of the bed, Isaac is still on the way to taking almost all the bed. Every minute, he inches closer and closer to where I am settled, seated on the bed with my back leaning against the headboard, my laptop turned on and on my lap. Now, I’m also allowed to edit and proofread soft copy manuscripts, which is something I’m very thankful to the new chief editor for. I don’t know much about his looks, but he sure does seem like a rational human being.

“I’m bored.” Isaac yawns and settles his head on my upper arm, openly looking into the laptop screen now with fascination.

“Would you like to listen to music then?” I ask the little fellow instead of telling him that it’s past his bedtime and to sleep. I know for a fact that there is more chance of William coming back home at the crack of dawn, bathing, and being off for work again before 7AM than him coming back home now, but I can’t tell Isaac that, so instead of scolding Isaac into sleeping or telling him that his dad might not come back home tonight, I decide instead to play the slowest music in my library in hopes of the child to fall asleep listening to it.

“Can I watch *Tom and Jerry*?”

“Yes, you can,” I reply, kissing the surprised-looking child on his forehead. “But tomorrow after school, okay?”

The loud sigh that leaves Isaac’s mouth makes me giggle and turn towards him to give him another kiss.

“I won’t sleep until Papa comes home,” the sleepy child grumbles but

snuggles closer, rubbing his face against me as he begins to close his eyes.

“If you say so, sweetie.” I smile, caressing his hair softly until I hear his breathing change and know that he’s asleep. For a moment, I continue to run my fingers along the prince’s thick black hair. I know, tomorrow morning, he will probably throw a fit. He’ll probably not even speak to me for a few minutes. I decide to wake up early and make him something delicious to make up for tonight.

“My little peanut,” I whisper lovingly at the sleeping child as I lean forward and place a kiss on his hair.

Still smiling, I slowly turn my attention back to the manuscript at hand. The manuscript at hand? A disaster. Or maybe it’s personally just not my style of reading. The male and female protagonists keep on marrying everyone except each other. The male lead, Arik, has two marriages under his belt. The female lead, Penny, so far has one. The funny thing? They have two children. With each other.

It’s no surprise when I find myself yawning after twenty minutes. It’s definitely no surprise when I find myself turning off my laptop, getting out of bed, and placing it on the study table.

Turning around, I slowly make my way towards one of the large windows in this room. I look outside.

The night is a dark one. The only source of light outside are the tall vintage, streetlight-styled lamps William has around his yards. From staying here over time, I have come to understand that the securities working the night shift turn them off around twelve-thirty in the morning.

My eyes move on, trailing the thick mist that shows quite brilliantly under the tall lamps’s golden light and I smile. It certainly is quite foggy tonight.

I stand here for a while, just staring at the slow-moving mist outside. I decide to move when I finally begin feeling the strain on my legs. Turning around, I slowly pad my way back to the bed. Quickly, I find myself shuffling under the blankets until I’m snuggled with Isaac who is now in the middle of the king-sized bed.

Then I fall asleep.

* * *

I feel it when he enters the room. The lights flick on and his slippers scuffle against the floor as he strides closer to the bed. I'm completely awake by the time he comes to stand beside the bed. For a few minutes, his tall shadow just looms over Isaac and me while he stands by the edge of the bed and just . . . looks at us.

My heart is beating crazily by now. I begin to wonder if I should let him know I'm awake. Instead, I keep my eyes shut tightly.

My mind goes into overdrive. *Is he alright? Why is he so quiet? Is something wrong? Is he hurt? Why is he standing there? Does he not want to sleep? Maybe he's replying to a text?*

All of a sudden, I feel it when William finally moves again. My heart begins to race as I realize that he's walking around the bed—around the bed to my side.

I wonder if this is the time I should jump out of bed. Still, in a very foolish turn of events, I continue to pretend to be asleep. I don't know what's going on, but at this point, I'm a pigeon ready to fly right into the tall glass window and then fall stunned to my death.

It seems like forever, but he finally comes to my side of the bed. Again, I feel as he just stands there. Looking over me. The room suddenly seems more silent than ever. All of a sudden, I am acutely aware of the silence in the room and every single movement William is making. I can't help but wonder what he is even thinking? What is he even doing?

Suddenly, he lowers himself down on the bed beside me, and I almost yelp. I can feel his hesitance, just as I can suddenly smell the scent of the shower gel on his skin or the smell of fabric softener in his bed clothes or even the smell of mint in his breath.

Just how close is he to me?

The lights shut now, and I clench the bedsheets under the blanket in nervousness. Is he . . . is he going to sleep beside me?

As if to answer my panicked question, he lies down. A few inches away but still beside me.

I freeze, but inside, I'm losing it. The butterflies in my chest are fluttering. I don't know if I'm trembling or if I'm as stiff as a log. All I know is that I have no idea what I'm going to do if he holds me. I have no idea at all. All I know is that I feel guilty. I feel guilty because I want him to. I want him to hold me. I want him to show a sign. Any sign of his feelings. If he's

upset, I want him to seek me for comfort. And that makes me feel even more guilty—so, so guilty because he’s not mine. Because I’m afraid that despite everything, his heart still belongs to Shirley. Everything still belongs to Shirley.

I am like a mere flower in his garden; my fragrance and beauty can only provide momentary comfort, momentary bliss. I am comforting and so I’m plucked and set in a vase. Admired and appreciated. I can only be loved for a few moments because I am plucked to be withered. And so, I can only bloom. I can only give so much comfort, give so much fragrance, as I slowly fade. Until I wither.

But Shirley . . . she is like this bed. Although William and Isaac spend most of their time away. Although they stay away for long periods of time, sometimes not giving in much importance and finding substitutes for periods of time, but in the end, this is what they come back to. They come back to bed.

In the darkness of the room, William sighs softly and I find it safe to open my eyes. It takes me a minute or two to gather enough courage to take a peek at William. Even though I know I won’t be able to see his face, even though I don’t know how to give him comfort, I still want to. *Turn around and peek at the silent man.*

“I had a rough day.”

My sharp gasp echoes around the room, and my hands instantly go up to my palpitating heart as I try to calm the crazy beating down. His voice sounds different tonight—heavier. I didn’t expect that; it shocked me. And how does he even know I am awake? How could he have known?

“Y-you knew I was awa . . . awake?” I stutter, gulping down my crazily-beating-but-slightly-embarrassed heart.

“Yes, you seemed tense when I was observing you,” William replies as a matter of factly. Once again, silence washes over the room.

“Oh,” I mumble stupidly when I find nothing to say, then I remember his initial words.

I had a rough day.

“Are you hurt? Want to talk about it?” I ask the man, now completely turned towards him while he continues to lay on the bed, on his back. The lamps outside shine a little inside the room and I can make him out looking up at the ceiling.

Still, I cannot read any sort of expression on his face. I wonder if he looks worried or if he looks angry. I wonder if there is any sort of indication on his face that would otherwise be able to tell me what his condition is, what he is thinking about.

“Can I hold your hand?”

I hear it. The vulnerability in his voice. The silent edge too. He’s taking a chance. It has been weeks and he’s taking a chance tonight. He’s trying to let me in, but he’s still guarding himself.

What exactly went wrong today? I still. Did surgery not go well?

As if asking that question is the answer. As I ask the question in my head, I know that it’s true. The surgery must not have gone well.

My eyes try to search for him in the dark. I find nothing. Still, it doesn’t take me a second to decide. It doesn’t even take me a second to think about the implications or the consequences. Frankly, I don’t. I don’t think about them.

At this moment, all I know is that William is upset; William is vulnerable and tired, and if I can provide even a third of my energy to him, if I can provide even a minute of comfort to him, even if I’m just a flower and will wither, even if I will fade and someday be forgotten, I will . . . I will comfort him.

Because . . . I care for this man.

Because . . . I like him.

“Yes . . . you can.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

One Drizzling Day

*While the rain outside continues to fall,
inside, she watches as he flicks the pages of his thick medical
tome.*

*His long, slender fingers caress each thin page and then he
turns to a new one.*

*She watches as his eyebrows pull together in concentration,
His dark hair shining under the dimly lit chandelier.*

Every time he tilts his head,

*The raindrops outside smile at each other witnessing the
scene occurring before them.*

*“Poor child, she does not even know,” one whispers to
another as they fall.*

The other agrees,

“It has begun. She is falling in love.”

Growing up, I remember I thought about marriage a lot. Many would say that I thought about it more than an average person would. I won't deny it, I suppose I did.

Marriage has always fascinated me. Maybe it's because of how different the couples in my family around me in my childhood were. Whenever we visited family or had gatherings, I noticed. The couples. Some were happy, some were sad, some didn't care, and some didn't exist anymore. I remember the first time I wondered how my marriage would be like was when I was in primary school.

At that time, I wondered if my marriage would be like how it was in

the movies. Would I stay at home and bake pie every day for a stern husband with a moustache and styled-back hair that stuck to his head as if he had used glue instead of gel? Would I serve him tea and cookies every time he came back home from work? Press his clothes to perfection? Would I spend my days in the garden? Have a life that revolved inside the perfectly white picket fence? Around my husband? Around us?

When I reached high school, I had more knowledge about marriages or more so about the people that were in these arrangements. It wasn't wise to classify marriages into categories. After all, how could all of them possibly be the same when the people were different? Still, I was sure I was going to marry someday. I just needed to find a suitable person.

During my teenage years, I wondered if my marriage would be like my mum and dad's. If I would find someone suitable, someone who's personally sung to mine, someone who balanced out my interests and filled up the voids I had like I filled up his. I wondered if when I found someone compatible, would my husband and I really be okay with talking to each other while one sat in the toilet, right in front of the other, and pooped? Just like my parents? By the end of high school, I swore to myself that I would never let my husband hear me fart or know when I pooped.

When university rolled in, unlike Saara, my belief in the institute almost shattered. After my last failed relationship in high school, I had sworn to myself that I wouldn't fall back into that trap. Still, how is it possible to just simply abandon a fantasy that I had weaved ever since I was a child? Maybe that's why I have always secretly still believed in a possibility.

Under the secrecy of my own thoughts, I wondered if marriages are like they are in the novels I read. Of course, I had been warned not to believe the idealistic romance and bed scenes these novels possess. In fact, I know not to believe them, but this tiny voice at the back of my head refused to stop. After all, where could such moments appear from if not from some small part of reality? People had to think of these ideas from somewhere, didn't they?

Through university, my thoughts and opinions were a large mess—a blend of idealistic and realistic, immaturity and maturity, ignorance and curiosity. A lot more reluctant to believe, but a lot more dreamy.

I wondered what it would be like to sit on the sofa together and watch movies. I wondered what it would be like to hold hands without having a reason to. I wondered what it would be like to be willing to die for someone

who was not the family your God had given you, but one that you had decided to give yourself. I wondered what it would be like to have a fight and who would be the one to first apologize. I even planned out ideas on how I would apologize if I were in the wrong. Would there be hand grabbing? Crying? Door slamming?

After all, people don't always stay happy when they are in love, do they?

I wondered what it would be like to fall asleep in each other's arms. How it would feel like to wake up with my husband's arms protectively around me. How it would feel like to be loved by a man. A man I could hold and call my own . . . until death would do us apart.

By the time university ended and I began working, I completely forgot about marriage altogether. There was a sharp progression from fascination to disillusionment.

Priorities changed and so did goals. I didn't care for a companion. Marriage suddenly seemed something I could see myself being happy without, so did a husband. So did love. I began thinking about myself more. Self-love, self-care, the beauty around me, my small home, my small family, and my small world. I thought I was happy. And I was; I was content.

Then I met Isaac . . . and his quiet dad.

Right now, as I lie awake in the still dark room at the crack of dawn while the birds outside begin to wake alongside the slowly rising sun, while the neighbourhood traffic slowly begins to buzz with movements to begin a new day, while the help downstairs begins to awake too, I don't know much about the other things; I also don't know much about being loved or having a husband, but I sure can tell how it feels to wake up with a man's arm wrapped protectively around me.

It feels . . . warm.

While I lie on the king-sized bed and stare at the ceiling above me, which is slowly become more and more visible to me, I can't help but ignore the two boys snuggled around me.

At first, when I woke up, I was shocked. My frazzled, foggy brain grasped the scattered remnants of last night's memory, and when everything began making sense, I felt a bit stupid for thinking we would be holding hands all night long.

In the slowly brightening room, I turn my head as much as I can and

gaze at the sleeping man beside me. He looks beautiful even when he sleeps. His slightly swollen face only makes him look more like his son—a child. It's surprising just how childlike someone can look while they sleep. It almost makes me want to reach out and slowly trace the soft planes of his face, then I slowly turn my gaze to the large warm arm wrapped around my naked waist and feel myself blush. My shirt must have ridden up during the night. For a second, I wonder how I feel about this. About this sudden intimacy. Should I remove his hand? That would be the most decent thing to do, right? Would he feel awkward if he woke up and saw us like this? Would we never be able to talk to each other normally?

Oblivious to the storm in my mind, William sighs in his sleep and shifts. A gasp rips out of my lips when I feel his arm tightening around my waist, riding up my shirt even more in the process.

Aborting the thought of removing William's hand entirely, I turn my attention towards my right instead and smile when little Isaac shifts under his blanket too. Curling himself further into a fetal position, he continues to shove his bum into the side of my waist. Smiling at the sleeping little peanut, I reach to brush his hair away from his eyes when I decide that I should slip out of bed now.

It's around the time when I've always gotten out of bed, and the sudden pressure on my lower abdomen subtly reminds me of my daily habits and duties. I need to use the loo. At the realization, my attention goes back to the arm thrown around my waist, but how will I get out of bed?

Normally, it's easier to get out of bed. Isaac isn't one to cuddle on the majority of the days so it's not hard to remove myself from bed usually. The hard part is that William wakes up every single time I try to get out of bed. He's a light sleeper, and even though that has not been so bad for me on other days, today, I feel like that's the worst sort of trait to have.

If I move, he will wake up too. If he wakes up, he will see his arm. If he sees the position we are in, he will get awkward. If he gets awkward . . . it will hurt.

I stop, not wanting to go any further. A sad sigh slips from me, and I bite my lip, trying to think about what to do now.

Maybe I can just get up really fast? That way he won't be able to grasp where his hands were?

I freeze and grin. The idea in my mind seems so simple I don't know

why I hadn't thought about it from the start.

Slowly, I begin moving my left arm up until they are covering William's, then manoeuvring my palm around his own, I slowly slide my fingers between the spaces of his. As if by reflex, his own fingers tighten around mine, and I smile triumphantly when I tighten our hold and slowly begin moving our arms to a safer zone.

When our hands are safely between us, I wonder if he will buy it. He was holding hands with me with his right hand last night, and today, he's holding my hand with his left. I want to scoff. Even I wouldn't buy it.

Oh well! It's too late for that! I tell myself. *You have things to do now!*

Then I begin trying to get up. Getting up to a sitting position, I slowly begin removing my hand from William's, and when I'm successful, I throw a bewildered look at the still sleeping man. Normally, he would have woken up by now.

Slowly though, my shocked expression melts into a sad one.

He had a rough day at the hospital yesterday, he must be tired, I tell myself as I carefully begin to move to the edge of the bed and climb off, standing steadily on my feet when I'm off the bed and standing beside it.

For a second, I stare at the boys sleeping on the bed. My mind swirls around the fact that I was in the small space that is now empty, only minutes ago.

I was there . . . where the woman of the house should be. Where Isaac's mother should be. Where's William's—

I stop, biting my lip to stop the thought from progressing.

It's dangerous to keep walking along that path of thought; it's dangerous for my heart, I tell myself for the thousandth time. Still, I find myself bending over a surprisingly still sleeping William. Up close, I can see the tired eye bags underneath his eyes, the tiny sharp facial hair he will probably shave when he wakes up. I can see every pore and every spot tiny spot of discoloration that can only show if you're as close to him as this, and I smile.

The feeling of gratefulness seeps into my chest as I gaze at the sleeping man. To be able to lie beside him . . . I must have done something good in my earlier childhood.

My eyes trace the bridge of his nose, his cheeks and then the mass of

thick hair that is usually styled back but is now falling over his forehead in abandonment, almost completely covering his eyes. For a second, I wonder if I would be able to realize if his eyes were open and he was looking at me behind the dark mop of hair. At the thought, my fingers automatically find themselves reaching forward and softly moving his hair away from his eyes. Watching my fingers touch the softness of his skin, I blink and quickly retract my hands back to my chest. My heart begins to thump wildly in my chest.

This is dangerous. I shouldn't do this, I scold myself under my breath as I begin to turn around and escape, but I find myself frozen on the spot. A sigh leaves my lips and I turn back around. Slowly reaching forward, I pull the blanket comfortably up till William's chest, then I turn around and quietly make my way to the bathroom, just as I've done a dozen times whenever I stay over during the past two months.

It has become a morning routine of sorts—waking up alongside William and then going to freshen up, going down to stroll in the gardens, afterwards, going to help in the kitchen and then walking back upstairs to wake Isaac. He's usually less moody if he's woken around six-thirty. I'd know because I've done a bit of experimentation with his waking times. Anything before 6:30AM leads to a very moody and pouty Isaac.

His father, on the other hand, for the past two months, has usually been up by now and out of the door by 6:40AM. His shifts start at 7AM and ends at around 5PM, 7PM on busier days, overnight on days when he is on-call, which are Mondays. Growing up being half brown, I was always expected to be a doctor as a career option. I remember I often thought about how cool the profession must be. Now that I see it first hand . . . apart from having the opportunity to save lives, the paycheck is the only cool part about it.

A frown settles on my face as I flush the toilet and begin making my way towards the shower, still half-naked. By the time I'm under the warm beads of water falling on me, I'm completely naked.

My frown deepens. William works long hours and barely gets time to have a proper eight-hour sleep unless it's Saturday when he has a day off. It might not matter to him because he's a bit of a workaholic, but the amount of time he gets to spend with Isaac is compromised. It makes me realize how much patience and understanding it takes for the family of a surgeon to have.

Washing the shampoo off my hair, I bite my lips. In fact, didn't I read

somewhere that surgeons had a high divorce rate?

I reach for the conditioner as a long sigh releases from my lips. Is that also why Shirley couldn't stay? Was she not prepared for her husband's long hours away? But . . . didn't she love him enough to understand? To stay?

Quickly, I shift my train of thought elsewhere. Speaking of William, it's surprising how today he didn't wake up when I did.

Oh well. I sigh before I turn the shower off and, twisting most of the water out of my hair, wrap a towel around myself before beginning to walk out.

I really should brush and get ready. After all, I have to go to work today as well.

* * *

"Could you pass me the salt, Gem?"

"Here you go," I beam at Mary as I pass her the salt before turning back to the cucumbers I am currently slicing.

In a normal household, it's unusual to see the house bustling with life so early. In this household, though, the house comes to life at the strike of five.

Around Mary and I, the housekeepers are also on a roll.

In front of us, Lilly and Ren are setting up the table. Out in the living room, Tara and Sandra are already taking down the curtains for a wash and to let some more light into the house. Outside in the gardens, the gardener Robert is probably watering the flowers or already beginning to plant the sunflowers he told me he wanted to plant last week.

The security guards out the front of the house must also be changing shifts—two going home and two signing in to work.

"Good morning!"

At the cheerful deep voice, my eyes snap up, and I smile when I see Olly entering the kitchen with a half-eaten sandwich in his hand.

"Good morning!" everyone in the kitchen echoes his bright greeting with the same enthusiasm. I watch as Olly turns to grin at Ren and the boy blushes under the muscular man's attention, then Olly turns his gaze to me and his stride quickens.

"What's little Isaac getting for lunch today?" he asks as he comes to

stand between Mary and me. His tall form looms over our tiny forms, and Mary quickly swats at his chest when he manages to steal a few cucumbers away from me.

“Naughty boy!” Mary scolds him, waving her wooden spoon at him in warning before turning back to the shreds of chicken she’s lightly roasting.

“Chicken sandwich and salad,” I answer, looking back and tilting my head up to smile at him brightly. I don’t know why, but Olly makes me feel like a little girl again. That’s why it’s unusual when I find myself being cute and childish in front of him most of the time. He treats me like a child too as he tries to take care of me like one. I don’t know why but I guess that’s why I treat him like an older brother.

“Someone’s in a good mood today.” Olly chuckles, messing up my hair as he instantly gives into my idiocy like he always does. I pout at the man before turning back to the vegetables.

“Don’t tease me. I’m just a morning person,” I grumble under my breath. At the thought of the word ‘morning’, my eyes glance towards the wall clock and I perk up when I see that it’s almost 6:30AM.

Turning towards Ren, I smile when I catch him already looking at me. At my smile, his eyes widen in surprise, and he nods immediately, knowing already what I’m about to ask him to do.

“I’ll wake him up now.”

“Thank you, Ren!” I call after the rushing boy.

When I had arrived here first, the help hated me. A smile flutters on my lips at the reminder of those times. It has taken a lot of time and communication to gain their trust. A lot of time to redeem myself in Shirley’s place. I still get happy when I think about the day Ren approached me first and apologized.

“Boss is late today.” Lilly blinks after she comes around the kitchen island and stands beside Mary, having set up the breakfast table.

I turn towards a suddenly-concerned-looking Mary and smile, putting my hand over her cold ones. “He had a rough day at work yesterday so I let him be.”

“I just hope every day that the boy takes more care of his health. So far, I’m only disappointed—” Mary sighs but stops when the fresh, crisply dressed person walks into the kitchen.

“Good morning.”

My eyes roam along his meticulously ironed and matched outfit, but I grin when my gaze reaches his socks and I realize he's wearing the black-and-grey-bat-printed pair that Isaac had gifted him last week.

"Good morning!" Mary beams as William settles himself on the dining table. Still grinning, I turn my attention back to the cucumber and slicing the last bits. Setting it aside, I reach for the slices of bread and begin to toast and butter it.

"Hey!" I hiss when a strong hand reaches forward and sneakily grabs the buttering knife and toast from my hand and begins buttering it himself. Twisting my neck and looking up, I try my best to glare at the tall man trying his best to look as straight-faced as ever.

"Give it back," I whisper at him threateningly.

"Go have breakfast," Olly replies simply, whispering back at me as he motions towards the dining table.

His head-bopping towards the dining table makes me glance in its direction too. At the table, four spots have been made—one of which is occupied by a silent William looking down at the toast before taking another bite of the buttered piece of bread. I glance in the direction of the empty spots and bite my lips, glancing in Mary's direction.

"Go on, sweetie." She waves her hands towards the table, catching me looking at her.

"Gemma."

I stop, noticing that everyone around me except Olly does too. My eyes shoot up and meet William's dark, piercing ones.

He smiles at me. I blink.

I feel the strings of my apron being pulled and falling loose on either side behind me. Still, my eyes continue to hold William's. My eyes widen when I notice the exact moment when his gaze dulls and he looks down, back at his food.

"Go on," Mary whispers, pulling the apron from over my white blouse and pale-peach-coloured office skirt before pushing me slightly to get me walking.

Sliding into the chair beside William, I look at the silently eating man curiously.

"You okay?" I lean towards him and whisper.

"I'm fine," he mumbles under his breath so that we are the only two

people who can hear. Somehow, his reply only makes me more curious.

“You’re upset,” I state in as-a-matter-of-fact way, turning towards the spread laid out before me. Truthfully, I’ve been craving roti and curry for breakfast ever since I woke up today. Seeing chicken, egg, and smoked salmon sandwiches in front of me instead is a bit off-putting, but I figure I’ll just make myself some desi breakfast when it’s my turn to take Isaac home, so, I pick up a smoked salmon sandwich and take a bite.

“And you’re clumsy,” William mumbles as he reaches forward and rubs mayonnaise off the corner of my mouth.

Our eyes meet and I find my hand shoot up and grasp on to his arm to stop it from moving back. “So you admit it. You’re upset.”

William and I just look at each other for a few seconds before he slowly pulls his arm from my grasp. I watch with wide eyes when he brings his thumb and licks the mayonnaise off with his eyes still on mine.

Behind us, Lilly begins to start coughing erratically. I immediately turn towards her with a concerned expression to see a grinning Mary patting the back of a now completely-red-looking girl.

“Are you okay?” I call out to her, only to have her shooting me a thumbs up and nodding like a crazy woman.

“She’s fine, just drank water in a rush.” Olly chuckles, his sparkling amused eyes on me.

“Oh.” I nod, still not understanding why the girl looks so embarrassed.

“What time do you get off work today?”

I blink, my attention shooting back to William at his question.

“Around five, why?”

“I’ll pick you up.”

Lilly’s cough starts again, and I cringe when I hear Mary hitting her back loudly. That must hurt.

Still, my attention remains on the man beside me nibbling on his toast. Surprise bubbles in my chest at his statement, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s trying to be nice after last night. That does make sense.

“Okay.” I nod, accepting his offer. However, I wonder if he’ll even be able to get off by then. Although he does get off at 5PM, that’s still a rarity. Usually, he can’t get out till after seven.

“Mummy!”

I can only turn around in my chair and open my arms before a growing bundle collides into my chest.

“Good morning, handsome,” I beam at the child as I tuck a small rebellious strand of hair behind his ear.

I don’t miss the proud grin Isaac sends in his father’s direction as he blossoms under my compliment, his smile widening from one ear to another.

“Your mother will come home late today, Isaac, so don’t make a fuss and go to bed when Grandma Mary asks you to, okay?”

“What?” Isaac and my identical outburst echoes around the room as we stare at William.

“Why?” Isaac turns towards me this time, his eyes wide and mouth set in a pout. He already looks like he’s about to cry. I brace myself for a fight between the father-and-son pair.

It isn’t like I’m not used to this. I’ve noticed that both father and son are quite alike. Both competitive and protective. Still, it’s never great to be the subject of their competition.

This time, however, William’s gaze slowly moves from his son to me. I find myself straightening in my seat. Like every time he looks at me like this, I can feel something inside me beginning to bubble under his deep, piercing gaze.

“I’m taking her out tonight.”

Lilly almost faints.

So do I.

* * *

An hour later finds me in the SUV with my lips pursed, hands clutching my bag tightly against my chest as I quickly sneak a glance in John’s direction before looking at the back of the front seat where Olly is seated. A low sigh leaves my lips after a few seconds and I let myself slump back against the back seat.

The silence in the vehicle is deafening. It has been this way since John, who is the driver, Olly, Isaac, and I left home. It has been this way ever since we dropped Isaac at his school. Actually, the silence has been a companion of the entire household ever since William indirectly asked me out for a date in the morning.

I'm sure the entire household has been aware of the dance William and I have been doing around each other for the past two months. Mary has even tried to indirectly blow wind towards the topic of conversation a few times.

Almost always praising William and then encouraging me to begin a relationship with him if we are both interested in it.

I think the entire household knows I like William. Saara even swears that William knows too. I pray every night that he doesn't. It's no secret between myself and me though; I liked him two months ago when I barely knew him, and I like him now, as I continue to learn about him more and more each day. Despite knowing my feelings clearly, I still can't tell how William feels.

That is what scares me—not truly knowing how he feels. Not having any verbal confirmation. The funny thing, though, is that no matter how much I keep warning myself to stop—to steady my heart—I can't help but like him more and more every day.

During the early mornings when I discover myself strolling the gardens just as the sun rises and find William suddenly joining me—just sitting beside me silently or walking with me, neither one of us talking, both being comfortable only in each other's presence as our hands brush against each other's innocently—I find myself liking him more and more.

During the nights when I'm deep into a book, editing and proofreading away without hours of break and then a milky hand extends a steaming cup of tea towards me without so much as me asking for it—but knowing that I secretly might need it and so making it for me—I find myself liking him more and more.

During days when it's my turn to stay at my house and then I hear my doorbell ringing at night or early in the morning, only to find a tired William on the other side of the door with a lame excuse even he doesn't believe. Knowing that he knows I can see that he's seeking comfort from me, and still letting me witness it . . . witness his vulnerability—I find myself liking him more and more.

There are these moments and more. Moments when I realize that I have started liking him a little bit more. Moments when I wonder if maybe it's not like anymore . . . if it's more.

“We're here.”

My eyes snap up at Olly's words and I look outside to see that he's right, we're already stopped in front of my office. And it's drizzling. The car's windows are now matted with water droplets. Thankfully though, the driveway is partially roofed, and so, I can at least manage to save my dignity and remain dry before signing in to work.

Without wasting time, I quickly get out and shut the back door before moving to the already opening passenger side's window.

"Thanks, John." I smile at the middle-aged man before turning towards Olly. "Thanks, Olly. See you later!"

"Bye!" John grins, waving his hand.

"Have fun on your date!" Olly winks at me mischievously, and I find my cheeks beginning to warm. *It's time to escape!*

"Bye, guys!" I blurt out instead, instantly turning around and beginning to walk away before they shoot another cheeky remark my way. The fading laughter that erupts behind me only makes my cheeks warmer. The light rain does little to soothe the sharp sounds of amusement. I pout sadly. *The jerks are laughing at me!*

Getting into the elevator, I try to console myself for ditching the stairs today, but I know that I can't deny the fact that my legs need a bit of a rest. That and the fact that I really need to sign in before 8AM in order to not get my pay cut, and it's almost 7:56AM.

Pushing in my floor's number, I quickly step back and lean against the metal wall, dropping my head down as I begin to analyse my nude heels.

"Wait!"

The sudden yell and hand shooting between the almost closed elevator doors has me letting out a shrill, loud yelp, and shuffling myself even more into a corner of the elevator out of shock.

Still, I stare at the entrance as the elevator's door slides open slowly, ready to ask the person on the other side if he's okay. That must have hurt!

However, as the door opens and the man beyond it becomes more and more visible, I find myself forgetting every single ounce of concern. Instead, my eyes widen as fascination and disbelief wash over me instead while I stare at a male model from some Armani's photoshoot standing on the other side of the elevator's door staring at me as well.

"I'm sorry, I seemed to have frightened you." The man turns towards me after a moment of silence when he walks into the elevator and steps back,

seemingly okay with my floor selection.

“Ah, it’s no problem. I overreacted. Sorry, I was just startled. I hope your hand is okay.” I wave my hands in front of me dismissively, shaking my head as well.

“Excuse me.”

My head snaps up towards the man, and I bite back my gasp, my eyes widening when they land on his ocean-bluish-green eyes. Looking at him this closely, I realize that although I was spared from the rain, he wasn’t. I watch as a tiny droplet drips from his wet hair and on to his forehead, trailing down his temple and jaw. Like liquid diamond.

It slowly begins to make sense. He’s tall, with almost perfect visuals, he’s chocolate-skinned and also has the eyes. He’s also going to the same floor as me. *Oh no.*

“Are you Gemma Windly by any chance?”

Oh, God! It’s him. It’s my boss.

“Yes, I am.” I smile at the man instead. I refuse to show him how nervous I am. Our first impression has already been ruined, and there is absolutely no way I’m going to let him be mistaken about my personality. This way, he won’t take advantage of me as much as Alicia did.

“You’re just as beautiful as you are in pictures.”

I still, my eyebrows pull together in a frown as I stare up at the man, suddenly not nervous at all but curious.

“Excuse me? I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“You were the model for a charity art and photography exhibit around two years ago, am I correct?”

Recollection begins to settle into my foggy brain and I find myself perking up with understanding. “Ahh! Yes, I did it when my cousin who is a photographer told me that the bidding on the piece would go to the charity. Unfortunately, I had exams on the day of the exhibit and couldn’t attend. You attended the event?”

Nathan smiles and nods. “Your portraits had a lot of audience around them.”

“Oh!” My eyes widen into small saucers at the statement. “My cousin just told me that they did well. Did all the pieces sell well?”

“Yes.” Nathan smiles as the elevator doors begin to open. “All four of them were bought by a single buyer.”

“Oh!” My eyes widen with surprise once again before I take a step out of the elevator, behind him.

“Well, that’s good to know. Thank you for telling me. Have a nice day, sir!” I smile at the man before beginning to make my way towards my desk without a second glance back. We’re in the office now, and I think it’s best I act as I should—as one of the editors under his supervision.

That, and I don’t want Sean to spot us talking and accidentally run his Volvo over me one day on the street.

“Gemma . . .”

“Yeah?” I glance up at the man on the opposite cubicle to mine with a bright smile.

“Why is Nathan looking at you?” I pale.

“Or maybe he’s looking at Jennie. She’s sitting right beside me,” I reply lamely, looking anywhere but in the direction of Nathan’s office where, I know, he must be standing.

“You’d be an idiot to expect me to believe that, girl!”

“Oh relax, Seany! I’m not interested and neither is he! Maybe he’s just looking at me because he hasn’t seen me around the office before?” I totally omit any information about Nathan and I meeting in the elevator today, knowing that that will only lead me to lose precious minutes of my life explaining everything in detail to these curious people. Especially Sean and Tully.

“As long as you remember that I called dibs first!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One Late Night

*“Why do you love the sun so much?” she asks a sunflower.
The loyal flower smiles to itself before turning to the pretty
girl dressed in blue.*

*“Pretty girl, don’t you see? I am merely a shadow awaiting
his light. He breathes life in me when he shines, and I . . . I
bloom before his sight. He is far away, and so, I can only
look.*

In this lifetime, that is all I can hope for.”

The girl thinks about it;

The sunflower’s selfless love.

Could she do the same?

Love and humble herself to just that much?

“I am afraid.”

*After a moment’s silence, she finally admits, “Dear child, do
not be afraid for your fate is nothing like mine.*

*Where I can only watch from afar, you can stretch your
arms and hold; Do not fear who your sun is.*

Do not fear who your sunflower turns to.

For while I may not have hope,

*For while I may only console myself into wanting just this
much, to share his light while my roots keep me here . . .
immobilised.*

You can hope for more;

Your feet are not bound.

*There is no distance,
If you want none found.
So child, be brave and love freely;
For just as he is yours,
You could be his too
You too could be the sun his sunflower turns to.”*

Around ten in the morning finds us all settled and progressing in our work. One of the many alternative/indie songs blasts through my earplugs as I continue to proofread and edit the work at hand.

“Attention, everybody!” Sean suddenly stands up and speaks loudly. Instantly, the entire office’s attention around me moves to the man and I find myself also taking my earplugs off.

Why exactly does he look so excited? I ask myself, frowning when I realise Sean looks like he’s almost vibrating on his spot with excitement.

“Read your emails, now!” Sean exclaims, grinning excitedly before sitting back down. Curious, I glance at Jennie to find her looking at me with the same expression.

Shrugging, we both turn towards the computers before us. There is only one way we’ll find out what’s up with Sean.

Signing in to my office email, I click on the latest unread email.

It doesn’t escape my attention, however, that the email is from Nathan. It also doesn’t escape my attention when I notice that Sean has gone ahead and forwarded it to us even though we don’t need it.

To all staff members,

Today, I have realized that although I may have joined the office two months ago, I have officially come into office only for two weeks, and I still do not know most of you all.

I believe in having a closely knit work environment where colleagues know each other well. This is because I firmly believe that unity and companionship enable productivity and quality work.

Therefore, with this email, I would like to propose compulsory monthly office dinners that will aim to build comradeship and a level of professional intimacy by socializing and relaxing with our colleagues. Since I am

new, this time, the dinner and entertainment will be on me. I am aware that some of you might not be able to avail yourself today since this is a last-minute email, and thus, to everyone who can make it this time, let us gather downstairs in the entrance parking lot at five in the afternoon from where will move to a restaurant of the majority's choice.

Looking forward,

Nathan Jinda

(Chief Editor, Bloomington Publishing)

P.S. All future gatherings will be organized by Sean. Thank you for your hard work, Sean.

“Oh my gosh! This is so exciting! I’m definitely going! Who’s going?” Wendina squeals, turning towards us. Both Sean and Jennie raise their hands instantly.

“Free food? Who can turn away free food!” Jennie grins, already looking ready to just jump up and get going.

“He . . . he said I’ll do all the future planning. Did you guys read that? I’m definitely his favourite!” Sean’s eyes sparkle dreamily, and I find myself almost smiling at the whimsical look that screams out ‘lovestruck fool’.

“Or maybe he wants you to do all the dirty work like booking places and securing tables before we march there and enjoy the night?” Tully whispers as she comes to stand beside the already ready-to-leap-and-slit-her-neck-off-looking Sean. I know it’s about to take a turn of the worst, looking at Sean’s face, I just know it; that’s why I quickly try and divert the conversation.

“I can’t make it.”

That captures everyone’s attention. “What?” Wendina gapes.

“Why?” Sean’s eyes narrow at me, looking genuinely curious.

“Yeah, why? Honestly, you of all people should come along! You’re too much of a homebody!” Tully frowns at me as well, folding both her arms in front of her in a demanding manner.

I gulp, regretting even mentioning anything right now. I think I liked it better when Sean was ready to fight Tully and vice versa.

For a second, I wonder if I should tell everyone. Maybe I should just be like, “I can’t because I have a date tonight, guys. Sorry!”

Of course, Tully, Wendina, and Sean will be ready to fire me with questions the very next second. Maybe then I can just answer with the truth again. Well . . . half the truth.

Maybe I can just say something like, “Oh his name is William, he’s a surgeon! I love his son and his smile. I think I’m falling in love with him and constantly fear that this will not end well. It probably won’t but I’m an idiot anyway, so YOLO, right?”

I want to groan out loud but stop myself with a silent facepalm instead. At this moment, I don’t care if they will judge me for being so weird. I somehow don’t care.

“Well?” Tully whispers excitedly, probably ready to know all about my suddenly busy life. I still. Instead of answering her, I find myself looking at her.

She’s wearing a dark green long-sleeved shirt today and fitting black pants. It’s formal but craftily designed to flatter her figure, I can see. My gaze lowers to her body, then lifts to her face; she does have a wonderful figure and a beautiful face too. Instantly, all the silent debating and all the signs of approval for my previous plans just dies a silent death here and now.

Instead, an alien sort of fear seeps into my chest, and I immediately begin devising lies I can tell. Suddenly, I don’t feel like sharing William and Isaac with them. I don’t feel like telling Tully about William. She’s beautiful. She’s beautiful and competitive. I know her. I’ve known her for years. She likes seducing other people’s boyfriends for the sake of ‘saving her friends’. So far, only Jennie’s husband has defeated her. Regardless to say, none of the other ladies can complain. In fact, Sean can’t either. She has saved all of them from dating losers after all. Still, just the thought of her near William has me tingling in a very disturbing way.

Realization hits me like a sharp lightning bolt striking a coconut tree. I’m jealous. I’m jealous of something that hasn’t even happened yet. I’m jealous just of the thought of William with Tully.

My wide, probably mortified-looking eyes snap up to Tully’s, and I know she can probably see the panic on my face because her smile fades slightly and she just blinks, waiting for me to say something. I, on the other hand? I want to disappear.

“Let her be, guys, she must have prior commitments. This is a last-minute thing anyway.” Jennie comes to my rescue, and I shoot her a thankful

look immediately. *At least someone has my back.*

“I smell something fishy.” Sean clicks his tongue, and I cringe at the sound, just as I always do whenever he or even Saara makes it while filming one of her YouTube videos.

Somehow, I still find myself with an analytical mind and I can’t help but glance up at Sean and wonder how he will react with William. Although no one in the office knows about it—mainly because Sean forbids me from telling anyone—but Sean and I have known each other since high school days. In fact, he even dated my best friend at that time when he hadn’t identified publicly as a bisexual.

Although he is a very different person from what he was then, I still know him enough to know that he isn’t a threat. Sean’s just a large kitten, all hissing and clipped claws.

As if noticing my eyes on him, his eyes snap to mine and I blush when he tilts an eyebrow up. “I know, booboo, I’m sexy as hell but I’m kind of into our male boss right now, so wait for me to start liking the vaginas better again, okay?”

“Shut up,” I grumble when Jennie chokes back her laughter beside me and glance at Wendina instead. Immediately, I look away. Wendina is definitely not the sort I need to fear. She fiercely believes in the girl code. *Good girl.*

“I’m putting my bet on a boyfriend Gemma doesn’t want me to meet,” Tully, who’s still been standing here all this while, huffs as she spares me a challenging glance before finally turning around and marching back to her desk.

“Keep him away from her,” Wendina whispers bitterly as soon as Tully has her back to us. “She tries every trick in the book until they really put her down rudely or give in. Trust me, she’s the reason why I found out my fiancé of two years had a rape play fetish.”

“Yeah, honestly, hide him away,” Sean whispers as well, nodding in agreement to Wendina. “She texted that assh*le Manny for two months before he finally sent her his dick pick. She promised marriage and all sorts of fake ass promises. When the deed was done, she forwarded the pictures to me with two words only: ‘You’re welcome’. I almost went to jail for killing two b*tches that day.”

“I thank God every day for giving me such a faithful husband,”

Jennie sighs, making both Wendina and Sean shoot her glares. “I thank my husband every day as well, for being loyal to me.”

An oblivious Jennie sighs contently. “I’m just so lucky to have him.”

“I’m about to go to jail for cutting a b*tch.” Sean looks at me directly in the eyes and smiles.

I can’t help it. Despite my awkward uncomfortableness and mortification from hearing their sad experiences with Tully, I find myself letting out a loud string of hysterical laughter.

And here I thought my life is too weird to explain.

Everyone around me is living a twisted life.

I sigh.

God bless everyone. Especially Tully. God bless her with a husband so that she stays away from everyone else’s. Yes, God bless her indeed.

* * *

A muffled ping of my phone brings me back from the world I am currently in and editing. A poor girl from a fishing village and her quest to find her mother who had left her when she was a child.

Still, curious, I pull my phone from under a stack of papers and open the message. My heart jolts when I see the name of the sender.

William.

I stare at his name for a second; he never texts me first unless it’s the days when Isaac is over at mine, and he wants to check up on him. I’m always the one starting conversations. Slowly, I begin glancing towards the message.

William: Missing meals is unhealthy.

By the last word of the text, I’m smiling. A glance at the wall clock has my smile brightening. It’s exactly 1PM. William doesn’t have a designated 1-2PM lunch period like other offices. I stop myself. I can’t let myself think that he waited to remind me ON time. I can’t. It’s dangerous.

Still, my smile only widens and I begin typing back.

Gemma: Make sure to practice what you preach, Doctor.

Ah!

Closing William’s message thread, I quickly open Mary’s instead. I wonder how Isaac is doing right now. Has he eaten?

Gemma: Hello Mary, is Isaac doing okay?

It takes thirty minutes before I get a reply. Pushing aside the worry, I've just began to get into editing the twentieth chapter when my phone finally pings.

Mary: We picked him up from kindergarten an hour ago. He's just eaten and has gone to bed now. Don't worry, he's doing fine. You just work hard and focus on your work. Everything is fine here.

Gemma: Yes, ma'am. Take care of yourself and Isaac. See you at night.

Smiling at the older woman's scolding and care, I press send and put my phone aside, then I move back to the manuscript. I have a feeling the girl is about to find her mum soon.

Suddenly though, I stop. My mind suddenly shoots out the information that William will be picking me around five at the front parking lot. The same parking lot everyone else has decided to meet. At five. The same parking lot Tully will be in.

A chill runs down my arms at the thought and my eyes snap to Tully who's sitting on her desk, completely unaware.

No way. I'm not letting her see him. Nope.

Before I know it, I have my phone in my hand and pressed send.

Gemma: I was thinking . . .

William: Yes?

The reply comes instantly, and for a second, I can't help but wonder if William is sitting at his desk, free for a while.

Indecisiveness begins to creep in. How can I ask William to pick me up from somewhere else? This is the first time he's asked me out. I blush, shaking my head and the thought away. I can't inconvenience him. What if he thinks I'm too fussy?

Heaving out a long sigh, I glance at Tully again.

Never mind. I'll just ask him anyway. Anything is better than letting him meet Tully.

Gemma: Could you come pick me up from the underground parking lot instead of the front one?

It feels like forever until the reply finally arrives. In the time that I waited, a thousand thoughts go through my mind. I wonder if he is upset, I

wonder if he's typing a dozen texts asking me reasons, telling me no, telling me how much of a hassle it is for him.

William: 5 o' clock. I'll text you when I'm in the lot.

Gemma: Thank you

Still, when the reply finally pings and I click on the message notification, I find myself letting out a breath of relief.

I don't want to drag this on. I might be disturbing him at work, I think to myself as I quickly push back a 'thank you' and put my phone aside.

Tully is not going to ruin the warm little world I have found for myself. It's not going to happen.

* * *

Five o'clock arrives faster than I expect it to. One minute, it's lunchtime, and the next, it's one minute to five. Everyone is already buzzing with excitement because of the official dinner.

"Okay, guys, let's go!"

My eyes snap up to the speaker, and I watch a still fresh-and-pristine-looking Nathan Jinda standing in front of his office, his silver iPhone in his hand, then I look away.

Turning towards Jennie, I grin and lean into her side a little. "Have my share of food!"

"Have a great time on your date!" Jennie winks cheekily in return as she begins to get up like everyone else in the office.

I think I'm a little surprised. I'm the only person not going.

"Gardenia, you're not coming?"

My wide brown eyes find Nathan's blue orbs across the office, and I find myself beginning to tingle under the death glares Tully and Sean are giving me.

"I'm sorry, sir. I have prior commitments."

"Commitments?" Nathan looks surprised.

I smile awkwardly. "Sorry, sir."

"Well, have a good evening!" Nathan smiles kindly, waving his hand in front of him in a brushing off manner. "Let's go, everyone!"

And suddenly, the office is extremely quiet. Looking around my desk, I begin tidying everything up slowly.

When I'm done, I reach for the phone instead. Opening the camera, I quickly begin going over my face and hair. I suppose it's only expected to appear and smell presentable when a man wants to take you out for dinner, right?

"Need to smell good too," I mumble to myself as I take out my miniature bottle of perfume and spray it over me, basking in the tiny drops of fragrance that falls to my skin.

Just then, my phone pings and I immediately feel like I'm going to faint.

William: I'm here.

This is a date. I'm a hundred percent sure it's a date. It's totally a date. William has asked me out on a date. Two months. More than sixty days. And he's finally done this. I didn't think he would. I hoped he would but I didn't expect him to actually do it.

I frown.

Wait . . . is it a date? Maybe he just wants to thank me for yesterday? A sigh slips from my lips and I nod. This makes more sense. I shouldn't get ahead of myself. I shouldn't think anything until he says it by himself. That is the only way I'll save myself from completely breaking my own heart. Just enough to have hope to pick myself up again in the future. Yes . . . that's it.

"Alright," I whisper to myself as I stand up, my resolution made. "Let's go. You can do this, Gem. You can do this."

"Good evening, Gemma!"

"Thanks, Rupa. Have a nice evening too." I smile at the young receptionist as I pass her by. "Oh, and please double check that the door is locked, will you?"

"Sure, Gem. Don't worry!"

The elevator moves into motion as soon as I step in and press the parking lot's floor number. Soon enough, I'm down and the elevator doors are opening.

"Yeah, let's go there! I heard that restaurant is nice!"

I freeze. My heart begins to thump like I'm suddenly facing my worst nightmare. I probably am. I'm probably going to have nightmares about this from now onwards because standing in front of me right now, in the underground parking lot, is everyone from my office.

Eyes wide and throat suddenly dry, I take an unsteady step out of the

elevator. Instantly, Jason's head snaps towards me and he grins. "Oh! Gemma! We all realized that our cars are parked here and not in the outdoor parking lot. Why are you here?"

The lump in my throat stops me from replying, and I glance nervously in the direction of Tully to see her eyeing me with a knowing expression.

I feel myself pale, awkwardly licking my lips as I try to move closer and act as normal as possible.

"Hi, guys!"

"Changed your mind, Gemma?" Nathan smiles, and I give him a short glance before looking around the parking lot nervously. As long as Tully doesn't see William, my heart is safe.

"Actually, no. I'm getting picked up."

"Ah!" Sean nods, then grinning, he turns to Nathan. "We should get going as well, shouldn't we?"

Just then a black Audi arrives and stops right beside us, and I almost facepalm myself, knowing exactly who is inside.

The passenger side's window opens, and everyone except Nathan and I immediately bend to look in. This time, I groan.

When I finally bend down and meet William's eyes, he smiles at me warmly and motions me to get in. If this were any other time, I would have been mesmerized; William doesn't genuinely smile a lot. But it's not some other time . . . Tully the 'friend's heart protector' has seen him. William's gone now. And so is my heart.

"What the heck? That's your boyfriend, Gemma?" Wendina breathes, standing beside me. I let out another groan, sneaking a peek at a suddenly bright-eyed Tuliana.

"See you tomorrow, guys!" I wave at everyone and quickly get in. As soon as the door shuts close, we're already driving away. The window on my side begins to slide up and the doors lock close. Before I know it, William reaches out and turns the AC on too.

"Are you okay? William turns towards me after a few minutes of silence.

"Huh?" I blink, not hearing him properly. I know it must be obvious; my attention is elsewhere. Have I ruined tonight already?

"You looked flustered back there." I sense William's eyes on me

again.

“Oh,” I mumble. “Tully likes to seduce her female friend’s crushes, boyfriends, fiancés, and husbands to protect her friends. We’re . . . friends.”

“So?” I notice as William’s voice quiets—deepens.

I let my head fall, embarrassment seeps into my system, and I shut my eyes when I say the next sentence.

“I wanted to hide you,” I mumble.

“You don’t trust her?”

I sigh. “No.”

“Hmm.” William nods understandingly, and I bite my lip and look out of the window. Slowly, silence settles in the car and all forms of conversation just seem to . . . disappear.

How many minutes pass by in this silence, I do not know. All I know is that the bustling nightlife of the city rustles by as we drive to wherever it is William is taking us. Everything outside twinkles—buildings, streets, people.

Inside, we sit in darkness. Darkness and silence. “Where are we going?” I ask, my tone light and nonchalant to my ears. On the inside though, I feel like I’m back in university, finally building up enough courage to raise my hand and ask my teacher a question in class.

“It’s this Chinese restaurant my family always likes going to. Are you tired? We are about to reach.”

I shake my head. “I’m not tired, just curious. Don’t worry. You must be tired though.” I glance at William, my eyes darting between his face and body posture.

“You’re tired.” I bite my lip at the revelation. I feel stupid.

Of course, he’s tired. He has to walk around attending to patients and doing surgeries. All I have to do is sit down and correct people’s mistakes.

“How about we just get takeaways and go back to your place?”

William glances my way, I feel it but I don’t dare look. “We’re not going home yet.”

And the silence settles between us again. “We’re here.”

I look up from my phone and my eyes widen when they fall on a traditional Chinese-looking house.

“It’s beautiful!”

“Yeah,” William agrees and I turn towards him to find him watching me. My breath catches in my throat and I instantly look away. The telltale

signs of my face burning up tells me I'm probably as red as a beetroot right now.

"Erm . . . let's go." I clear my throat, quickly closing the message thread between Saara and I and shoving my phone into my handbag. Opening the door and getting out feels like an accomplishment met in record time, and before I know it, I'm out of the car.

The chilly night air greets my flushed skin with open arms. A content smile settles on my lips as I just stand there and inhale, taking the clean night's air in. The air feels cleaner here. Despite the parking lot being almost full and the muffled noise coming from inside the restaurant, outside . . . it's still very quiet. Peaceful.

"Coming?"

"Hmm." I turn towards William, still smiling, then reality sets in and I feel myself begin to blush once again.

"Oh! Yeah!" I squeak to my mortification as I begin to speed by him towards the entrance of the restaurant.

If someone had asked me this morning if I thought those hand grabbing scenes really happened in real life, I would have said no. Right now though, as I feel William's warm slender fingers wrap around my wrist and pull me back, I can only let myself move in the direction he wants me to.

When my back collides with his chest and he takes a step back, giving me space, I can only watch him, thankful for his hold on me.

I don't know if I'm breathing, but if I am not breathing, then how am I still standing here? In front of him? Or is it him holding me what's really keeping me up?

I don't even know anymore.

The only thing I know for certain at this moment as I am breathing the clean night air, as I am staring here with my head tilted up, looking at the man before me, is how exceptionally fictional this seems. Is this why people write fairy tales? Because love feels so unreal?

"Do you really not trust your friend?"

My breath hitches at this question, and I find myself looking down at the part where our skins are currently meeting. I just can't look at him.

"Yes." It's almost a whisper, I know, but any louder than that seems too ambitious for my throat right now. I want to scream. Why can't I be like the other girls? Why can't I be like the girls in these novels nowadays? Why

do I have to show how much this is affecting me? Why do I have to be so honest? Wouldn't it hurt me less in the future . . . if I protected myself a little more?

“Then trust me.”

My head snaps up and my wide eyes instantly find William's serious bronze orbs. *Did he just . . . say what I think he said?*

“I'm . . . sorry?”

I stare at the man standing in front of me. I feel as my eyes begin to become foggy, but still, I dare not blink. I'll never admit it out loud, but I'm scared. Scared that if I blink, this moment will be gone. William will change the subject and I'll have no other option but to accept it.

Accept the moment's loss.

William just stands in front of me, looking at me silently for a moment. I don't know what he's looking at. I don't know what he's searching for, but I refuse to look away. I refuse to blink.

Suddenly, he's leaning forward, and I can't help but gasp sharply when he stops at my face level. I can almost taste the peppermint in this breath, the mixture of his spicy cologne and the chilly night's breeze. He's so beautiful.

Can I . . . can I possibly let myself hope?

I blink, and William leans in closer, the tip of his nose now touching mine. I close my eyes as his fingers find my cheek, twirling the loose flowing wisps of hair and carefully tucking them behind my ear.

“Trust me,” he breathes.

His warm breath touches the flushed apples of my cheek.

I do.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

One Magical Midnight

*The round white moon glistens over her head joined by a million stars above her;
They shine, hoping their light can help her guide herself back to where he is.*

“Trust me,” he whispers again, and this time, I feel his warm breath on my mouth. “Okay?”

I shudder, my fingers clutching the materials of my clothes. I feel a blush rush through my cheeks when I feel his fingers unclench my fingers and slowly hook our fingers together.

I feel like I’m dreaming. Standing here, out in the night, smelling the clean night air with my eyes closed, I can almost convince myself I’m dreaming. Yes, I’m probably dreaming. I’ve never even allowed myself to dream of this happening.

I’ve never let myself have even an ounce of hope. An ounce of expectation. And now . . . here I am. Under the moonlight, with his slender fingers between mine.

“Okay,” I breathe, feeling myself shivering but not from the night breeze.

“Don’t . . . move,” William’s soft mumble echoes in the air around me, and I nod, not trusting myself to say anything right now.

It feels like forever as we continue to stand here with our hands intertwined. A bubble of happiness floats into my chest, and I smile without giving it much thought. We’re holding hands because we want to, not because we have someone to show.

Suddenly, his soft lips press against mine, and I find my entire world illuminate in silver and gold.

The night suddenly seems nicer, the moon a little brighter, my skin feels like it's buzzing with electricity everywhere, and I find myself falling against him, suddenly possessing jelly legs.

I feel as he smiles against my lips. He doesn't move his lips. He just keeps it there as the pressure of his lips against mine a sweet reassurance and affection instead of sensual need. My reaction clearly amuses him, and as if he was expecting my reaction, one of his hands immediately braces my face and the other finds itself around my waist.

I'm pulled against his chest and I welcome the closeness.

I am putty in his arms when he slowly breaks the kiss and then softly presses his lips against my cheek. This time, I can't help but smile. I'm happy. I'm so happy. He likes me. William likes me. Now I can like him too. I can openly like him too.

I haven't felt this sort of happiness in a while. This sort of peace hasn't visited me in years. The feeling of reassurance. The tiny voice in my head is screaming, 'You didn't make a mistake that evening' happily. I am so happy.

I open my eyes as my brown pools glaze over with mirth and joy, and immediately, I'm looking into his deep brown eyes smiling down at me.

"William," I breathe, not knowing what else to say as we stand there, looking into each other's eyes.

"It's just you," he replies. His eyes are suddenly serious. He wants me to see he means it. I do.

"Really?" I ask, cringing when I realize I'm saying it out loud instead of inside my head.

Still, he replies, "Really." Then he smiles. "Let's go inside, okay?" My heart warms.

This time, I kiss him instead.

* * *

If one day, I am told that the only way I can be with him is if I am a flower, I will be a flower for him. I will wilt and bloom and wilt and bloom every day, just to be near him.

If one day, I am told that the only way I can be with him is if I am the water, I will be the rain for him. I will fall and fall and fall, every day, just to be able to touch him.

If one day, someone tells me that the only way I can be with him is if I am the sun, I will be the sun for him. I will shine and shine and shine. In the day, I will shine on him as the sun. At night, I will lend my light to the moon and the stars. Every day . . . just to be able to be of use to him. Just to be by his side.

It scares me. Feeling this way. In the darkness of the vehicle, I steal a glance at the man seated beside me right now, driving the Tesla home, and bite my lip.

The date went nicely. Although I was as shy as ever after kissing him myself, William seems to never stop grinning afterward.

What surprises me is how easily we manage to begin and hold various sorts of conversations with each other. The ease with which we have moulded each other into the other's life surprises me.

And that scares me. I'm getting used to Isaac and William. Over the past few months, I have fallen in love with little Isaac. And now, the realization that I've fallen for his quiet father too . . . scares me. It terrifies me.

When the time will come for me to say goodbye, I'll hurt. Badly. Leaving will shatter my heart. Goodbye will be really hard now. Really hard. I steal another glance at William and, immediately, smile when his free hand suddenly covers mine.

"Feeling okay?"

"Yeah," I reply assuringly. Although I don't know who I'm trying to assure—William or myself.

"I was thinking we should take something back home for Isaac," I voice out softly, very cautious because I know how William feels about junk food and Isaac.

"Like McDonald's?"

"Anything delicious. It's a once-in-a-while thing after all. He'll be really happy seeing takeout for breakfast tomorrow. Trust me!"

William stays silent for a minute and I start thinking that he won't agree.

"Let's go to KFC's drive-thru then."

It's almost ten-thirty at night when we finally step into the house. I immediately find my way towards the kitchen and begin storing the food inside the refrigerator when Mary enters the kitchen with an excited look in her eyes.

"So? How did it go? Did he show you his romantic side?"

I feel my face heat at her bluntness and quickly turn back to doing anything but looking at Mary.

"It was nice." I blushed, turning away as I attempt to hide my face from the woman.

"Nice?" Mary scoffs. "Your face says it was more than nice!"

Suddenly, I find myself grimacing. Guilt and sadness wash over me for the elderly woman standing before me, and I find myself stopping in my act and turning towards the woman.

Her smile drops at the sight of my expression, and I reach out and slowly grasp her hands in mine.

"I'm sorry." I let my head drop. "I'm in love with your grandson and son-in-law. I'm sorry."

"What are you talking about, dear?" Mary's voice suddenly sounds heavy, and I know she knows exactly what I'm talking about. She knows what I'm guilty about.

Still, I say it. "I don't want to replace her. I just . . . I'm sorry. Being with you all makes me happy. You have treated me so well. I just don't want you to hate me."

"Oh, child!" Mary finally cracks and pulls me into her arms with tears freely falling down her cheeks now. "I won't ever hate you. I won't ever hate you, my child. You're just like a daughter to me. I won't ever hate you." The older woman clutches me, her palms patting my back lovingly, and I find myself clutching on to her too. Crying with her.

It feels like a while as we stand there holding each other and mumbling words of comfort until Mary feels sleepy enough. I make my way to Isaac's bathroom to shower, like I always do now out of familiarity and habit, before finally walking out of the closet and into Isaac's bedroom.

The bedroom lights are dim in the child's room, but I can still make out where he is laying down, fast asleep.

William seems to be missing, and I can only guess that he's in the house somewhere right now. Or maybe he'll sleep in his own room for a

change tonight.

Honestly, I don't mind that. The man needs to utilize his own sleeping space. That, and I feel awkward. It has been months since he's slept with Isaac and me.

At the thought of Isaac, I eye the sleeping child again and quickly begin making my way towards my side of the bed. Isaac must have gone to bed upset because I was not here. *Thank God William and I got him KFC for the morning.*

As I reach the bed and begin sliding underneath the covers, realization hits me right in my face, and I almost let out a loud 'Ah!'

Isaac doesn't have school tomorrow. Instantly, I begin pursing my lips in thought. Should I stay at home with him tomorrow? I sigh, I shouldn't. I should go to work like I am supposed to, then come back early and spend the entire night trying to cheer up Isaac until he falls asleep.

Yes, I'll treat him on Saturday. With my mind made, I smile as I turn and curl around Isaac.

Putting my arm around the child, I lean forward and press a kiss on his forehead.

"I missed you so much today, kiddo."

* * *

The first rays of sun peek into the room through the cracks between the curtains. The slowly increasing light bounces around the pristine white room and on to my skin, and I crack an eye open and peer around the still slightly dark room.

A glance to my right has me smiling when Isaac groans and snuggles himself closer to me. The absence of his father, on the other hand, is quite apparent. I smile. It's about time he sensed some shame and used his own bedroom for once.

A glance in my iPhone's direction has me reaching for the phone and tapping on the notifications I had not gone through last night. I smile when I see that the first message on the list is from Saara. My smile fades though when I see the two names below her—Sean and Tully.

Ignoring Sean and Tully, I open Saara's message instead. There is no way I'm going to ruin my morning by reading a message by Tully. Not a

chance.

Pressing on send, I can't help but frown as I think about Saara's text. Come to think of it, she has been complaining about her CEO for the past few weeks. Something about him always bullying her. This makes me feel even more guilty. *How could I have forgotten? How could I have not paid her issues any attention so far? I am a trash cousin.*

Quickly, I begin typing back another text.

Pressing send, this time, I find myself swiftly sliding out of bed and marching me towards the bathroom. Another day has begun and I need to start my day too. Lazying around won't get me anyway after all.

Today, although I'm not in much of a dress-up mood, I find myself applying makeup and wearing a white chiffon top and dark green skirt anyway. Pulling my hair up into a simple ponytail like always, I let out a soft breath as I analyze myself in front of the mirror for the final time and quickly make my way out of the bedroom and down towards the kitchen.

"Good morning!" I smile at everyone in the kitchen brightly.

As if my voice is a signal, suddenly, silence settles around the entire household and everyone stops what they are doing and turns towards me sharply, taking me by surprise.

"W-what? Is everything okay?" I ask Mary, hesitantly looking over Ren who is seated on the dining table with a bowl of noodles in his hand to everyone else trying to seem uninterested but failing.

"They want to know who kissed who first. Just answer that and they'll be back to normal." Ren grins at me before Mary can even answer.

I feel the blush rising from the pits of my embarrassment, my cheeks quickly becoming inflamed with the splotchy red colour I am sure is there right now.

"I-I don't know what . . . I—" I continue to blush, much to my horror as I try to look around the kitchen now. Anyone but into these people's faces. I never knew that the housekeepers are so curious.

"I did."

Sharp gasps echo around the entire kitchen, and in an instant, all the audience I've had around me since walking into the kitchen is gone—save Mary and Olly. Both of who I dare not look at right now.

Actually, I dare not even move right now too. Hearing William's voice freezes the soles of my feet to the floor, and I find myself absolutely

rooted to the spot as I feel him walk into the kitchen and stand behind me.

“Good morning,” he mumbles as he leans against my back until his lips are only centimetres away from my ear.

“Good morning,” I breathe back like an idiot, instantly feeling the blush rise to a new level when I hear him smile under his breath and continue to make his way around me towards the table.

When he begins to sit down on the table, I find myself twirling around towards Mary instead, trying to hide the embarrassing blotch of red I probably have all around my face right now.

“What are we making today?”

“Don’t worry about food today, dear. The duck soup is already ready and I saw you two got KFC for Isaac. He’ll be happy when he wakes up today.”

Mary smiles at me just as Ren finishes washing his bowl and puts it in the drainer, then, surprising me, she turns towards the tall boy. “Let’s go, Ren. It’s almost time for that show *Scarlet Heart* to go on the television!”

In the next second, the two scurry their way out of the kitchen, leaving only William and me behind.

The newly found silence sends a shiver down my spine, and I wince when I realize I’m becoming shy in front of William. Granted, I have always been sort of shy in front of him, but this speech-rendering shyness is leaving me feeling a bit scared.

I’ve slept with him in the same bed for months, for God’s sake. Worse comes to worse, he’s probably seen me drool all over my pillow! Maybe he’s heard me snore during nights when I’ve been really tired. Who knows? Why do I have to feel like a stupid high schooler having her first crush? Ugh, this is aggravating!

“Gemma?”

I almost choke on my own saliva. It feels like I’m dragging my feet, but they’re bound by chains as I slowly make my way towards the table where William is silently having his noodle soup. Carefully, I take the seat one chair away from him.

My heart is acting like it’s running in a marathon; my chest is refusing to cooperate, it almost feels like I’m going to have a cardiac arrest or something. I clench my palms against my shirt underneath the dining table, gritting my teeth as I try to calm myself down. What the hell is happening to

me?

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I can’t breathe,” I blurt out before I can even think it through. Instantly, I feel William shoot up and move to me with one hand immediately finding my wrist and the other checking my breathing.

Feeling lame for worrying him, I continue, “My heart feels like it’s running a marathon, my palms are sweating like crazy, and I’m beginning to turn into a fifteen-year-old having her love. Fix me.”

By the end of my panicked rant, my voice is barely a mumble and I’m trying to grasp on to even an ounce of shame for being so blunt. In front of me, on the other hand, William seems to be still in his seat.

I don’t know what to say anymore. I’m still feeling like I’m going to have a heart attack or a panic attack or something, so I decide to focus instead on my wrist, where he’s still touching me like he’s taking my pulse. Slowly, I watch as the pads of his fingers smoothen around my wrist until his hand is holding me in a comforting grip.

“I like you the way you are. Just the way you are, you are enough for me.”

His quiet confession rattles me to my bones, my breath hitches in my throat and my wide gaze snaps up to his.

“I like you, Gemma, so take responsibility of me.”

* * *

“Good morning, Gemma.”

“Good morning, sir. Thank you.” I smile at Nathan gratefully as I step into the elevator while he holds the doors open for me.

“I’d like to warn you. You were a big topic of discussion amongst the staff at last night’s office dinner. You might be getting a lot of questions and teasing today.”

I cringe at the thought of what’s to come once the elevator doors will open at our level.

“I knew this was coming,” I admit, shuffling on my feet with nervousness.

“Ah, so you are dating then.” Nathan nods, grinning at me when I shoot him a wide-eyed glance, my cheeks already beginning to blush.

“Yes, sir. I am committed.” I nod, awkwardly looking at the elevator door and dreading what’s lying on the other side. Especially Tully.

“Shame.”

I blink, snapping my head towards my senior. “I’m sorry?”

“For the buyer of your portraits.” Nathan smiles at me sadly and I find myself frowning.

“Who bought those portraits, by the way?”

“We’re here! Oh, and call me Nathan, please. Good luck!” Nathan’s smile brightens when the elevator’s doors ping open just as I finish asking my question, and he breezes past me without a second glance my way. My question was forgotten. Or discarded.

“Start spilling!” Sean whispers scandalously as soon as I settle myself on my seat.

“Yeah! Tell us everything! We saw that Tesla, you can’t deny it! How did you meet?”

“Leave her alone. She must be tired.”

“Tireddd,” Wendina squeals.

“Ohhh!” Sean mirrors her. “Someone didn’t sleep all night,” he teases, wiggling his eyebrows at me.

I, on the other hand, want to disappear. Maybe I can just go back home and finish the rest of my ten days of desk job later in the month?

“No, actually, I had a good night’s sleep.” I find myself replying when I spot Tully coming over. I really just want her to turn around and walk away.

“Sure you did.” She smiles at me and my eyes widen when I notice the humour in them. What is she even finding funny?

“Stay away from William, please.” I looked up at the woman straight in her eyes, my lips pressed into a thin smile.

“His name is William?” Sean asks excitedly.

“That’s so hot!” Wendina grins, almost vibrating in her chair now.

“Dr. William Noo. A neurosurgeon resident at City Hospital. The son of one of the major shareholders of the hospital. His father also owns many hospitals around Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Basically, he’s a billionaire’s son. Nice catch, Gemma.” Tully smiles at me brightly and I feel everyone around me stiffen.

He’s a billionaire heir.

“Don’t you dare, Tully!” Jennie snaps at the beautiful seductress of a woman who is looking at me triumphantly.

“I’ll cut you for real this time,” Sean hisses, looking completely serious now.

A billionaire heir. An evil mother.

“Wait, how do you know so much about him?” Wendina frowns, and I find myself trying to remember what William told me last night.

Then trust me.

Trust me.

“I trust him.” I look her in her eyes.

We stay that or for a second—her smiling at me sarcastically and me looking up at her with determination in my eyes.

She breaks the eye connection first. With her smile still splatted over her mouth, she turns towards Wendina instead.

“My older sister’s husband shoved her down the stairs again a few months ago and she was taken to the hospital. Gemma’s boyfriend was her main surgeon. She’s been staying at the hospital ever since and I have been visiting her a lot.”

“I hope your sister is doing better, but . . . so?” Sean makes a confused face at Tully and I sigh. Sean really needs to show a little bit more empathy sometimes.

“I saw him around a lot. He’s kind and genuinely cares for his patients. I-I liked him . . . so I asked him out.”

“What?” all three of us blurt out the same thing at the same time. All three of our mouths remain open as we stare at Tully. *Do such coincidences even happen in real life?*

“He came for his final round for the day one night and I chased after him when he was leaving.” Tully shrugs.

“What did he say?” Jennie demands, suddenly seeming the most curious out of all of us. I secretly don’t want to know anymore. I’m scared.

Tully shrugs again but I can see it had hurt her. William is a high-class heartbreaker. Literally . . . billionaire heir.

“He thanked me for liking him and apologized because he didn’t reciprocate the feelings.”

“That’s it?” Sean gapes at Tully, disbelief clear on his face.

Tully sighs. “He said he admired my courage to express myself, said

it must have taken guts to approach him. He said he hoped he would find enough courage to express himself to the woman he loves too. He laughed that even though she is already the mother of his child, he has still not told her how he feels yet and that after seeing my courage, he was going to do it soon too.”

I don’t know what to say, so instead, I blink back the tears that are suddenly threatening to pour out of my eyes and eternally embarrass me in front of my friends.

“I asked him the name of the woman he loves. I wanted to know the name of the woman I had begun to hate in a matter of mere minutes . . . He said it was Gemma.” Tully scoffs, barely concealing the bitterness in her voice. “What are the f*cking odds, right?”

“Wait.” Sean turns towards me, and I can almost see him loading his gun. “You two have a kid together?” he fires.

Jennie sighs from beside me. “Yes, they do. Now, can we get back to the topic?” She turns towards Tully. “So the bottom line is that you’re not going to ruin her relationship, yes or no?”

“Yes, I am not going to attempt to expose her boyfriend because he’s passed already.” Tully rolls her eyes.

“Is your brother-in-law in jail? Because he should be,” I ask, trying to change the topic. I can’t bear seeing her talking about William anymore. Life is so ironic. Tully has always spent her years seducing men her friends are interested in just to show how disgusting men are. She never really cared for them. It was just a game. And then she finds William . . . someone she genuinely likes, but . . . life is so ironic.

“Yeah, he got sentenced for attempted murder. She’s gotten a restraining order and they are finally get divorced.” Tully nods, sending me a small smile. It doesn’t meet her eyes and I don’t blame her. I wouldn’t be able to like me if I were here as well.

“Wait, wait, wait . . . what’s the name?” Wendina asks, her excited but curious expression telling me that whatever she’s gotten to know so far will be all around the whole office by the time work ends today. Wendina is no cheater, but if she feels like there is no threat in spreading information, everyone knows about it. Everyone.

“Of my brother-in-law?” Tully frowns a look of slight disgust on her face.

“No, Gem’s kid!”

“Oh!” Tully exclaims and I cringe.

“Isaac,” I answer her.

Since she knows so much already, telling her Isaac’s name won’t make a single difference.

Just then, my cell phone suddenly begins ringing and I find myself reaching for my phone and accepting the call without a single glance at who is calling.

“Hello?”

“Gemma, okay, don’t panic, okay? It’s Saara. She’s . . . she’s gotten run over by a psycho. She’s in the operation theatre right now. Can you come over?”

Shot. Saara. Right now.

I blink. August’s laboured breath leaves no room for me to wonder if I’m being pranked like all the other times. My heart falls in my chest and I find myself losing complete knowledge of whatever is going on around me. Saara is all the family I have right now. She’s all I have. And I’m all she has too.

I find myself shooting to my feet, ignoring the questions I’m suddenly being asked. Shoving everything into my bag, I walk towards Nathan’s office. I don’t have time for anything else except going to Nathan’s office. I need to get to the hospital. Hospital. Which one is she even in?

“Which hospital?” I ask, already knowing at Nathan’s door.

“Hospital?” I hear Jennie echo behind me, but I have no time. No time.

“City Hospital,” August answers immediately.

“I’m coming.” I cut the line, already focusing on the man that is still to acknowledge me. I knock again.

“Come in!”

I have the door open and am inside even before he finishes his sentence.

“Sorry to disturb you, but I just got a call that my cousin has gotten into an accident. I’m the only family she has in this city. I need to go to the hospital right now, please!”

“Yes, yes, of course! Will you manage getting there? I can drop you off,” Nathan asks, beginning to grab the jacket that is draped on his chair.

I shake my head insistently. “It’s fine, I can get there. Thank you for offering, Nathan.”

“Okay, you know my number, right? Text me and let me know how everything is, okay?”

“Yes, sir!” I nod a bit crazily before rushing out of his office and towards the office door.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Jason yells as I brush past him.

I don’t even spare him a second glance but manage to yell back, “I’m sorry, I have to go!”

The elevator ride to the ground floor seems like a drag, and by the end of it, I’m almost vibrating with nerves. When the doors slide open and I see the building’s main entrance, I find myself breaking into a run.

“City Hospital!” I almost yell as I slide into the seat of the first taxi I am able to hail. I ignore the awkward glance the taxi driver passes me and instead grasp on to my iPhone tighter. All sorts of ominous thoughts begin to seep into my brain, and I find myself praying in a moving cab on the way to the hospital.

“Thank you so much!” I thank the driver before hurriedly handing him the fare and leaping out of the taxi. I notice that the paparazzi have already begun to loiter around the outside of the hospital.

Rushing towards the receptionist, I find myself panting with nerves instead of tiredness.

“Saara Malik. She was brought in a bit ago for an accident case.”

“I’m sorry, but is there anyone who can verify that you personally know the patient? Unfortunately, as you can see outside, a lot of people are claiming to be her family right now.”

I sigh, then quickly unlock my phone and dial August’s number.

“Hey, are you here?”

“I’m downstairs. Can you come and get me from the reception? They need genuine validation.”

“Sure, I’ll be right down!”

“Thanks.”

Disconnecting the phone, I turn towards the nurses at the reception area. “Her manager is coming to get me. Is that okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. If you could please write in your name, your relation, and sign here. Sorry, we are extremely strict about our celebrity patients.”

I nod, already pulling the paper towards me. "I understand."

"Gemma!"

I turn around just as August's arm finds its way around my shoulder and he begins leading us towards the elevator.

"What happened? What the hell happened?"

"Khristian was teasing her again when one of his psycho exes decided to kill the jerk! Saara pushed him aside and got hit instead."

"What? She pushed him aside just to get run over herself?"

"The ass*le looks like he's in shock."

"He's up there?" I exclaimed, immediately being brought closer to the tall man as if to hide my loud eruptions.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, not knowing whether to cry or murder this Khristian.

"Who the hell is this Khristian?" I hiss as I tilt my head up and glare at August.

"He's the CEO of the company." *WHAT?*

When we reach the OT, I spot the man responsible for all this sitting on one of the seats with his head bowed and being braced by his hands. If I didn't know the situation, I would say he is devastated, but he's probably sticking around to see how he can control the damage he has caused.

I find myself shrugging August's hands away when he tries to hold me back. When I reach the man, I let myself drop to my knees until we are almost at level with each other.

"If something happens to my cousin, I am going to make you remember what a pathetic, low life you are for the rest of your life."

At my words, the man looks up and I feel my eyes widen when they meet his red-rimmed ones. *He's crying?*

"I'm sorry." It's a whisper, but I'm sure even August has heard it.

"You should say that to the one inside the operation theatre, not me," I snap back dryly.

"Gem, let's go sit there."

It takes ages before the red light turns green and the surgeon walks out of the room. His eyes first find August's who rushes over immediately. I can't. I can't find myself moving from my seat. I don't think I have enough courage to stand on my two feet right now.

"She's fine. There is no need to worry. She has sustained a head

injury and some superficial injuries around her limbs. A few weeks in the hospital for some rest and she'll be completely fine. She's unconscious right now. We're moving her into one of the VIP rooms. She'll come around once the sedative wears down."

"Yes, Doctor."

As much as I want to feel relieved, I still find myself on the edge. Saara had just almost died.

* * *

"Mummy, where are you going?" Isaac's sulking is obvious even through the phone.

"Aunty Saara has gotten into an accident, sweetie. She's in the hospital, so I'll have to stay with her tonight. Can you sleep with Dad tonight?" I ask as I pack some of my stuff into my bag; Saara's suitcase is already packed and placed on the bed.

"Can't I come too?" Isaac whines. I can even hear the muffled sounds of him stomping his feet. I smile.

"Little children aren't allowed to stay overnight in hospitals if they aren't sick. Aunty Saara has always been nice to you, hasn't she?"

"Yes," Isaac mumbles back.

"How about I ask Grandma Mary to bring you over tomorrow after school to visit her, is that okay?"

He's silent for a second, and I almost grin when I realize he's actually contemplating it.

"Yes," he replies finally.

"Good boy. I love you, okay? I'll see you tomorrow then. Can you give the phone to Grandma now, please?"

"Okay, Mummy."

"Hello, Gemma. What happened?" Mary's worried voice takes over my phone instead, and this time, I find myself turning serious.

"She got run over by a psycho ex-girlfriend of her company's CEO."

"What? Is she okay?"

"She's fine right now." I sigh. "Just unconscious."

"Which hospital is she in?" Mary asks.

"City Hospital."

“That’s where William’s doing his residency, right?”

“Yeah.” I let out a heavy breath.

“Does he know?”

I’ve spent a while considering letting him know that I am in the same hospital. I clear my throat. “I didn’t want to disturb him.”

“Oh my god, don’t be stupid, Gemma. He’ll be irritated when he finds out you didn’t tell him.”

“Let’s just let him be, Mary. He must be tired and busy as it is. I’ll tell him later.” I sigh, feeling almost repulsed even by the idea of disturbing William at the hospital. I don’t want him running around for personal matters. He must have a reputation he needs to uphold. The hospital is his workplace after all.

“Isaac and I will visit Saara tomorrow, okay?” Mary does well to change the topic. I can’t help but let out a breath of relief, secretly grateful for her understanding.

“Thanks, Mary. Isaac’s a little upset. Could you give him the phone please?”

“Okay, dear. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.” I smile into the phone, lowering myself down on my bed and placing my hand on my packed backpack.

“Ello . . .”

“Mumma’s going to go to take care of Aunty Saara now, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Thank you. Be good. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay, goodnight, my little peanut!”

“Goodnight.”

I’m about to disconnect the line when Isaac suddenly speaks up again.

“Mummy?”

I can’t stop the smile that flutters on my lips every time he calls me Mummy. “Yes, sweetie?”

“I miss you.”

It feels like just this one sentence from him, just this one expression of endearment, unknots every tension and stress I’ve felt throughout the day. All the worries and fear fade away at this one sentence. I feel as my shoulders

just give away, and I slouch on my bed, the tears I have held ever since I found out about Saara begins to fall and I don't dare stop it.

"I-I miss you too, sweetheart."

* * *

"You on your way over?" August's concerned voice sounds out of my phone, and I press the phone closer to my ears.

"Yeah, I'm in the Uber. It's really noisy outside right now. I think someone's having an Indian wedding celebration."

"Yeah, I can hear the noise from my end too. How close are you to the hospital right now?"

"Hold on." I lean forward a little bit. "Erm, excuse me, how far away are we from the hospital?"

"We're just there."

"Ah, thank you!"

"We're just there," I mumble into my phone.

"Okay, I'm coming down to help you with the luggage," August states, sounding like he is already up and walking.

"Okay, I'll meet you in the lobby then."

Honestly, a little help with the luggage will be my secret prayers answered. All the tension and running around from today is beginning to take a toll on me.

"We're here!"

"Thank you so much." I smile at the Uber driver in thanks as I grasp my backpack tightly over my shoulder and pull out Saara's suitcase as carefully as I can.

"You're always welcome! Let me know if you need a ride some time!" The driver grins at me and I find my mood lightening a little looking at the girl's bright smile.

"Thank you! I will," I promise with a wave and then close the car's door.

Turning around towards the entrance, I take a deep breath before beginning to stride forward, dragging the black suitcase behind me.

The automatic doors pull themselves open, and I stride through the open entryway. Slowly, I make my way to the lobby.

“I hear he has a son,” one of the nurses mumbles to the other. This makes me smile, so they do gossip about their superiors. Interesting.

“Shame he’s all alone. He’s one of the hospital’s most talented surgeons. It’s so sad, he’s handsome too!” The nurse groans, sounding just as disappointed as she looked.

“I’d volunteer but you know what they call him, the ice king. He’ll probably die single.” The earlier nurse pouts before she spots me and straightens in her seat, a professional smile on her face.

“I see you’re staying for the night?” she asks me as I hand her my ID card. I’m pretty sure she’s trying to be friendly knowing I’m the famous singer’s, Saara, cousin. I don’t blame her though. I’d be nice to me too.

“Yeah,” I reply, smiling at her and at the other nurse standing beside her.

“Well, take care.” The first nurse waves at me after handing me back my ID card. I wave back, not knowing what else to do, before continuing to progress towards the elevator. I’ll probably find August in the elevator at this rate since he’s not here yet.

“Ohh! Doctor Noo! What are you doing down here? Can we help you?”

I freeze. I snap my head around at one of the nurse’s words.

“William,” I blurt out. Finding William standing a few steps away from me is the last thing I thought I would face tonight. Who told him? Did Mary tell him?

A blank expression guards his face as he begins walking towards me with his hands tucked into the white pockets of his coat, his stethoscope hanging around his neck. My eyes snap between his tight jaw and his circular-framed glasses that are currently in front of his eyes.

Not being able to contain my curiosity, I glance at the two nurses with wide, panicked eyes to find them gaping at the scene occurring before them. Instantly, I feel myself blushing and looking towards William, still stunned and a bit worried now.

He comes to a stop when the tips of his white sneakers meet the tips of mine. I can only stand here, frozen, as he leans forward and removes the backpack from my shoulder to sling it over his, then as if that isn’t enough, he grasps the handle of Saara’s suitcase and rolls it from my side to his.

“Let’s go.” He glances at me, his expression still unreadable as he

slides his fingers through mine and grasps on to my hand. I swear I hear a pair of loud gasps behind us and it makes me cringe. *Great, now, William will have to deal with gossip for ages.*

Then he begins walking.

“W-William, the hands!” I whisper frantically, shaking our hands between us. “What are you doing? They will be talking about this for weeks now!”

William’s fingers tighten against my skin, and he pulls me a bit closer to him. Despite the frantic beating of my heart and my sudden paranoia, I find myself letting him.

“I’m taking responsibility of you.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

One Day When the Flowers Bloomed

*“Take responsibility of me.”
These words held so much power to her;
Enough to make the flowers in her chest bloom,
Enough to water them too.*

The feeling of guilt doesn't really mix well with happiness. Right now, as William continues to lead me towards the elevators by my hand, I can't help but feel a fitting blend of the two emotions.

I feel guilty because the hushed whispers we are slowly walking away from will continue to spread around the hospital. Eventually, that will become highly awkward for William.

I feel happy because, despite all this, William is still holding me by his side. He thinks this is the right thing to do. He thinks I'm good enough to not be kept hidden away. I'm still feeling his warm skin against mine.

When we come to stop in front of an elevator, I can only stand beside him and wait for the doors to open—wait for some more people to see the man holding my hand.

Just then, the doors of the elevator ping open, and I watch wide-eyed as two male doctors look up from their iPhones, straight at the two of us.

Watching their eyes widen in surprise while their gaze snaps from William and my face to the part where our hands are joined only makes me shuffle closer to William awkwardly as we step into the elevator with the two of the doctors.

The ride is awkwardly silent. Thankfully though, when the doors of

the elevators open again, the two doctors silently stride off the elevator with only a polite nod at William. I can only hope that they do not have a knack for gossip.

“Are you okay?” I find myself asking William in the newly acquired privacy of the elevator. Tilting my head up towards him, I eye the man standing in front of me, who is still holding one of my hands firmly in his.

“I think I should be asking you that.” William looks at me with a small smile.

He has me there. I don’t know what to say except let myself shamelessly blush harder in front of him.

“Detectives.” William observes once we’re out of the elevator and nearing Saara’s room. Contrary to the surprised tone in his voice, he doesn’t seem surprised at all. I suppose he’s used to this coming from a rich family himself.

“Yeah.” I shrug, though already feeling irritation at the thought of the guy who was here only an hour ago, calling and demanding authorities to set up tight security since his psycho ex-girlfriend had fled the scene after hitting my innocent cousin.

“Thank you for the hard work.” I smile at the one I know to be Inspector Richard.

“I thought you both might be hungry,” I mumble, extending the plastic containing snacks and drinks I got them before coming to the hospital to the other man whose name I don’t know.

“Oh, thank you! You didn’t have to. It’s our duty.” Richard grins at me brightly, glancing at the plastic and then at me before nodding politely at William.

“If you don’t mind, what relation does . . .” Richard leans forward squinting his eyes at the ID card hanging from William’s neck. “Dr. Noo have to Miss Malik?”

I feel surprise bubble in my chest when, instead of answering questions regarding him like he usually does, William glances down at me, waiting for my answer.

For a second, I’m a little stunned, contemplating exactly how to put this information out there. I had a feeling it was quite obvious, but I guess not, then I lift our joined hands up.

“Her cousin is Dr. Noo’s girlfriend.” I hand Inspector Richard a

sheepish smile.

“Ah! Thank you for the snacks! Also, don’t worry, we’re here. You should go see your cousin.” The other inspector smiles at me appreciatively before Richard can say anything. I can see he’s trying to defuse the awkwardness.

“Still, it’s just a small thank you.” I smile at both of them before turning towards the door. “I should go check how she is now,” I excuse myself politely, feeling as William’s fingers tighten against mine and already begin to open the VIP room’s door.

When the doors click close behind us and we slowly make our way into the room, I feel William’s hand leaving mine.

Instantly, I take the chair placed by Saara’s bed. Leaning forward, I sigh as I trace the purple bruise on her arms and her right cheek with my eyes. They look bad.

Putting the bags on the guest’s sofa, William finds his way to the bed as well. He lifts up the clipboard hanging from Saara’s bed and silently begins turning the pages.

“She’s fine. She’s just sleeping because of the medication,” he says assuringly after a few minutes, then places the clipboard back where it’s supposed to be.

“Will you be okay here all night?”

I sigh, closing my eyes and leaning back on to him when I feel him come to stand behind me. At this, his hands silently come to rest on my shoulders.

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry. Don’t you have to go home soon?” I mumble, letting myself just relax for the first time today. It’s been such a long day.

“I’ll make one last round and then go home. Isaac must be throwing a tantrum by now.”

“If he’s moody, don’t scold him please.”

This time, William sighs, pressing my shoulders comfortingly. “I won’t.”

“Have you taken a leave from work for this?”

“I was thinking of informing the chief editor tomorrow.”

“That’ll work. I’ll come by tomorrow.”

“Okay.” I smile. I slowly find his hands and I curl my fingers around

his own. The musk of his cologne mixed with the nostalgic smell of a hospital that's lingering on him does wonders to calm me down. It's strange —me pulling peace from the scene of him. It almost feels warm in my chest. Warm and comforting.

“Mary and Isaac want to come visit tomorrow after Isaac's kindergarten ends for the day,” I mumble, rubbing the pads of my thumb against the fair smooth skin of his hand.

“Okay. Text me when they get here.”

“Umm . . .” I nod. On a whim, I open my eyes, and before I know it, I'm standing up and facing William.

I guess it's alright. He should get back to his patients. “Let's go,” I mumble, slowly beginning to pull him towards the room's door.

“Where are we going?” William asks, clearly sounding confused.

“I'm dropping you at the door.” I turn to look back at him with a soft smile.

We stop in front of the closed door, his hands still in mine. Suddenly, it's silent between us and I find myself turning around so that I'm facing him. He's quiet, just standing there watching me, waiting for me to say something, do something.

I lift my gaze up to meet his, and my heart jumps in my chest. William's looking down at me with an expression he's never had before. His usual unreadable eyes are staring down at me, searing into my own dark pools.

When his fingers tighten around mine and he pulls me closer, I feel like my heart is threatening to melt. Still, he doesn't speak. He doesn't do anything more.

I wait . . . and then run out of patience. My crazily beating heart fuels my actions as I slowly begin to lift his hands up with mine and then take it back until I can softly place it around my waist, then without much thought, I put my own arms around his neck.

It comes as a complete surprise when, all of a sudden, William's arms tighten around my waist he leans forward, his warm breath suddenly grazing my lips.

We're so close, so close that I can almost swear that the smell of his cologne will now linger on my skin for the rest of the night.

“I'm mad at you,” William whispers against my lips as his lips softly

graze mine when he speaks. He's upset I didn't tell him, I realize. Guilt begins gnawing at my chest.

"I'm sorry," I squeak quickly, pressing my lips against his in a quick peck.

"I'm sorry." I quickly press another kiss on his chin this time.

"I'm sorry." And another one on the cheek. "And thank you for today." On another cheek.

Under the showers of my kisses, William chuckles and pulls me into a hug, resting his chin on my shoulder. I almost have a heart attack when I feel him press a kiss on my shoulder.

"I'm still mad." He sighs and tightens our hug, squeezing me against him.

My cell phone rings right after William leaves the room. Slipping the device out of my back pocket, I send a whisper of a cuss when I see the name flashing on the screen.

Quickly, I accept the call and press the phone against my ear.

"I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry, I totally forgot! I'm already up in the room!" I cringe when all I hear is silence on the other end.

"Oh, I thought you got caught up in traffic or had an accident." There's silence again, and I can't help but groan, knowing I'd be really upset if I were in August's place.

"It's okay. I'm coming up, don't worry," he mumbles before the line disconnects. I find myself beginning to parade in front of the room's door.

When it finally opens and August's dark eyes find mine, I'm almost left struck on the spot. The heck? Is he crying?

"Are you okay?" I rush towards him, stopping only short of grabbing the tall man.

"I couldn't get through, I thought you had an accident, too, or something."

Oh dear, he must be traumatized about Saara's case.

"I'm fine." I smile brightly at the man, reaching forward to grasp one of his large hands with two of mine. I pull his hand up and place it on top of my head. "See?"

For a moment, August just stands and stares at me with his hooded eyes, then he scoffs, chuckling as he fluffs my hair with his hand. "Yeah, I can see that."

“What’s the update on the CEO and his ex?” I grimace at the thought of that awful boy. Flashes of him just sitting against the hospital floor, stunned, comes to my mind and I almost roll my eyes.

“Khristian’s at the office. I don’t think he’s going to sleep tonight. Clara is still on the run.”

“I don’t like him.” I turn to glance at my battered and bruised cousin. “What if this reaches the public? What will he say then?”

“He’s already gotten all the news removed from getting printed.”

“Watch TMZ or someone, not a damn.” I shake my head, already feeling lightheaded just thinking about it.

“I think he likes her,” August assesses, his voice low. He sounds like he believes it and pities the boy too. I’m confused. Does he like Clara or Saara?

“Likes who?”

August motions towards my battered and bruised cousin lying on our right. “Saara. He’s been trying to secretly make her jealous, but I think it’s gotten too far. This has made him realize that.”

“I’d never go out with a boy who dates a dozen girls to make me jealous.”

“He’s never really liked someone like he likes Saara. It’s been a learning process for him, too, to be honest.”

I shrug. “I’ll have to see what Saara feels about him. I don’t like him so far though.”

“Let’s see.” August sighs, moving to drop down on the sofa by the corner of the room.

“Are you going to stay here overnight?” I frown, suddenly wondering why he’s still here when it’s almost nine at night.

“Yeah, I should go back home. I was just waiting for you to come back.” August shakes his head, getting up on his feet and raking his fingers across his dark hair.

Standing up and beginning to walk, he comes to a stop beside me and turns around. Suddenly, he leans forward until his face is at the same level as mine, and I feel his hand on my hair. I blink.

“You should rest. You look tired too.” He smiles at me softly, caressing down my hair like my father usually does.

“Yes, Dad.” I smile back brightly, making him chuckle again.

He straightens to his full right shaking his head, still chuckling.

“I’ll be late tomorrow. I need to handle the PR and everyone else surrounding Saara. It’s a bit of a mess.”

“Okay.” I nod. “See you tomorrow! Goodnight!”

My phone rings for the second time in the room tonight when I’m taking a shower. Rushing out in a towel, I quickly grab my iPhone and rush back into the bathroom, not wanting to risk getting caught by any of the staff or the detectives.

“Hello.” I accept the call without much of a glance at the screen.

“Gemma Windly! Why isn’t your cousin receiving her call?”

I freeze.

Isma Khala.

“Oh! She had dance rehearsals till noon today and then she just went back home, bathed, and fell off to sleep after taking some pain medication. I think they cause drowsiness. She’s been asleep since I got home.”

“You’re not lying to cover up for your cousin, are you, Gemma?”

“What!” I shoot out. “No! No way! Why’d I do that! I’d call you and complain about myself!”

“Gemmmaa.” Khala must be frowning suspiciously on the other side of the line. I’m sure about it. I can’t afford this. I can’t afford to have her march here and then proceed to sue everyone. She has always been wary of Saara’s profession. This will give her an opportunity to force Saara to make use of her degree in some other way.

“She really is sleeping, Khala. When she wakes up, I’ll tell her you called, okay?”

“You’re sure, nah?”

I gulp. *No, I’m not.* “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Acha then. I’ll talk to you girls tomorrow. Sweet dreams, bubba.”

“Goodnight, Khala!”

When I put my phone away and slowly begin walking back towards the shower, I let out a long tired breath.

I’m going to have karma come to bite me in my ass.

* * *

“Oh Lord, you won’t believe how crazy it is downstairs. The media is

having a field day,” Magenta complains as she strides into the room, letting the door swing shut behind her while she continues to drop down unceremoniously on to the chair beside Saara’s bed.

A glance in my wristwatch’s direction and I shake my head when I notice that it’s just nine in the morning. The paparazzi really know no sleep.

“I’m surprised how the security is able to filter the genuine people from these paparazzi,” I reply, feeling pity for all the people who must be having to face the brunt of the situation.

“They were already beginning to clear them out of the vicinity by the time I arrived. No one can do much, this is a private hospital and not government-run. It has its rules after all.” Magenta shrugs before extending a paper bag towards me. “I packed some chicken sandwich and that milk chocolate Isaac likes. There’s enough for the both of you. Rich-people rooms like this one have fridges, right?”

I can’t help but laugh at that. Moving towards the mini-refrigerator, I pull the door open and take a sandwich out, putting the rest of the stuff into it. “Thank you so much for the breakfast, Mrs. Red! And to answer your question . . . “ I smirk, tapping the door of the fridge. “This privileged room does have a fridge.”

Mrs. Red scoffs. “Knew it!”

“So . . . “ Her tone turns serious, and she takes Saara’s hands in her own. “How did all this even happen?”

I let out a small sigh and find myself moving around Saara’s bed to the other chair placed there. “I don’t know much myself, except the fact that Saara’s CEO’s ex- girlfriend ran her over because of jealousy.”

“Oh Lord, that’s awful! She should have run the boy over now, shouldn’t she? Why bring an innocent girl into this?” Mrs. Red hisses scandalously, covering her mouth with her hands and then waving it around while she spoke.

“Exactly what I’m confused about! Only Saara and that CEO can answer us, to be honest.”

“Has she woken up yet?” Mrs. Red smiles at me sadly, rubbing Saara’s arms lovingly while she does.

“Not yet. Her doctor came by around seven in the morning. She said Saara will hopefully wake up before twelve.”

“I sure hope so.” Mrs. Red shakes her head before turning back

towards Saara.

“I hope so too.”

* * *

I stare at the screen of my laptop, the page with my almost finished email requesting for my absence for the next week is open. I’ve been staring at it for the past five minutes, trying to make it the utmost professional and convincing.

Of course, I’m sure Nathan will understand and agree regardless, but that’s not to say my email should be any less professional.

“Oh, just press send already!” Mrs. Red whispers tiredly and pushes my hands over the mousepad of the laptop. I can feel the restlessness, I am restless too. And I’ll be this way until this is done with.

I shake my head. I have written this as formally as I could have. This is it. I press send.

“Congratulations.” Mrs. Red sounds relieved and I can’t help but chuckle as I put my laptop away.

“Thanks.”

The sound of the hospital door opening quietly brings in the buzz of the busy hospital outside.

Both Mrs. Red and I find myself turning around to greet whoever it is that is coming in, only to stop when our gaze meets with the red-rimmed ones of Khristian.

Normally, I’d be well on my way to reminding the man that he is not welcome here, but the mere glance at his condition stops me from doing anything but gape at him.

He’s dressed impeccably, his hair is styled in a way that suits his face. But that face; it looks dead. *Does this guy . . . does his guy really like Saara?*

“Morning.” I find myself greeting him, surprising both him and me after my hostility yesterday.

That is something else that catches my attention as well. He still came here knowing he isn’t welcome. Does he really like Saara or is he scared he’ll get sued?

He looks surprised. His wide red-rimmed eyes meet mine across the

bed, and I can only hold my breath when he clears his throat and finally replies. "I'm sorry."

Mrs. Red seems to catch on to the awkwardness because she immediately clears her throat and begins rummaging through her bag.

"Er, she's still unconscious." I clear my throat as well, turning back to Saara. Once again, I find myself flinching at the sight of the colouring bruises on her olive skin.

"I . . . yes." Khristian sighs, surprising me when he runs his fingers across his hair in frustration. "I just wanted to see . . . I'm going back to the office now. I'm sorry for everything."

"Do you love her?" I surprise myself when I call out the question just as he reaches for the door.

"Do I even have the right to answer that question anymore?" I can hear it, his voice breaking as he tries to scoff out the question.

Despite everything, I find myself smiling. "You didn't say no."

For a while, he just stands there. Mrs. Red and I glance at each other, then he opens the door and walks out.

"Well, that was intense!" Mrs. Red heaves out a relieved sigh.

"I know . . . right!"

Both my and Mrs. Red's head snaps to the bed, and I find myself shooting up to my feet and cowering over a conscious Saara.

"You! Oh my god! Thank god!" I let myself grasp on to my cousin's hand, the tears that begin to fall down my cheeks come in streams and I don't even stop it.

"Do you know how scared I was!" I demand, starting to feel irritated at seeing Saara grin at me guiltily.

"I was scared too. I missed you too." She sighs, her soft fingers pressing my skin weakly before giving up.

She turns towards Mrs. Red. "Can I get some water, please? Gem seems . . . useless right now."

* * *

There was once a time in my life when I had thought of becoming a psychiatrist. Not really because of the profession, but because I just always like the smell of hospitals. The people here always seem like they had a

purpose, an aura of importance and sophistication, then one day, a rude nurse opened her mouth and my entire viewpoint on the people working in these large buildings changed.

I don't regret changing my career interests. I'm happy being an editor. Still, during times like this when the rain slides down the hospital's windowpane and everything is silent around me, I can't help but wonder what life would have been if I had ended up becoming a psychiatrist. Would I have met William earlier? Would I have liked him then as well?

"Thinking about how it would have been like had you ended up being a psychiatrist?"

The smile that had somehow settled itself on my lips while I was thinking brightens at Saara's question, and I turn towards her with a grin. "How'd you know?"

"If it were up to Nani, we'd both be working somewhere in this hospital today."

"True!" I chuckle, slowly walking away from the window and settling down on the chair by her bed.

"Funny story, my grandma wanted me to become a rich man's wife." Mrs. Red scoffs, sounding amused just thinking about it.

"Sometimes, I thought about getting a sugar daddy as well during college," Saara groans, and I join her.

"Me too! Especially before the finals!"

Just then, the sound of the door clicks open sounds around the room, cutting short all of our giggling and grinning.

"Ah, Miss Malik, I see you're doing better." Saara's doctor smiles at her as she walks in with four more people behind her. Two nurses and two other doctors that I suspect are fellows or trainees right now.

"Yes, thank you so much, Doctor."

Strangely, though, the nurses's attention isn't on Saara.

Instead, their eyes find me, and I witness as one of the nurses nudges the trainees who also snap their attention to me instantly.

Something in my chest curls in discomfort, but I manage to send them a smile, regardless of whether they send one back. Of course, I know what's happening. I know it. The nurses did their thing last night. Everyone knows now. I wonder how William must be dealing right now.

Thankfully, they smile back at me too. I notice that they look

surprised.

“You must be her guardian?”

My attention turns to the doctor, and for the first time, I realize she’s quite beautiful. I smile. “Yes. I’m her cousin.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. We have some paperwork you need to look over,” she beams at me, extending her hand towards me. I glance down to notice a big diamond on her ring finger. *Wow, doctors sure are rich.*

I grasp her hand into mine gratefully. “The pleasure is all mine. Thank you for taking care of my cousin.”

The door opens again, and I can only turn my attention in the direction of the door when Isaac rushes into the room with Mary and Olly trailing behind him.

“Mummyyy,” Isaac whisper-yells as he gets closer and closer until he’s wrapping his arms around my legs and is looking up at me with a big grin.

“Hello!” I grin at the child, picking him up into my arms. I notice he’s gotten a lot heavier over the past few months.

Strangely, although that makes it difficult for me to pick him up, it makes me happier too.

“Grandma said Auntie Saara is sick. Is she okay now?” Isaac whispers into my ear. I’m sure he’s aware of all the people around us. I don’t even have to look at the nurses and trainees to know that they look scandalized. I guess the hospital is going to get fresh gossip after they walk out of this room.

“You have an adorable son.” A nurse chuckles awkwardly when I finally meet her eyes. Do they think Isaac’s biologically mine?

“We’ll be back to make a round in the afternoon, Mis. Malik.” The doctor clears her throat suddenly, giving the rest of the group a pointed glance before turning to Saara and I with a professional smile. “Make sure not to try walking around a lot. It’ll just delay the healing process.”

“Yes, Doc.” Saara smiles at the doctor sheepishly, and I immediately find myself shaking my head as I continue to subconsciously bounce Isaac in my arms. *Of course, she was planning on doing the exact thing before she got told not to! Oh, Saara!*

“Come here, handsome.” Saara turns to Isaac as soon as the group of five leaves the room, reaching out her hands towards the now giggling boy in

my arms while I continue walking towards her.

Reaching her, I let Isaac down as he carefully settles himself beside his aunt and leans his head on her shoulder.

“You seem very sick, Aunty Saara.” Isaac glances up at Saara, and Saara’s just about to wrap her arm around him when I turn my attention to the rest of the three people in the room.

“Olly, could you text William that you’re all here? He wanted to know when you all visited.” I smile gratefully at the bulky man standing behind Mary, who is still standing by the couch, looking me over.

“Were you able to sleep comfortably last night? We brought food. Hopefully, Saara can have corn soup.”

“I can. Thank you so much, Mary.” Saara’s voice sounds from behind me. I glance at her to see her and Isaac already beginning to watch something on her iPad. Saara’s on her way to making Isaac a major anime fan like herself. I’m sure she’s having fun because I have never been able to continue a lot of the anime she’s watched since our childhood.

“Thanks, Mary. I was able to get some sleep last night. The sofa’s strangely comfortable.” I smile at Mary before I begin padding my way towards her. Covering the short distance in a few steps, I grasp her hardened-with-labour hands in mine and slowly begin leading her towards the sofa.

“Oh, I was perfect—” Mary begins blushing, shaking her head when she realizes my intention.

“I’d never let you stand around. Please sit.” I squeeze Mary’s hand, once again being reminded how close to my mum’s image she seems in my head. Granted she is almost ten years older than my mum and an entirely different race, but over the past few weeks, I have come to feel a motherly sort of affection exuding from her. I can’t explain it. Maybe she’s trying to fill the void in her chest? Regardless, I’ve decided that I’ll let her. I’ll be her daughter figure if that’s what makes her happy. She’s always been nice to me since day one.

“Oh, oh, oh! Look at the way she’s spoiling you! You’re a very lucky woman, Mary! I wish I could have Gemma spoil me like this all the time.” Mrs. Red pouts, and I find myself grinning at both the women.

“I do spoil you, okay!”

“Gemma is too good for her own good.” Mary smiles at me, and for a second, under the shadows of a certain angle, I even think that it’s a sad one

—a sad smile—then she turns to Mrs. Red and grins, and I shake the thought away.

“Yes! Not everyone deserves your kindness, Gemma. Remember that,” Mrs. Red warns me, and I nod enthusiastically, agreeing to her scolding.

“Yes, ma’am. I will remember that, but will that change anything? Don’t people usually know something isn’t good for them? Don’t they do that anyway? What makes me innately different? I can be as foolish as anyone, can’t I?”

Despite my thoughts, I smile.

I hope not.

The door opens again, and I begin wondering if this really is a VIP room. Aren’t these rooms supposed to have more privacy? More peace?

When I see the person who’s opening the door and walking in, my thoughts fall away. A grin settles on my lips instead.

“Kris!”

“Hello, beautiful! I’m sorry I just got time to take a break. I was on-call yesterday. It was hectic.” Kris strides into the room, wrapping an arm around me casually before pulling both him and me towards Saara’s bed.

“You’re recovering faster than most would. Good job, Malik!” Kris reaches for Saara’s hand, and she lifts her own hand to meet his halfway. She smiles at him warmly, and for a second, I actually wonder if something could boil up between them, then the thought simmers down to absolutely nothing. I have a strange suspicion Saara likes Khristian, which makes me scared . . . for her heart.

“Thanks, man. I can’t wait till I can get out of here.” Saara sighs, a sheepish smile on her face again. And why wouldn’t it be? It makes sense that it is. That she can’t really blame Khristian. After all, Khristian’s girlfriend hadn’t targeted her. She was not the one who was intended to get run over. No. She was the one who saw Khristian in the ‘line of fire’ and pushed him to the side. She saved his life. At the risk of her own.

I can’t help but send a worrying glance in Mrs. Red’s direction. When Saara had told us about the events of the incident a few hours ago, I found myself wondering where I had seen such a situation before. It didn’t take me long to realize I had seen it many times in dramas or movies, and sometimes, even in some novels.

It made me realize something—something I am not even sure Saara has realized. And if she has, she isn't ready to accept it to anyone. Maybe she hasn't even accepted it to herself. She's falling in love with her CEO.

It scares me. I suppose this aspect of love scares everyone. Maybe that's why some people try not to think about it, but will Kris catch her . . . if she falls?

The dead eyes of the man in question float into my mind. His red-rimmed eyes and pale, hollow cheeks. I take in a steady breath. Yeah, maybe he'll catch her too.

"And where is our Gemma lost?" Saara chuckles with Kris, and I find myself being pulled back to reality just as the door opens again.

This time, in strides William. His eyes instantly zeroes on to his child before it eventually finds me, or maybe Kris's arm around my shoulder. I notice the exact moment when his attention sharpens on our point of physical contact and he begins striding forward.

"William! Good, you're here! I got lunch for all of us!" Mary speaks up when he reaches her range of sight.

Continuing in his stride, he glances at Mary with a grateful smile. "Thanks, Ma. I'm starving."

Mary seems thoroughly pleased at that, and I can't help but smile at the man walking towards me. He always knows how to make people feel appreciated. Especially Mary.

When he reaches Kris and me, he smiles at Kris and takes Saara's clipboard from him. "Hey, man. Updates?"

"She's recovering very nicely." Kris grins back, turning to a proud-looking Saara.

"Good job." William smiles at Saara before turning to Isaac.

Seeing his father's attention on him, Isaac quickly begins trying to reach for him, stretching his arms towards his father.

It's truly a pretty sight to see when William immediately takes the boy in his arms and, without a single moment of hesitation, places a kiss on his hair.

The warmth I always feel in my chest around these two makes a visit once again and I find myself silently echoing Saara's loud "Awww!"

I don't think I'll ever be grateful enough for the scarceness of any hesitation towards showing affection the father and son have come to form

over the last few weeks. Although it might seem a little farfetched to ask, I secretly hope that this relationship will continue. That even if Isaac is one day seventeen, he will not feel any hesitation in giving his father a sudden hug or kiss. I can only hope.

Really, really hope.

“Had your lunch, kiddo?”

“Mmm . . . not yet.”

“Gem?”

My eyes snap up to his, surprised, and I find myself shaking my head. A little tongue-tied at his usage of the shortened version of my name. It sounds more . . . endearing. More . . . intimate.

I notice Kris squeeze my shoulder comfortingly before removing his arms from around me when he leans forward to see something in Saara’s iPad. Instantly, I make my way to the father-and-son duo looking at me expectantly.

“Not yet.” I smile up at William, shivering when I feel his fingers slowly curling between the spaces of mine.

“Pretty sure everyone’s starving here.” Kris chuckles, and in the giddiness of his actions, I surprise myself when I find myself handing William a playful pout.

I can almost swear his eyes widens and his gaze darts from my lips to my eyes, then his gaze hardens.

“Yeah.” His voice is suddenly quite serious. “I’m starving.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

One Day When the Sun Shone & the Wind Blew

*How glorious a day it was that day,
When the winds blew across her skin,
And the sun lit her pathway,
Growing roses in her trail.*

It's sunny today. I'm not complaining. It's sunny, but even right now, when the sun is at its peak, it is quite cool.

That's bearable. I can live with that. As if my inner thoughts are heard by God, who must be in a very good mood today, another cool breeze rushes past my skin and I can't help but smile.

"It's a very good day today, right, Isaac?" I look down at the child who has my hand held in his. His pouty face tilts up towards me and my smile turns into a grin.

"I'm still sleepy," Isaac grumbles but continues to walk with me, his small body rubbing against my legs more and more as we continue to make our way towards the bakery. A restaurant is next.

"Want me to carry you?" I ask the child. Behind me, I feel as Olly moves a little closer, maybe to grab all the paper bags and plastics I am carrying.

Still looking at me, Isaac's pout increases and the child slowly gives me a wonderful display of an exaggerated sad nod.

I turn towards Olly with a grateful grin when he leans down and takes the bags from me without a word.

"Thanks," I mouth at the man before turning back to my boy.

"Come." I lean down, extending my arms around his form and

picking him up until I have his head tucked comfortably under my chin. I smile.

This boy in my arms right now, I did not know him a few months ago, I'll admit, but right now, as I stand here with him in my arms, he is someone I love the most. Even if he isn't, he is. He is my son. And he always will be.

"Do you want to eat something?" I ask as we enter the bakery, smiling when the person at the counter turns to me at our entrance.

"That!" Isaac instantly points at the display of cookies in a jar. I glance at the attendant with a soft smile when she reaches towards the jar. "Do I pack these, ma'am?"

"Does it have peanuts in them? My son is allergic to peanuts."

"Ah! I'm sorry, ma'am, I think they do." The woman's smile turns apologetic, and I chuckle, waving my hands before me dismissively.

"It's alright. What about those ones?" I point towards the chocolate cookies that seem to have chocolate chips in them as well.

"No, they don't." The attendant grins back, looking relieved.

I turn towards Isaac instead. "The cookies you chose have peanuts in them, sweetie. Do you want those chocolate cookies instead?" I ask, pointing towards the jar in question. "Or do you want something else now?" I add when I notice him looking towards a display of jam rolls.

"Mummy, what are those?" Isaac whispers into my ears, his grip on me tighter.

"Those are called jam rolls, little peanut," I whisper back, pecking his cheek afterwards out of habit.

"Are they yummy?"

"Very but you can't have a lot at one time, okay?"

He answers with an enthusiastic nod.

"Can I have a jam roll, a dozen of those chocolate cookies, a white bread, sliced, and three of those tarts, please?" I make a move towards the counter where there is a cash register and reach into my handbag for my wallet.

"Thank you for coming! Have a nice day!" the cheerful girl calls out when we're making our way out of the small bakery. I glance at Isaac as my grip on him tightens and then at the brown paper bag containing his jam roll. He insists on holding it, and it's funny how it's dangling right now from his

hands. Still, I can't find it in my heart to ask him to give the bag to Olly.

"You okay?" I ask the tall masculine man walking behind us, carrying our bags in one hand and eating one of the chocolate cookies from another.

"These are really good." He takes another large bite and the cookie disappears. I chuckle when he takes out another one immediately. "Oh, we're here!" He nudges his head to his left, and I turn just in time to turn towards the restaurant entrance.

"This is Saara's favourite restaurant," I mumble. My voice lowers as we enter the Indian restaurant.

"Mummy, bilani!" Isaac whispers into my ear again and I find myself grinning.

I've noticed something about him over the past few days. When he wants something, he whispers his request. Always. At first, I had a feeling it's because he doesn't want others to know if he's told no, but now, I think he thinks it makes him cute and that means I'll give in. I do.

"Sure, sure. I'll just go order everything now. You sit here, okay?" I look into his eyes as we reach an empty table and I lower him on to a chair. I notice when his eyes sadden, but he nods and turns towards Olly when the man settles himself beside Isaac.

Standing at the counter and looking down at the menu, my mind tries to equate everyone in. My mind flutters to William, who must be at the hospital right now, and then to Saara who is also at the hospital. It has been four days since her accident today. Right now, August is keeping her company. That makes it three. And then there is Kris as well. Four. Olly, Isaac, and I will make seven.

"Feeding a large crowd today, Gemma?" Mrs. Sharma smiles at me with the same motherly expression she's worn ever since Saara and I became a regular here, years ago.

I can't help but chuckle, giving her a pitiful smile. "Six hungry stomachs to fill today, Aunty."

Hearing my reply, Mr. Sharma who is just coming out of the kitchen, lets out a loud laugh. "Don't worry, Beta. We've got your back!"

"Thank you, Uncle." I smile at both Mr. and Mrs. Sharma gratefully and then begin placing my order.

* * *

The hospital seems media-free as we make our way through the entrance and into the hospital grounds.

I suppose Saara's PR team managed the press well. They stated the incident as an accident, excluding any involvement of the CEO or his ex-girlfriend from the narrative. Since Saara is due to go on tour starting next week, her tour dates are also postponed. Thankfully, her fans have always been nothing but supportive, and so, Saara doesn't have anything to worry about. That is, except Khala. And that, even I have to worry about.

Khala finally saw the news yesterday. I got a very dangerous call right after. She's going to be here by today afternoon 'cause she couldn't get an early morning flight. I think my parents are going to be here soon too; I know for sure they can't be here with Khala because of work but definitely over the weekend. I'm a hundred percent sure I'm getting a beating. For Saara's matter and for my matter too.

"Those people are staring," Isaac grumbles, and I try to smile at my son. It comes with difficulty. How do I smile at him when I'm feeling awkward under all the other awestruck or hard eyes on us?

"Pa!" Isaac whisper-shouts when he spots his father, who is standing talking to a group of very important-looking men at a distance. The group seems to be a blend of suited men and doctors in white coats. The doctors seem to be showing the men in black suits out. Maybe they are the shareholders?

As if feeling eyes on him, William's head snaps in our direction, and he tilts his head when he looks at Isaac and then at me. I can't help but smile at him while Isaac sends him a wave before we turn towards the elevators.

"Wait, Gemma. He's coming here," Olly mumbles under his breath as he reaches forward and grasps my hand in order to stop me.

Turning back in William's direction, I am caught off guard when I see William and Kris making their way towards us. The attention of the group of happy men is now shared on us as well.

"Gemma!" Kris reaches us first, wrapping his arm around my shoulders casually like he always does. "Oh, I smell food! Good timing, we're starving!"

"Don't worry, I've got you covered." I look up at Kris, grinning back

at the happy man.

“Hey.” I feel William before I hear him. His hand slipping around mine makes me smile, then we’re walking towards the elevators again.

“Where have you all been since the morning?” William asks as we stand inside the moving elevator, his voice is quiet but I glance up at him when I notice the edge in them. He sounds upset.

“We went out and about,” I answer briefly. Looking down at a bright-eyed Isaac, I quickly place an impulsive peck on his forehead. Immediately, the child beams under my affection and leans his head against my chest.

“Welcome back! I was just beginning to get so bored!” If Saara didn’t have a few fractured bones, I’m pretty sure she would be jumping on her bed right now with the amount of excitement she’s buzzing with.

“We have food!” Olly grins at the excited-looking girl when her eyes land on the takeaway bags.

“I knew you had my back, Olly! I wish I could steal you from William.” Saara grins at the man who winks at his partner in crime.

“Where’s August?” I ask, ignoring the two troublemakers when I notice the absence of the tall manager in the room.

“Oh, he had to go to meet the PR and legal team. Apparently, TMZ got a bit too close to the actual truth. Khristian’s ex got taken in. He’s too angry to function.”

Her attention then turns to Isaac, and she immediately begins beaming again. “Isaac! My one and only favourite nephew! What do you have there in your hand?”

“Mummy got me jam rolls! But I can only eat a little at a time,” Isaac answers back excitedly, and when I feel him leaning towards Saara, I begin walking towards my cousin’s bed and slowly place him down beside her.

“That’s good! Did you get Auntie Saara some bilani?”

I don’t hear what Isaac answers her when my attention is stolen by a hand grasping my wrist. My head snaps up, and I tilt my head in a silent question when my eyes meet the dark orbs of William.

“Can we talk?” he asks, his voice low but still somehow, everyone hears.

“Let’s go open all these!” Kris instantly says to Olly, who agrees readily. Moving towards the small dining table in the corner, beside the fridge. I know they are trying to pretend like they didn’t hear William. It’s

nice that they want to give us our space.

“Sure.” I glance in Isaac’s direction to see him distracted before turning back towards William. I slowly follow him when he leads us towards the bathroom. He opens the door and I follow him into the bathroom, then he closes the door behind us.

For a while, a long while, there is only silence in the bathroom.

“I was worried.” His hand slips from my wrist. I turn towards him as he leans his back against the door.

“Why?” I ask, putting my arms behind me and tilting my head up to look him in the eye.

“Irrationally.”

Somehow, I don’t buy that. A sigh slips from my lips and I take a step away from William. I realize he stiffens at my action. “What’s wrong?”

“You and Isaac have slept at your place since Wednesday. I don’t even know where you two are or what you’re doing most of the time. Like today. You—”

“Didn’t even text,” I finish for him.

“Yes.” He nods, finally lifting his head up and meeting my gaze. I almost gasp. The unreadable black orbs that I had always been so weary of, that always felt were staring straight into my soul, are back. They are back, and black, and deadly. William’s not just upset. He’s angry too.

“You’re angry,” I observe, fascinated by his anger being directed at me.

“And you’re amused,” he retorts dryly.

“A little bit,” I admit guiltily.

I’m an idiot. I know I shouldn’t be amused but I’m a little thrilled. I’m probably going crazy. Shaking my head as I try to be rid of my thoughts, I take two steps closer to him until my feet are standing between his and I have my arm wrapped around his waist.

“What can I do?” I mumble into his white coat, taking in the scent of medicine and his spicy cologne.

“I want you to not leave me behind. I want you to let me be responsible for you too.” William sighs, releasing a long frustrated breath of air. “Oliver knows more than I do, Gemma.”

The guilt builds in my chest, and I feel myself tightening my hold on William even though his hands are still limp by his sides.

He's right. There have been many times when I've opted not to tell him things. Many times when I've dealt with it myself.

I do that because William's a surgeon and he's always so tired from work. Just the thought of adding on to the list of things that causes him stress makes me feel the worst sort of curdling in my chest. I want to be the home he comes back to feel peaceful in, not think about more problems to solve.

"I just . . . don't want to worry you. I know your work is stressful. I don't want to add on to that," I admit, tilting my head up until my chin is leaning against his chest and I'm looking up at him.

"I want to know," William answers instantly. His hands clasp around my shoulders and I feel him push me slightly back. I almost begin to feel a tickling of rejection when he suddenly bends forward until his face is in level with mine. "Everything about you and Isaac, I want to know."

"You'll get upset at some point," I whisper, a little out of breath with the intensity I see in William's eyes.

"I will be."

"You'll complain you're always stressed at work and you can't even relax at home," I whisper when he leans closer and frames my cheeks with his palms, brushing my cheeks with the pads of his thumb.

"Some days, I might," he admits.

I sigh. "See?" I'm starting to feel upset myself.

"But I'll apologize every time."

I can't help but look away. "It'll still hurt me when you ask me to tell you everything and then get upset at me for doing so. Whether you apologize or not."

This time, William sighs and straightens back up again, running his fingers through his hair. I step back and William stiffens at my action again. Again, we have a good amount of distance between us. He doesn't say anything and neither do I. In this silence, I drop my head and stare at the amount of space we have between each other right now.

I can't help but recall the train of thoughts I used to have over the years while being single. The dozens of thoughts and opinions I had only months ago about life and sharing it with another person. Wasn't this one of the points I brought out when I made mental lists about why it's better to be single? That dating is too tiresome? Too complicated?

"To be honest, I'm quite surprised by what you're angry about." I

chuckle stupidly, catching William's complete attention again when he lifts his face up from his hand and looks at me. Suddenly, I don't know if I like it better this way with his angry attention on me or when we were both silent.

"What did you think I was angry about?" he asks me with a straight face, his narrowed eyes make me do a second take before answering. Still, I do.

"Kris," I reply simply.

William scoffs and whirls around suddenly, running his fingers through his hair again. Looking away from me, he scoffs again. "Unbelievable." I hear him mutter under his breath, shaking his head in frustration, another raking of his hair away from his forehead.

Seeing William slowly unwind and show how agitated and upset he really is, leaves me a little stunned, so I bite my bottom lip and silently shuffle on my spot, glancing around the bathroom like I've never seen it before. *I should calm down. I really should.* Of course, I am not perfect, and neither is William. We have both been brought up with different lifestyles, in different parts of the world where cultures are completely different and people are formed differently through nature and nurture. I'm not by myself anymore.

I suppose that is what is scary, that I am not single anymore. I had been single; a few days ago, I had been single for seven years. Seven years is such a long time, some marriages don't even last seven years, and I was happy by myself for seven years straight. For seven years, I did whatever I wanted to without being accountable to anyone but my parents. Having a boyfriend is different though.

Being accountable to William is different than being accountable to my parents. Very different.

For a second, I wish William and I could be as simple as Isaac and I. I've never had a child before, but still, with Isaac, it comes so naturally.

Is this what Nani means whenever she says that most women are born mothers? I wonder if it will be too presumptuous to think that she's right? Wasn't it the mother in me that had fallen for Isaac since the very first day? Even though at first, I kept myself in check, I reminded myself that I was not his real mother, but at this point, I think it's safe to say that I'll do everything I can for Isaac. Even if I have not given birth to him. Even though his real mother is Shirley. I am his mother, and he is my son.

I just wish it was just as easy with William. It isn't though. William is an intelligent grown man who won't bow down under my authority most of the time with his heart filled with innocent devotion like Isaac does. With William, I will have to give just as much as I will take. I will have to understand him just as much as I will expect him to understand me.

A good, lasting relationship does have arguments and fights, but it also has a lot of other things I've come to forget being single and independent for so long—understanding, persistence, loyalty, adjustability, communication, and compromise.

Had I been younger, I might have added love there too, but now. I know better. To love, anyone can do it, anyone can fall in love, but to uphold it, not just anyone can do that.

I try to think about the list Mary had given me about William. Only one point stands out to me out of everything I can remember. William is a difficult man, and right now, I can attest to that. In front of me, William runs his fingers through his hair again. I find myself following his movement with my eyes. As if feeling my eyes on him, he turns and our eyes meet. Instantly, I look away, unable to hold his smouldering gaze. Again, he runs his fingers across his hair and turns away.

"Can I go out now?" I goad him, knowing completely well that this will irritate him even more, and it does. He snaps back to look at me with the most blazing eyes I have ever seen to date.

"I've been trying my best to be at my best behaviour and behave in a way that would make you feel comfortable, but you're pushing it, Gem."

"My grandma always says it's good when men show you their bad sides well before getting serious and not act like a saint only to show their real self afterward." I shrug but realize the weight of the words just as it leaves my mouth. Of course, it's best that I'm seeing William's darker side now rather than later. This way, I won't delude myself into imagining him to be some sort of perfect guy. He isn't. He's only human. This way, I'll learn how to accept and deal with him when he's being like this. Just like he will learn to deal with my less than side too. If he wants to.

At my reply, William shakes his head frustratedly and points towards the door. "Feel free."

For a minute, I wonder how I've theorized arguments to be between mature couples all these years while I'd been single.

In my theories, it always comes down to calm-headed discussions where both parties listen to each other completely and do not lose their temper like we were doing only a few minutes ago right in this bathroom. It comes like a bucket of cold water to my head, then when I realize that regardless of age, people can still be immature.

Thirty-year-old couples can still pout and shout and act irrationally just like seventeen-year-old couples. And that's fine. Like us, right now we stand here, a twenty-four-year-old girl and an almost-thirty-year-old guy, in a hospital bathroom, childishly turning a discussion into a childish fight. And I'm the instigator. I'm an idiot.

Still, my eyes lift and find the door. Stubbornly, I begin walking towards it.

"I just want to know, okay?" William blurts out when I'm almost at the door. He sounds extremely upset, almost exhausted; I can't help but turn around until I'm facing him. Still, neither I nor he makes a move to remove the distance between us. This time, no one reaches for the other.

"Call me paranoid. Call me crazy. I just want to know. The idea of not knowing what's happening in your life—in our life—stresses me out even more than I would be if you told me!" he continues, messing his hair with his fingers again before it magically falls back into place when he's done.

I can see it now; he's completely showing how irritated and upset he is. He's so upset, he's almost shaking. I can't help but just stare at the man before me silently.

"Just five-word texts updating me about something you think is important, five-word texts telling me what's happening or if there is something wrong! Five-word texts telling me how you decided to deal with it! I'm not saying I constantly want you on the phone talking to me, I may not even read the texts when you send it, but at least, they will be there! At least you'll think about me when you make decisions in your life! At least I'll be there!"

He takes a deep sigh and I wonder if everyone outside can hear him borderline yelling at me in frustration.

"Look, I can't force you. I know, but I can hope that you try. Okay?"

For a minute or two, I just stand there, looking at William in the eye until he heaves out an irritated breath and turns away.

Then I'm striding forward. It takes me only seconds before I'm

grasping his right arm and turning him around until he's facing me and towering over my small frame. William looks down at me, a little surprised.

"You know you're shaking, right?" I whisper, reaching forward and grasping his arm. A loud yelp escapes my lips when suddenly William rips his arms away from my hand and just as quickly has me pressed against him, his nose buried in my neck while he stands towering over me.

"I hate it when other people know more than I do about you, Gem. I hate it," William mumbles, and I feel my legs give away from the shock of his words and the huskiness in his voice. *Where did this come from? I was not expecting this!* Sometimes, William's straightforwardness really catches me off guard—like right now.

He continues, "Even though I've received international schooling since high school, my thoughts and values are still very Asian. This . . ." He knows exactly what he's doing to me when he brushes his lips against my jaw and I shiver, suddenly clutching to his coat. "Us. It's not a joke. I'm not testing the waters. Everything I said in your kitchen that day three months ago, I was serious about. I was serious about everything I asked and said. I'm still serious. Very serious."

There is a storm in my mind right now, an earthquake in my chest. I'm feeling everything right now. A jumble of emotions as I'm standing here and looking at the man in front of me. The warm shaking in my heart asks me if this is what love is. The twirling in my head asks me how I know he will continue to stay serious in the future. I want to kiss him. I want to cry. I want to run away and live by myself like I had for seven years. I want to live with William forever.

Again, I find myself asking the questions, *Is this what love feels like? This surrender? This warm fluttering that overrides my fear? Is this what love is? Seeing how difficult and irrational even a quiet, sorted man like William can get, and still wanting to be here with him? Choosing him over the independence I have felt being single for so long, is this love? Putting myself in his hands despite knowing that the future is uncertain, is this love?*

Slowly, my attention slips away from my thoughts and I find my eyes fluttering as I come back to William again. Witnessing my obvious state of confusion and indecisiveness, a soft smile has settled on William's lips and I watch with wide fascinated eyes as he pushes the length of my hair back. "Okay?"

I know what he means. He wants to know if I understand him, understand his heart.

“Okay.” *I do.*

The smile that graces William’s face blows me away. I’m standing here, dazzled, smiling at him just because he’s smiling at me like this. The prettiest smile I’ve ever seen on a guy. It changes his face entirely; he looks younger and more carefree. Suddenly, I see just who Isaac has taken after. My smile brightens.

“Can I drop by today? I’ll be home by eight?”

Home . . . as in, my tiny humble house. William just called it home. I want to kiss this man.

“Okay, Isaac and I will wait for you.” I nod, giving in to him. “I’m sure we have your clothes too.”

At this, William turns a little red. I can’t help but reach up and place a kiss on his chin. “Thanks for not being able to stay away when it’s my turn to stay at my place, I guess.”

“Funny,” William grumbles.

“Wanna go outside now?” I chuckle, letting William squeeze me against him and press a kiss on my hair.

Honestly, I don’t mind being here in his arms, but I’m definitely sure that everyone outside is getting worried by now.

“Yeah.” William nods and I reach up and fix his hair back to how it was before he assaulted it with his hands over and over again. Again, he leans forward and presses a kiss on my forehead.

“Thank you.” William smiles.

“You’re welcome,” I beam at William, wrapping my arm around him and giving him a squeeze.

“For running after me that night. For taking a chance when I was too indecisive too.”

My gaze snaps to William and I blink, finding my smile brightening just as my chest flutters with warmth for the man in front of me. *Yes, I suppose this is love.*

“It is so easy to fall in love, you know?” I say, my voice breezy and casual as I grasp his hand and begin walking towards the door.

William remains silent, I guess waiting for me to continue, and I do once we reach the door and I have the cold knob held firmly by my hand.

I turn back and smile at a curious-looking William.

“With someone like you.”

Then I pull the door open and walk out.

* * *

Isaac’s already asleep by the time we drive into the driveway of my home and pull over.

“He needs to have a bath and eat something,” I mumble, looking at the child sleeping in my arms.

“I’ll wake him up,” Olly offers before getting out of the driver’s seat and opening the door to the side I’m sitting on, then he takes Isaac from my arms.

“Hey, buddy.” He immediately begins rousing Isaac from his sleep. Somehow, like it always does whenever Oliver tries to wake him up, Isaac is up and staring at me with his big sleep-filled eyes.

“Mumma?” He blinks as I grab everything and get out of the car, my hands full of our bags.

“Look, baby! We’re home. We just need to get you bathed and fed and then you can go back to sleep.” I smile as I try to fish out the keys for the house.

Isaac surprises me when he breaks out into a sob, my head snaps up to spot a shocked-looking Olly staring at a completely red-faced boy now crying in his arms.

Immediately, I rush and place all the bags on the small front porch before taking Isaac from Olly’s arms and handing Olly the keys.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” I bounce Isaac in my arms as I caress his hair, trying to soothe him.

“I had a bad dream,” Isaac sobs, hiccupping through his words as he tightens his arms around me.

“What did you see?” I ask, frowning as I remember him telling me about seeing nightmares on a number of occasions since I’ve met him.

“I can’t tell,” Isaac whispers, giving me the same answer he’s given me all the other times before. At this point, I’m very concerned.

“Please tell me, Isaac. I won’t tell anyone, I’ll fix everything. I won’t let it hurt you, I promise. What do you see?”

“I’m sorry, Mummy,” Isaac sobs harder, clutching to me at this point. “I can’t tell.”

I go into panic mode. Seeing Olly push the door open, I rush inside with Isaac. “Okay! Okay! I’m sorry! Don’t tell me anything. Let’s go get you bathed and then we can have dinner and watch a cartoon, okay?”

It takes a while, but finally, Isaac nods, still a hiccupping mess. I hold the boy closer to me as I slowly make my way towards the bathroom.

Just what does he see that leaves him so upset?

* * *

By the time William comes home, Isaac and I are settled on the sofa with me sprawled across the largest sofa and Isaac stretched above me—bathed, fed, and asleep.

At the sound of the doorbell, I find myself letting out a tired huff when I try to stand up with Isaac in my arms.

Somehow, I don’t feel like leaving him alone now that he’s asleep. It’s irrational but I don’t want him to be alone in case he sees that weird dream again. Maybe holding him will assure him someone’s there for him, even while he’s asleep. I can just hope.

“Hey.” I smile at William as I pull the door open with one hand, holding Isaac with another.

“Why are you carrying him around?”

The first response that comes to my mind is, “Oh it’s nothing, don’t worry,” but thankfully, I shut up before I say that.

“He’s been having nightmares. I’m scared to leave him alone,” I say instead.

It takes William by surprise, I can tell. Which part though—Isaac having nightmares or me being scared to leave him alone because of that— I don’t know.

“Does he tell you what they are about?” he asks, closing the door before turning to Isaac and me. Leaning forward, he brushes the mop of Isaac’s hair away from his forehead and places a kiss on the centre, then places one on mine.

“He refuses to tell me anything. Maybe you can try it sometime? Maybe he’ll tell you?” I ask, and William nods.

“He must be heavy. Let me put him to bed,” William offers after putting away his bag. Turning back to me, he pulls up the sleeves of his white shirt and extends his hands towards me. Even though I don’t want to, I let him take Isaac, then slowly follow after him when he begins walking toward the second room where we stay whenever Isaac is over. I let Saara have the main bedroom since she’s used to it anyway.

I watch as William lays Isaac on to the bed and tucks him in, placing a kiss on his forehead again. It’s nice to see him show Isaac so much affection. I’ve noticed he’s grown into it over the past few months. Isaac flourishes under his affections. It makes me very happy too.

“I’ll just take a shower.” William smiles at me and I point towards the towel and his pair of clothes.

“Thanks.” He grins, and I notice the red tinge on his cheeks again.

“I’ll take out a plate for you,” I inform him as he walks out of the room.

“Thanks!” He throws me a thumbs up before closing walking out.

For a second, I look down at a sleeping Isaac and sigh, not wanting to leave him alone. After a few moments of hesitation, I lean down and brush his hair away from his eyes, then straighten up and walk out of the room, making sure to dim the lights but leave them on.

Walking into the living room, the silence slowly fades away to the low hum of the TV playing *Spongebob*. A content breath leaves my lips and I slowly trail my way towards the couch. Picking up the remote, I change the channel to a different one and place it down on the coffee table as I turn around and begin tidying up the cushions.

When I’m done, I make my way to the kitchen and begin heating dinner. The night’s chilly, and the cold breeze brings in the scent of frangipanis from the tree just outside the kitchen. I smile as the breeze leaves tiny goose bumps along my exposed skin that’s not covered by my thin-strapped tank top and long baggy pyjamas.

For a second, I freeze when I suddenly feel a warm, strong pair of hands grasps my shoulder from behind me, but then William chuckles and drops his lips on to my shoulder and I find myself relaxing in his arms.

“You’re warm,” he states, turning me around and away from the microwave.

“You’re warm too.” I smile up at him as I cup his face between my

palms. “And very cute,” I add teasingly, giving in to temptation and pinching his right cheek on a whim.

At my display of affection, his nose crinkles and his mouth twitches with the shadows of laughter as he tries to pull his cheeks away from my pinching hands. He can’t stop the blush that graces his cheeks though. I can’t help but grin when I see that.

“Go sit down and relax. You need to rest. I’ll serve myself.” *I don’t like that, he looks tired too.*

“I can— “

“Go,” William cuts me off, leaning forward until his eyes are in level with mine. Is it awful that I want to hold him and kiss him every chance that I get? Not even the lip kiss, just kiss—a peck on the cheek, a brushing of lips just so he knows how much I adore him. I smile. *Yes, I adore this man. This difficult, difficult man.*

“Yes, sir.” I find my way to the highchair at the kitchen island and settle down on it.

“You know I think the rest of my life will be adventurous.”

I look up, confused when William speaks up all of a sudden. I find him looking at me with a soft smile.

He continues, “With someone like you.”

* * *

What time is it? I don’t even know. All I know is that William got called in for an emergency half an hour ago, and I can’t sleep now. It’s not like this hasn’t happened before; he’s had to leave because of emergencies a lot of times before.

Tonight though, I just can’t sleep, so instead, I lie on the bed, browsing the internet while Isaac sleeps soundly beside me. For a second, I wonder what time William will return, and if he will even return tonight. Usually, he just ends up spending the night at the hospital.

I’m browsing through some random site when a notification pops up and catches my eye. Immediately, I tap on the message notification.

Saara: Hey, you okay? Did you two fight in the bathroom?

Gemma: Hey . . . I’m okay. How’s Khala? Is she too mad at me? Will I get beat up? :/

Pressing on send, I let out a sigh, and instead of going back to the browser, I tap on my iBooks and open up a new historical romance novel I've been planning on reading for a while now. I'm trying to keep the thoughts of getting a potential beating away from my mind. Khala can be a very dangerous woman when she's mad. Maybe I should have just told her, then the stupid CEO would have been the one to get beat up instead.

Saara: Don't worry, she's fine now that I've told her that you only kept it from her because I made you promise before. And DO NOT CHANGE THE TOPIC!

What do I even say to her? I think about it for a moment.

Then decide to just tell her the truth.

Gemma: Sigh . . . yeah, kinda, I don't know. He was angry. Sigh . . . he feels left out that I keep things from him and I do that because I mean he's a surgeon, okay, he has like 100 things to be stressed about at work. I don't want him to feel pressured when he gets out of the hospital every day. Also, I'm 100% sure he'll get upset if I start telling him everything.

A ping.

*Saara: *facepalm**facepalm**facepalm**facepalm* Did you tell him that?*

I let out a sigh.

Gemma: I told him that. He gets it and he even admitted that some days he might get upset. Honestly, kill me.

And another ping.

Saara: <how to kill.gif> Dear lord, and?!

I can't help but laugh when I see Mickey's GIF. I think about it for a moment, then lay it on her. She's the only true person I can tell all this to anyway.

Gemma: He said, he can't promise that he won't get upset sometimes, but he'll apologize right away because he's the one who's asked for it. He wants to be told everything that concerns me and Isaac, Poofy. He just wants to be kept updated. Even though he won't be on standby to read the text, sending a message to update him is still something he hopes for.

Saara: 'Hope for' . . . did he say that?

*Gemma: *facepalm**facepalm* Yes.*

Saara: You're feeling weird. What are your thoughts about this?

Gemma: I'm not answering that. No thanks, Madam Shrink.

Truthfully, I want to answer that, but she's sick, and I don't want Khala to get even more upset at me than she is.

Saara: <loading gun.gif> Start talking, woman.

I hesitate, biting my lips, then I begin typing, typing things I've not even had the courage to contemplate in the privacy of my thoughts.

Gemma: I've never thought of him as perfect. I always knew that he had his limitations — but this is the first complication I'm seeing in his personality. I don't want to think about it like that... but I feel like it's because of his wife.

Her reply comes within minutes.

*Saara: Ex-wife**

And I think so too. He's a little sensitive about you. You told me his ex-wife was never home. He must have been really hurt and confused during those times. I'm sure he didn't even know what his wife was doing or what she was doing through then. I think that's why he wants to know everything so much.

I also notice how he glances at Kris whenever Kris puts his arm around your shoulder or touches you. William acts casual and lets you two be because he knows you might get uncomfortable or upset. But Gem, he gets really jealous. I noticed.

I sigh. The overwhelmed feeling I was getting in that bathroom comes back in showers, and I suddenly find myself drenched in an intense amount of emotion—so much that it feels too strong to take. Almost . . . like suffocation. Will I be able to survive like this?

Gemma: Is it wrong of me to feel a little suffocated right now?

Saara: Not really. You've been single for a while. Of course, suddenly giving someone so much of your consideration and

heart is going to be very overwhelming. I think you should read this poem called "A visitor" by this Korean poet Jeong HyeonJong. It's the only advice and words of wisdom I can give you right now.

I sigh. A poem . . . I type back a reply.

Gemma: Sigh . . . you're right.

Maybe my body and mind are in an adjustment period right now. I've been single and free for so long. A visitor by Jeong HyeonJong. Okay, I'm googling it now.

I don't. I don't google it. Instead, I find myself putting my phone down and staring up at the black ceilings of my bedroom.

Her reply comes with a ping soon enough though, and I find myself grabbing for my phone instantly.

*Saara: Good girl. Read that poem and think about it. I really mean it, Gem. Oh, and P.S. your parents sent a lot of stuff for me (and you). They're going to come over for a long weekend to visit me (and you). Ma said she'll see you tomorrow. Now I have to go, she's telling me to put away the phone and rest. *facepalm**

I smile. Phew. Maybe I won't get beat up after all.

Gemma: Mothers know best. Goodnight, Poofy! Tell Khala I love her (and you) <3 See you both tomorrow, I'll make the house spotless before you arrive!

As soon as the message is typed, I press send and let it drop on me. In the peaceful darkness, my phone lands on my abdomen with a thump and I let out a slow sigh.

Strangely, it doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would. In the darkness, right now, I can't see anything, but still, I lie on my back staring at the ceiling as if the room is lit as brightly as it can be. I may not be able to see anything in this darkness, but I can think more than I can see when there's light. In the darkness, thoughts come freely to me.

A visitor. The poem comes to my mind out of the blue. I'm curious, it's true. What piece of wisdom and advice can this poem have? I pick my phone up again. It takes a bit to get the spelling of the poet's name right, but soon, I have google popping up thousands of hits for my search. I click on one with an English translation.

A Visitor

*Meeting someone in life is
something that's actually astonishing.*

*That's because he brings himself with his past,
present,
and his future.*

*That's because someone's whole life comes along.
The heart is fragile.*

*Therefore, it might have been broken. The heart is coming
too . . .*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

One Day When the Tears Flowed & the Past Came Back Crying

*When the tides are high,
She sits by the bay
Her eyes trying to see the world that lies beneath the
mysterious sparkling sea
Her feet, they hang toes,
dipped in the sea.
For a moment, she breathes, just silence and peace;
The tears that trickle down her cheeks,
just as they always do and pull her back to her reality.
When the waves settle in, bringing with it green weed.
She sighs as it tangles around her skin.
Her tears slip,
again, she breathes;
Her head tilts up,
again, she breathes;
“Is this my life?
Am I to live like this?
Am I always supposed to live in two worlds,
and belong to neither one?” she asks out loud,
and wonders if God will have mercy and answer her this
time around.
No reply arrives, and so she continues,
hoping God will hear her,*

*& one day help her too.
“Here I sit,
my hands in one world and my toes in another.
Here I live,
a world I was born into and then there is his.
Where am I to belong?
How am I to live?
Or will I meld with these waves in the end?
Merely bubbles, like that sad mermaid did?”*

I have a lot to say but not enough words to say it. My mind is a blur of how I am feeling and how I shouldn't feel. And so I stand here and continue staring at the trembling back of a broken man as he continues to lean against the closed doors of the hospital room.

“Dante.”

His name leaves my lips, and it almost sounds like a toad's croak. My chest is stuffed with the heaviness of surprise when the man turns towards me and I stare into his misty eyes.

“Gem.”

He reaches forward and clings to me, his body heaving up from the ground until he has his arms wrapped around my waist. It catches me by surprise. It also catches the companion who is standing beside me by surprise too.

“Gem, is she okay? I can't bring myself to go inside,” he sobs against my stomach. I feel as his wet eyes burn a wet spot on my dress. I glance up at William to find him staring at the crying man holding me as if I am his lifeline.

“She's fine.” I let out a sigh and place my hand on his shoulder. I wonder if I'm trying to comfort him, the man who cheated on my cousin with her own manager or if I'm trying to comfort myself for the lies beyond those closed doors is something I don't know of. *Is Khala the only one there with Saara? Is there August too? Maybe Khristian?* I sigh again, my fingers find their way up to Dante's hair for a second before I let them fall lamely against my sides.

Dante notices and he looks up with his broken eyes. “Everyone is looking, Dan. Please get up,” I mumble, noticing for the first time how the

people around us are functioning quite slowly as opposed to the speedy functioning I have noticed on other days. Even the two officers guarding Saara are staring at us with open fascination.

“I’m sorry,” Dante sniffs, nodding vigorously as he shuffles back and stands up. Suddenly, he’s towering over me, almost at the same height as William. “I’m sorry,” he repeats, running his fingers through his hair frustratingly.

“How did you know she was here?” I asked, wondering if I should reach out to comfort the tall man. I can’t believe he’s standing in front of me, shamelessly letting his tears fall despite the fact that he’s a well-known lawyer and that I’ve never seen him cry like this before. I don’t think I’ve seen him cry at all.

“The media.” Dante’s shoulder slumps, and I feel William’s fingers find the small of my back. “And connections,” he mumbles softly. I nod. Of course, he and Saara have a lot of mutual friends. They had been together for seven years after all.

“Mum called me,” he finally admits to it, and I’m left stunned. *Khala called him. Khala still doesn’t know?*

“Saara didn’t tell her yet, I guess,” he answers my silent questions even before I can ask him, then his eyes find where William’s hand is, and he glances up at me looking surprised.

“This is my William, my boyfriend,” I answer his unspoken question, feeling William’s hold on me tighten. He pulls me slightly closer. Dante doesn’t miss that move, his eyes snapping from William to me.

“You’re dating again.” He smiles softly, and for a second, I think he almost looks sad.

“Yeah,” I reply, shutting away any shadow of disappointment I hear in his voice.

“I always thought you’d never date after—” He stops and shakes his head, looking up at me apologetically. “Congratulations.”

“Hi. Dante.” Dante extends a hand towards William, and for a second, it feels like William won’t take it.

He does. “William.” His hand grips on to Dante’s and they give each other’s hand a shake.

“We should go in,” I offer. I don’t know if Dante should come in as well, but I can’t bring it on to myself to send him away after seeing him sob

as a child clutched to me. That and Khala did call him. Saara needs to solve this one by herself.

Walking into the room, my eyes zero in on Khristian on the sofa, and I instantly feel like something horribly momentous is going to happen today. August is nowhere to be seen, and neither is Khala. I don't know if I should say my good prayers for this or not but say them regardless.

Saara's eyes find mine first, and she's only beginning to smile at me when Dante makes himself known.

"Oh my god," Dante hisses as he steps out from behind William's shadow, his eyes murderously roams over a suddenly-very-shocked-looking Saara before he begins striding towards her, his arms reaching for her. I bite my lip and focus on Saara's and Khristian's reaction.

Khristian understands from the get-go. I see it in his expression as he looks at the devastated man rushing towards Saara. He looks resigned. He looks defeated. I feel bad. I feel like it's somehow my fault he's feeling this way.

When did I begin to root for Khristian? My eyes move to Saara instead, and I watch as a dozen emotions rush through her face. Shock, anger, affection, familiarity, sadness. For a second, she looks like she wants to open her arms and let Dante hold her while she cries, then she looks like she wants to slap him across his face with those exact hands, but I do notice that she doesn't look at Khristian. Not even once. Not until he stands up and begins walking away.

The look in her eyes, even Dante notices because he turns around and stares at the retrieving back of Khristian just before he opens the door and walks out and the door clicks shut behind him.

I, on the other hand, can't help but look from my silent cousin's teary eyes to the closed door. My chest constricts as realization begins to settle in.

Oh, Poofy . . .

* * *

"She likes her CEO," William states as we step out of the room after a few minutes, leaving Saara and Dante alone in the room. It was William's idea, tugging my hand gently until I realised that the two were withdrawn in our presence.

As much as I would like to pretend that ending a relationship is as easy as saying, “Let’s break up”, I know that’s not true. Saying something does not mean it just ends. Dante and Saara have seven years behind them. For seven years, their relationship has cultivated and grown. A simple “get lost” can never do anything. They need to talk, they need to figure it out themselves. So we walked out.

“Hmm,” I agree after a moment of silence of not being able to find proper words to express myself. I think she likes Khristian a lot too.

“She still loves the lawyer.”

He’s right. Of course, he is. How easy can it be to throw away seven years’ worth of feelings in just three months? It was hard enough to let go of my last boyfriend, and we had not even dated for three years. *Of course, Saara still loves Dante. Of course.*

“Hmm,” I agree again, squeezing his hand before tilting my head up to look at the man who I call mine right now. Saara and Dante have loved each other for years before things fell apart. What guarantee do I have that it will not happen to me and William? Shouldn’t I stop before it becomes unbearable to be without him?

Looking down into my eyes, the corners of William’s lips curve up almost as if it’s a trick of the light. He slowly reaches down and twirls a loose strand behind my ear. I blink as realization dawns over me . . . it’s already too late. It’s already too late.

“Are you still angry about Olly knowing more than you?” I grin, finding myself changing the topic as I lift up to my toes and shamelessly place a kiss on his jaw.

Indulging me, William scoffs, but I notice how rigid his entire form is. Whether it is from my public display of affection or from bringing up his jealousy towards anyone else in his household except Isaac being closer to me than him, I don’t know. I sigh, finding myself slightly amused.

Slightly confused. Slightly regretful.

“No.” He slowly smiles down at me. “As long as I know I’m the one you reach for.”

He looks beautiful. Right now, when he’s smiling. His eyes are crinkling slightly on the sides. His teeth are dazzling against his pink chapped lips. His smile—it makes me happy.

“Good,” I beam up at him. *I love you*, I want to say.

* * *

A few minutes later finds me in front of the elevator—alone—waiting for the doors to open so that I can leave the hospital. William got a call and left a few minutes ago, after which, I went back to Saara’s room just to find Dante still there. Both of them were just . . . there . . . silent. I said my goodbyes, and now, here I am.

Seven. Six. Five . . . I watch the numbers beside the elevator decrease and let out a soft sigh, my mind moving back to the hospital room.

I saw it in Saara’s eyes, she didn’t want me to leave her alone. She didn’t want to be with Dante, but I still left.

Aside from the fact that I have a class today that I don’t want to miss, I can’t fix Dante and Saara’s hearts. They have to fix it themselves. Or for each other. And that choice too has to be made by them.

“Gemmu!”

My gaze snaps up and widens just as the elevator opens and Khala and August step out of it. I am pulled into the welcoming arms of my mum’s older sister.

A sense of relief and warmth runs through me as I wrap my arms around my Khala and hug her back—relief because I’ve evaded the smacking, and warmth because I realize that I’ve missed her so much.

“Bubba, where are you going?” she asks, looking me up and down after she breaks our hug, stepping back and taking me in.

“I have a class in an hour so I was just going to Uni.” I smile back at my aunt sheepishly. At my answer, understanding instantly swims into her eyes, and I once again see how similar she and Mum look. At times like these, there is no denying that they are sisters.

“Oh, okay! Acha go. You’re so busy yourself. Studying and working, you must be so tired.” Isma Khala makes a pitying face and pulls me back into a hug.

“I’ll call you,” I promise her when we break the hug and take a step back. For the first time, I turn towards August then, who’s still standing beside Khala.

“Hi!” I smile.

“I’ll drop you.” He smiles at me instead when my attention finally

lands on him.

“Yes, dear, please drop her at her campus. Everyone keeps telling her to get her license but she doesn’t listen.” Khala Isma turns to look up at August with a big motherly smile, and I want to groan when August gives me a cheeky grin at the ‘driving license’ bit.

“Yes, Isma.” August grins at Isma Khala, and for a second, I marvel at how well he manages to pronounce her name when, before I know it, I have a strong arm wrapped around my shoulder and I’m being steered towards the elevator again.

“Talk to you later, Khala!” I turn back towards my aunt, waving at her before I’m led into the elevator.

“I haven’t seen you in a while,” August states as we shuffle to the back of the empty elevator, already making way for other people. His arm shifts from around my shoulder to my elbow just as I look up at him and grin.

“Yeah, you’re always out whenever I’m here, aye?”

August grins back, looking down at me with that playful expression he has on his face whenever we’re together. “Yeah.”

Slowly, the elevator begins to fill and our conversation fades.

“Hey, isn’t that your CEO?” I whisper when I spot the entertainment company’s young CEO sitting on a bench with his body bent over so that he can rest his head on his hands.

“Khris?” August stops, turning and frowning at the guy.

“Yeah, it’s him.” I nod as the young man tilts his head up for a second and I recognize him properly. I’m already walking towards him by the time I finish ‘him’ with a shocked August trailing behind me.

Why am I approaching the man who’s in love with my cousin? I don’t know. Maybe it’s because I feel responsible for the clear hurt that’s almost pouring out of his being right now. If only I hadn’t let Dante in, things would be different right now. Maybe Khristian would still be in the room, just sitting there on the couch—a silent but comforting companion.

“I’m fine,” he says when I drop down beside him. Despite myself, I smile.

“I tell that to myself, too, sometimes. Especially when I am not fine at all. I tell that to myself and everyone around me.”

There’s silence around us for a while. I almost begin to wonder if this is it—if he won’t speak anymore and I’ll end up waiting here patiently until

it'll be too late to reach Uni on time.

"She still loves him." Khristian finally breaks the silence after a few minutes of waiting.

"And you?" I ask, I know I'm being promiscuous, asking for answers where he holds no obligation to answer me, but my thoughts are cut short when Khristian scoffs. A very bitter sound.

"What is love?"

"I used to ask myself that too." I smile. "But then I realized that I was so busy trying to find the meaning of it in words when I could have just stopped and felt it instead. You can't make the heart feel something it won't." I shrug.

"Are you telling me to back off because your cousin still loves her cheating ex-boyfriend?"

I tilt my head to the side, looking at the brooding CEO. "No."

Khristian scoffs. "Yes, you are!"

"Do you know how long it took me to break up with my ex-boyfriend? Almost a year and a half. It took five more years to let him go."

I look away, up at the sky. "It's hard to let go, especially when you've loved someone wholeheartedly."

My voice is wistful by now, I realize. The nostalgia hits me in the wrong places and I take a shaky breath in. "We are different people. Our actions are our own. Our feelings are our own. Just because the person you love does something to hurt you, does not mean it'll change how you feel about them instantly. You'll get hurt, yes, but your heart is yours in the end. You can't make it feel something it doesn't want to. In the end, maybe you will forgive them. Maybe you'll fight. Or you'll walk away."

"Do you think she will take him back?" Khristian asks, all the while keeping his eyes on his shiny shoes.

"What will you do if she does?" I ask instead, not trusting myself to come up with a good answer. I don't know where she and Dante will end up.

"It won't change how I feel," Khristian admits slowly. His answer feels bitter, I can tell. It makes me feel pity for the young CEO.

"That's it then!" I beam at him instead, standing up and patting down any dirt from my jeans.

"What did your ex-boyfriend do?"

The question stops me mid-step, I look down and I find myself

staring at my feet for a moment before I lift my head up again and look forward . . . into my future instead of my past. A possible future with William.

“He loved me.” I smile, turning my head up to the sky. “He did, but maybe not when he was drunk. He would hit me all the time.”

“I loved him too much to let go, so I stayed until I couldn’t, then I broke up with him.” I sigh, letting out a soft breath before I turn back to looking at trees. “He cried a lot. He was sober then.”

When I can muster up enough courage, I turn around to look at him.

“Saara and Dante have seven years behind them. It wasn’t like their road had been rocky for ages. No. Everything was perfect until she found out he had cheated on her. She still hasn’t been able to process it. It was so sudden. Of course, she won’t be able to let go so easily—regardless of what he did, he was her first love, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t feel for you. She does. She pushed you aside to get run over herself, what does that say for her? Do you think you can treat her better? Do you think you can love her as she deserves to? Do you think her love will be enough for you? Do you want her enough to wait? If yes, then fight for her. At least once. Fight for her and wait for her.”

* * *

It’s chilly today. It has been raining since yesterday afternoon after I got back from university and all morning today. A glance at the wall clock tells me that it’s almost nine o’clock in the morning. I bring my cup of cocoa up to my lips and take a sip of the lovingly warm liquid.

The house is quiet around me. Despite the housekeepers working in the house, they are all surprisingly silent today. I appreciate that. I’ve not been feeling great ever since waking up. As if hearing my thoughts, the twisting pain in my lower abdomen comes back with a bang. I find myself squinting my eyes and curling further into myself on the sofa. I hate period pains.

“Here.” I feel Mary’s soft hand caress my hair before she walks around the sofa and extends a small bowl towards me. I scrunch my nose when the foul bitter smell reaches my nostrils.

“It’s Chinese medicine. It’ll help with the cramps. Drink it.” Mary’s

voice turns commanding as she edges the bowl towards me. My eyes move from her warm eyes to the bowl and I make a face before looking at her again.

“Gemma,” Mary warns, motioning towards the bowl again.

“Just drink it.” Ren sighs as he comes to stand beside her, looking down at me as well. “It helps with my period cramps as well.”

I chuckle at that. “Of course it does.” I grin at the boy before turning towards Mary and taking the small warm bowl from her hand.

“Here, let me close your nose for you.” Ren scrunches his nose as he smells the poison liquid and softly presses my nose between his thumb and index finger. I take the burning liquid in with a big gulp. It burns through my throat as I swallow the thing. For a second, I even contemplate puking it all out but I don’t. William’s house is too pristine for this disastrous concoction, so I swallow. And begin coughing.

“Here.” Ren immediately extends a glass of water and a pack of Eclipse mints towards me. I take it, reaching for it like a woman who hadn’t drank water in years. That thing was foul.

“Good girl.” Mary smiles at me when I look at her with a wounded expression, I’m sure.

“Thanks, Mary.” I find myself saying instead, reaching for her hand, then I look at Ren and extend a hand to grasp his. “Thanks, Renny.”

Surprisingly, the medicine works quickly. The cramps become bearable to almost disappearing on most parts, and I can’t be more grateful to the horrible-tasting medicine as I sit on the sofa and work on the manuscript I’m due in a week. My eyes find the clock on my laptop’s screen, and I frown, turning slightly towards the stairs.

It’s almost eleven and Isaac is still asleep. William hasn’t come down yet as well. I wonder if I should go check up on Isaac, then think against it. It’s Saturday, one of the only days he gets to just relax and laze around. Of course, he does need to go out to the city today, but I think I’ll let him sleep for a little more. I go back to my editing.

“How’s it going?”

The question catches me off guard, and my gaze swiftly snaps up towards the speaker when I find William standing behind me, looking at my laptop screen. I notice that he’s already in his formal clothes, then he’s walking around the sofa with a frown settled between his two thick eyebrows.

“Are you feeling unwell?” He leans forward and places his hand over my forehead.

“Erm, just the usual monthly subscription,” I reply after a moment’s silence. He understands immediately.

Taking me by surprise, William drops himself on to the sofa beside me. Before I know it, I’m being picked up and pulled on to his strong lap.

I let out a squeak when I feel his thigh muscles flex underneath my buttocks and my wide eyes immediately find his amused ones as he wraps his arms around my back and my waist and holds me against him like I’m a child.

“Does it hurt a lot?” I feel as his warm lips move against my forehead and close my eyes at how great it feels to be here right now . . . in his arms.

“It did,” I confess with a small voice. “But Mary gave me something to drink and it’s okay now.”

“Good.” William presses a kiss on my hair when I finally settle against him, tucking my head against his chest.

“I’m ruining your clothes,” I grumble, suddenly realizing how wrinkly this will leave his shirt. I’m already beginning to move out of his embrace when his arms tighten around me and he pulls me back into his arms.

I stare up at William with wide, confused eyes, and the man chuckles, impulsively leaning his head down and pressing his lips on my neck. I can’t help but gasp at the sensation his kiss produces in my body. My neck arches on its own and I find him chuckling before continuing to toy with my neck.

“It’s just a shirt,” William mumbles against the sensitive skin of my neck before straightening a little and pressing a kiss on my jaw.

“You’re more important,” he adds, pressing another kiss a little higher above my jaw.

I don’t know why but it makes me happy. His words. Him being here, holding me in his arms like a child. I can’t help it when I suddenly move my arms around his neck and bring his head down to capture his lips between mine.

I feel the effect my action has on him instantly. His arm around my waist tightens, and I’m suddenly feeling the evident proof of his manliness against my thigh.

By the time we break the kiss, we’re both panting and my heart is

drumming at the speed of a couple dozen miles a minute. It's become even harder to ignore his manliness pressing up against my thighs.

He looks beautiful freshly kissed. My eyes run from his dark hazy eyes to his slightly flushed cheeks to his plump pink lips. He looks beautiful like this. My heart constricts for the man before me. *I sure am lucky.*

Slowly, the high of the kisses rides out and I begin feeling my cheeks burn. Clearing my throat, I try to shift out of William's lap and his arms around me instantly locks me into position, a soft groan leaving his lips as he drops his head against my shoulder.

"Don't move." William's hoarse groan stuns me to my spot.

"Oh," I whisper.

"Talk about something else." William presses a kiss on the bare skin of my shoulder where my loose sweater had fallen askew.

I want to yell at myself, or maybe even at William.

Suddenly, I don't want to talk about anything. All I want to feel is his lips against my skin. Anything to always see him flushed from my kisses like he looks right now, but we're in his living room. In broad daylight. Feeling this way right now should be illegal.

I still try.

"We're going to be taking Isaac out today for grocery shopping."

"Hmm." William presses another kiss on my shoulder and I shudder. Doesn't he want me to distract him?

I try again.

"Saara's getting discharged tomorrow. I'm going to stay at mine from tomorrow for a bit," I mumble. This seems to stop William, he lifts his head until I'm looking into his dark hazy eyes.

"For how long?" I can see it, the moment the haze disappears and his eyes harden. For a wistful moment, I almost take a risk and wonder if he can't stay without me now, then I push that thought away. That can't be possible.

"I don't know," I admit.

For a second, he looks like he's going to refuse, but then William nods. "Okay."

I nod too. "Okay."

"Do you think I should tell my folks about us?"

This question catches William's attention. His eyes peer into mine

and I find myself smiling at him like a foolish baboon.

“Saara’s gotten into an accident right now. I don’t think right now is a good idea. Maybe we should wait a little longer?”

It makes sense. “Okay.” And lie my head against his chest again.

“Gemma.”

I glance up, finding his eyes on me. “I—”

“Mummy! Pa!”

Both our heads snap towards around to the small boy standing at the foot of the stairs, his wide eyes glued to us.

I don’t know why neither William nor I try to right our position on the sofa. I don’t know why I don’t get off the man’s arms or he doesn’t push me off, but before we know it, little Isaac is running towards us, then he’s climbing on my lap and all three of us are laughing.

It sure must be a sight to see. Isaac sitting on my lap while I’m sitting on William’s.

“I think we’re crushing your dad,” I admit, still in between chuckles as I wrap my arm around Isaac and pull the lovely boy towards me. Feeling him snuggle against me, I press a kiss on his hair and then tilt my head up and press a kiss on a bright-eyed William’s cheek as well.

I really am lucky.

* * *

“I think you should rest at home today, sweetie.”

I groan, looking up at Mary, Ren, Olly, and Isaac all standing before me, ready to leave. Almost an hour has passed after William finally left for the hospital, leaving behind a glowing Isaac and I on the sofa. Half an hour before any housekeeper decided to walk into the living room and look me in the eyes without blushing their faces off while talking to me.

“But I was supposed to come help too,” I mumble back, feeling sort of useless today.

“Why is Mummy not coming with us, Grandma?” Isaac lifts his disappointed eyes up to his grandma before looking down at me. “I want her to come with us.”

“Your mother is not feeling well, Isaac. Don’t you want her to rest?” Mary explains, and eyes me, silently asking me to help her.

“Really?” Isaac turns towards me with his concerned wide eyes.

“Yes.” I find myself nodding awkwardly at the child. Even though the uneasiness in my lower abdomen and my back pain tells me to just stay at home, I really don’t feel like being here and not with Isaac. Still, I have a feeling Mary is not going to let that happen. The more we’ve gotten to know each other, the more she’s become overbearingly protective of me. Just like my own mother. Is this something to do with Asian mothers?

The response from Isaac is simple. “Okay.”

* * *

“Are you eating well?” The smile that flutters on my lips is something that I cannot stop. Expect my mother to ask me if I’m doing okay at work when I called her a few minutes ago and for dad to ask me if I am eating well.

“I’m eating just fine, Pa. Don’t worry. Are you doing okay?”

“I’m okay, darling.” I hear my father chuckle from the other side of the line.

“Did your aunt and cousin tell you that they are coming back the day after tomorrow? Saara has decided to take a small break back home while she recovers. Your mum and I think it’s a good idea. I was thinking . . . maybe you should join them? Come home for a bit?”

I contemplate it. The idea of returning home. Of course, I want to, but then I think about Isaac and William. My breath hitches in my throat. I contemplate.

“Dad . . . I have something to tell you.” I find myself saying before I can stop myself. To think about the consequences and ramifications. I definitely don’t think about how William and I had agreed just hours ago that we will tell my parents later. Right now, I just feel like my dad needs to know. Like I have to tell at least one of my parents.

“Yes, darling?” my father replies, his tone—I notice—becomes a little serious.

“Dad . . .” I stop and take in a deep breath. “I’m dating a man who has a child!”

The moment the words leave my mouth, I begin to regret my tact dreadfully. I could have said it in a much nicer way! I could have prevented it

from sounding so grave!

What follows my outburst is silence. A long-suffering silence.

After five minutes of not saying anything, my dad speaks again. “How did this happen?”

So I tell him. I start from the beginning.

When I reach the end there, only silence meets my ear. Granted, he didn’t speak a lot while I was reciting the happenings of the past few months of my life.

“How old is his son?” my father finally speaks up. His question seems simple enough, but I still find my palms sweating.

“He’s five,” I mumble.

“And the guy, how old is he?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“A neurosurgeon. He mustn’t be around a lot.”

I release a shaky breath. “He isn’t.”

There is no need to be untruthful. It’s common knowledge doctors hardly have personal time.

“But it’s enough,” I add, my voice a mere whisper.

“Are you serious, darling?”

I gulp. “I love him.” This is the first time I’m saying my feelings out loud. To my dad. To anyone.

“Does he?” my dad asks, unknowingly putting his finger on a weak spot. The answer is, I don’t know. I don’t know if he loves me.

“I don’t know,” I reply truthfully, looking out into the garden from my spot in the living room.

“Gemma.” My father sighs.

I sigh too. “He said . . . he said he likes me, so I should take responsibility of him.”

This seems to catch my father off guard.

“Responsibility?” he asks. “And does he . . . take responsibility of you?”

My heart flutters knowing the answer.

“He does. He gets upset when I don’t tell him if something troubles him. He doesn’t like being left out.” I bite my lip, remembering the time in Saara’s bathroom when we had had our first major argument.

“What ethnicity did you say he is?”

“Half Vietnamese and half Chinese.”

“Okay.” My dad sighs, and I almost feel him nodding on the other side of the line.

“What do his parents do?”

I blink. This is the part where things get tricky, I know. “They are rich.”

“Rich?” Dad sounds startled.

“Extremely rich.” I bite my lip again, nervousness creeping on to me.

“How rich?”

“Billions,” I admit.

“You’d be smart to break up with him, Gemma.”

This catches me by surprise. “Why, Dad?”

“They will think you’re with him for their money. Haven’t you learned anything from your mother’s Asian dramas?”

I look away from the garden, letting my gaze move to my feet. “The only things I want from him are Isaac and him, Dad.”

“Isaac. Yes . . . your stepson.”

“Dad.” I sigh at the slight bitterness in his voice, but I don’t blame him. He had never thought that his daughter would find herself in love with a child and his father.

“Even though he’s not mine, he’ll never be my stepson.”

“Gemma.” My dad sighs, and I sigh with him.

“Send me a picture of them when you can. I won’t tell Mum until you want her to know, you know she’ll freak out,” he says after a while.

I’m thankful, I really am. Mum would definitely have a lot of choice words to send my way.

“Thanks, Dad!”

“Love you, kiddo.”

“Love you too, Dad.”

My phone is slightly warm when Dad and I finally hang up the phone, but then immediately, my phone is blaring up again. A glance in the screen’s direction and I find a soft smile on my lips.

Mum Calling . . .

Isaac must be wanting to check up on me, I think as I tap on ‘Accept’ and place my phone against my ear.

“GEMMA! OH MY GOD, GEMMA! I’VE BEEN CALLING

FOREVER! ISAAC! OH MY GOD, GEMMA I DON'T KNOW HOW IT HAPPENED! HE JUST ATE A COOKIE, I JUST—”

I feel it. The sickening jolt in my stomach as I hear the panicking woman on the other side of the call. Suddenly, I feel faint. Mary seems hysterical, and I know that I can't afford to have the same reaction if I want to have Isaac safe and sound, so I focus on the important things.

“Mary! Mary, hold on! Hold on, tell me what happened?” I cut the older woman off. I know my voice sounds strong, I know I sound like I want to get down to business, but I'm secretly begging her to tell me what's wrong. What exactly is wrong.

“It's my fault! Oh, Gemma, William will never forgive me! I forgot to ask if the cookies had peanuts in them! I'm such an idiot, Gemma! William is never going to forgive me! You have to come here! I don't know what to do! Please!”

“Where . . . where are you?” I ask, my words come out like a croak but I'm trying to control myself. Mary is panicking, so I have to control myself. I have to be strong.

A minute later, I'm running towards the front door, barefoot, with my shoes, bag, and everything in my hand. The maids look worried as I rush past them, but I can't afford to pay them any explanation. All that's running through my mind is my son. My son. Yes, that's what Isaac is. I'm only twenty-four, I'm still studying, I'm definitely not married, but he's my son and I just need to get to him.

I throw the front door open and rush outside, the soles of my feet pressing against the wet pavements as the rain already comes down to meet me against my skin. My hair is flying everywhere, but I don't care as I rush forward to Lord knows where.

A hand grasps me even before I reach the gates, and I'm pulled under the safety of an umbrella, a strong male arm around me.

My wild eyes dart up and I almost begin sobbing when I see Olly looking at me with concerned eyes. The more I try to remain calm, the more I find myself losing control.

“Calm down, Gemma,” he says, holding the umbrella with one and my shoulder with the other.

“He's fine. We got there in time.” Oliver's lips are pursed, and I'm finally feeling the rationality I had temporarily lost while grabbing my things

and rushing out finally settle back into my system.

“He’s fine?” I ask dumbly, looking up at Oliver with my quickly blurring eyes.

“He’s fine.” He nods, then turns towards the Jeep and then opening the door, he pushes me in.

“William?” I ask if William knows. There’s no way I can find any sentence that would seem okay to inform him by.

“I’ve already told him. He’ll drive to the hospital.”

“Okay.” I nod, thankful when he’s turning on the ignition and begins driving.

“How is he?” I ask a silently sobbing Mary as soon as I reach her and wrap my arms around her trembling figure.

“It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault,” she keeps whispering, shaking her head as she continues to talk to herself.

“No, it isn’t,” I insist. “All that matters is that he’s safe.”

“It’s all my fault. My grandchild. It’s my fault, Gemma!”

I bend my neck until I can see her from her level. “No. it. is. not. It can happen to anyone. Please, Mary, stop beating yourself over this. Why don’t you go get some fresh air, okay?”

“No,” the older woman insists vehemently, and in the end, I just turn towards Olly with a helpless look on my face.

“You can see the patient now.”

“Why don’t you go see him first?” I ask Mary, who gladly accepts and rushes into the room.

Olly and I stand outside the room, in the hospital corridor. I keep glancing at the elevator, hoping for William to come out of it, but minutes pass and he doesn’t.

Mary walks out of the room looking a lot better. Giving me a soft smile, she motions towards the hospital room. “I’m going home to make him some hotpot. He suddenly wants to eat hotpot.”

“Okay, I’ll come back with him then.” I nod, reaching for the older woman and wrapping my arms around her again.

Walking into the private room Isaac is in is something I can’t do any faster—once Mary and Olly step into the elevator—as I find myself almost running into the room.

“Mummy . . .”

As soon as I hear his voice and see his soft but still pale-looking face peering up at me from his bed, I find myself almost leaping towards him—discarding my bag on the floor.

The sight of seeing the needle for his drips pushed up his arm makes me cringe. I look away from his small arm, already beginning to feel the scorching guilt eat away at me. It wouldn't have been like this if I had just gone with them. *I should have gone with them.*

“Hey, kiddo.” I smile at the child as I settle down on the chair beside his bed.

“Mummy, you crying?” he asks, and I find my eyes misting again. From so close, I can even see the swelling on his face that's slowly beginning to recede.

“Mummy was scared you'll hurt too much,” I admit, leaning forward and grasping his face between my shaking hands. I wish I could take him in my arms, but I'm scared the needle will move and it'll hurt him, so instead, I place a kiss on each one of his cheeks.

Just then, William walks in. The door opens quietly, and a calm-looking William strides in, his eyes immediately zeroing in on his child.

“Pa!” Isaac yells, then begins coughing. Immediately, I fill up a glass of water and help the child up to drink it.

“Hey, buddy,” William speaks softly, his hand comes down to caress the child's hair, and I look up at him to give him some silent encouragement.

He doesn't look at me.

“Feeling okay?” he asks his child instead.

“I'm hungry.” Isaac pouts, and by this time, I'm growing concerned. William hasn't looked at me even once.

“William.” I find his name on my lips as I stare at him with my widening eyes. *Is he mad at me? Why is he mad at me?*

“I don't want to talk to you right now, Gemma.”

I blink. “But why?” I whisper, already beginning to feel a confused sort of panic settle into my chest.

Finally, William turns to me. I find myself wishing he hadn't.

“I know you're not obligated to, but I had hoped you would at least remember that Isaac's allergic to peanuts. Even though you're not really—” he stops. We stare at each other for a while, and I realize that he thinks I was out with Isaac. William looks away, running his fingers through his hair as he

turns back to his child.

“Want me to go get something for you?”

Isaac’s reply is an immediately excited one. “Yes, Pa!”

I watch as William nods and turns around, beginning to walk out of the hospital room, then he stops.

“Go home.” His voice sounds strangled but I hear it clearly. “Your home.”

Then he’s gone.

I’m left in the room, blinking away tears behind the man who just left the room. I feel wronged, I won’t lie. I feel bitterness too. *How can he just believe that I would not care for Isaac just because I didn’t give birth to him? How can he just . . . tell me to go home when he knows I love Isaac so much?*

Something in me wants to run after him and tell him that I was sick and at home. Shouldn’t he know me better? Shouldn’t he trust me? I remain silent. Let him think what he wants to. The truth will come out soon. He will regret this pain I am feeling in my chest.

The tears spill on to my cheeks, and I turn away, glancing at my bag on the floor a few steps away.

Inching away from the bed, I begin to move towards my bag.

“Don’t leave me!”

I freeze. I whirl around, surprised, to look at the wide-eyed boy already on the brink of crying.

“Isaac . . .” I whisper, not knowing what exactly to say other than his name.

“She’s not my mummy, you are. She didn’t love me. She didn’t spend time with me. You love me, don’t you? Please . . . don’t leave me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

One Day When the Impulsive & Proudful Collided

“I’m sorry,” the rose apologises.

“I am sorry I am not perfect and neither is loving me.

It is hard.

*Although I make you happy when my fragrance wafts
through the midnight air, giving you sweet dreams;*

When I’m blooming under the sunlight and your warm graze.

Someday, you will touch my thorn and it will hurt.

*Please know that even though I have faults, and I may hurt
you sometimes—*

it doesn’t mean I don’t love you.

I love you. I do.

I’ve loved you all this while.”

Relationships are weird. There are many times when the one you love makes you the happiest person alive and there are many times when they make you cry. People can’t be the best version of themselves all the time. Life cannot always be a bright sunny day. Some days, it storms, too, and people say things they really wish they hadn’t after a few hours. In the end, it all comes down to not the person storming, but the person being stormed down on. Does it make sense?

Perhaps not. I suppose though, in hard times, whether one decides to walk away or not though, that is the most important thing. Today . . . I could have walked away. I really could have . . . but instead, I choose to stay.

I choose to stay not because of William, but because of the boy clutching to my shirt, crawled up on my lap with his grip tight on me. His head is tilted back on my chest, he's watching me with wide desperate eyes as if he's afraid I will disappear . . . and I want to cry. I continue to sit on the bed with him in my arms.

I don't know what to say. I don't know what to ask.

Should I even ask him anything? Should I apologize? I don't know.

"I've seen her picture. In Grandma Mary's room. You don't look like Grandma Mary," Isaac whispers after a while, and I look down at him, biting my lips.

"Why did you run up to me that day, sweetie? Why did you pretend that I'm your mum?" I ask him softly. My voice is merely more than a whisper, perhaps something that can be mistaken for the wind.

"Aunty Cecelia's mummy and daddy want her to marry Pa. I saw your yellow umbrella and thought . . ." The child doesn't continue.

"Oh." I nod, realizing the reason why William and Isaac were at the restaurant that day. Isaac must have thought I was his mother and ran out to me. Of course, it makes sense.

"Why didn't you stop when you saw that I wasn't her?" I ask the little boy slowly and feel as his grip on my shirt tightens. His big teary eyes shine up at me and I find myself unable to look away.

"You were nice," he whispers as tears begin to slip down on to his porcelain-like skin.

As I begin to cry as well, pulling the child into my embrace, for a treacherous moment, I begin to wonder if he had run up to some other girl and she was nice to him too. Would she be here in place of me now?

"You kept your promise," the little boy whispers again, and my eyes snap to him, all thoughts forgotten. These words still me. I kept my promise.

"I kept my promise," I repeat his words.

"You found me again. Please don't leave me, Mummy." He's crying now, hiccupping between his words. I look at the tiny pink bundle in my arms and just take it all in.

"I told you I'll find you."

The words echo in my head, spinning around my mind until I've heard it for what seems like a hundred times.

"Oh, Isaac!" I suddenly sob as everything settles in and hold on to the

little boy placing kisses on his forehead and hair.

“You won’t leave? Please don’t leave me,” Isaac sobs with me, tears streaming down his scared little face. I move my head back a little and look at the small child in my arms. He looks terrified. He’s terrified I’ll leave him. Like she did.

My arms around the boy tighten and I nod. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Not even if Pa’s mad?” Isaac sniffs, looking up at me unexpectedly.

I can’t help but smile at the little boy—my son. “Not even if he tells me to leave. I won’t go until you get tired of me.”

“I won’t!” Isaac replies immediately, his little voice so resolute. It makes me chuckle.

“Okay.” I nod, playing along. “I’ll remember that.”

“Mummy,” he suddenly stops, and I blink when his eyes turn serious and he inches closer.

“Hmm?” I giggle when he shuffles closer and his lips accidentally smack against my chin.

“I love you.”

I freeze, my wide eyes stuck on Isaac’s sincere brown pools. The warmth that bubbles in my chest at his soft confession leaves me almost breathless. And I realize that I love him too. So much. This little boy is the best thing that fate has handed to me.

“I love you too, bubba.”

The door swings open and William is walking inside. His eyes immediately find Isaac’s and stays there, but I know that he’s noticed I’m still here. For a fleeting moment, I can swear I see relief brush across his face, but then his eyes are blank again and I console myself by thinking that it must have been a figment of my imagination. Of course, he’s not relieved that I’ve not left. He doesn’t tell me to leave again though. That must be a good sign.

“I got you some frozen yogurt. You like these, don’t you?” he asks Isaac as he reaches the bed and slowly settles down on it. Reaching forward, William brushes his son’s hair away from his forehead in a manner that is so soft I can’t help but glance at William to see what expression he must have had on his face then.

“Your doctor said you can go home now if you want to,” William adds just as the door opens again and in strides Isaac’s attending doctor.

Isaac turns to look up at me instead. “I wanna go home,” he

mumbles, looking up at me with begging eyes. I find myself nodding immediately, not being able to say no to the child.

“Let’s go home.” I nod, smiling brightly at the child—my child—as I, too, lean forward and shower my affections on the boy with tiny pecks on his cheeks.

“I’ll just go get the discharge papers ready then, Dr. William,” the attending doctor, whose name I still don’t know, says to William with a nod before turning around and walking out of the room again.

* * *

The car ride is silent. Save Isaac and my conversations that arise once in a while, the car ride is silent. Throughout the ride, sometimes, I feel his gaze on me through the rearview mirror. Sometimes, I notice how he stiffens when Isaac asks me something and I reply.

Still, I’m silently confused. He has been silent since he came back into the hospital room, not once re-emphasizing the statements he made before he had left. He was silent when Isaac refused to let him be the one to carry him, he was silent when he opened the door for us, and he is silent right now during the ride.

As I’m sitting here in the car while he’s silently turning into the house’s driveway, I can’t help but wonder. *Does he regret it? Saying those words? Being so harsh? Does he regret assuming things?*

Then I wonder if it’s my fault for not clarifying his mistake. If I had just told him that I wasn’t there with Isaac, that I was too sick to go, would he say those words to me? Maybe Mary? I drop that thought. Somehow, I want to remain silent this time and have Mary break the ice above his head.

Maybe it was the moment he said the first harsh word that pierced through my chest, maybe it was then when I first began to silently think, “He’ll regret saying this when he finds out the truth.” Maybe it was then when I began the silent, selfish desire to make him feel just as regretful as he had me feel hurt with his words just a while ago.

Feeling such desire, I don’t feel like a good person right now, but I continue to indulge in it. Even though I may not be a bad person, but it doesn’t mean good people don’t get upset.

I glance out of the Tesla’s window when William—having parked the

vehicle in the garage—gets out of his side and begins to open my door.

His eyes avoid me, remaining solely on his child as he leans forward into the vehicle and carefully picks the now sleeping boy up in his arms and straightens up, waiting silently until I'm out of the vehicle as well, then he begins walking.

I can hear it, the muffled hustle and bustle through the opening of the main door as William swings the door open and steps into the house. Immediately, I find myself taking off my shoes and turning to take Isaac from the arms of his father.

Silently, I extend a hand forward. Silently, I watch as William stiffens and slowly puts Isaac back into my arms. Without a reaction, I find myself just turning around and slowly beginning to move into the main area.

“Oh, he's home! Thank God!” Mary rushes forward, her aging face is tear-stained and a hopeless smile on her face.

When she hesitates to ask to hold her grandchild in her arms, I freely lean forward and give him to her. I feel bad that she wants to beat herself over what happened, it was an honest mistake, but I realize how gutted she must feel. Would I be able to forgive myself if I forgot and Isaac ended up in the hospital? Probably not. I'd be too devastated.

“William.” Mary's wide guilty eyes stare at the man behind me just as I feel his warm body behind me. I wait. “I'm so sorry, my son.” Mary mumbles, and her gaze drops low with obvious shame. “I didn't ask if the cookies had peanut. If I'd just asked them, Isaac wouldn't—”

Her voice breaks, and I watch the older woman's lips tremble as she tries to contain her tears. I know the housemaids are somewhere in the corners hearing the whole scene. I don't dare to look around and search for them though, just as I don't dare to turn around and look at the man standing behind me.

It feels like this is what I need. Mary saying this to him by herself. My proof.

It makes me feel ten times more pain than when William had so stupidly unleashed his temper on me. I want to cry. The twisting in my chest hurts, my throat hurts; I feel like if I say something, I'll choke. I want to cry. Instead, my face blanks, and I force myself to feel numb.

There! I think bitterly. *I hope you regret it!*

“Gemma, I'm so sorry!” My gaze snaps up, wide eyes staring now at

the old woman in front of me. “You’re sick too, and you were supposed to rest at home. I had forced you to stay home and look how much trouble I’ve still brought you. I’m so sorry, my dear!”

I smile at the woman who’s well above my mother’s age softly. “I would’ve been more upset if you didn’t call me and tell me about Isaac.”

Mary nods, tears flowing down her cheeks as she silently looks at me gratefully.

“Gemma wasn’t there?” I stiffen when William takes my name.

Mary doesn’t seem like she expected this reaction from William because she frowns. “Didn’t she tell you?” She glances from William to me. “I called her from the hospital. She was at home resting because of her health.”

The silence that settles around the living room is deafening. I dare not look at anyone, so I fix my stare at the bright white walls of the living room and begin wondering if I should just walk away.

“Mummy . . .”

My eyes flutter to the source of the sleepy mumble, and I smile when they stop on two bright eyes staring back at me.

Without a sound, Isaac extends his arms towards me, and I can’t help the dazzling smile that finds itself a home on my lips when I lean forward and take the child in my arms. Mary gives me a warm smile before glancing at William nervously—I catch that.

I walk away. I don’t know what I’m leaving behind. I don’t know what William is thinking right now, or if he’s feeling guilty.

Some selfish, ruthless part of me hopes that he’s feeling like crap right now, but I can’t bring myself to turn around and look at him.

Right now, I don’t want to be anywhere near him. Is it strange to feel like doing anything but leaving him when he told me to go because he thought I was guilty, and now, I’m wanting to just leave him standing here and go home now that his misunderstanding has been cleared by Mary?

Probably. Probably not.

Still, I continue walking toward Isaac’s room. William continues to stand exactly where he is.

Silently, I’m grateful. Actually, I’m really not. I wish he would have apologized. At least.

* * *

“Don’t tell Pa.”

The whispered request takes me by surprise. Snuggled in bed beside the warm child, I know it’s almost twelve midnight already, but Isaac refuses to sleep, and so, we lie here aimlessly listening to a Vietnamese song Isaac’s requested me to play a while ago.

“I won’t,” I promise, and I mean it even though it feels like it’s just whispered words thrown at the bright breeze that is twirling in the bedroom through the open window, dancing with the flimsy white curtains as it arrives and leaves.

“Promise?” I feel him tilt his head up at me as his small head brushes against the skin of my arm that is currently his pillow—as if he can see my face in the dull bedroom light. I almost smile.

“I promise,” I reply before leaning forward to press a kiss on his hair. I mean it. I always mean my promises.

Especially when it comes to him.

“Okay,” Isaac’s replies instantly, and I giggle when half of his word is eaten by a large yawn he finds himself breaking into, then the child goes silent, and I realize that he’s finally going to sleep.

For a long while, I lie still and listen. To the distant traffic outside in the neighbourhood street. To the slowly settling breathing of my child. When I’m absolutely sure that he’s asleep, I find myself smiling.

Isaac has known I’m not his birth mother from the beginning. Isaac chose me just like I chose him.

In a sense, this thought is assuring. It is assuring because it makes Isaac’s emotions for me genuine. I am not a shadow of Shirley anymore. I can now live as myself and not as his birth mother.

And yet, this thought is so scary. At least if he had thought I was Shirley . . . he wouldn’t leave. I am not his birth mother, not something that has been given to him by God. I am afraid. I’m afraid that someday he will grow tired of me. I am scared that someday, he will turn around and tell me, “You’re not my real mum!”

The thought of that future . . . scares me.

While I am surrounded by the whirlwind of my own thoughts, Isaac suddenly turns in his sleep and a small snore escapes his lips. This brings me

crashing away from my daunting thoughts immediately, and once again, I'm smiling.

Maybe one day, he will turn around and remind me that we are not blood-related. Perhaps when he is older, his love for me will fade, and I know that if I were smarter, I would just walk away right now before it gets worse. Before I become more susceptible to being hurt by both father and son. Still, I remain here, holding the child in my arms. And no matter what I know the future may hold, in this moment, I'm sure about one thing and one thing only—I'll continue to hold Isaac for as long as he lets me.

"Goodnight, bubba," I whisper, hoping that even though my words may float in the bright breeze and dance with the curtains, it eventually finds its way to the little child's heart and he has a sweet dream tonight.

The muffled sound of my phone pinging sounds just as the bedroom's door suddenly opens and light peers in through the crack. I don't even have to look to know who's come in. The sudden goose bumps along my skin tell me that just fine.

Still, I ignore him. Just like I have been doing ever since we came back home. When I tap on the text notification I've gotten, I can also feel him manoeuvring his way around the room in the lack of lighting and settling at the foot of the bed.

He doesn't say anything, and so, I continue to ignore him. My eyes slowly focus on the words written on my phone's glaring bright screen. Immediately, I squint my eyes and decrease the brightness, putting my phone in invert mode.

A soft smile debuts on my lips when I see who it is from.

Saara: Oye! I have something to tell you. I'm going back home with mum for a bit. I just . . . need to decompose, you know? Heal away from all the drama.

Gemma: Oh, how long will you be gone for? I think that's a good decision. Just go home and relax for a bit. Away from . . . everyone.

I wonder, for a moment, if I should go send them off. I'm sure they will leave by 12PM because that's when Khala gets completely capable of traveling every time she's over.

Just then her reply pops up on the screen and I'm just about to type back a reply when another message pops up right after the previous one.

Saara: I've not decided yet.

Saara: Hey . . . GemGem, can I ask you something?

Gemma: Sure!

I know what she wants to talk about, so I lay back—completely ignoring the silent man sitting at the foot of the bed in the darkness, looking at me—and wait for her reply.

It arrives. My smile fades.

Saara: Why didn't you take Don back? He begged you so much . . . for a whole year.

I don't know what to say. What should I say? I don't know. Saara and I had talked a lot about it after I had left Declan, my ex-boyfriend, but she had never asked me whether I wanted to take him back even in the slightest bit. In fact, we had never even touched that possibility. I'll admit, mostly it was just me crying and her holding me. Or me being emotionally drained, ignoring Declan's insistent calling, and her holding me.

So now that she's asked me this question . . . I don't know how to reply. Still, taking in a deep breath, I try.

Gemma: I did take him back. So many times during the time we dated. I silently took him back so many times, then in the end, I just couldn't anymore. Even though I still loved him, I realised I loved myself more. And with him . . . I didn't love myself. But that was me. You are different. Your situation is different.

When I press send, I know whatever I've written is true. I did give a chance. Many chances. So many that by the end of it, I had lost count. Saara is different though. She has found Khristian so soon afterward. I didn't have anyone then.

Her reply pops on the screen and I find myself letting out a sad sigh.

Saara: I still have feelings for him.

Gemma: I know.

She replies instantly as if she was going to send this anyway.

Saara: I . . . really like Khristian. But it feels wrong. I feel like I'm cheating on someone. That I shouldn't open my heart to Khristian.

Gemma: I know.

“Gemma.”

I feel my body stiffen. His voice sounds hoarse like he hasn't spoken for a while. I want to ask him if he's okay. I want to ask him what's wrong, but I don't. Instead, I tap on the message's notification that pops up on my screen.

Saara: How did you know it was over with Don?

*Gemma: I realised it was over when loving him felt tiring.
When loving him hurt me, I realised it's over.*

Her reply is instant.

"Gemma." William sighs again. His husky boyish voice drifting to me in the darkness of the room. He sounds hopeless. Just like I felt when he had said those words to me in the hospital. Still, I can't ignore the chill that's going through my body right now.

I read Saara's text.

Saara: I'm scared.

Gemma: I know

Saara: You know?

Gemma: I'm scared too.

Again, she replies instantly.

Saara: Is everything okay?

Gemma: Everything is okay

Saara: You're lying.

Suddenly, a hand is grasping at my arm and pulling me up. In the suddenness of things, I find myself quickly turning towards Isaac and slipping my arm from under his head and as I am pulled up to a sitting position.

Still, I ignore the man holding on to my arm and blankly read the text.

You're lying.

Her text stares at me, mocking me.

I am. I'm lying. I'm anything but fine. I'm a little scared right now, a little nervous, and secretly very thrilled.

I want to grin, I want to smile. William is here to persuade me, then I want to kick myself. Shouldn't I continue to be upset at him? Why am I so happy?

I continue to ignore him though. My silence goads him for a reaction. Honestly, all I want is an "I'm sorry". Or maybe a dozen. I'm not sure yet.

Maybe my period is near. Even though it's just passed.

I sigh and quickly type back a reply.

Gemma: It's fine. Maybe my period is near!

Saara: <cantus relatus.png>

Saara: Mine just finished.

I sigh.

Gemma: >. >You lucky woman.

Another minute and another quick reply.

Saara: Gem . . .

Gemma: Yeah?

Saara: I really shouldn't give Dante a chance, right?

Gemma: Dante loves you.

My mind flutters to the memory of him quietly sobbing against the closed hospital door, and I find myself biting my lips, feeling guilty because I know exactly which guy's side I am on. Khristian's. But I can't deny it. Dante loves Saara.

Saara: I know

Gemma: Khristian loves you.

Saara: He does?

Gemma: Yes, he does.

I sigh, feeling bad for my cousin. A little part of me wants to tell her to keep the past in the past and give Khristian a chance, but I don't because who loves her does not really matter as much as the question: "Who does she love?"

Gemma: Who do you love?

Suddenly, William tugs at my arm again. I let out a squeak when I'm suddenly pulled onto his lap in the darkness. Both his arms wrap around my waist like steel bands, keeping me there against him.

We sit, quiet in each other's arms, and after a while of waiting for him to apologize and being disappointed, I turn back to my cell phone.

This reply takes a while, but it arrives in the end.

Saara: I don't know.

Gemma: That's okay. Take your time and find out. :)

Saara: I love you

Gemma: I love you too

"I'm sorry."

These two words. These two words I had silently waited to hear for the past few hours. Hearing them right now, I'm confused why they are not enough. Maybe I really do need a dozen more.

"I'm sorry." William leans in, resting his forehead against mine as he whispers the two words again. I don't know what to say, his minty breath touches my cheeks, and I find myself suddenly trying to get out of his embrace. I'm scared if I stay here longer, I'll forgive him. I'm scared that if I forgive him like this, he'll do it again.

His arm around my waist loosens, and I take a breath of relief when suddenly he's wrapping his arm around me again and I'm being picked up and taken out of the room.

I bite my lips to hold the bitter screams in, lifting my head up to peek at a still sleeping Isaac from above William's shoulder.

"He'll be fine," William's quiet voice echoes through the walls of my chest, silently shaking my heart. I bite my lip harder, my body stiff in his arms.

I want to scream at him. What exactly? I don't know. I want to let him hold me like this forever. Why exactly?

Because I'm a fool. Love really does make a fool out of people after all.

I sigh against William's chest. Maybe my period really is near.

It takes me a few minutes to realize where he's taking me, and when I do, I find myself stilling. Eyes wide as he continues to stride forward—closer to the open bedroom's door.

Then we're inside the room, my wide eyes flying over everything except for William as he walks to his bed and places me above the soft mattress.

I stare at the open door. I can't look at him, so I stare at the open door. Why am I suddenly so upset? I don't know. I shouldn't be. I know if I were in William's place, I probably would have reacted the same way as he did. Am I angry? Am I sad? I don't know, all I know is that I am.

"Gemma."

In this empty room with just him and me, his voice sounds more haggard. This is new for me, although I've been in a room alone with him two times before. I've never been in a room with him like this. Never so late at night. Never after a fight.

He's standing in front of me. Just standing there. Silent.

The silence feels pathetic, the hopelessness oozing out of every word that is not said and into our pores.

Suddenly, William drops to his knees—right in front of me. His hands reach forward and grasp my hands. I stiffen.

"I'm sorry." William tugs at my arm and I find myself fighting to look at him.

"Gemma." He sighs, a sound that somehow spells angst right now. His thumb finds my cheeks, and I feel my walls begin to crumble. My gaze begins to mist. I'm going to cry. I'm definitely going to cry if he continues to look at me like this.

"Stop it." I bite my lips, turning my head away from William's hands.

"Gem." William edges closer, his hand returning to grasp mine. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those things."

I can't help it. I scoff. It's a bitter sound, I'll admit. Probably more bitter than I am feeling right now.

"Yes, you shouldn't have," I whisper bitterly, still looking away from his face.

There's silence for a while. Silence where I can feel his helpless eyes staring at me.

Finally, he speaks, "I know."

"How could you just—" My voice breaks into a sob and I bite my lip as I try to control the wrenching tightness I feel in my throat and chest. I'm crying now. Unashamed, as I let the tears flow.

"—tell me to leave like that? Throw me away?"

I'm hurt. And I'm realizing it just now, it hurts so much. Months ago when I had first realized I like William, there were many things that held me back. A lot of things that made me wary of my growing affections. The fear of being thrown away just like I am nothing—that was one of my main fears.

What happened today . . . wasn't he just throwing me away? Just like that?

"I didn't mean it," William's whisper echoes around the otherwise completely silent room. "I was just angry."

"Does that change anything?"

I lift my blurry eyes up just as another tear falls and watch as William's eyes widen, an expression of pure panic flashes across his face

before his grip on my hand tightens.

“I won’t ever let you go, Gem.”

“Yes, because you just threw me away a while ago.” I shake my head, feeling hopeless. When was the last time I cried so much for a man? When was the last time I wished I would never cry for a man? Love sucks.

“Don’t say that.” William shakes his head, peering up at my wet face with his pained eyes.

I turn my face away.

At my action, William stiffens in front of me. It takes a whole second before his demeanour changes.

His grip on my hand drops and he straightens up right in front of me. The cold dread in my chest leaves me almost paralyzed. Have I pushed it too far? Is he giving up? Is this the end?

All of a sudden, his arms swoops under me and we’re walking towards the head of the bed. William gets on to the bed and I let out a squeak when he settles himself down, dropping me on his lap before wrapping his arms around me.

I can smell it, the mixture of his spicy cologne and the crisp scent of soap on his neck as William tucks my face under his neck, resting his chin on my hair.

“If you think . . . that I will ever let you leave me, Gemma, then you’re stupid,” William sighs. His voice sounds serene now. A little sad but serene.

“I can’t promise you that I won’t ever hurt you again, because I’m far from perfect and I say things I don’t mean when I’m angry, but I do promise to always apologize and work on something that has made you upset. Either way, Gemma, you’re not going anywhere. You’re stuck with me forever now.”

“I don’t want to be with you anymore.”

As soon as the words leave my mouth, the air around us turns chilly and I notice the exact time William’s arms around me begins feeling like bands of steel—cold to the touch and unyielding.

“Are you being honest?” I find a chill rush through my veins at the cold tone of his voice.

My heart twists in my chest, and I bite my lips but remain quiet. Why did I even say that? I don’t know. Although I did think about leaving for a

minute—that’s far from true. I can’t leave Isaac. My mind wanders to the man holding me right now. I can’t leave him.

“No,” I finally whisper, letting my shoulders slump against his chest.

William visibly relaxes behind me. I find the opportunity to turn around in his lap until I’m left straddling him, then he hugs me.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, caressing the back of my head as he holds me against him.

“You can’t say those things to me again. Please ask me first and then get upset if you have to, but don’t ever tell me to leave . . . like that.” I cuss myself, feeling another round of tears dropping on my cheeks.

“Okay?” I push, bringing a hand up and wiping my tears off my face. I lift my gaze up to find William looking down at me with his dark eyes. As if waiting for me to look up, he immediately swoops down and captures my lips.

“I will,” he agrees, pressing a new kiss on my forehead.

* * *

“You better call me when you guys get there!” I grin as I hug Khala and then Saara.

While Saara grins back, Khala squints her eyes and looks at me closely.

“Have you been crying?”

I stiffen but recover quickly. I can’t afford to slip up. Khala is very sharp.

“Yeah,” I admit. “The manuscript I’m working on is angsty. I cried a lot.”

Immediately, Khala’s eyes soften and she caresses my hair away from my face. Giving her a little truth and a little lie always works.

“I wish you would have come with us, beta.”

I smile, putting my hand hers—the one palming my cheek.

“I wish I could, too, Khala. I’ll visit you soon.”

“Okay.” She nods before glancing at her wristwatch. “We should get going.”

“All good now?” Saara whispers in my ear when we hug.

My arms around her tighten and I nod against her.

“Yeah,” I say, blushing a little under her knowing gaze.

“Take care of yourself and text me, okay?” She squeezes me before taking a step back.

“You too. Relax and take time out for yourself.” I smile.

“Ready to go?” I turn towards Olly, looking away from Saara’s car almost disappearing on the street a few minutes later.

“Yeah.” I smile at him.

“Get in, princess.” Oliver grins, opening the passenger’s door of the black SUV.

I can’t help but chuckle as I get into the vehicle. “Why thank you, sir.”

Due to the traffic, it takes a good few minutes to reach William’s home. When we drive into the driveway, I can’t help but notice the expensive Audi parked beside the parking SUV.

“Maybe someone’s over,” I say to myself as I get out of the vehicle, pulling my tote bag out behind me.

“You really do look like you’ve been crying.” Olly frowns as he looks down at me. “Did Mr. William do something?”

“It’s been fixed.” I hand the concerned-looking man a smile before motioning towards the front door.

“Let’s go?”

Oliver nods. “Yeah, let’s go.”

The house is quiet, just as it always is. The busy housekeepers turn to give me an awkward smile as I pass them, and I suddenly begin to wonder what’s wrong.

“Hey, what’s up?” I whisper-ask Ren when we run into him.

“Oh, girl, wait till you see it.” Ren rolls his eyes and then turns back to taking the two used cups into the kitchen.

The muffled sounds begin sounding clearer the closer I get to the living room.

I see her as soon as I enter the living room. Her beautiful black hair is shining against her white jade-like skin, her eyes dazzling as she looks up at the man sitting beside her with a laptop on his lap. My eyes slowly move to the arm she has hooked around his before moving up to the girl’s face again.

Of course, I remember her. I’ve seen her before. She still looks just as beautiful as she looked then. She still looks just as in love as she did then.

Cecelia.

Just then, William lifts his head up as if sensing company and his eyes immediately find mine. I give him a small smile, completely missing the hardness in those dark orbs, then he stands up. Cecelia's hand drops to her side and the laptop suddenly gets forgotten, on the coffee table, as William shoots up to his feet and begins striding towards me.

"Where have you been?" he demands, and I flinch under his dark eyes as I remember waking up in his arms, still in his bedroom, and then slowly sneaking myself out to get ready and see Khala and Saara off.

The butterflies that soared when I woke up beside him in the early hours of the morning—just the two of us in a room for the first time, to have his arm around my waist, his breath against my neck, to have a taste of how being with him forever could be like—all come rushing back.

"I went to see my aunt and Saara off," I reply lamely, super aware of the girl now sitting on the sofa alone, her wide heartbroken eyes on us.

"Where's your phone?" William reaches me, his lips pressed in a thin line.

I slip out the useless device from my bag, waving it in the air between us. "It's dead. I forgot to charge it," I mumble guilty.

"I—" William stops, heaving out an irritated breath. I find myself forgetting all about the girl just a few steps away. Taking a step forward, I wrap my arm around the tall man, tilting up my head until I'm looking up at him.

"I'm sorry." I smile at him and immediately watch as the anger dissolves from his gaze and he lets out a soft sigh.

"Okay," William mumbles, bringing up and wrapping around me as well.

"So . . . it's true. You're really dating!"

Both my and William's attentions snap around as the accusatory words are spoken behind us. We turn around to face a tearing Cecelia. Her wild misty eyes moving between William and me.

Suddenly, she melts to her knees, right before us.

"I didn't believe it," she sobs quietly, her head hanging low. "I didn't want to believe it when they told me."

I can only gasp as she looks up, her broken, wet eyes on William.

"We were supposed to get married."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

One Day When Love Wasn't Reciprocated

*She had loved him for a long time
For a long time, her eyes had only seen him.
Today, a tear slips down her cheeks as she watches him from
far away.*

*“For so long,
You were everything to me.
The smell of rain, the first morning light.
The fresh dew on the grass, the warmth for which I sighed.
You were the chilly breeze that flew in the night;
The brightest star in the darkest of skies.
I had planned an entire future, with my hand in yours.
I was at fault. I have lost.
I was never any of those to you,”
she whispers as she watches him bring the other woman
close.*

*“It’s alright,” she whispers after a moment, her tears flow.
At a distance, the other woman is smiling.
She wishes she could smile too.
Her trembling body, it turns away;
her eyes turn up, instead, to the moonless sky.
“I am alright.
I may never be any of those to you, I know, I am aware.
Truly, I never was.*

I was never the reason why your sun rises, or why your skies

*glisten with a million stars.
I was never the one your heart seeks, the warmth you want in
your arms.
Still, please . . .
Let me love you silently, let me want you like this I swear,
I won't make a sound. Please, please, let me, because I
cannot stop.
It has been too long to turn back so suddenly.
Please let me love you . . . while I watch you love her.
And for as long as I can,
I will love you each day.
I will love you like this until the last piece of my heart
breaks and falls away into the nothingness of this one-sided
love.”*

I have seen this scene before. Numerous times in numerous novels and TV shows. This particular scene where the perfect second female lead finally sees the perfect male lead and the hopeless female lead together. I can't help but remember those moments right now as I watch my life's perfect second female lead sobbing on the floor. Her perfectly curled brown hair is falling around her beautiful face as her body shakes with her silent tears.

She is inconsolable. She is beautiful. Cecelia.

I have never been someone who has criticized myself for how I look, not that I have ever been vain. I am well aware that I am not bad to look at, but I always acknowledge if someone is prettier than I am. She is beautiful, definitely far exceeding me. It is what it is. Her hair is more luscious and rich in colour, her face more oval, her eyes wide and innocent, her bright pearl-like skin is scarless. She's much slimmer than I am too.

Her slim body is wrapped in designer outfits that I can only share the air with while I walk past the expensive stores to the more moderately priced ones. Even the wristwatch that is glistening from her pale wrist looks like it costs her more than my fortnightly pay.

All in all, she is far exceeding me in status and physical appeal. Somehow, a part of me feels inadequate just standing here in the arms of the man she loves. Challenging such a beautiful woman seems like the most

foolish thing. A part of me wants to scoff and taunt myself.

Now that's someone fit for a billionaire neurosurgeon heir!

It's almost like he tastes my thoughts in the air because as I'm standing here, thinking about the clear distinction between Cecelia and I, the man holding me tightens his grip around my hand. I suddenly lose my train of my thoughts. My mind, instead, turns to where she is right now and where I am. The rich, beautiful lead, like herself, is on the floor, heartbroken. And here I am, the less impressive option, in the arms of the leading man.

Perhaps all these books show some part of reality.

Perhaps beauty really doesn't matter sometimes. Perhaps it really does lie in the eyes of the beholder.

I can't help feeling bad for her. Even though thoughts of whether I can even feel bad for a female who is on such a higher standard than myself rush around my mind. I feel bad for her. Really, I do. Thinking about myself on the floor, in her position, crying for William, it breaks my heart. I realize just how much of her pride she has thrown away right now because she's in love with the man who is holding me instead. I realize just how much it must be hurting her every second when he isn't going forward to hold her up.

I want to hug her. I want to apologize. What for? I don't know. Should I apologize for falling in love with the same man she loves? Should I apologize for being the woman he may be in love with as well? Should I apologize for not being able to walk away from William right now even though I know how hurt she is? How much she loves him?

Would it hurt to admit that maybe she loves him much more than I do? After all, she's loved him for so long. It hurts to admit it but maybe she does. How long has she loved him? How long have I? Does that discredit my blossoming love?

Should I let go then? Be the self-sacrificial female lead in the daily dramas? Can I let go?

I lift my gaze and meet the peering dark eyes of William. He's looking down at me, his eyes searching for any amount of emotion in my eyes. I know it.

Does he look worried? After a second, I think he does.

He looks worried. Can he see the storm in my eyes? The sea of pity, the winds of uncertainty. Can he see what I'm thinking about right now? I suppose he can. I blink, realizing my answer right away. Or maybe I have

always known. I can't. I can't let go. No matter how much it hurts her, no matter how selfish it makes me, I can't leave William until he tells me to. I love him.

I don't know what to do. I don't want her to cry, I want to comfort her . . . but how? I still don't know. What will I say to her? I don't know. I'm afraid I'll receive a right slap across my face. I'm afraid I'll accept it in compensation for the hurt I must be causing her.

I stare at her as she continues to sob, and my heart continues to hurt for her. Beside me, William does nothing but look at me. So impulsively, I take a step forward. I am fearful and hesitant—so hesitant—but I harden my face and take a step forward, then I'm pulled back to a stop.

My eyes snap towards William's and his grip around my hand tightens, stopping me from going and comforting Cecelia.

"Oh Cece." Kris sighs loudly, just then, when he suddenly enters the living room, a tray of cookies in his hand. Putting down the cookies, the man quickly moves over to his younger sister. I watch as she melts into his embrace, her sobs turning into loud wails.

"He . . . he scolded her, *gege!*" Cecelia sobs against her brother's chest and I shuffle against William, I'm sure looking as guilty as I feel. "He loves her!"

Kris, however, turns towards William and me. I watch him mouth something to William with an apologetic look in his eyes before glancing at me and mouthing, "I'm sorry!"

What is he sorry for? I wonder. I should be the one apologizing. I'm the one who walked into William's life and took his sister's happiness away. Despite my stormy thoughts, I keep quiet, watching silently as Kris quietly grasps his sister around the shoulder and begins moving her towards the front door.

"I'll see you later." He nods at William when he reaches us and then he's pushing his despondent younger sister out of the front door.

"Don't even think about it." William's voice suddenly fills the silence around the living room a few seconds after we hear Kris's car drive away.

"What?" I ask, frowning when my attention moves from the crying girl to him.

"Leaving me," William mutters. His wide eyes darken when I look at

him wide-eyed, and he realizes that I was actually thinking about it.

I don't want to fight but I can't help but be honest with him. "I thought about it, to be honest."

For a second, there is silence. I conclude that he's thinking of a reply. Finally, he speaks.

"Gemma, if I ask you to marry me, will you?"

I blink. My legs fall limp underneath my body. I can't help but slump against him when his hold on me tightens instantly, my eyes unable to rip itself away from his dark ones.

I can't help but think about the words we had said months ago in my small kitchen.

When you love me then . . .

"What if I don't love you yet?" I ask. My words are just a mumble but that's all I can afford right now; my heart is beating too fast. I wonder if he can feel it against his chest too.

"You do." William smiles softly. "You would have left me yesterday when I had asked you to."

"I stayed for Isaac." I shake my head.

"Not even a little bit for me?"

I shake my head defiantly. I realize that I had. I had stayed back for him too. Or maybe it was for me. I'm selfish, it was for myself. When it came to him and Isaac, both. It was eventually for me because I can't live without them. Me.

Still, I tell him nothing. For a moment, there is just silence between us, then he speaks again.

"Will you cry if I go to Cecelia right now?" The smile in his eyes disappears. He's suddenly looking very serious again. My clutch on his shirt tightens unconsciously. I try to think about it. Picture it in my head. I try to think about my life with William suddenly being in love with Cecelia and not me. Of him holding her like he is holding me right now. Touching her as he touched me last night.

"Hmm?" He looks at me questionably. I can't take my wide eyes off him as I continue to just hold him silently. When he lifts his hand and brushes his fingers against my cheek, I realize I'm crying. My lips begin to quiver as I think about William wiping Cecelia's tears like this. I let my head fall.

"You're crying just by the thought of it, Gem," William whispers

softly. I find myself being pulled tightly into his embrace.

“I’ll cry,” I admit finally, burying my head under his neck, on his chest.

“I won’t let you ever leave me,” he mumbles against my hair. I notice how he hasn’t said he loves me yet. Still, I nod in his embrace, pushing aside the pang of disappointment. I’m as content as I can be right now just having him here with me. I haven’t said I love you to him as well, then suddenly he bends a little and I’m lifted off the floor with my arms wrapped around his neck as I try to keep myself securely in his arms. William begins striding towards the stairs, I’m sure towards his bedroom. I begin to wonder where Isaac is, the house is so quiet right now.

“He’s still asleep.” William reads my mind again. I nod with the knowledge, not even amazed anymore by how well he reads my face.

It seems like no time at all when we reach his bedroom door, but my legs are numb and my chest is fluttering with nerves. William’s warm body suddenly seems so much more real right now. I can’t help but shiver when he turns and pushes the door open and then back close once we’re inside.

Once we’re inside, I feel the air rise around us. Memories of last night shoot across my brain and I press my cheeks against William’s chest as I try to hide my blush—the sweet kisses, the lovingly innocent caresses while talking about random little things about each other.

It’s been a while since I’ve been touched like that—the touch of a man. It’s been years, having been kissed, having been touched. It almost felt like my first kiss all over again. I’m still so tingly inside. In my mind, the memories are sweet. Almost like they are dipped in molasses. I can’t help but smile.

He smells like crispy expensive cologne and fresh soap. I feel him press his lips against my hair when he settles me on his bed and then sinks on to the mattress himself, leaning his back against the headboard and slowly pulling me on top of his lap next.

“I like this.” His breath is like the chilly morning breeze against my burning cheeks.

I sigh. Content. Right now . . . I can’t help but wish that I always stay like this. In this moment. With him.

* * *

One Month Later

The sound of traffic outside the window of this shabby run-down apartment building is a constant reminder that I am alive. The only reminder that I am not alone. Or perhaps it is a constant taunting that I am surrounded by people and yet still feel so alone. I wish I wasn't. Alone, that is. I don't mind if I were dead.

"What's happening with your female protagonists, girls?" Sean asks out loud, erasing the silence that has settled since the day began half an hour ago. I lift my eyes from the manuscript on screen, and I find myself rolling my eyes at his question.

"She wants to die but doesn't want to feel alone. All because her best friend used her shoulder to cry on again when he and his girlfriend had a fight. I don't get it; I'd tell him to stop playing with my heart by now if I were her!" I shake my head, highlighting a section I feel needs fixing by the author, and proceed to add a short note to him.

"Mine just had sex with the hero who is her maintenance man. It's scandalous!" Jennie giggles, but I groan instead.

"She's already married, isn't she?" I make a wild guess.

"Well, duh! They are always married!" Tully rolls her eyes.

"Thank God I'm not editing any fiction work right now."

"Lucky," the rest of us three grumble at the same time, then we look at each other and break out into muffled giggles.

"Mine is haunting the reincarnation of her lover and her murderer, guys. The girl killed her in their past life because she was into the guy. I kinda feel betrayed because in this life, the guy has fallen in love with that wife. It sucks to be the female lead."

"That's so sad!" I turn towards Wendina with a pitiful look. "That must be so hard to edit too. So much angst."

"Tell me about it." She sighs, shaking her head as she turns back to her computer screen.

"Talking about angst . . . any progress with your man, Sean?" Tully snorts, straightening in her seat as she nudges her head towards Nathan's office.

"Ha. Ha. Ha. So funny!" Sean scoffs bitterly, and the rest of us can't

help but giggle again at the miffed-looking man. He's still trying to grab a hold of the boss's attention.

"It's so obvious, okay? He's into Gemma!" Sean adds, his narrowed, accusing eyes snap towards me and I find myself gaping at the guy.

"You can't be serious," I blurt out, turning my gaze to everyone else, hoping they will side with me. "You guys don't believe that, right?"

"Sorry, can't do. He's into you, Gem." Wendina shrugs, pursing her lips as she looks at me guiltily.

"Not true!" I shake my head. "Ya . . . let's just change the topic, guys," I quickly add, feeling my chest get uneasy.

Instead, I turn my attention back to my computer screen.

I can't lie, Nathan has been good to me. He's attentive and caring and very helpful, but then he's like that with everyone. He takes good care of everyone, and I don't see how he pays any special attention to me. Even if he does, I don't want to know. He knows I'm committed.

"That doesn't stop him from looking at you all the time and asking about you." Tully grins at me. Her grin suddenly turns into a devious sort of thing—almost like a Cheshire cat's—and suddenly, I begin to feel like there's something bad coming.

"Say, how possessive is your man of you?" Tully's eyes begin to sparkle brightly as she asks me the question.

Suddenly, the rest of the three are also looking straight at my face, observing any reaction.

I try to stop the blush but it arrives anyway, so I clear my throat and look away instead. "A lot."

"Ooohhh." Sean's almost vibrating in his seat with excitement now. "On a scale of zero to ten?"

I feel my blush deepen. I almost don't even want to answer, but a small part of me wants to share this information. I don't have anyone except Saara to tell these things to anyway, and lately, she's been having her own love life bursting with eventful occurrences. Being stuck between the love of a man she has cultivated for seven years and a man who has suddenly walked in and makes her heart flutter in her chest must be hard.

That, and she's supportive of almost everything William does as long as Isaac is happy. Ultimately, she's on team Isaac through and through.

"A lot, " I repeat lamely, not knowing how else to answer without

feeling like I'm telling them everything. I don't actually want to tell them how many kisses and touches I get every time Kris leaves the house or when William's male colleagues ask and try to talk about me.

It's taken me time to realize how insecure and scared William is when it comes to other men and me. It's also taken me time to accept that it's not because he doesn't trust me, but because he's also human and fear often outweighs everything else. I get insecure about him, too, after all.

I'm sure he knows that I'm not going to leave him, he once told me he does, but he had also said that people are changing constantly. Even if I say I won't change, I may one day realize that my life is better off without him and the luggage he brings.

I remember that afternoon well; I got really upset at him for calling Isaac 'luggage' and thinking that I would ever consider our child baggage. Despite his various attempts after realizing his mistake, I didn't talk to him for two days.

Until he fell sick overworking himself to the point of absolute exhaustion just because I was ignoring him. I forgave him quickly when I rushed to the hospital and promised myself to never let him get to that point ever again. That incident made me realize that the only way I can make him understand that I don't want anyone but him is by showing him. Every day. Little by little.

"Oops!" Tully makes an apologetic face, but I'd have to have very bad eyesight to not see the excitement in her eyes as she continues, "I met him yesterday at the hospital. My sister had a review. We kinda talked about you."

"Tully, I'm going to cut you if you don't continue talking, sister!" Wendina hisses, suddenly looking very suspicious as she narrows her eyes at the beautiful woman.

"I'm speaking! I'm speaking! Sheesh!" Tully rolls her eyes, waving her hands in front of Wendina as she comes to stand beside Sean, bracing herself against his desktop.

"I asked him if he was tired of you yet—"

"WHY YO—"

"I didn't let him answer though," Tully quickly cuts off Sean mid-exclamation. "Before he could reply, I said, 'Well you better not be because, just so you know, Gemma is very attractive to the male population in the

office. Heck, even our boss likes her!” Tully stops suddenly and then looks at me excitedly. “So did you get angry sex or what?”

I want to slap her and then slap myself. How can she just say that to William? Oh god, William must have felt like sh*t all night! Sex? What sex? There has been no sex yet! I kinda wish though . . . then the thought of the initial pain comes along. Yeah, maybe I don’t wish at all. Maybe it’s good William is respecting my boundaries. Maybe I’m going to die a virgin.

“Oh god, did you forget again?” Sean groans before I can even answer. “Mondays are his on-call days this month, Tuliana!”

“Oh sh*t, yeahhh!” Tully’s eyes widen. She smacks her forehead with her palm. The sound of the taut skin of her palm meeting her forehead is loud—loud enough almost that everyone around now us has their eyes on us.

I sigh, shrinking further in my seat.

I really do want to slap Tully. And then I really want to slap myself.

“Gemma.”

“Ooi!” Sean shrieks as we all jump in our seats, suddenly turning towards the owner of the voice.

Dressed smartly in a blue and white suit, Nathan Jinda looks thoroughly amused as he stands before us, his eyes analysing each one of the people in our group.

“Yes, sir?” I ask him quickly, grasping his attention back to me and away from the startled reactions the rest of the four people are wearing right now.

“Ah yes, Gemma, can you please come out with me for a while?” Nathan’s attention shifts back to me. I watch, mortified, as his eyes brighten when they fall on mine.

Wait . . . what if Sean is right? No. No way.

“Sure.” I smile up at the man, standing up and grabbing my phone as I shove it into my small sling bag and then turn back towards Nathan.

“Thanks for accompanying me.” Nathan smiles at me an hour later as we stand at the entrance of an expensive boutique.

I can’t help but feel a little confused. *Why are we here?*

As if knowing my unvoiced question, Nathan quickly answers it himself. “My older brother’s getting married in a few months and I need a suit.”

I blink. Is he serious? He wants the suit right now? Still. “Isn’t it . . . a

bit early?” I manage to squeak out.

At my words, Nathan’s eyes snap towards me and he instantly begins chuckling. It’s probably the shocked look on my face.

“I like to be prepared, Gemma.” He smiles down at me, and once again, I am reminded of just how handsome our chief editor is. “Today’s my fitting. For all three occasions.”

“All three occasions?” I blink. *Isn’t a supposed to be wedding the only occasion?*

“The engagement party, the wedding, and the reception party.” Nathan smiles and surprises me when he tucks my hand between his arm and his shirt, then he leads us into the store.

“What do you think?” I turn my eyes up to the fashionably dressed man half an hour later and immediately give him a thumbs up.

“I like it!” I grin and Nathan smiles at me sheepishly. This is his last outfit, and there is really nothing to debate on with all the picks that had been made initially. Regardless of that though, I still give him my thumbs up every time he wore his outfits and even commented on the tux of the groomsman’s fitting to look like I was of some use—that and it really was a bit tight around his bicep. Nathan isn’t what they exactly call ‘lanky’. Definitely not.

“Want to grab something to eat?” Nathan asks, turning his head towards me once we are back in his Tesla.

My eyes instead move to my wristwatch.

4:30PM.

“Are you hungry, sir?” I ask, moving my attention back to him. Honestly, I hope he’ll catch my drift and say no, but he doesn’t.

“Starving.” He smiles sheepishly.

That makes me think about what to do. Would it be okay to have food with him? Would it be bad? Should I just go home? Home. Suddenly, I’m reminded of which home I’m supposed to go to today. Mine. Isaac must be on his way over already, then I turn back to him.

“I’m sorry, sir. I have to get home early today. I can’t leave my son alone.”

This seems to catch Nathan’s attention. His wide eyes latch on to my troubled ones and I bite my lips nervously as I wait for his reaction.

“Son?” he asks. “You have a kid?”

“He’s my boyfriend’s child,” I answer truthfully, wondering just why

he looks like he's seen a ghost. Still, pushing the thought aside, I add, "But yes, I do."

This makes Nathan think for a while before he speaks again.

"How about drive-thru then? You can grab something for . . . what's his name?"

"Isaac." I smile brightly as I think about the wonderful little dumpling who keeps growing so quickly every day.

"Yeah, you can get something for little Isaac too."

"Okay," I concede easily. It seems like a good idea! I grin. "Let's go!"

"Thank you so much for the ride!" I wave at the man in his car as I stand outside my home's gate.

"Oh it's no problem." Nathan waves his hand dismissively. "See you at work tomorrow."

"See you." I nod at my boss with a grateful smile on my face just as the sound of my home's gate open reaches my ears from behind me.

Instantly, I turn around and come face-to-face with Olly and Isaac, who is crying in his arms.

"Good timing." Olly groans just as a sniffling Isaac spots me and begins wailing, leaning forward trying to get to me with a pout on his lips.

"What happened?" I asked Isaac worriedly as I reached for him, too, passing everything to Oliver.

"He had a nightmare."

"Again?" I ask Isaac softly before turning back around towards my boss. Isaac clutches me tightly.

"Thank you for dropping me home, sir." I smile at the concerned-looking man, then I bite my lip. "Do you want to come in for coffee, sir?"

For a second, I see Nathan contemplating it, then he smiles and shakes his head. "Definitely some other day, Gemma. See you tomorrow!"

For a while, we stand there watching the vehicle disappear on the road, then all three of us turn around and walk into my property.

"He's into you," Olly grunts as he closes the door behind us. I can only place a kiss on little Isaac's flushed forehead and move us to the kitchen.

"Everyone keeps saying that," I confess as I bring out a plate and begin dishing out Isaac's happy meal.

"How about we have Macca's first and then you tell Mummy what's

troubling you, okay?” I whisper into Isaac’s ears as I push Olly’s package towards him and being mine to me.

“Okay.” I hear Isaac whisper before slowly beginning to unravel his meal.

In the end, he ends up eating my burger as well. I can’t help but grin at Olly as Isaac slowly gobbles up my quarter pounder as well while sitting snuggled beside me. Suddenly, Olly stands up and I lift my head in surprise.

“I’m going to get more ketchup, anyone wants more?”

* * *

Growing up, my Khala often warned me not to plan things out because things never turn out the way we have planned for it too. When I asked my mother if that was what she thought as well, she told me that Khala was simply too lazy to think about anything more than what was occurring with her at a given time.

At that time, I had laughed at my mother’s words. I had thought that Khala really was too relaxed by nature. I suppose I should have listened to Khala this time around. Planned things don’t usually work out. Definitely not in my life.

For example, while today, I had planned to ask Isaac about his nightmares once and for all, he had ended up falling asleep only minutes after finishing his meal.

So here I am now half an hour later, freshly bathed and holding my sleeping son instead of having a chat with him about his troubling nightmares.

“He must have had a busy day in school,” Olly says, his gaze full of endearment as he watches over Isaac and me as I continue to stubbornly hold on to the child as he sleeps.

Somehow, the act of holding him in my arms while he sleeps stupidly assures me that he won’t have the nightmares. Not while I’m here with him.

His reasoning is not something I am proud of, I’ll admit.

Even Olly laughed at me when I refused to let him take Isaac up to bed.

“Okay, let me just spread this mattress over the rugs so that you can at least lay on it. Holding him like that will begin to hurt soon.”

“Thanks, Olly,” I mumble as the tall man continues to carefully spread a white blanket over the small mattress I got ever since Isaac started coming over, then he throws in two pillows and a blanket.

“Oh, it’s nothing! You’re like my younger sister back home. Of course, I’ll take care of you.” Olly smiles softly at me before he fluffs a pillow and places it beside the other.

I know he also has to take care of me because it’s in his job description, but for him to say that he cares for me because I am like a sister means so much more. I remind myself to beg Mary to help me cook a hearty Chinese meal for this man soon. He must be missing his home.

“Thank you,” I beam up to the man as we both move down with Isaac in his arms as I try to ignore the already aching muscles in my thighs.

“Say, do you have something to eat? I’m hungry again,” Olly immediately replies, and I can’t help but burst out laughing when I see him rubbing the back of his head with a sheepish smile on his face.

“Since you consider me your younger sister, then you’re my older brother. In that sense, the kitchen is yours too.” I smile back at the suddenly red-looking Olly. I watch as he throws a soft glance my way before nodding and rushing towards the kitchen. I know I have a lot of curry in the fridge. I hope he can stomach the spice though. Westerners usually make friends with the loo after having Indian food.

“Oooh, curry!” I hear Olly cheer to himself and bite back a happy laugh before I shuffle closer to Isaac. My hand reaches for my phone as I realize I haven’t checked my email for any official emails.

That is when I see a message awaiting me.

Saara: Gem . . . I have to tell you something

I blink. My heart begins to drum with shameless curiosity. I type back a reply. I wonder what gossip she has this time.

Gemma: <yescat.jpg>

Gemma: Yes?

Her reply is quick. I’m a little surprised since she had sent her first message an hour ago. I press on her message notification.

Saara: Dante’s here.

Oh no. A dozen scenarios rush through my mind, but only one motive. Dante desperately wants Saara back. *Oh dear.*

I type a reply. Once. Twice. Thrice. Each time, typing something and

then completely erasing it. What should I say to her? Should I begin throwing warnings at her right now? Should I remind her of how he behaved towards her? Should I play dumb?

I decide to play dumb, waiting for her to progress the conversation. To say whatever she wants to without my influence.

Gemma: <waitingcatgif.jpg>

Gemma: And?

Another minute and three more messages.

Saara: He's not giving up.

Saara: Khris isn't here.

Saara: He is.

Wait . . . what? What sort of trash reasoning is this?

I blink, reading over the three sentences over and over again and wondering how attendance can determine sincerity? Hadn't I attended every class for Physics back in high school? Hadn't I still failed the finals?

Releasing a breath, I press send.

Gemma: <whycat.jpg>

Gemma: So?

Again, her reply is quick.

Saara: I refuse to let him in. He's standing outside. In the pouring rain. It's been hours.

Gemma: Bring him inside, Poofy. The man will die.

Saara: Won't that mean I'm taking him back?

Oh . . . oh wow. Haven't I seen this scene before? A former donkey of a guy proving his worthiness by standing hours in the rain outside the girl's house?

I can't help but wonder, *Is Saara watching a lot of movies later? Is this why she thinks bringing the man inside will mean she's forgiven him and was unable to see him stand in the rain any longer? Because she . . . loves him?*

I remind myself of the matter at hand. The man has been standing in the rain for hours!

I think about it, then slowly type back my reply.

Gemma: Do you want to take him back?

Saara: He hurt me. It hurts so bad, Gem.

Ah, yes. My mind wanders back to the night Saara broke the news to

me and how she spent the night drunk and crying out of her mind. The last time she had cried so brokenly was when her pet dog had passed away. She cried until she got a massive migraine and swollen eyes.

Maybe it's time to tell her some facts? I frown as I type the sentence over three times in three ways before sending it to her.

Gemma: You probably won't be able to trust him like you used to.

This time, her reply is slow, but when it does arrive, I quickly tap on the notification.

Saara: I know.

Gemma: Calling him inside doesn't mean you've forgiven him and are taking him back.

Logically, it doesn't. It's an act of kindness for a person she's loved for seven years. Just because they've broken up doesn't mean she doesn't care anymore. When did I stop caring about him? I sigh. Has William stopped caring for Sherlyn?

I secretly wish Dante also understands the same. Male thought processes function at a different wavelength than females after all.

Saara: You're sure . . . right?

Gemma: Of course.

Gemma: Take one step at a time, Poofy.

"Very important conversation?"

My chest jolts with surprise, and I turn my head just in time as William's lips land on my forehead.

"Saara may be taking her ex back," I inform him as I wrap an arm around his neck and pull him into a kiss. I break the kiss with a soft peck, pretty sure that I'm blushing right now.

Leaning down, William impulsively places a quick kiss over my lips again. "The one who was crying in front of her room?" he asks, narrowing his eyebrows.

I nod. "Yeah."

"Okay, I'll be off then." Olly's voice echoes around the living room, and I turn just in time to see him moving towards the door.

"Aren't bodyguards supposed to be there almost all the time?" I tease him, watching as his ears turn pink while he continues to avoid eye contact.

"That's because Willia—"

“I told him that he gets off work when I’m home,” William cuts in, and Olly nods his head in confirmation. “Also, I’m going to place two security guards here for whenever you and Isaac are here, okay?”

“Okay.” I relent easily. “Well.” I pout at Olly and stretch my hand forward, waving it lazily. “Byeee.”

This makes Olly chuckle. “See you tomorrow morning.”

A few minutes later, as the sound of Olly’s SUV grows fainter and fainter until it blends completely with the other traffic, I continue to just lie here beside Isaac while William sits beside me, hearing the soft whisper of Isaac’s breathing. Finding comfort from the state of peace the child is in.

“Cecelia called me today.”

I still, my attention moves back to William, who is quietly observing me.

“She apologized and asked if we could have lunch together tomorrow.”

“What do you think?” I ask with a tiny voice. I can’t help but think about the second leads in those dramas my mum watches, then shake my head. This is the real world. Stuff like that doesn’t happen here.

“I’ll let you decide,” William mumbles back softly. I bite my lips and wonder if he caught the glimpse of panic in my eyes.

“Sure.” I smile. “Let’s have lunch together then.”

William is silent for a moment and then he nods and quickly pecks my cheek again as he begins picking himself up.

“I’m gonna go take a shower,” he informs me as turns towards me again.

My attention snaps to the man shielding the light from me right now and I nod, smiling at him brightly. “Okay!”

This earns me another kiss on my lips before he’s suddenly standing up and walking around us towards the bedroom.

“Gem!”

I perk up from my place, ten minutes later when William’s voice suddenly echoes around the house.

“Yeah?” I call back, careful not to wake up the sleeping prince.

“Can you please get me a towel?”

“Oh.” I groan, remembering that I had washed towels and hung them on the line outside in the morning before going to work.

“I’m coming in,” I call softly as I hold a fresh new towel in my hand and knock on the door of the room we are using.

Twisting the silver knob open, I slowly move my way into the room, hearing the door close behind me.

“Here,” I say out loud just as I reach the bathroom’s door and knock on it. My heart is hammering in my chest, but I choose to ignore it just like all the other time. I’ve seen William in a towel before. I mean, we have been cohabiting for months now.

Slowly, the door to the bathroom creaks open and his slightly tanned hand shoots out. *Maybe I’m not the only one feeling shy*, I think to myself as I shake my head, grinning before placing the towel on his expecting hand.

I turn around and begin rushing out of the room. “AHH!” a loud yelp rips from my lips when, before I’ve even taken a few steps towards the bedroom door, a very wet pair of arms wrap around my waist and pull me back.

Quickly, I’m twisted in his arms to face him. He softly pushes my head against his chest while he continues to hug me. Silently, I debate between closing my eyes or just staring at him when I’m being given such a golden opportunity again.

Despite having such a busy schedule at the hospital, William somehow always finds time to go to the gym. His consistency really shows.

“You’re always so warm. As if you’re having a fever,” he mumbles softly as every drop of water from his wet body continues to splay on the exposed skin of my body, soaking the material of my tank top as he continues to hold me. My warm face rests on his naked chest.

“Or maybe you’re just cold after the shower,” I reply, lifting my now wet face up and looking at him with a grin.

“Now, go get dressed.” I smack my hand playfully against his chest, glancing at the white towel wrapped around his lower hips.

I snap my head up, trying to push the blush I know I have on my face away. My eyes widen when I witness the corner of William’s lips lift before he leans forward, and something jolts in my chest.

“If you do that again, I won’t be able to control myself.” His warm breath tickles the soft shell of my ear, making my cheeks heat. To my utter embarrassment, he chuckles when he sees the proof of my foolish shyness and then places a soft kiss on my left cheek.

“You’re mean,” I grumble, hitting his chest playfully as I feel the tell-tale signs of a blush rushing along my neck and cheek.

“How am I mean?” William whispers, pulling both my limp arms up from my side to wrap around the muscular surface of his back.

My breath hitches in my throat, and my eyes flutter as I look up at him, stupefied.

“I-I . . .” I stutter, suddenly unable to speak at all.

William looks down at me for a while, his dark eyes full of an emotion I can’t really read. He just stands there, looking at me silently.

All of a sudden, he bends down and his arms wrap around my thighs before I find myself being lifted off the ground.

“William!” I squeak, startled, as I desperately grab on to him, wrapping my legs around him while trying to keep myself from falling, then we’re turning around, and a second or two later, my back is touching the soft mattress of the bed.

“Why are you shy?” William whispers, his dark eyes pierce into mine, and I’m pretty sure my mouth opens and closes like a fish out of the water before I turn my head to the side, blooming under the warm blush spread across my cheeks.

Slowly, I feel as William’s hand wraps around mine, and he softly begins it until it touches his cheeks.

“All of this . . .” He looks at himself, his voice is almost like a caress, so soft. “Is yours.”

My blush deepens, and I bite my lips still not able to look at him.

“This . . .” My startled gaze snaps to his and then to the centre of his chest where he has my hand pressed against. I slowly look back up at him. “Is yours.”

For a while, we just look at each other, silently watching over the other as my hand remains on his heart. I want to admit it to myself, what my hand on his chest means. I want to admit that he means that he loves me.

I know what he’s asking for. My love. Me. In my complete entirety.

I stare up at the man looking down at me, and I feel my heart warm up just like it always does when I look at him.

Growing up, my mother always brought me up, teaching me about the purity and importance of virginity. The most precious gift a woman can give to the man she truly loves. Who truly loves her. I noticed that she never

told me to wait until marriage. She never spoke of marriage. She spoke of love and maturity. She had brought me up with her more cautious values while we lived in a western society, but I kept it. I kept her values. I shared them.

I dated plenty in high school, but I reminded myself that I was just learning about myself. I was still trying to find who I was as a person. Even though to the outside world, I may have looked like an experienced person due to my dating record in high school, but in reality, I was anything but. I had waited.

Right now, at the age of twenty-four, I'm staring into the eyes of the man I've fallen in love with. Not because he's handsome, or he's rich, or because he bought me a drink over a bar's counter. I've seen his good, and I've seen his bad. I've come to love him through both. And now, I'm wondering if this is enough to give him myself.

Above me, William tilts his head to the side, contemplatively. Patiently waiting. For my answer. For me.

I don't know what to say, so I frame his face with my fingers and meet him halfway as our lips touch. I hope this is enough of an answer. I hope this tells him what I desperately want to say. That I love him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

One Day When Love & Longing Met

What does love feel like?
A fluttering in the heart.
What does longing feel like?
A broken wing waiting to take flight.
What does hope feeling like?
A rainbow after a storm.
What does disappointment feel like?
You. It feels like you.

Life is so unpredictable, isn't it? That night, the night before I met William and Isaac, would I have ever expected to collide with them? That afternoon, at that moment when I was walking away from them, had I known I would ever meet them again? That we would be here today? As we are?

The truth is that life is unpredictable. Things that are planned don't always end up being crossed over.

Sometimes, we fail. I have failed before. I have failed miserably. Life is harsh. We don't always win. We don't always have time on our hands. Sometimes, we don't have love. Sometimes, both.

I've read somewhere that every person that someone meets in their lifetime will say goodbye one day. Today. Tomorrow. Someday. But it will happen. People come in to our lives to leave. Where there is an entry, there is always an exit. A hello and a goodbye.

Life is unpredictable, and that unpredictability is frightening. Who will arrive? Who will leave? Thinking about it, I can't help but be afraid.

There is a storm in my mind. Tumultuous winds that refuse to leave.

That has refused to leave me for hours. Ever since Isaac finally confessed what his nightmares are about, I have been afraid ever since I've known his fear. How could I have comforted a scared child when I was so scared myself?

But I did. I comforted him. When he cried in abandonment, clutching to my shirt in his fear, I promised him. I cried and I swore. I swore and swore until I, myself, begin believing that everything is going to be okay. That everything is going to be like we have planned it will be.

William, Isaac, and I. A family. For a very, very long time.

I swore when, suddenly, I didn't know if that was going to be true. I wished it would be. With every tear that fell down my cheek, I wished, but my heart was breaking for the poor, frightened child in my arms. What if what he saw in his nightmares . . . really happened? What if Shirley really came back? What if she told me to leave? What if she laughed in my face and told me that she is Isaac's mother, and I am nobody?

I realised that I had forgotten all about the possibility of Shirley coming back. I had feared in the beginning, but as things had progressed and everyone had begun to warm into my life . . . I stopped worrying; I stopped thinking. Now, I couldn't help but fear. Fear that she will eventually get tired of the very freedom that she craved for and realise that what she left behind has always been far more meaningful than that.

Still, I promised him. I swore and I swore. I swore until I believed she would never come back. I swore that she would never make me leave. I swore and swore until I myself believed that she won't. I wiped away Isaac's tears when I was crying myself. Is that what love is? Doesn't that make me eligible? Doesn't that make me acceptable? Acceptable enough to be his mother?

Hours have passed. Hours since he confessed, hours since I put him to sleep. It felt like an accomplishment; at least the child could sleep. I wish could too, but I couldn't. Unlike him, all I have in my mind is the possibility of Shirley coming back and how I'm going to deal with it. I made a promise to Isaac. I'm never going to let Shirley take him.

William came home sometime around midnight. By that time, all the tears had dried and I decided to push myself into work. It's obvious that any hopes to sleep anytime soon was futile, so when William insisted that I sleep, I shook my head and turned back to my laptop.

That was until the laptop was closed shut suddenly, and I was scooped up in strong solid arms. At that moment, another thought found its way to my mind.

*We have said our hello. Now . . . will I leave first? Will Isaac?
Or will William?*

* * *

In the end, I fell asleep after all. Maybe it's the reassurance of having both William and Isaac on my sides. Perhaps, it's the warmth of William's arm around my waist; perhaps, it's the weight of Isaac's leg thrown over mine. I lay awake for a while thinking of all the possibilities through which Shirley could come back, and I tried to think of a dozen solutions to each of these possibilities. In the end, I fell asleep before I could even register that I was falling asleep.

When I woke up a few minutes ago, I realised that sometimes, it is better to sleep on somethings. Right now, as I am lying down here in the backyard on the green grass with my back against the ground and face towards the slowly clearing sky, I'm feeling nothing but a sense of calmness. All the fear has vanished, and suddenly, I'm slowly realising that maybe it's useless to plan things out. Life is unpredictable and it is always going to be unpredictable. It can't be helped.

"Gemma?"

At the sound of his voice, I smile under the protection of the book covering my face and imagine the tall man towering me, looking down at me like he always does. I wonder how he must look like right now. How must he be looking at me? Maybe with an amused expression. Maybe even love. In my mind, I try to figure out what the time must be like right now. Perhaps seven or a little after.

Under the protection of the hardcover book covering my face, I smile without restraint. Feeling the rush of youthful butterflies once again beginning to flutter in my chest, lifting my feet up above the ground, and twirling me around in the winds of love. *So he couldn't sleep in without me, huh?*

I feel like I'm in my teen years again, experiencing my first love. He makes me feel like this—this fluttering in my chest, the rush that ripples

through my skin every time he is near; it's him that makes me feel this way.

When he looks at me. When he says my name. When his fingers brush against the soft skin of my cheeks. He makes me feel this way.

Maybe . . . if I make him feel even a third of what he makes me feel, maybe then I don't have to be so afraid? Even if Shirley comes back. Maybe even then it will be alright?

"Gem?" he calls my name again, and I almost jump up to reply, but I decide not to. Instead, I inhale the crisp morning air and stretch against the cool grass, curling my fingers and toes against the still wet garden floor.

Suddenly, William lets out a strangled groan and I feel him drop down beside me. I feel as his fingers instantly find the hem of my dress and he softly pulls the dress down from my upper thigh where I realise it has ridden up to.

"I can't let you wear this dress outside of our room anymore."

Underneath the protection of the book, I bite my lip, feeling the warmth from his protectiveness seep from my heart to my cheeks.

I've always been aware of how possessive William has been of me, but ever since our first night together a week ago, his personality has intensified tenfold when it comes to me. Now, I can definitely see why Mary wrote some of the points in her list.

"It's so hot," I mumble from under the book before slowly closing the book and putting it aside. My eyes naturally find William's dark piercing ones, and I find myself blushing under his intense gaze.

"Let's go inside, the AC is on," he replies quietly as he gets up to a sitting position, already grasping my arm while coming to stand up.

Knowing quite well that he won't let me stay out here after I've mentioned how hot it is today, I let him pull me up and quickly grab for the book as I'm pulled up to my feet again in one swift tug.

"Ah," I squeak as I tumble forward against his chest. I look up at the man whose arm immediately comes around my waist. The quiet man looking down at me with his piercing eyes—I'm sure he can see through my soul.

I beam at him, waiting to see his serious brown pools melt into swirls of badly hidden amusement like it always does. Around us, it suddenly doesn't even feel warm anymore. A soothing breeze blows across my face and I smile as I smell the fragrance of rain. The fragrance of wet soil and frangipanis, then just like that, it begins to rain.

It surprises William, I realise, as he quickly begins to pull me back towards the patio—away from the rain. Turning my attention away from the sky and towards him, I smile as I continue being pulled towards shelter, then I suddenly stop and pull him back.

He snaps his head back and my amused gaze meets his confused ones.

Life is unpredictable. Who knows who will say goodbye?

I decide to cherish every moment.

“You’ll get sick.” He frowns, turning towards me completely before taking a step closer. The rain has soaked us completely by now. His grey shirt is now clinging to each and every muscle of his. I pull my eyes away from his chest just in time to see his own serious-looking ones locked on my own soaked dress. I bite back a smile as I realise just how transparent this dress gets when wet.

Still, I can’t help but notice how serious he is today.

Moving close until our bodies are touching, I go on my tiptoes and wrap my arm around his neck. I tilt my head to the side under William’s quiet gaze.

“Isn’t it your day off? Why are you up so early?” I ask. Above us, the rain continues to fall. I blink, pushing away the rain trailing down my eyes. It’s a simple question, and I’m quietly waiting for an answer. Maybe there is an emergency and he has to rush to the hospital again.

But it’s not that. William’s gaze latches on me and decides to let go. I watch as his lips pinch into a thin line.

It takes him a while, but I wait.

“Cecelia just called. She wants to come over for lunch.”

I feel myself stiffen at the name of the beautiful girl. It takes me by surprise. *She wants to have lunch. After everything . . . she wants to have lunch.*

“With you?” I ask him softly, my eyes flicking to his curiously.

I wonder if he can see what I am feeling. The fear, I wonder if he can see it? I am afraid. Even though I know I should not be, but I am. Their parents had talked about getting them married. Even though William never intended to marry her, I am the intruder.

Being the female lead does not mean that the second female lead does not deserve the male lead more. That she does not have more rights.

I suppose it really does show on my face because a spark of amusement shoots through William's dark gaze and he pulls me tightly in his arms.

"What?" I ask, my words muffled against his shirt. A shiver runs down my back as the rain gets heavier and the drops become larger as they fall on us.

"She wants to make peace. She's asked to have lunch with us."

I notice how he emphasises 'us', and strangely, it makes me smile. I like it when he says 'us', it makes me feel like we're a family. A real one.

I can't help but smile as I lift my head up and look at the quiet man looking down at me, observing me silently. He always does this. Observes me with those dark piercing eyes of his until my heart begins to flutter in my chest and my cheeks redden with a blush.

"What?" I ask him, biting back a smile as I look up at him with a suddenly mischievous looking expression.

"Gemma."

I tilt my head, now slightly curious. "Hmm?" I look up at him expectantly.

"Will you marry me if I asked you to?"

* * *

Would I kiss death if it promised me love? If it promised me a final chance to frame your delicate face between my calloused fingers and press my lips against your softness, would I kiss death? Yes. I would. I would kiss you.

"They're here."

I blink as I rip my eyes away from my laptop's screen and slowly snap it closed. I ran my fingers against the soft hair of the distracted child on my lap fiddling with his small storybook.

Finally having my attention back on him, Isaac instantly tilts his head back with a wide grin on his face. "Mummy wants Isaac now?"

I blink, surprised. Something inside my chest snaps, and I quickly pull the boy completely on my lap before showering him with kisses. "I will always want you. Don't you ever forget that."

This instantly makes Isaac's smile brighter and he quickly jumps up

and clutches to me. “Really?”

“Of course, really!” I beam, placing a disgustingly loud kiss on Isaac’s forehead. I’m hoping it will gross him out enough to run and have another bath because it’s almost his nap time, and I usually like if he’s freshly bathed before it.

“More than Pa?” he asks, suddenly not feeling quite trusting. This surprises me a little bit but I can’t press on the matter because, at the same time, I hear the front door open and muffled voices begin to carry towards where we are seated.

Both Isaac and I turn our heads just in time to see them enter the living room area. My gaze first meets Kris, and I offer him a smile as Isaac’s grip around my neck tightens and he presses his cheek against mine, then my eyes meet William’s, and I slowly turn back to Isaac before putting him to the side and getting up.

Although I’ve never done it before whenever Kris came over, it seems rude to just sit here when there is someone over for lunch.

The change in Isaac’s expression is instant. When I turn back to pick him up, his wide eyes are already watery and his lips are trembling in a pout. It’s stupid. Instead of feeling sorry, I also feel amused.

An amused smile finds its way on my lips before I can stop myself. I extend my arms towards Isaac, watching his pout become larger, then he’s in my arms, clutching to me like a little monkey that he often is.

With him in my arms, I slowly make our way towards the three people standing a few steps away, as if awkwardly waiting for my acknowledgement.

My eyes once again find William’s, and I notice how he’s strategically standing beside Kris, not Cecelia.

Cecelia.

My attention turns to her. Once again, here she is looking extremely beautiful. Her hair is just perfect, her makeup light and youthful, her white dress is probably designer. Compared to her, my naturally thick wavy hair falls down quite typically. The soft blue striped dress that I have on does nothing to accentuate my figure. It will take even a blind bat to see that I am curvier than she is. My makeup is on the minimal as well. For a while, we just stand here staring at each other until I take a step forward.

“Hello.” I smile. On the inside, everything in me is telling me to be

cautious of this woman in front of me, but I can't help myself; I can't be cold with someone who hasn't done anything to me.

Surprise flashes across her face for a second before a blush blooms on her cheeks, and she extends her hand forward, her bright eyes looking at me softly. "Hi."

Despite a little whine that leaves Isaac's lips against my ear, I grasp on to her hand and give it a shake. Even her hands are soft. A telling that she's never done a lot of hard chores at home, and that she is a frequent user of hand creams.

"I'd like to apologise about last time," Cecelia mumbles, the blush on her cheeks brightens, and I can't help but smile wider.

"Let's not talk about it," I comfort her. Silently, I'm surprised that this is going a lot more smoothly than I thought it would.

She nods, visibly looking relieved by my words. Her attention turns to Isaac instead. She reaches forward and caresses his hair.

"Hello, Isaac," she greets the child in my arms with a wide smile.

Isaac, on the other hand, hides his face against my neck instead. "Hello." His response is short and muffled. I smile awkwardly at Cecelia, silently hoping she doesn't take Isaac's attitude too seriously.

"Let's go sit down while lunch is being made," William speaks up suddenly, and I turn back to him to see a smile on his face before he reaches forward and grasps my hand in his. I stiffen, my eyes snapping to Cecelia just in time to see her look away.

I can empathise with her. No matter the courage that she had to muster to come here today, it must still hurt to see William with me like the way she has wished for him to be with her for so long. Here she comes, apologising and trying to turn a new leaf with us yet we're sprinkling salt on her wounds.

I bite my lip, my gaze moving to a quietly observing Kris's.

I haven't seen him since that day when Cecelia first saw William and me. I can't help but try to look for an ounce of contempt in his gaze. I can't find any. Instead, he grins and steps forward to wrap his arm around my shoulder like he always does.

I feel Cecelia's gaze on me. Somehow, I don't know what to make of it and how she will respond if I look at her and smile right now to decrease the tension. Here we are standing with the love of her life holding my hand,

his child in my arms, and her brother's arm around me. While she's standing there. Just standing there. So I awkwardly avoid her.

William's grip on my hand tightens at his action, and I sigh as I look up at William and smile, silently asking him not to release his barbarically territorial side right now like he's been doing so often this past week.

"Oh, you're all here!"

I breathe a breath of relief and turn towards Mary, just in time for her to reach us. Her warm gaze falls on the child in my arms and then turns to me. She smiles. "It's his nap time, isn't it? He's already had lunch, right?"

I nod. "Yeah."

Mary smiles softly, patting my back. "Why don't you go bathe him and put him to bed? He always starts yelling if someone else does it."

I smile softly, nodding because I know the older woman is right. "Good idea. I'll go now."

Secretly, I'm very thankful. Things are beginning to get awkward.

"I'll come help!"

My wide eyes snap back to the speaker just as Isaac is taken from my arms without any space to refuse. I bite my lip when, this time, I feel both Cecelia and William's piercing gaze on me.

"Thanks." I smile at Kris. Silently, I can't help but wonder if he wants to give William and Cecelia some alone time to figure things out. For a second, I feel dread in my chest.

What if she still wants to take him away? The thought makes me so scared. I almost don't leave, then I take a deep breath and begin to walk towards Isaac's bedroom. My chest hurts with the thought I settle on. What is to happen will happen. Whatever way it is to happen. If it is to happen, no one can stop it.

"Oof!" Kris huffs beside me as we talk towards Isaac's room. "He's gotten heavier over the week! What have you been feeding him?"

I can't help but grin at the small pout that forms on the sleepy Isaac's lips.

"Awe, you're so cute," Kris teases Isaac with a cute childish voice just as we enter Isaac's room.

"Bath first, okay?" I ask Isaac softly and wait for him to answer before Kris strides into the bathroom with him.

"Leave it to me!" he says before closing the bathroom door behind

him.

With the bedroom is empty again, I let my shoulders slump as I realise that I'm still tired from not sleeping as many hours as I usually do. Within my line of sight, I focus my attention on the bed and quickly begin dragging my way towards the soft mattress. *Of course, I'll just go sit there on the bed. I don't have time to sleep anyway, we have guests over.*

"I think your mother's very tired, huh, kiddo?"

Muffled voices buzz around my ears, and I frown, trying to hear clearly as the foggy darkness quickly begins to fade away.

"Mm-hmm."

Mm-hmm. I echo in my mind. *Mm-hmm . . .*

Suddenly, a large cold hand touches my forehead and I freeze.

Wait. I frown. *OH NO!*

I shoot up! My eyes snap open and I find myself staring at the face of a wide-eyed surprised-looking Kris just inches away from my mine—who still has his hand on my forehead.

"You have a fever, did you know?"

"Mummy has a fever?" Isaac frowns and suddenly climbs over my lap stark-naked under his towel, shooting his face up between mine and Kris's as his tiny hands begin framing my face.

"Mummy's sick." The little peanut pouts, then turns to Kris. "We call Pa?"

"Guys, it's fine!" I quickly brush off their concern. "I'm always this warm," I reply truthfully. Growing up, I've always been this warm. To someone else, it often seemed like I had a fever, but I was always fine.

"I'm still not letting you off the hook." Kris narrows his eyes at me and I sigh. Instead, I turn my attention to my son, and just like that, a smile appears on my lips.

"Let's get you dressed, okay?" I ask, pecking the child on his forehead.

"Yes!" He jumps on my lap with a wide grin on his face having my attention back on him.

"Oh bless you! You're all matching!" Mary breaks into giggles when she sees us walking towards them. I can't help but giggle with her.

Halfway through dressing up Isaac, when Isaac asked me to match the colours of our outfits, I laughed and complied with the adorable little

angel. Kris was in the loo then. It was when he came back did we realise that we are all matching. We all are wearing different shades of blue.

My eyes find William's, and I bite my lip when I realise he's upset. He's sitting there while watching me quietly with his sharp eyes and a blank expression. Just like he always does when he's angry. I never like him like this.

"They look like those cute little families wearing matching family outfits." Cecelia giggles, turning to an amused Mary and placing her hand on the older woman's hands. Mary only glances at William worriedly before chuckling softly, patting the younger woman's hand.

My smile fades a little when I witness something flash across William's eyes just before he looks away.

"Really?" Kris chuckles, seeming to not have seen William's change in demeanour. I lift my head up and watch him as he looks down at me and then wraps his arm around my shoulder, bouncing Isaac on his other arm. He turns towards Mary and Cecelia. "How do we look?"

Mary and Cecelia break into another fit of giggles, and I turn my blushing face away from all this. Do they have any idea what William is feeling right now?

"What do you think, Will? Don't they look cute?" Cecelia asks William, bright-eyed and genuinely looking in good spirits.

William's eyes once again meet mine, and I find myself letting out a sigh when he once again turns away. "They look good."

I sigh, then tilt my face back up at Kris, hoping he's seeing what I'm seeing. He isn't. He's still grinning away. In his arms, Isaac is already falling asleep after his shower. I sigh harder.

William seems to notice this too.

"Gem, Isaac is falling asleep. Maybe we should tuck him in?" he asks, already getting up and striding towards us.

His tall frame towers over me as he takes Isaac from Kris's arms and begins walking towards the room again. His hand holds mine, pulling me with him.

The silence of the room is heavy. We work in silence; William lies Isaac down in the middle of the soft mattress while I frame him with pillows so that he doesn't fall from the other side of the bed. I watch as William pulls his blanket up until his stomach and tucks it in.

I bite my lip as I watch him, trying to read him. When the task is done, he lets out a sigh and just settles on the bed, his head drooped down facing his legs down.

A soft sigh leaves my lips as I slowly begin walking around the bedroom until I stand right in front of him.

“William?” I bend a little so that I can see his face.

“You two look good together,” he says after a few seconds of silence. He lifts his head up, and I almost gasp seeing the storm in his eyes. When he’s angry and his jaw is clenched, suddenly everything about him becomes sharp. Like a double-edged knife.

His arms feel like bands of steel as it comes to wrap around my waist all of a sudden and pulls me closer.

I let out another sigh and bring my hands up to frame his face. My fingers carefully caress his hair off his forehead, and I rub my thumb along his prickly jaw as he continues to stare at me with the anger fuelling his eyes.

“You’re cute when you’re jealous,” I say truthfully before leaning down and pecking his lips.

“This is funny to you,” he says through clenched teeth. I lean back to place another kiss on his lips, wrapping my arm around his neck this time.

“Kinda,” I say. It makes me worry more.

His fiery gaze narrows at my admission, and suddenly, he hooks his hand around my neck and pulls me down—his mouth latches on to my neck halfway.

A gasp escapes my lips as I close my eyes and my fingers clutch to his shirt, letting him continue his onslaught on my neck.

“Ah!” I hiss when, all of a sudden, it stings. Quickly, William’s eases his mouth against my skin, nibbling softly on the spot instead. I hold him when he slowly kisses my neck and stops, panting softly against my skin while trying to push away the remaining anger.

Tilting my head, I silently press my lips against his cheek, trying to tell him that it’s fine, that I’m fine.

“Guys, Mary ask . . . Yaah!” Kris’s yell has both William and I snapping our heads towards the door where he is standing. His wide eyes are suddenly filled with mischief and he lifts his eyebrows when it lands on me. “Damn!”

I want to groan with all the embarrassment seeping into my system. I want to hide my face against William's chest and never see the light of day again.

William is quick to react though. Just as I expected him to do, he quickly stands up and turns us around so that he's shielding me from Kris protectively.

"Go back down first," William speaks up.

Surprised at his husky, deep voice, I lift my eyes up to meet his. He's not looking at me though; he's looking at my neck.

When I feel his grip on my waist loosening, I clutch my hands around his shirt and slowly peek out.

Kris's amused eyes meet mine from the doorway, and he grins when William's hand suddenly frames my face and pulls me back to face him.

"Okay! I'm going down!"

Kris's chuckle echoes around the room. "Come down before Mary comes next, you two!"

The sound of the door clicking close has William and I standing here, just staring at each other.

In this silence, I remember the question he asked me early this morning.

"Will you marry me if I asked?"

Right now, I realise that that isn't what he's trying to ask me.

When I love you then.

Instead, he was asking me if I loved him yet.

As I continue to look up at the tense man staring down at the love bite he's given me, I smile.

Slowly, as we continue to stand here, I lift my palms and caress his face while softly brushing my fingers against his cheek. At my action, his gaze snaps to mine and my smile deepens.

"I love you."

"You guys okay?" Kris asks William and me as we all begin to settle around the table a few minutes later. I notice awkwardly as Cecelia automatically seats herself on the chair beside William before I can find my spot.

Kris sits opposite her.

I turn away, looking at Kris who is seated opposite her, and move to

settle beside Mary.

“We’re fine.” I smile at Kris, who grins at me and nods.

“Of course,” he replies and I blush.

“Gemma.”

My head snaps up and I blink, looking at a smiling William.

“Sit beside me.”

I glance at Cecelia softly, who stiffens in her seat. She suddenly hangs her head low as she realises where she has seated herself. Slowly, she looks up and nods. Her eyes find mine and she quickly gets up, so do I.

“No, no.” I stop her, shaking my head. “No need for that. I’m fine!”

“I’m not,” she replies, her wide eyes shining brightly with unshed tears, her soft pink lips trembling. “I’m sorry, I forgot. Please sit beside William.”

“No, no.” I shake my head again, guilt beginning to show its pitiful head in my chest. “It’s fine, trust me. I’ll just sit on the other side.”

“It’s f—”

“Enough of this!” Mary cuts off Cecelia. She turns her head towards me and she motions me toward William.

Silently, I find myself moving beside William and sitting on his other side. Immediately, his hand covers mine and I look up at him with a small smile.

“I think we need to talk and clear a few things out here, don’t you think, Kris?” Mary speaks clearly a few minutes after we begin eating. Immediately, I feel William stiffen beside me, but we all keep quiet.

“Yes, Aunty,” Kris answers quietly.

“Firstly, I know, the situation is hard, but let’s make some things clear. Cecelia, your parents brought up the marriage proposal with William’s parents. Although William’s parents were okay with it, William declined it from the beginning.

“Therefore, there was no engagement and no expectations. William has met Gemma, and here we are at this point. I believe marriage should be between two people who love each other. A marriage should begin with love. Because love will allow people to have the ability to live together harmoniously meeting a middle ground without it feeling like a compromise. If the marriage begins with compromise, then what will the rest of your life be? A series of sacrifices that will make one of you feel more and more bitter

over time.” I bite my lips as I watch Cecelia’s lips trembling harder. William’s hand finds its way on my thigh and gives it a squeeze.

Mary continues, “William loves Gemma. Let’s all please respect that. She is his choice, and he is hers. You’re young. I’m grateful that you’re smart enough to not take this to heart, but please wait, wait for someone who loves you. Someone who you don’t have to keep on sacrificing for. Let’s all just be more mature about this, understand?”

The table is quiet for a while. My mind is reeling with whatever Mary’s said. Specifically this one word: love.

I blink. *Does he love me?*

As if sensing my inner turmoil, William’s hand squeezes my thigh again, and I lift my gaze up to his in contemplation. Maybe . . . he does?

Maybe . . . William does love me.

* * *

“Bye, Gemma.” Cecelia gives me a small smile as we stand by the door an hour later. Outside, the sun has begun getting weaker as it’s slowly nearing three, and by the looks of the grey clouds hanging low above us, it seems like it’s about to rain too.

As I’m standing here with my head slightly tilted up, looking at the beautiful sad girl standing in front of me, I don’t know what to do except feel sad about this whole situation. For a minute, I wonder if this is why female lead’s become self-sacrificing and give up the male lead? Because they feel this guilty?

“Goodbye, Cecelia.” I give her a small smile back. My gaze snaps down when I see her hesitating on her feet, taking a step forward and then quickly moving back. My smile softens a little, and I risk it. Taking a step forward and carefully wrapping my arm around her, my smile brightens when she gently wraps her arms around me as well.

When we break the hug and move back, I turn towards a smiling Kris just as his arms wrap around me as well.

“See you soon.” He pats me on my back like in a child and takes a step back, turning towards a silent William standing behind me.

“Bye, William,” Cecelia suddenly acknowledges William, and both Kris and I stiffen as our eyes find each other.

Somehow, after Mary's talk during lunch, Cecelia had gone very quiet. She refused to join the conversation unless she was directly spoken to. Everybody had taken this as a good sign, but I couldn't help but think that there is always a calm before a storm. Something tells me that the calm has passed . . . it's time for the storm.

"Bye, Cece." William shuffles closer to me. I watch as Cecelia's eyes trace his action and narrows slightly when William's hand finds my waist.

"By the way, did you know?" Cecelia tilts her head, and I can only stand here and watch as a smirk forms on her pretty lips. "Shirley is back. She's getting married."

I stiffen when I feel William's grip on my waist tighten. In front of us, Cecelia's smirk widens as she looks at William with a smug look, then she turns to me and her stare softens. "I'll see you around, Gemma."

"I'll be in the car." She turns to her older brother before giving me another short glance, then she walks out.

I can't help but feel the dread seep into my system. Suddenly, I'm scared.

Shirley's back.

* * *

"Oi, is everything okay?" Sean's cold palm covers my forehead. I snap my head back up to look at my friend who's now standing behind me.

"What's wrong? You look like you've not slept all night!" Jennie frowns as well, joining the conversation as she moves closer to me and puts her hand on my neck.

She's right, I haven't. I couldn't. Even after William sat me down and assured me that it didn't matter that Shirley was back, even though he said that he didn't care, even though he held me as tightly as he ever had all night, trying to silently make me believe what I couldn't all day, I couldn't help but worry. I couldn't help but be scared.

I had seen the subtle change in William after Cecelia made the revelation. Even though he smiled for me, his smile didn't meet his eyes the way it usually does. Even though he held me, it felt like he really wasn't there. I couldn't help but wonder if he wished, even for a second, that it wasn't me that he was holding but her . . . his first love.

“She has a fever.” Jennie frowns, tilting her head up to Sean.

“She does, doesn’t she?” Sean’s frown deepens. “Gemma, you know you can tell us anything.” Sean bends down on his knees before me so that both our eyes are at the same height. I look away.

“I know.” I let my head fall.

“Did that neurosurgeon do something? Do you want us to intervene?”

“His first wife is back. She’s getting married.” I sigh, slowly lifting my gaze back up to meet my friends’ eyes.

“Wait, he’s divorced?” Sean’s eyes widen.

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jennie, on the other hand, knowing everything only frowns.

I sigh. *How do I explain?*

“I’m scared he’ll realise that he still loves her and . . .” I look away, not able to continue.

“Wait, so that kid you keep talking about . . . is his and his ex-wife’s?” Sean looks scandalized.

I flinch, reminded of yet another thing of hers that I am holding right now. Another thing that I love and that can be snatched away from me.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, Gemma! That’s why I keep telling you all not to get entangled with married or divorced men!”

I let my head fall again.

My voice is small the next time I speak. “What should I do?”

“Have more faith in yourself.”

My head snaps up at the new voice, and my gaze meets Tully’s who is now standing in Sean’s cubicle in front of us. Her hard eyes stare down at me as I continue to look up at her with a surprised expression.

“Oh come on!” Tully rolls her eyes. “You’re very good-looking, you come from a decent family, you’re highly educated and have a well-paying job, you care about his son like he’s your own, and honestly, don’t mind me saying this but you’ve probably given him your virginity by now as well. Dr. Noo would have to be an A-class jerkass with a two-digit IQ to not love you by now. Have more confidence in yourself, woman!”

“Wait,” Wendina whisper-shrieks and I almost facepalm myself. “Gemma was a virgin?”

“Not everyone can lead a successful hoe-life like yourself, Wendy.”

Sean rolls his eyes before he tugs at my hand.

“Did you really give him your virginity?”

“Of course she did!” Tully rolls her eyes, and I find my face burning harder. “Look at her face, for God’s sake!”

“I don’t think the office is where we should be discussing my sex life, guys.” I groan, trying to keep my voice as low as possible seeing Jarred, one of the editors moving around our cubicle.

“Okay, okay, forget about that. Just remember that you’re a strong, beautiful independent woman, and William loves you not his ex-wife, okay?” Jennie speaks slowly, trying to ground everything into my head.

“Yeah, and that ex-wife is clearly over him. She’s getting married, for God’s sake!” Wendina whispers as well, reaching out to grasp my hand comfortingly.

I sigh, not knowing what else to do but believe them. Actually, hearing Tully say these things to me, makes me feel better in a way. She reminded me that I am actually worthy as well. I should trust myself. I should trust William.

“All of you are right.” I look up at all my friends gratefully. “Thanks, guys.”

“Oh, don’t men—”

The shrill ringing of a phone cuts our conversation off as all our attention snaps down to the phone on my desk.

“An unknown number.” Sean’s eyes widen, and he glances at everyone suddenly looking very alert.

“What if it’s the ex?” Jennie whispers.

“Shut up, Jen!” Tully snaps at the scared looking woman, then turns her stern eyes to me. “Pick up already!”

Her hiss startles me out of my shocked state and my eyes dart towards my still ringing phone once more.

Quickly, I slide my thumb across the screen and quickly bring my phone against my ear.

“Hey, Gemma,” the girl’s sweet voice echoes from the receiver. She sounds hesitant. A bit lost.

I blink. “Cecelia.”

“Hi,” she mumbles. There is silence for a while as we both don’t know what to say.

“Can we meet?”

“Meet?” I echo her question. In front of me, everyone tenses.

“Yeah,” Cecelia clears her throat. “You have lunch around one, don’t you?”

I look at my computer’s screen. It’s almost one. “Yeah.”

Cecelia’s voice sounds confident when she speaks next. “So can we meet?”

I turn towards Sean, who has his ear pressed against my phone as well.

He motions to agree, and I clear my throat before replying. “Okay. Where?”

“Let’s meet at Aquamarine. The café near your office?”

“Okay, see you there,” I agree softly, not knowing exactly what else to say.

“See you there. I’ll be there in five.”

“Sure,” I mumble before Cecelia disconnects the call. I slowly move my phone away from me and place it down on the desk in front of me.

“How does she know where you’re working?” Sean wonders out loud, and I find myself simply shrugging in response.

“Don’t the rich always have ways of finding out?” I reply, getting up on my feet.

“Or maybe she’s a stalker. You’re really going to go meet her?” Tully asks, watching me grab my wallet and phone.

“I guess I should since I’ve agreed.” I hand her a small smile before moving around my chair and pushing it forward.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” I assure my friends.

“Oh no, thank you, I’m coming with you.” Sean shakes his head and begins to stand up as well.

“Yeah, I suddenly want coffee too,” Tully joins in.

“I have some work pending, guys, so protect our child for me and get me something to drink, please?” Jennie smiles sheepishly.

“Yeah, me too,” Wendina mumbles, looking between Sean and Tully.

“Don’t worry, we’ll get your lazy asses something.” Tully rolls her eyes before walking towards her desk to grab her wallet.

Instead of stopping the pair, I begin to move towards the door. Knowing Sean and Tully, I’m sure that no amount of refusing their

‘protection’ will go through their willful brains. If they want to do something, they always do it in the end. I will only waste my breath, so I let them come.

I walk a few steps ahead of them while they trail behind me lazily. When I spot the café and begin walking towards it, my eyes try to gauge the scene inside so that I can prepare myself for what’s to come. At this point, I don’t know why Cecelia has called me to this café. For a few seconds, I even wonder if I should tell William about this before entering the café.

Sean and Tully open the door and rush past me, pushing me into the café in the process. It isn’t hard to find Cecelia amongst the moderately busy café. Seated beside the tall glass window with large green pot plants behind her, she looks like a vision of innocence and beauty. The sight of the light falling on her, hitting her fair skin and bouncing back like a heaven’s glow almost has me stopping frozen on my feet, just staring at her beauty, then she looks up and the spell is broken. A soft smile flutters across her face. She puts her hand up in a timid wave, motioning me closer as if we are friends. As if we have been friends for years. Silently, I begin making my way over to her.

“Hi,” she greets me awkwardly with a smile.

“Hey.” I smile back, settling down in front of her. I notice out of the corner of my eye that Tully and Sean have settled down a few tables away from us—at a good distance to be away and yet near enough to come to my rescue.

“I hope I didn’t disturb any plans you had,” Cecelia asks hopefully, her wide eyes full of fear.

It makes me want to comfort the girl, so I shake my head dismissively. “No, you didn’t. It’s fine.”

“Oh.” She nods, her face flooding with relief. “Good.”

“Is something wrong?” I am the first one to cut the chase.

Cecelia’s smile visibly dampens right before my eyes, but I decide to remain silent, raising my hand to a waiter instead.

“What can I get you, miss?”

“Can I please get a mango passionfruit smoothie?”

“Sure! Anything else?”

“Yeah.” I smile up at the teenage boy. “A slice of banana bread would be great too. Thanks.”

“Sure, coming right up!” The boy smiles at me before turning around

and walking towards the counter. I, on the other hand, turn my attention back to Cecelia.

“I’ve known William since I was little. Ever since I knew what love meant, I’ve loved him. I’ve only loved him. I’ve been thinking about how I should say this to you. I’ve been thinking all night and I’m still not sure, so please . . . just listen before you decide on anything.” Cecelia lifts her gaze up to mine, then quickly brings up her mug of what smells like hot chocolate up to her lips.

I quietly wait for her to continue. I suppose it’s more because of how stunned I am after hearing her speak.

“When William told us he had proposed to Shirley, I knew she wasn’t the type of person that could be tied down to him. She liked to move around and party, and he liked to stay home and relax. That, and his social status bound him to certain obligations. I knew it wouldn’t last, but I kept quiet. I kept quiet because he loved her and she loved him.

“On his wedding day, I cried myself to sleep. I cried for weeks. Months. I tried to forget about him. I tried everything. I thought that he’s married now. He can never be mine, but isn’t love so funny? You can never decide when you fall in and when you stop. If you can stop. Then Shirley finally had enough, and she left him and Isaac. William cried himself to exhaustion in front of my brother and me. He’s not a drinker, but he drank until he passed out that night.

“Will it be evil if I said that even though I was sad because he was in pain, I was secretly happy as well? I thought that it was alright that she was gone. Now, William could be with someone who was more suited to him. I thought it was my chance to show him how much I love him, but words are easier said than done. It’s easier to dream about things than actually attain it, isn’t it?” Cecelia lets out a soft pathetic scoff before picking up her hot chocolate again.

“Years passed and he got over Shirley, but he never saw my efforts and he never saw my love. I saw that he looked happier, that he looked like he was over it. I thought it would be better if our parents talked, so I asked my parents to approach him with a wedding proposal. Even then, he bluntly refused. Once again, I was left disappointed.” She took another sip of her hot chocolate, and I listened silently as her tone turned bitter word by word.

“Still, I didn’t give up. One day, I went straight to his hospital and

asked him out on a date. He agreed. I was so happy.” Cecelia’s eyes light up, then dim down into two regretful pools of black. “After dinner, we went to watch a movie. That night, when he went to drop me home after the movie, he told me he likes someone else. He said he was sorry. Wouldn’t it be great if a sorry could make the pain go away, Gemma? Maybe then I wouldn’t be feeling like this, huh?” I look away, unable to say anything. William told her he liked someone. Did he lie just to get out of it?

“I asked him who she was. I begged him to at least give me a name. A name that I could place on the faceless person who I suddenly wished I could be more than anything in my life. He has always been quiet, ever since he was a child. I guess that that is what made me curious about him in the beginning. He was always so quiet, so serious. That night though, he smiled. The type of soft smile that I hadn’t even seen on his lips with Shirley. His eyes twinkled when he told me her name. Gemma.”

My mind whirled with the winds of surprise. William liked me even before everything? How? Just how? Did he use my name just for the sake of it?

Cecelia seems to spot my surprise because she hands me a sad smile before she continues. “I didn’t believe it. I didn’t want to believe it. I threw a fit. I cried and cried. I demanded that he prove it. That he proves that he’s in love with you. The poor man . . . he only smiled and said that you didn’t even know him nicely yet. It was just one-sided love. That maybe . . . you and he would never even meet again.”

“That consoled me. I thought that if he didn’t even have the guts to approach you, that maybe you would already have someone else and I would still have a chance to show him my heart. Days passed, then weeks, and William began getting busier. *Gege* began getting more and more evasive whenever I tried to talk about William, then I found out about you. That you and William were dating. That you were the same Gemma that he liked—had liked for months. I didn’t want to believe it. I wanted to hate him. I wanted to hate you. Loathe you from the depths of my bones. Loathe you until I can’t feel anything!” I feel her words turn bitter, and I flinch when my eyes land on her white knuckles as she continues to clench her fists on the table.

“Then we met. I watched as William stood in front of you and scolded you, and you stood before him with nothing but love in your eyes. You looked beautiful and kind. And William looked . . . in love. It hurt. It

hurt so much. And as I cried that day, I tried to hate you. I tried to hate you so much. Tell me, Gemma, how can I make myself hate you? You have been nothing but kind to me. I can't hate you. I can't blame you for my unfortunate fate in love.

"Eighteen years. I have loved William for eighteen years. For eighteen years, he has been the only one I've held in my heart. The one I've hoped for over and over again. The one who has left me disappointed over and over again. Then how can I hate you? I can only beg you. "My wide eyes snap to the spot where her slender warm fingers are suddenly covering mine.

"Please let me have William. Please let me keep him. He's the only thing that I have spent so many years of my life wishing for. He's the only thing that I've dreamt to build my life around. I know you're not a bad person. I know, so I can't help but beg one last time. Please let me have William."

For a few minutes, we both just sit there, Cecelia having thrown away her shame in front of me as she silently cries in front of me, and I'm sitting in front of her with tears spilling down my cheeks as well. I'm crying for her. I can't help but cry for her. A few tables away, I can swear I even hear Sean and Tully sniffle a little.

I don't know what to say. What should I do? How can I ease the pain away? Can anything make it go away?

I bite my lip and consider the option of leaving Isaac and William. Of letting Cecelia have her chance at a happy ending. It hurts too much. It hurts too much to think about them with someone else, so I bite my lip, dropping my head in apology.

"I don't think it's up to me, Cecelia," I reply, my voice comes out as a strangled rasp. I bite my bottom lip again when I feel Cecelia's hand over mine slowly drift away.

"I wish I could tell you that I'm selfless enough to leave, but I can't. I can't leave. At this point, it's not up to me. Compared to you, my love may seem like nothing. You've spent so many years in love with William and I've barely loved him for one, but in the end, nothing matters except what William feels. Who he wants. Who he loves. I'm sorry, Cecelia. I'm selfish, I can't leave. I love both Isaac and William. I can't ever leave unless they throw me away."

I lift my gaze up to meet hers. "I'm sorry."

* * *

“Boy, that was intense,” Sean breathes as we walk into the elevator an hour later. I can’t help but agree, nodding dumbly.

“I feel so sorry for the girl.” Tully sighs. “She gave her heart away to the wrong person.”

“Eighteen years,” I breathe, still in disbelief. “Do you guys think I made the right choice?” I ask, causing the two people to look at me with a pained expression in their eyes.

“I think you did the right thing,” Sean admits softly, putting his hand over my shoulder and squeezing it comfortingly.

“Yeah, me too. I don’t think Dr. Noo would have let you go even if you did agree. You’re right, it’s not about what you two feel. It’s about what he feels. He isn’t a bottle of water that you two can just give to each other.” Tully shrugs.

“Do you think I should tell him?” I bite my lip, contemplating if I should and I’m already trying to imagine how the scene would play out.

“I believe in clear communication and honesty,” Sean speaks firmly, giving me his answer clearly.

“I don’t think it’s necessary to embarrass the girl in front of the guy she loves. I’d feel embarrassed if the guy I love’s girlfriend told him that I practically begged her to give him to me,” Tully contradicts Sean, and I find myself nodding.

“Yeah, me too,” I mumble, thinking about how embarrassing it would be for Cecelia. She threw away her self-esteem to come to the café today and cry in front of me and so many people, to beg me to let him be hers.

“You girls are too sentimental.” Sean groans. Both Tully and I turn to give him a smile just as the doors of the elevator stops and opens at our floor.

“Whatever makes you happy, Ice Prince,” Tully throws back as we both exit the elevator and begin moving towards our office.

“Let’s hope Cecelia takes it all nicely. One-sided love is painful.”

Me too. I wish she deals with this nicely. I hope, someday, she forgives me too.

* * *

“Mummyyyy.”

Hearing the excited voice of Isaac calling my name makes me smile. It’s almost like some miraculous tonic. In an instant, the pain in my back and my mild headache disappears; all the worries and woes I’ve carried over the entire day disappears.

I’ve just managed to take off my shoes and place them in the shoe cabinet when Isaac runs over and jumps on me.

“Mummy, I missed you.”

“Awww,” I coo, sliding my feet into a pair of house slippers before picking the child up in my arms and beginning to carry him in. “I missed you too! Have you had your dinner already?”

“Yes!” Isaac nods, beaming under my attention.

“Hmm.” I nod as well. “Good because I got you something.”

“What? What?” Isaac begins jumping with excitement as I place him down on the sofa and extend the white plastic bag I am carrying towards him.

I watch as he takes out a slice of chocolate cake and custard pie and carefully puts it on the coffee table in front of him before turning towards me and jumping back in my arms.

“Mummy got me sweets!” the child whispers into my hair, and I chuckle as I take out another package from my bag and hand it to him.

“Now, we can match.” I smile as Isaac pulls out a yellow rainsuit matching the colour of my umbrella.

For a few seconds, he sits still, staring at the suit in his small arms, then he looks up and my smile turns into a frown. Immediately, I scoop the child closer up in my arms and tilt my head until I can see him straight in his face.

“What’s wrong? You don’t like it?” I ask softly, wiping the pad of my thumb against his now wet cheek. More fat pearls of tears roll down his cheeks as he silently shakes his head before wrapping his arms around my neck and hiding his face in my neck.

“I love you, Mummy,” Isaac whispers, tightening his grip on me. My concerned frown slowly fades. I find my eyes watering as well, my arms pull the child closer into my embrace.

“Don’t leave me,” he whispers again.

“I won’t.” I shake my head, beginning to bop the child in my arms. My mind wanders back to the woman who is somewhere in this same city. I wonder what she must be doing. I wonder if she’s missing her son. I wonder if she wants to have him back in her life.

I look down at the thick mop of dark hair tucked under my chin and lower my head to press my lips against it.

“I will never leave you.”

“Never?”

My heart bleeds a little. It’s a promise. “Never.”

“So this is Gemma Windly.”

At the new deep voice booming around the living room, I lift my head up in surprise and meet the good-looking but stern face of an older man standing a few steps away from us with a short fashionable-looking older woman by his side. Behind them, a nervous-looking Mary is standing while looking at me with worried eyes.

It doesn’t take too long to realise just who they are. My heart drops in my chest as Isaac continues to hold me, completely not understanding the tension that has now entered the air inside the living room. Somehow, I wish William came home early tonight, but I know I’m all alone.

I’ll have to deal with the elder couple all by myself.

Whether they welcome me with caution, or they throw a stack of money on my face and tell me to leave at once.

So I turn back to the blank-faced older couple and offer William’s parents a nervous smile.

“Hello, Mr. Noo. Mrs. Noo.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

One Day When Proposals Were Made & Intentions Were Questioned

*Out in the night,
Wrapped in the bright light of the glowing, distant full moon,
She breathes in the lingering scent of the afternoon rain.
The fragrance of drenched gardenias;
a forgotten love that had once made her swoon.*

An hour later, the chilly afternoon finds us seated on the sofa. Isaac is stuck to me like glue while the two elders have settled opposite us.

The silence is heavy, so heavy that it almost feels deafening. My heart is hammering in my chest, and I feel like I'm almost going to have a panic attack. This feeling, this breathlessness—it feels like I'm back in primary school and have been caught being a bad child is irrationally coursing through my veins. I feel myself flinch under their critical eyes.

Under such circumstances, what do I say to them? The lack of knowledge in this department only works to fuel my anxiety. I try to remember what I've read heroines do in books, or how I've seen female leads behave in dramas.

Sadly, despite years of experience both reading and being a drama viewer, I cannot think of a single dialogue to say to the very good-looking couple before me.

Should I declare that I will not take any amount of money they throw on my face to make me leave their son? Should I say that I will not tolerate if they try to pressure me through disturbing my parents's life? Should I

establish the fact that I am not someone who gets intimidated, that I am beyond the point where I can leave? Maybe I should just confess. I love their son and his child. I love them with my whole heart. Or maybe . . . I should tell them that I gave their son my virginity, and I'm pregnant. Okay, definitely not that. Nope. Maybe I should just keep quiet.

"It's good to see you again."

My eyes snap up, wide and surprised. I stare at the expensive-looking man with the slightly greying hair. His accent is a little thick but still very westernised. It makes me think that he must have a constant connection with international industries.

See me again?

"Have we met before?" I ask timidly, looking slowly from Mr. Noo to Mrs. Noo.

"We saw you that day . . . outside the restaurant," Mr Noo replies straightforwardly, his face is void of any expression. I look away from his peering gaze that makes me feel like he's seeing into my soul. I suddenly realise that Mr. Noo reminds me of William. A lot.

"Oh," I mumble, feeling my cheeks warm under the watchful eyes of William's parents. I don't know what else to say. I'm still not sure if they are viewing me as a gold digger or not.

"William has always been a good child," Mrs. Noo speaks this time, and naturally, my attention moves to her. I watch her attentively, waiting for her to continue.

She smiles. "He called us and told us that he cares about someone again. He said he's seeing a girl named Gemma Windly."

"It was a surprise when we pulled out some information about the girl and what a surprise it was when we found out that it was you, the same girl from the restaurant."

I blink, my eyes fall on my lap again when I feel my cheeks burn. Isaac, feeling left out—or perhaps noticing how nervous I am—suddenly crawls on my lap and dipping his head under mine as he shoots up and smacks his lips against my cheek

"Mummy, I love you!" he beams brightly, looking extremely proud at my surprised reaction.

I circle my arms around the adorable child by habit, and I pull him closer into the safety of my embrace.

“I love you too,” I whisper into his ear after I place a very loud kiss on his cheek, causing him to break into a fit of giggles, then I look back up at the quietly observing couple, managing to avoid direct eye contact in case they consider it as me trying to show off my relationship with Isaac or something.

“I see.” I nod, not knowing what else to say, then I clear my throat. “Is there . . . is there something you would like to ask me?”

Mr. Noo shakes his head. “We have already investigated your background. Interviewing you would be wasting time.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Noo agrees with her husband. Her attention moves to me. “Your background is fine. Your family, upbringing, education, social habits, they are all fine. We both know our son is spoilt. He always gets what he wants, and he will never tolerate our interference. The only thing I would like to know now is—” Mrs. Noo clears her throat, glancing at Isaac.

“Do you truly love William?”

“Yes.”

“What about our grandson? Do you love our grandchild?”

I glance from Mrs. Noo to Mr. Noo, then down to the child who is oblivious of the conversation happening between us adults and is almost nodding off on my lap now.

Finally, I meet Mrs. Noo’s stare. “More than anything.”

“Anything?” Mr. Noo cocks an eyebrow, looking at me speculatively. “Are you aware that if you and William continue to stay together, then one day, you both will want a child of your own. What will happen then? Isaac will just be a stepsibling, a stepchild.”

My stare turns into a glare by the end of the elder man’s question. Shocked at how the older man just said such a thing in front of Isaac. What if Isaac takes this to heart? What if he starts worrying?

I snap my eyes to the child in my lap. Although his eyes are shut tight and he looks like he’s asleep in his dream world, I can’t bring myself to believe it. What if he’s awake?

The thought of Isaac hearing what his grandfather has said, the thought of him beginning to fear the future, to begin fearing for his position in this family, to begin fearing that I wouldn’t love him as much anymore, it makes my heart ache.

As I look down at the child curled up in my arms, I think about what

his grandfather has said. I think about the future, about William and I. Would we want a baby? I try to think about it—a child of our own.

For a minute, I think about it. I sincerely stop and think about it. My mind flutters around the possibility, but every time I try to think about it, I think about Isaac's small body curled on my lap. I think about his bright smile and his tearing eyes. His wet eyes put a stop to every single thought. My arms around the child tighten.

"I may not have given birth to Isaac, sir, but he is my son. With him, I am content. If it will hurt him, if it will make him feel like my love for him is being divided, I will never have a child of my own."

Before me, the till now silent Mary and Mrs. Noo both gasp loudly. I, on the other hand, simply look down at Isaac and smile.

As I look down at the child, I try to find even a scent of regret in my chest. Even a wisp of mourning for the murder of a possibility I could have had for my and William's future. I try to look for indecisiveness. It surprises me when I realise that I don't feel anything. Instead, the only thing on my mind is the little boy in my arms.

"Gemma," Mary chokes out, and for the first time since sitting down on this couch, I look up at her.

"Isaac is enough," I assure the woman who looks like she's on the verge of tears.

Slowly, I turn my head to Mr. and Mrs. Noo.

Mrs. Noo looks stunned. The elder man, though, looks just as expressionless as before.

"Are you telling me that you will not have another child of your own for Isaac's sake?" he asks, his eyes flashing with interest as he leans forward in his seat.

"Yes, I won't have a child of my own." I nod, feeling my decision becoming more resolute.

At my response, the older man nods and then his gaze moves to something behind me. "How long are you going to stand there, William? Your legs will start hurting."

William!

I snap my head around and I watch—suddenly terrified—as a blank-faced William walks out of the shadows, his bag hanging from his shoulder while he continues to keep his dark eyes on his father and nobody else.

* * *

Have you ever felt a man's chest against your own? With nothing separating both. It feels magical. It doesn't matter what sort of chest they have—skinny, lean, or muscular, they all feel great pressed against your breasts.

“Hey, is that an erotica?” My head snaps up from the hardcopy manuscript to a very curious-looking Sean.

“Yeah,” I mumble a response before turning back to my manuscript.

“What's up with you?” Sean gasps as he gets a clear look of my face, all curiosity about the erotica forgotten. “You look like you haven't slept all night!”

“Hold up, what's going on?” At Sean's outburst, Jennie snaps her head away from her computer and looks at me with a frown.

I sigh, already giving up on keeping this inside. “William's upset with me.”

“What did you do?” Sean immediately sends an accusatory question flying at my face. I let it slap me straight across my right cheek and then letting out a small sigh as I begin explaining last night's situation.

“He's feeling guilty.” Sean rubs his palm down his face after I end my story, looking extremely exhausted all of a sudden.

“I don't understand.” I groan, bracing my face with my hands and rubbing my temples. I'm sure I'm going to get a massive headache at this rate.

“Dude! You just decided not to ever have a child just so his son doesn't feel like he's left out or feel that you're going to love your own child more over him. I mean, the man loves you. Imagine how guilty and horrible it makes him feel to see you decide to do this for his son. He's feeling like sh*t,” Sean explains softly.

“He's been avoiding me since last night. He disappeared in his room, then left before I even woke up. I wake up around five guys! That means he left for work not soon after he got back home. That means he slept at the hospital! He's not accepting my calls, he's not replying to my texts. I don't know what to do.” I groan, absolutely frustrated at this point.

“He's probably angry at you for taking this decision without him.

He's probably also angry that you've decided to make a sacrifice like this for his son's sake. He's probably angry for you just as much as he is angry at you." Jennie sighs, pushing her hair back from her face.

"Girlll!" Sean looks at Jennie with an extremely surprised expression on his face. "I'm impressed. That's some good reasoning."

I smack my palm against my forehead before dropping it on the desk. "What do I even do?"

"What about the in-laws?" Sean asks instead of answering my question.

At the mention of William's parents, the urge to facepalm myself once again takes over my mind.

"His dad seems to still be evaluating me silently. His mother and ex-mother-in-law have completely fallen for me after last night. They were both serving me breakfast and bringing up ideas to get past this situation. I don't know how to take it."

"Honestly, being a woman, I would also appreciate you a lot more. We all know how big of a sacrifice it is to decide that you're not going to have your own child just to make your partner's child feel secure," Jennie mumbles softly, looking at me with a sad expression.

At the thought of Isaac feeling like I'm pushing him away for a child of my own, I feel my chest ache once again.

"I just want Isaac to be happy." I shrug.

"Talking like a mother." Jennie smiles softly. I only give her a small tired smile.

"What do I do about William?" I ask again after a minute of ignoring the stunned silence that has settled between us three friends.

"I say confront him." Wendina jumps into the conversation, as usual, listening to us quietly. Thankfully, Tully is on sick leave today. Or I'd be getting a lecture right now.

"I would if he would allow it." I scoff, rolling my eyes at the idea. "I feel like stomping my feet like a little girl until he forgives me. Think that'll work?"

"Hahaha, no." Wendina looks at me sternly. "I suggest you just sit back and chill out. He'll come around." She shrugs and I let out a long sigh.

Sean lets out a loud sigh of his own.

"You've been getting a lot of sh*t lately. First, the almost fiancée,

then the return of the carefree ex-wife, then the in-laws's surprise visit and your sudden declaration of dedicating your motherhood to Isaac and then William gets pissed off. To top it off, all this happened in a matter of days. Can someone wake me up from this nightmare already?"

"I'd be the first one to want to wake up, honestly. Just throw a bucket of water on me, I swear," I grumble, shaking my head before letting it fall back on the table with a thud.

Just then, the loud buzzing of my phone vibrating on the desk begins and all four of us find our attention on the screen.

William Calling . . .

"No way." Sean gapes at the screen.

I blink rapidly, in case I'm reading the name wrong. "Eeeeh! It's him! Pick up!" Jennie whispers excitedly, pushing the phone towards me.

"He really does have a long life," Wendina mumbles to herself as she too stares at the phone screen.

"Ah?" I blink, the shock quickly fades and my eyes focus on my phone again. "Oh. oh!" I quickly grasp at it and slide my thumb across the screen and then place the phone against my ear.

"Hello," I mumble into the phone in a small voice. My eyes flutter from Wendina to Sean to Jennie. All three have three different expressions on their face—worry, shock, and excitement.

"I'm in the underground parking lot."

I frown. William's monotonous tone sounds deep and gruff in my mind as I replay his words in my mind. *He's downstairs? Right now?*

"I'm coming."

I disconnect the call and quickly get up, shoving the phone in my pocket. I turn to my friends. "He's downstairs in the parking lot. I'll be right back."

"Good luck!" all three of my friends whisper motivationally, and I spare them a grateful smile before I'm flying out of there.

I'm out of the office and in the elevator, moving down in no time. Pushing down the feeling of nausea, my mind whirls around the man waiting for me. Before I know it, the elevator has come to a stop, and I'm moving out of the elevator and into the parking lot.

It's easy to spot him. His Tesla's headlights are on, glaring lights hit against my face as I begin making my way closer to the vehicle.

Reaching the SUV, I quietly open the front passenger side's door and get into the vehicle, settling myself on the passenger's seat silently.

For a long while, we only sit in silence. Each in our own seat. I don't even dare to look at him, so instead, I continue to look forward. My heart is racing, but on the outside, I can only sit on this seat dumbly and wait.

"You can't go around making sacrifices on your own," William says loudly all of a sudden, breaking the silence that had formed between us in the vehicle.

At his words, my head turns towards the man in surprise. Honestly, I had expected a fierce temper or something.

"William." I don't know what else to say right now, I feel so tongue-tied.

"We're going to have kids someday, do you understand?" William's hand reaches out and frames my face. I can't help but stare into his sincere black pools.

I want to shake my head, tell him that I still stand firm in my decision from last night, but I feel myself reaching forward and framing his face with my hands instead.

"We have Isaac. He's enough," I whisper at him lovingly.

At my words, William's hand shoots up and grabs mine, tapping mine there . . . against his cheeks. I watch, wide-eyed as his eyes begin to water right before me.

"We're going to have kids someday, do you understand?" he repeats himself, and this time, my smile falters as I realise that Jennie was right. William is feeling guilty. He's feeling angry for me as much as he is feeling angry at me. He's feeling sad.

"Isaac is enough." I pull my hand away from his face and witness a second of rejection flash across his face before I wrap my arm around his neck and pull him into a hug.

"I don't agree to this," William mutters against my neck. I let out a sigh and slowly rub his back.

"We don't know what's stored for us in the future, we might not even marry. L—"

"We will get married," William cuts me off, his own arms slide around my waist and pull me as close to him as I can get.

His words sound like an oath. It makes my heart flutter. I forget what

I was going to say.

“What if Isaac asks for a younger sibling?”

I still against the man holding me, my mind going over the possibility.

“If he wants a younger sibling, but only if he’ll be okay with it.” I think I’ve replied vaguely. Truthfully, my mind is a mess. I don’t know what I want to say right now or how to say it. I want to yell at William for ignoring me. Suddenly, I also want to cry. What for? I do not know. I suppose I will just take it as it comes, the future that is. Who knows what will happen?

Against me, William lets out a content sigh before snuggling his face against my hair. I let it fall loose down to my chest today. Slowly, I feel him push away a strand of hair with his nose before he presses his lips against my neck. “I want a daughter.”

“A daughter would be nice.” My heart flips in my chest as I agree, turning my head I place a kiss on William’s hair.

“Thank you for loving me.”

I blink, my breath hitches in my throat as William mumbles these words to me.

“Thank you for loving Isaac,” he continues, and I find my eyes beginning to tear up.

“Even though I’d never even thought about it, it didn’t even take you a minute to make such a choice. Just for Isaac’s happiness.” William clutches my shoulder and pushes it away until we are face-to-face. I almost gasp when I see his eyes—red-rimmed and wet.

“Gemma, I don’t deserve you.”

Impulsively, I find myself shooting forward, tilting my head and pecking his lips. “You do.”

William shakes his head and lets it drop. “Sometimes, it feels like you’re still a dream. Shining brightly in front of me while I can only sit at a distance and watch you, watch you continue to shine like this.”

“William,” I breathe, looking down at him with wonder. I don’t know what to say.

“Gemma.” He looks up and I let my eyes close shut as one of his hands comes to frame my face, rubbing his thumb softly against my cheeks.

“Don’t leave me.” His warm breath hits my cheek as I snap my eyes open, instantly staring deeply into his serious dark orbs.

“Ever,” he adds firmly, his eyes staring down at me. I can’t find myself looking away.

“Mmm.” I nod when I can’t bring myself to say anything else.

William nods as well before he moves an inch closer and he stares down at me. “From now onwards, I’m never going to let you go. Not even if you want to.”

He wraps his arms around me and he pulls me into his arms.

I lie my cheeks against his shoulder. “Gemma Windly, you belong with me.”

Something about his words makes me giggle, and I find myself pushing him a little away until we’re face-to-face again.

“You’re acting strange today,” I mumble as I look up at him. “You never say things like these.”

For a second, William silently looks down at me before he suddenly leans down and presses his lips against mine.

“If I don’t say these words, how will you know how I’m feeling and what I want? So I say them.”

I can’t help but smile at his response. I understand what he’s saying. If we don’t have communication between us, if we don’t tell the other person what we are feeling, even if it’s embarrassing to say, no matter what, then how will the other person know how we are feeling? Actions speak louder than words, yes, but sometimes, no amount of action can assure a person as much as words can. Sometimes, we need words too. Actions are important, but words are also sweet.

So I just nod enthusiastically. “Mmm!”

“I love you.” I smile up brightly at him, basking in his attention and love. Suddenly, I know exactly what Isaac feels every time I shower him with affection. He must feel just like this.

“I love you.”

My smile freezes.

I find myself stilling as I stay there, still staring up at the man looking down at me with a soft smile on his lips. The man who’s just spoken. My heart is running a marathon.

Suddenly, I don’t even know if I can breathe. My hand finds my chest and I take in a deep breath in, then count till seven and let it go.

My eyes flicker to William’s amused dark pools and I clutch his arm

tightly. “Say that again.”

“I love you,” he replies, his smile getting wider seeing my reaction, then he’s leaning down and placing a kiss on my nose. I beam under his attention.

“I love you too.”

* * *

“Well, well, well, doesn’t someone look happy after meeting her man?” Sean smirks widely when I finally settle down on my cubicle. I grin back at him.

“We decided to have kids when Isaac demands for a sibling. I have a feeling William is going to coax the child by telling him how the baby will be his playmate.” I grin at my excited-looking friends.

“See, clear communication can make such a big issue look like a small math problem. I’m glad you both handle things so well.” Jennie smiles at me warmly, looking very pleased.

“It’s sweet of him to insist on having a child with you. Shows that he isn’t willing to let you make sacrifices. He cares about your happiness.” Wendina sighs dreamily.

“I’m suddenly so jealous.” Sean’s expression bitters. “When is a certain someone going to notice me?” He looks wistfully towards Nathan’s office. All three—Wendina, Jennie, and I—glance at each other with a grin on our lips.

“In your dreams.” Wendina pokes her tongue out at Sean and we chuckle when Sean shoots her a death glare.

My chuckle settles down into a soft smile and I lean forward in my seat.

“Sometimes, we are so busy looking at flowers in someone else’s garden that we forget the beautiful ones we have in our own,” I speak softly, causing Sean’s eyes to snap to mine. “Don’t go looking too far, some things can be found just beside you if you try.” I smile.

“I hope you’re not talking about who I think you’re talking about,” Sean hisses as his gaze shoots towards the silent man sitting across the office in a glass-walled room of his own, looking into his computer screen.

Following his action, I glance at the man as well. The well-dressed

lawyer looks serene in his space. His jet-black hair is falling softly on his forehead. The black shirt he's wearing today contrasts sharply against his milky white skin. He looks like a fallen angel.

"You have to be kidding me." Sean scoffs and looks away from his college time's number one enemy. "There is no way!"

"Forth has always loved you. Ever since college, Sean." I sigh, finally confessing the one secret I've kept for Forth since he called me one night, asking me to get Sean from a party.

I drove over as quickly as I could that night. Parties had never been my scene, but they had always been Sean's.

When I reached the building, I saw Forth seated on a bench outside with Sean passed out on his lap.

The same Forth from the law faculty who had always shunned and went out of his way to irritate Sean. He was sitting with a smile on his face as the passed-out boy slept away.

I think it would have been impossible for anyone to hide it, the expression that Forth had on his face as he looked down at Sean. It was love.

I glance back towards the man sitting in his office when, suddenly, he turns his head and looks right at us. Or specifically, Sean. Sean chokes on his saliva and quickly turns away, heaving in his seat while trying to calm his coughing or his heart, I don't know.

"Oh man, the way he looks at you," Wendina breathes dreamily as she continues to stare at the lawyer.

"Sean, you're officially an idiot," Jennie declares, causing Sean to give her his famous deadly glare.

"He doesn't love me," Sean huffs and turns back to his computer.

"Sean." I let out a frustrated sigh. "Stop lying to yourself."

"Oh, whatever!" Sean suddenly gets up, running his palm down his face. The almost sad-looking frustration that is lingering on his face surprises me a little. I've never really thought about it before, but over the years . . . could Sean also have something for Forth?

"I'm going to grab some coffee. I'll get you guys some," Sean mutters gruffly just as he turns around and begins marching towards the exit before we can say something back.

* * *

“Gemma dear, can you pass me that purple yarn?”

“Sure, Mrs. Noo.” I smile at the older woman who is sitting comfortably on the sofa with Mary as I reach for the basket full of yarn and pick up the purple one and hand it over to her.

She seems at peace. Her feet are stretched across the longer sofa’s expanse while Mary is settled on the smaller sofa right beside hers.

“I thought I told you to call me Ma.” Mrs. Noo looks up at me with her sad eyes. Despite my troubled mind, I can’t help but grin at her antic.

A week ago when William’s parents had just arrived, things truly were very awkward. Mr. Noo ignored me on the first two days and Mrs. Noo tried her hardest to not look at me in the eyes. At first, I was hurt, but when I realised that even Mary was avoiding my eyes, I wondered if it was something about that conversation we held that afternoon. Maybe it wasn’t dislike they felt . . . maybe they were guilty.

Every time I think about that afternoon, I can’t help but wonder if Isaac was awake and heard our conversation.

Every time I think that, I pray he didn’t. That isn’t a conversation a five-year-old should be thinking about.

My and Mrs. Noo’s relationship began to ease over William’s backyard garden. Both of us woke up early. Both of us spent our early mornings in the garden with her doing yoga and me tending to the flowers or just reading. I suppose it was me who made the first move. I made her some juice one morning when I saw her sitting outside. She was surprised, and I was happy that she didn’t refuse the glass. The next morning when she woke up after me, she offered me a glass of juice.

After that, she warmed up to me very quickly—so quickly that even William is shocked at how endearingly his mother behaves with me.

William’s father, on the other hand, still prefers to offer a simple acknowledgement and then proceed to ignore my existence. Needless to say, we are still awkward around each other. I don’t really mind though. I know that no matter how nice I am or how well I live my life, I can’t make everyone like me. Like William’s dad. However, I know that I can always make sure to be my best so that even though I am not liked, I am not hated.

I made a point not to unnecessarily seek his attention or stand out in his eyes; I just stay as I usually am with Isaac and William. I guess I’m

secretly hoping he sees my sincerity in my simplicity. Even though it's okay with me if William's dad doesn't like me, I guess I am secretly hoping that he accepts that I am a good person. A good enough person to be with his son and grandson.

I'll admit, until yesterday morning, I was scared that William's dad hated me. That is until I happened to overhear a conversation between him and William.

It wasn't quite early, but early enough for it to be called morning. William had to suddenly stay on-call the night before and had just reached home just a few minutes after I woke up, which was around 5:10AM. He looked so worn out despite his attempt to cuddle up to me on the sofa, I had pushed him into his room to sleep.

I think it was around a few minutes after eleven when William's mum asked me to take a glass of juice up to his room and wake him up. Walking up with a glass of juice and some sandwiches while Isaac holds on to the material of my pants with his small hand as he walked with me, I had never expected to find the door slightly open and William fully awake inside—talking to his father.

I never expected to find myself frozen on my spot, a quiet Isaac beside me, as we heard William's father say the most unexpected thing ever.

"She seems to be a very decent girl, William, but you're dishonouring her by keeping her here without proper right. I thought I taught you better."

"Pa . . . what do you mean?" I heard William's surprised voice ask his father.

"When are you going to marry her? I know these Westerners here are a lot more relaxed with life and think it's okay to live together before marriage, but this is not how we raised you, William. How can you just keep the girl here just like that? I am going back at the end of the week. You better do right by her before then."

Right now, a day later, I still don't know how I feel after hearing that conversation. A part of me feels happy that William's father secretly cares for me and my honour. The other part is troubled. I don't want William to tie himself down just because his dad asked him to.

I love William. Truly, I do. But now with all these doubts, I can't help but wonder . . . will I be able to say yes if he really does propose?

“Is Isaac asleep?”

My eyes flutter as I turn towards the new voice that has spoken and I find myself facing Mr. Noo. Silently, I find myself shaking my head. “He’s taking a bath with his dad.”

Mr. Noo nods, seemingly accepting my answer before turning back to his laptop.

“Come, sit.”

I freeze. Mr. Noo’s deep drawl echoes around the suddenly silent walls of the living room. Both the older women’s worried eyes dart silently between Mr. Noo and I as they watch me hesitate for a second before slowly making my way towards the spot Mr. Noo patted on and sit down beside him.

“Can you proofread this email for me?” He turns to me with the question, and once again, I am left with the feeling of how similar William and his father are. So blank-faced. I can’t read them at all.

“Sure, sir,” I accept immediately, smiling gently at the older man before taking the laptop he is extending towards me and placing it on my lap instead.

“Pa, Ma.” William marches into the living room with Isaac a few minutes later. When his eyes land on me, he stops in his tracks, looking between his father and me.

“What’s going on?”

“She’s helping me with a few documents,” Mr. Noo replies straightforwardly, lifting his gaze up to his son, before looking back down at his phone.

“Oh,” William just replies simply, looking a bit stunned, then he comes and drops down beside me. I look away from the screen to give him a soft smile before getting back to work. Isaac, oblivious of the tension running between the adults, seems to be as carefree as ever, giggling as he bounces in his father’s arms.

“All done,” I report after a few minutes, finally completed going through all the English emails Mr. Noo had in his drafts tab.

Before me, Mr. Noo lifts his gaze from his cell phone, and for the first time in a week, he looks me in the eye and smiles at me. I almost drop his laptop on my toe.

“Thank you,” he speaks. I blink.

“Oh, it’s my pleasure, sir.” I shake my head, handing him his laptop,

before quickly turning towards an amused pair of older women sitting opposite us.

“Isaac, come to Nei-Nei.” Mrs. Noo puts aside her knitting progress and extends her arms towards Isaac who immediately jumps off his father’s lap and begins padding his way over to his grandmother.

“Nei-Nei’s made dumplings for you. Do you want to have some?” she asks the child with a sweet voice that is definitely a tone higher than her usual voice. I can’t help but smile as I watch the exchange.

“Yes!” Isaac immediately jumps on the beautiful woman’s lap and wraps his arm around his grandmother, waiting for her to pick him up and begin walking towards the kitchen. An amused Mrs. Noo laughs as she follows his unspoken demand.

In the midst of all this, Mary’s eyes meet mine and we both exchange an amused grin.

I feel as William leans in then. His warm breath grazes the sensitive shell of my ear.

“Wanna watch a movie?” he whispers into my ear. I shudder when his breath tickles my ear.

“At home or at the cinema?” I ask underneath my breath, refusing to turn and look at him. Although, even at this rate, I’m pretty sure Mr. Noo can hear everything we’re saying.

“Home,” William replies and I nod.

William’s home theatre isn’t used as often as it should be. When I initially found out about the room, I was confused about why he would go to a public cinema to watch a movie with Cecelia that night and not just use his own, then I was relieved because the home cinema felt so much more intimate. It was better to think of them in a cinema full of people instead of a home theatre. *Yeah, he made the right choice.*

“Pa, we’re going to watch a movie,” William informs his father as he gets up and extends his hand towards me.

“Uh,” Mr. Noo acknowledges his son, nodding without lifting his eyes from his laptop.

“We’ll take care of Isaac.” Mary smiles at me, answering my silent request when I look at her.

“Thank you,” I reply gratefully before William begins to lead me towards the cinema.

“What are we going to watch today?” I ask as we come to a stop before the door. William turns to me and smiles before dropping my hand and slowly coming around me.

I shiver when he grips my shoulder, and I find myself frowning curiously at his sudden action. Suddenly, something feels weird. I turn my head to look back at the tall man holding me and chuckle. “What? Do you want me to open the door?”

Smiling down at me, William drops his head and presses his lips against my cheek. “Yes.”

“Okay.” I chuckle under his open affection. Gripping the doorknobs, I slowly push it open and take a step inside the room.

Everything stops.

The entire room is illuminated with what feels like a hundred candles. Two lines of candles create a path towards the front of the large room. Lingering in the darkroom is the soft scent of roses. I feel my heart warm at the lovingly romantic ambience in the room. I feel William’s hand sliding down until they are holding my arm from the behind instead.

“Go on.” His warm breath tickles the shell of my ear again.

In the dark glistening room, I follow the path; I slowly begin walking.

Slowly but surely, we reach the front of the room. I find myself stopping when my eyes land on the beautifully arranged candles that make a heart.

Suddenly, it hits me. I turn around and lift my eyes up to meet two intense dark ones looking down at me with a warm smile.

“William,” I breathe just as the man I have come to truly love drops on one knee.

He pulls out a small box from his pocket. My wide eyes dart from the box to his. I feel like I’m running a hundred-metre race; my heart is going crazy in my chest and I’m feeling so lightheaded, I don’t know if I should sit down or laugh. Still, I can’t pull my eyes away. I can only stand here, giddy and ticklish with the fluttering in my chest, and wait for the question.

“Gemma Windly, will you marry me?”

* * *

Saara: Hey, just letting you know I’m back home!

The ping of a notification fills the empty car just as I settle in the driver's seat of my new car and close the door. Turning towards my bag, I quickly pull out my cell phone and click on the notification.

So far the car is a few weeks old, but it still feels like I went to the showroom and bought it just yesterday. I smile at the memory of Olly tailing behind me, asking the attendant how safe the vehicle is at every option we were shown. Thankfully, since I am lucky enough to inherit a house—bless my aunt—I had a lot of money saved up for a car. I can't say I regret the decision.

My eyes run over the text and a soft smile begins pulling at my lips. She really does have good timing! I begin typing back a reply.

Gemma: Mm-hmm. I'm on my way over. Do you want something from the grocery store?

Her reply comes back instantly.

Saara: Yeah, can you get everything? It looks like you've not been here even once since I've left.

Ah yes. I sigh. Guilt bubbles in my chest. It's true, it's been a while since I've gone back home. Somehow, right now, I feel like I've been inattentive towards my own property.

Shaking the thoughts away, I let out a slow sigh and begin typing again.

Gemma: Mm-hmm, okay. Yeah, I haven't. I'll be home in an hour. Open the gate when you hear a link.

Saara: Yes, boss!

I snort, then quickly send her a reply.

Gemma: <peace_sign_hamster.jpg>

Putting my phone on silent, I turn to look at the suitcase lying on my back seat for a little while, then I turn back around and begin driving out of the parking lot.

* * *

“Hii!” I beam as I get out of the car and wrap my arms around a grinning August. It feels like it's been forever since I've seen the taller man. He wraps his strong arms around me, and I feel him pat my hair before I'm ripped away from him and pulled into another pair of arms.

“You’re supposed to hug me!” Saara yells, sounding outraged as she rests her face on my shoulder. I can’t help but squeeze her in my arms.

“I missed you too, Poofy,” I mumble into her hair, allowing myself this one moment to feel the pent-up emotions I’ve ignored since last night. In my cousin-sister’s arms, I let myself feel confused and sad and hopeful.

“Hey.” Saara stops suddenly, I suppose noticing my quietness. “Is everything okay with you and William?”

“William?” August asks, and I lift my face up to answer him. For a moment, I hesitate when I see his dark eyes blazing with shock and something else. For a moment, I hesitate, wondering if August will actually go around and confront William if he thinks William has hurt me.

“Her boyfriend.” Saara takes my hesitation as an opportunity and replies before I can.

Hearing the word boyfriend, I flinch in my cousin’s embrace and lower my head, feeling guilty all of a sudden.

“Actually . . .” I mumble, letting my arms fall beside me and taking a step back. I forget about all the groceries that are in the car’s trunk and look my cousin in her eyes. “Fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” August and Saara both echo after me, both their eyes wide and jaws slack.

Looking between both of them, I nod slowly. “Yes. Fiancé.”

It’s like a light bulb goes out in Saara’s head. I watch as her expression changes from shock to excitement.

Suddenly, the confused blurriness in her eyes fades and her eyes light up, then she screams.

“AHHH! WHEN DID THIS HAPPEN?”

“Hold up, so you’re telling me that he proposed last night, and you packed up almost all your luggage and came here today instead of staying there?” Saara gapes at me half an hour later as we finally settle down on the sofa beside August, having finished putting all the groceries where they belong and generally cleaned the house.

I let out a huff of air. “I just packed the things I don’t usually wear! And I felt like I was neglecting this place. Besides, William and his folks know I’m coming here for the rest of the week.”

I avoid the part where I’m feeling conflicted about his intentions. Even though I know he cares and loves me, even though I know that

eventually, he would have asked me, but I can't help but think that he's only asked me right now because of his parents. I can't help but worry that he's forcing himself to commit quicker because of his parents.

"HOLD UP! HOLD UP! HIS FOLKS? YOU'VE MET THE IN-LAWS ALREADY?"

I really want to facepalm myself.

"How did it go?"

August's quiet question comes as a breath of fresh air in the chaos between Saara and me, so I decide to just answer August instead.

"His mother wants me to call her Ma," I reply, then pause before continuing. "His dad seems to be better with me now."

August nods. "No ring?"

I look up to find him looking down at my hands and clear my throat when I'm once again reminded of the biggest mistake today.

"I took it off before showering in the morning and I forgot to wear it again," I mumble, probably looking just as guilty as I am feeling right now. I really hope someone finds it on my vanity and places it somewhere safe.

August nods again, looking away from my hand and up at my face. He smiles. "I'm going to go get some takeout. You guys go freshen up, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay." I nod, getting up with August.

"See you guys in a few." He smiles at us before walking out the door.

At the sound of the main door click close, I turn towards a still lazily sprawled Saara.

"I'll take the main bathroom, you can take the master bedroom one," I call back to her as I begin walking towards the bathroom.

"Wait!" Saara's sudden yell stops me in my step. I turn around to look at my cousin with a curious expression on my face.

"Someone's coming over today. You have to promise not to be upset, and be open-minded, okay?" I watch Saara visibly cringing as she looks up at me.

For a moment, I narrow my eyes at her, not exactly sure what she's talking about, then it hits me. *Dante*.

I roll my eyes.

"Sure! sure! Don't worry," I assure her before turning around and walking away.

* * *

The night air feels warmer on my skin after the cold shower, but still, I can't complain. I feel refreshed, and the lingering headache that I have felt all day is finally gone.

As I stand in front of the mirror and give myself a final once-over, I stare at a pimple forming on the side of my cheek hoping it dies before it becomes uglier and mentally countdown the days left before I get my period.

Once I have the calculation down and the need to stare at my face is over with, I finally give myself a nod. After wrapping myself up in my towel, I begin wrapping a dry towel around my wet hair as well.

It seems like forever, but when I am finally done, I pull open the door and step out, ready to get dressed and begin eating something.

That is until I open the door and my face smacks straight on to a hard chest. Shocked, I look up at the person. My heart drops in my chest.

“Declan.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

One Day When the Birds Sang & the Bees Buzzed

*Her lover, he holds her.
She breathes in and then out;
her mind wonders, thinking of things her mouth can no
longer speak about.
An almost forgotten memory of a night just like this,
an almost forgotten memory of an embrace just like this.
A man who had once loved her, but not like this;
A man who had once hurt her, had it hurt like this?*

“Declan.”

Only as I turn my head up and look into his eyes, only as I breathe his name do I grasp the fact of who I’ve just bumped into. And just as that fact settles into my system, by reflex, my hand clutches my towel closely to my chest. I run towards my bedroom, slamming the door closed and locking it shut.

My mind is a flurry. What is happening here? Why now?

How? I can’t help but pant as I let myself slide down my door, falling to my feet with a small thud. *I can’t think. I can’t think straight. What is going on? Why is he here?*

Declan.

If I didn’t know the man that was just in front of me a few seconds ago as I well as I do, if there hadn’t been a time when I had spent hours committing him to my memory—every slight scar and mole, the scatter of

freckles near his nose, the light browns in his blue eyes—I would think that he is Dante. After all, they are the same height, they both have the same broad shoulders, the same face, the same hairstyle. Even their family members occasionally mistake them for each other. Still, I know, the man standing before me isn't his twin. He's Declan. The guy who had once made me whirl in the cool breeze of first love. The guy who also made me feel my first love's heartbreak.

It's like we're back in senior year of high school—running on the tracks like we usually did, laughing and joking our way around the large grounds without a care in the world. It's like we're back to holding hands every day on our way back home. Or studying together before exams. It's like we're back to prom night, my gown matching his tux while we're standing beside Saara and Dante, beaming into the camera our proud parents are holding in front of us. It's like we're back in that bed, or in that hallway, or in that living room with a heavily drunk Declan on top of me, or before me, slapping me across the face and pushing me down until the imprints of his grip are forced to remain on my body for the next few days. It's like we're back to those times, where his heartbreaking words made an entrance every time he was intoxicated, tearing down my self-esteem with those hateful words to me.

I stop, clutching my towel until my knuckles turn pale. I can't relive that anymore.

It's funny how while I am sitting here, years later, what hurts the most isn't his actions, but his words instead. This is truly when I realise just how much more hurtful words really are.

I sit on the cold floor, wet from head to toe, wrapped in a towel, panting like I've ran a marathon. After a few minutes, the high of what just happened seems to slowly begin to ease, and I find myself being able to think properly.

Truth be told, even though it has been years, I still feel so anxious. Anxious, I realise, to discover just what sort of a person Declan is now. And why he is here.

Although we look the same from years ago, we are different people now. It has been seven years, I am not that girl anymore. I'm not. Is he the same man he was? I'm sure he is not. Then why?

My head drops down slowly, and I find myself lowering my eyes to

my finger where, only a few hours ago, a ring was settled. A small smile flutters on my lips. That's right. I'm not that girl anymore. I'm a grown woman. I have a career. A family. I need to be strong.

"Alright." I let out a long sigh and push my hair back with my trembling fingers. Finally, I find my balance and get back up on my feet.

I can do this. It's not as crazy as it looks like. I can handle this maturely without creating a scene. It's fine. I'm fine. Lord knows what he's made of his life to date, if he's even married or not. And Lord knows I might as well be as committed as a married woman too, considering William and Isaac.

Silently, I begin getting dressed.

Five minutes later, standing here in front of my closed door fully dressed, I'm wondering if I can really do this. If I can really confront my ex.

When I finally muster enough courage to open the door, I'm met with the dark eyes of someone else.

My eyes meet a silent August. His tall frame stands stiff as he remains here, standing in front of me outside my door. I let my head drop.

"You okay?"

His quiet question makes me snap my eyes up at him. Our dark eyes collide, and I take a step forward, readily letting myself settle under the hand August has on my head now, slowly rubbing it as if I am a child. Like he always does.

I nod, trying to express that I mean what I say through my steady gaze. August silently looks at me for a second before he nods as well, then he lifts his hand from my head and begins walking away, revealing a silent Declan behind him.

My heart hammers in my chest at the sight of him. My suddenly wide eyes darts from his face to the retreating back of August's.

I want to call out to him again, to make him help me escape, but then he turns around the corner and disappears.

No, no . . . August . . . come back!

Once again, it is just Declan and me, and I instantly feel it in the air. Everything suddenly becomes heavier. Much more charged.

"Go away," I whisper to the man standing in front of me as I close my room's door right and stare at the wall behind him, avoiding his eyes.

This is all I can do—stare at the wall behind him because if I look at

him, if I look him in the eyes, Declan will win. I'll have to listen to him then. Stand here and listen to him try to make things right again.

"It's been seven years, Gem. Why did we break up?"

A deep sigh slips from my lips. I shift my weight to my other foot as I turn my attention from the wall behind him to the one on our right.

Standing here in front of him, I wonder if Declan will ever understand what I have felt about myself for these seven years. If he will ever understand that what feels more painful, more humiliating than having someone hurt you, is someone hurting you and not remembering a thing because they were so drunk.

"We've gone over this. We've gone over this very nicely, Declan. Can you please not do this?" I speak as slowly as I can. My heart's beating like it could go a mile a minute. I can't stay here. I can't stay here with him all alone like we once used to, a hundred times before, so I begin walking away as quickly as I can.

The sight of the living room hits me like a breath of fresh air. I urge myself to move forward quicker than I am doing right now. I see Saara sitting on the couch with her head down, hiding her expression from me, but I'm sure it's anything but nice. On the sofa in front of her, a silent August sits, leaning back on the sofa with his iPhone's headphone plugged into his ears.

I'm almost there, almost amongst the people I can look straight in the eyes when a hand I've once felt so many times before, wraps around my arm and pulls me to a stop.

Immediately, I feel myself stiffen. The cold chills of self-disgust begin crawling out of the darkness I had pushed it into years ago, and it tickles my skin. Declan's arm wraps slowly leaves my arm and shoulder from the behind, and in reflex, I flinch away from him.

"Gemma," he simply says, just like he used to back in school when he pushed me to speak my mind because I normally didn't. This catches Saara's attention and she immediately jumps up on her feet.

"Dec, I told you not to do this a dozen times over text. You said you'd just talk!"

I sigh, getting slack in Declan's arm.

Oh, so they had talked about this. No wonder Declan is inside the house. Of course, Saara let him in.

"Gemma." Declan ignores her. Instead, he repeats my name before he

leans on me until his face is just beside mine. Resting on my right shoulder. I turn towards him. My nose brushes against his cheek and I feel him shiver.

“You used to hit me when you were drunk because I wouldn’t let you have sex with me. You said you hated me that I pretended to be so modest when I had dated so many boys before you. You said that if I wasn’t even a virgin, to just let you have it and not show so much attitude because you were tired of waiting. That is why I wouldn’t see you for a month. That is why I broke up with you.”

I can’t believe I said it. The voice that says those words are mine, but it feels like a completely different person saying it. Still, I try to remain strong. It is the simple truth after all. It’s the truth. It’s really what happened. It’s really what he said. What he did. Why I did what I did afterwards.

“But I wouldn’t ever do that to you, Gem! I don’t even remember!” Declan insists, tightening his arm around me as he tries to turn me to face him. With loose arms and legs, I let him.

“Of course you don’t, Declan! You were drunk! You never remembered anything that you did when you were drunk!”

“Gem,” Declan huffs, sounding exasperated. “I—”

It happens so suddenly. Even before I can realise what’s going on.

In just a second, another hand wraps around my arm and pulls me forward, jolting me away from Declan. I stumble as I am ripped out of my tall ex’s hard arm and pulled into another strong chest. My wide eyes snap up to the person now holding me, and my breath hitches in my throat when my eyes meet William’s sharp jaw.

“Who is this?” Declan raises his voice, seeing the spectacle. I turn towards him just as he takes a step forward—his complete attention on William. “Who are you?”

He sounds furious—so much so that I flinch under his bewilderment and instinctively shuffle closer to William, feeling his arm instinctively wrap around me. This strangely comforts me.

“What’s going on here?” He takes me by surprise when he ignores Declan and asks the rest of us the question in a very calm manner instead.

William then turns to Saara. “Who is he?”

I bite my lip, noticing how he’s holding me but he’s not acknowledging me. Somehow, I know. Even though he’s not expressing it publicly—he’s upset.

“Er . . .” Saara visibly hesitates under William’s serious eyes. “He’s Declan, my ex-boyfriend’s twin. Gemma’s ex . . . er . . . boyfriend.”

“Forget about me, man! Who the f*ck are you?” Declan snaps loudly. I cringe at the anger in this tone. If these two keep going on like this, Declan will throw the first punch. I know him well enough.

Again, William ignores his aggression. Instead, he finally looks down at me and I feel as his hand unwraps from my body.

“The Vice CEO of LogTech Inc., correct?” he asks the question, however, his eyes remain on mine. I can only stare back, speechless, until I feel his soft fingers begin brushing against the now tingling skin of my arm again.

“Yes,” Declan replies, his pointed stare is directed to William now. Or perhaps to the spot where William and I are now skin to skin.

“I see.” William glances at Declan and nods, his action seems quite casual as he turns his attention back to me.

I can feel him. The trail of tingles his fingers are leaving down my arm almost electrocutes me. When his fingers find my palm, I waste no time in intertwining our hands together. Truthfully, this action may seem clingy, but right now, all I want to do suddenly is to just grasp on to him and not let go. It’s a little weird, but that’s how I feel.

When he lifts our hands up in the space between us, I feel like I’m jelly in his arms. When I feel the cool metal slide snugly around my ring finger, I instantly find my eyes seeking his.

“You forgot this at home.” William smiles, twisting the ring fondly before squeezing my hand and wrapping his arms around me.

Oh my god.

“Do we still need introductions? I’m sure everything is clear now,” August drawls out all of a sudden before he gets up from his seat and begins walking over to us.

His eyes find Declan, and a small smirk flutters on the corner of his lips. I can only stare. I don’t think I’ve ever seen August look so . . . unattached. So cold.

“And aren’t you getting married?” August adds lazily as he brings his hand up and with it what looks like a wedding invite.

My heart jolts in my chest. I feel as my jaw drops, my eyes dart to Declan’s.

Declan's . . . getting married? Why is he even here?

"Yeah, Dec." Saara rushes forward, her voice pleading.

"See! You're both getting married! It's time to let go!"

I can tell she's trying to stop a confrontation from happening, but I just can't help but stand here, useless. William's here to witness this mess with my ex-boyfriend and then there's Declan who's getting married and has still come here to fix issues that are better thrown away and be forgotten about than fixed. Normally, I would marvel at the fact that my chest doesn't hurt at all for Declan, but right now, my mind is a complete mess.

"You're getting married?" Declan's attention turns back to me. He takes another step forward and then takes two back, running his palm across his face frustratedly.

"You're getting married too," I state softly. "I think you should forget about the past already, Dec."

I watch as Declan's eyes soften before he drops his head, running his fingers through his hair this time. "You know I used to love it when you called me that."

He looks up, and I see something flash in his eyes. "Please, it's not too late! I won't get married if you—"

I shake my head, cutting him off before he can give himself any more hope.

"No, Dec. I forgave you the first time you did it. I thought that it was alright because you were drunk. That it was just the alcohol talking. That you would never do that if you were in your right state of mind, but you didn't just do it once. Besides, we've both moved on."

"Gem—"

"I think you should leave. Your fiancée is waiting for you," William interrupts.

Declan freezes, a sudden frown forming on his face. "Shirley?"

This time, I'm the one freezing. Suddenly, I can't feel my legs.

Shirley's in town. She's getting married.

Can it be? My eyes snap up to William and I notice his jaw tightening, aware of me watching him. *No way . . . what are the odds?* Lost in my thought, I scoff out loud, shaking my head. *No way.*

"Correct."

Correct? My wide eyes snap up to William's again. The shock surges

through my blood. I feel it raging inside my veins as I glance around the living room just as shocked as Saara is looking right now. I'm sure she's thinking the same thing I am.

Is life playing a joke on me? I blink. Rapidly.

Declan is getting married to Shirley . . . then I still.

William is talking like he was with Shirley before he came here.

"I think you should hurry up. She's sprained her ankle." William drawls lazily as he motions towards the front door.

He was.

"Wait, how do you know Shirley? Where did you meet her?"

"I think it's better if you ask her that, Dec." Saara sighs before William can even answer. To be honest, I'm quite thankful that it's her who answers and not William. I really don't want to hear William speaking about her right now.

Something clutches my heart, and I flinch when I feel the pinch in my chest. I realise what I'm feeling when I find my fingers clutching to William's shirt. Is this what jealousy feels like? What possessiveness feels like? Not even wanting William to talk about her right now? Going crazy at the thought of them meeting each other alone?

Is this what jealousy feels like or am I insecure? I let out a small sigh, but my grip doesn't loosen—maybe it's a bit of both.

"For now, please leave." Saara clears her throat. This time, her voice sounds louder—a lot more desperate. I wonder if I look just as irritated as I am feeling right now. She doesn't give him time to answer though; without waiting, she marches up to Declan and, twirling him around, she begins to push him in the direction of the front door.

I purse my lips when Declan turns his head around and his eyes meet mine from the distance.

"Don't do it," I beg him silently as I press myself further against the man holding me, willingly taking the protection of his arms when he offers it to me, then, taking me by surprise, he suddenly turns us around and begins moving toward the stairs. Leaving everyone else behind.

"F*cking hell! Saara, is she really married?" I hear Declan yell behind us. I cringe at the desperation I hear in his voice. *He's getting married, for god's sake!*

There was once a time when everything was better. There was once a

time I would have never walked away from the man I'm leaving behind in the living room. There was once a time I truly loved him. I thought I couldn't love anyone but him. When we broke up, I thought I would never love anyone again. I cried and cried. I missed Declan. I missed his smell. I missed the way his hand felt on mine.

The hole in my chest, the part that seemed to be missing—I thought I would never be able to fill. Today . . . I'm walking away, in another man's arms.

Now, falling in love during my youth seems like a pleasant memory to look at and learn from. Then, I had promised myself I would always feel empty whenever I thought about that stage in life. Instead, now, I can smile.

Oh, how the times change.

"Isaac's okay?" I ask hesitantly, trying to change the mood that's brewing between William and me. I know he's upset about what's happened right now. Even though he doesn't show it, I can tell in the way he breathes. His long sighs and short huffs. It's always like this when he's mad.

"Yes."

I bite my lip, letting him lead me into the guest room and shut the door behind us.

Should I ask him?

"Is he getting married to that Shirley?" I ask after a moment's hesitation.

"Yes."

Again, I bite my lip, not knowing exactly what else to say to him. I really want to ask him if he's okay. My insecurity about William still having some feelings for his ex-wife comes simmering to the top, but I push it down. Instead, I think of something else to say.

"So thanks f—"

"The bastard was touching you like he owns you."

I freeze. My stunned eyes snap up from where I am sitting on the bed to a plank, looking William standing right before me.

I blink back my surprise. Somehow, I'm looking at William right now but he doesn't really look like him. The fire in his eyes are flaring—untamed. His jaws are clenched together so tightly that I'm scared it will start hurting soon.

"We're engaged," I remind the man in front of me with a strained

voice as I settle myself on the bed.

“So?” William mutters, narrowing his eyes at the wall behind me before he takes a few strides forward and drops down beside me.

“Okay. Okay.” I shrug, giving up on trying to reason with him. Instead, I shuffle closer to him until I’m sitting between his legs with my back against his chest.

“I’m sorry,” William mumbles after a few minutes. I’ll admit, he takes me by surprise. I stiffen in his arms a little and my eyes snap up to his again.

“For what?” I ask softly, shivering when he leans forward and his warm breath touches the side of my face.

“I get jealous all the time, don’t I?” he admits slowly.

I know he does. Mary was right in this list. William is a difficult person. If Saara was the one in my position right now, she would surely tell him to sort himself out because she doesn’t handle jealousy well. Somehow, for me, it’s different. For me, the garden in my chest blossoms, shaking their leaves in excitement.

“You don’t have to be.” I smile as I tilt my head to look at the man holding me. At the same time, William looks down at me. I shiver when his warm hands touch the warm skin of my cheek. His thumb caresses me as he softly holds my face, disabling me from looking anywhere but into those piercing brown eyes.

“I still do,” William admits. “Even of Isaac.”

“You don’t have to be,” I whisper this time, blinking up at him now. Sometimes, I hate it when he does this; it turns my strong body into jelly.

“Why don’t I have to be?” William brings his lips closer to my cheeks, his voice now is just as low as mine.

My eyes close on their own when his lips brush against my already tingling skin. How could I have forgotten how seductive he gets when he wants to?

My face flushes with heat, and I instantly find myself clearing my throat and turning my face away.

“Just c-cause,” I stutter, praying he can’t see the red cheeks under my flushed olive skin.

I feel my face heat when I hear him chuckle and press his cheek against mine, then he presses his lips against my cheek.

“You’re so adorable.” He chuckles, sounding thoroughly amused. His previous temper seems to have dissipated into thin air just like that. I’m grateful, but I can’t help but pout.
So adorable, my ass.

* * *

“I’ve decided to forgive Dante.”

My head snaps in the direction of the soft mumble.

Wait, did I just hear what I think I heard?

“What?” I ask, completely blank all of a sudden.

It’s early morning, not even seven yet, and I’m having a bomb dropped on me. It’s too early to think about how to deal with anything except breakfast, for God’s sake! I knew I should have expected something big when Saara also woke up around the time I did. Since then she’s been tagging along, almost like a lost puppy, I somehow expected some sort of news from her . . . but nothing like this!

“I’m giving Dan another chance.” Saara groans, rolling her head back in embarrassment before running her hand down her face.

“Okay.” I nod after a few minutes of silence. Honestly, I was rooting for Khristian, but this isn’t my life anyway. Still, I’m secretly going to continue rooting for Khristian.

“Okay?” Saara seems surprised as she blinks at me from across the kitchen island we are currently settled at with a hot cup of tea before the both of us.

“It’s your life.” I tilt my head to the side, looking at her expectedly. I watch as her shoulders slump, and she nods.

“I was kinda thinking you’d tell me to drop this idea at once,” Saara confesses in a small voice and I find myself frowning with curiosity.

“Why?” I blink.

“I dunno.” She shrugs again.

“Why did you decide to give him another chance?” I ask after nodding to her answer. Saara’s eyes seem to sparkle as if she’s been waiting for me to ask her this.

“It’s hard,” Saara confesses, her head hanging low. “Feelings aren’t like a switch you can turn on and off. I can’t just stop if he’s been a dick. It’s

bad, I know. I don't love him like I used to, I know. I also have something for Khris, I know, but I can't stop loving Dan right now. I keep thinking about 'what ifs.' I keep thinking about how much he's trying to make things better right now. Will it be really bad if I give him another chance?"

For a few seconds, all I can do is stay silent. Stay silent and contemplate what she's said. What do I say to her? It's so much easier to give advice, to tell people what they should not do when I'm not in their shoes. What would I do if I were her?

"It's fine if you want to give him another chance, Poofy. If things work out this way, then that's great! But at least, if this time, things do not work out, you will not think 'what if'." I hand my cousin a sad smile before picking up my mug and taking a big gulp of tea. Somehow, my throat suddenly feels so dry.

"You can take Dante back, that's completely fine, but don't expect Khristian to wait."

"I know," Saara mumbles, looking down at her lap. "I don't expect him to wait for me. I would never want him to. That's unfair on him as a person."

"It is," I agree softly.

"Honestly, Gem, I'm making a huge mistake, huh?" Saara groans, pushing back her hair away from her face.

"Not if you can't let Dante go," I reply, and Saara nods. We both silently return to our steaming mugs.

Sometimes, even when a heart is ripped out of someone's chest, it still remains attached by bare threads. It still beats. There is no other cure for such a condition. The heart must get ripped once again. Sometimes, pain is the only lesson that teaches the best.

"Good morning."

The deep voice that echoes around the kitchen draws both my and Saara's attention to it the moment it speaks. Looking up at the speaker, I can't help when I watch as a freshly bathed and dressed-up William begins padding his way towards us. It's amusing how even though he looks ready for work, he still looks like he's about to drop down and just go back to bed.

I notice his eyes find the silver band on my finger before a soft smile shadows his lips and he wraps his arm around me, pushing his face against the crook of my neck.

“Mmm, morning,” he grumbles against my neck, then presses a soft kiss on it.

“You look like you’re about to fall dead.” Saara snorts as she eyes the big man draped over me. I feel William’s teeth emerge from between his lips and playfully nip at my neck before pressing a quick peck on the same spot and straightening up. Immediately, he turns towards my cousin.

I watch as he does a once-over on my cousin before he moves around the island and begins taking out the breakfast I’ve already made for him.

“Same to you.” He smiles at her.

Immediately, Saara turns to me with a pout. “I like him better when he’s quiet.”

Again, William smiles at her. “Me too.”

“When are you bringing my nephew here?” Saara huffs, changing the topic when she realises she can’t win against the tall man.

“Oliver will drop him here after school today.” William turns to me as he answers the question, and I smile at the man, already feeling happier knowing Isaac is going to be in my arms in a few hours.

“I bet he threw a fit without Gemma.” Saara smiles knowingly and William smiles in admittance.

“Yes, last night.” William nods. “He wouldn’t sleep.”

“You’ve honestly spoiled him.” Saara looks at me with a teasing look in her eyes. I can’t help but pout at her. “Heh, what a hypocrite, speak for yourself, okay?”

“Right.” Saara grins sheepishly before bringing up the cup to her lips.

“Oh, by the way.” She lifts her gaze up at William again, this time her eyes are sparkling with excitement. “I’m going to steal your wife away for a week, okay?”

Beside me, William observes my cousin with his suddenly serious black orbs.

“I’m taking a break, and so naturally, she is as well. Probably a resort.”

“Thanks for letting me know.” I chuckle mockingly at my cousin, for a second completely forgetting just how stressed she looked only a few minutes ago.

“You’re welcome.” She winks at me before turning back to William. “So, can you survive?”

“Sure.” William nods before glancing at me with a soft smile on his face. “She works too hard. She needs to unwind.”

“Awww!” Saara coos, bringing up both her thumbs. “We love a supportive husband!”

William only grins at her just as his phone rings. He quickly gulps down the remainder of his coffee before turning to me and placing a loud kiss on my cheek.

“Gotta go, Oliver’s here,” he mumbles against my cheek before giving me another loud kiss on my other cheek and walking away.

“Take care of my wife,” he says loudly to Saara as he passes her, then patting her head as he passes her, effortlessly avoiding her swinging arm.

The sound of the front door close echoes around the silent house, and I watch as Saara’s smile gradually decreases. The playful excitement that was here only a few moments ago in front of William suddenly begins to bleed through her lips in my familiar presence, showing the confused indecisiveness behind the cracks.

As I observe the silent change before me, I can’t help but wonder . . . it’s so funny how easy it is to ignore our pain when we’re around people, but so hard to do the same when we are alone.

* * *

There are many words that I would like to piece together one by one and create something that touches someone’s heart, but somehow, every time I pick up my pad of paper and pen, I can’t produce a single sentence that’s worthy of anyone’s attention let alone mine.

Over my years of professional editing, and even before that when I used to freelance while studying for my bachelor’s, I have read millions of sentences that have touched my heart. I have read hundreds and thousands of emotions through thousands of people’s hearts. And somehow, even though I cannot remember all of them, a little piece of them still live in me, with the sweet memory of that emotion they invoked in me. In that moment, they made me feel something. That feeling . . . that’s immortal.

“You’re taking your job too seriously, dude,” Saara grumbles as she grabs my laptop away from me and drops Isaac on to my lap—who proceeds to wipe my face with a bunch of tissue paper I’m guessing was handed to him

by his aunt.

I bite back a choked laugh as I let the little boy fuss over my tear-stricken face with a look of absolute concentration.

“Don’t cry, Mama.” He frowns at me once he’s done.

Instead of intimidating me, it only makes me want to pinch his cheeks instead.

“Okay, bubba,” I concede, leaning forward and placing a peck on his nose. This makes Isaac giggle, and I beam under the brightness of his happiness.

“Here.” Saara offers me a glass of water when she enters the living room again, her eyes running over my face with concern.

“Bad script?” she asks, sitting down on the floor. “Isaac, come here, sweetie. Mummy has to get back to work.” She pats her lap, motioning the little guy over.

He’s hesitant at first; he glances at me for silent permission, and when I nod, smiling at the sweetheart, Isaac instantly shuffles off my lap and tumbles his way over to Saara’s.

“Just a sad one,” I reply tiredly, leaning forward and retrieving my laptop back from the coffee table.

“What’s it about?” Saara asks, frowning at my laptop as if that will allow her to read the manuscript I have open.

“Unrequited love.” I smile at my cousin miserably, feeling another round of tears coming along.

“Wow, that’s so much information.” Saara groans, rolling her eyes before turning around and turning the TV on for Isaac.

“Come on, be more specific!”

“How about I buy you a copy once this gets published?” I offer, definitely not in any mood to recite the plot of the book and end up crying again.

“Ha!” Saara huffs. “You just don’t want to cry while telling me the plot!”

I’m the one rolling my eyes this time. “If you know that, why ask?”

“Because I want to!” Saara pokes her tongue out to me before turning to the TV.

I turn back to the manuscript on my screen.

* * *

The sun was smiling in the sky, shining down its happiness on us mortals of the world. The city was as busy as it usually was. Just as glorious.

I let the grin that spread on my face settle itself on my features peacefully as I bounced the bags dangling from my hands, walking beside the black-haired man dutifully.

Always beside him.

From the corner of my eyes, I could see the small sliver of a smile on his usually stern face. My heart warmed with joy and I felt my shoulders broaden with happiness.

He was happy. I was happy. "Jennise?"

I blinked, my eyes snapping to the man's dark orbs. "Yes, sir?"

Rain Lutheran crinkled his nose. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he began striding forward at a quicker pace. By habit, I mirrored his action.

"Do you believe in the concept of love?"

My heart jumped in my chest. Could he know?

"Yes," I mumbled, wishing I could avert my eyes. Wishing that I could stop being so transparent.

Rain Lutheran cocked an eyebrow up at that, tentatively bringing out his vibrating cell phone from his pocket before proceeding to accept the call by shoving it against his ear. Still, his attention remained on me. "Oh really?"

The raging storm in my chest began to rise and I almost burned to feel the destruction the aftermath would bring. "Don't you?" I whispered, my voice giving out.

I didn't have to ask this question. I already knew the answer. Rain could not love. He would not love. All this was trivial to him. Unnecessary. Unworthy of these thoughts.

And these fears.

"My mother once told me that love is giving someone the power to hurt you, but having faith that they won't. It's all ridiculous in my opinion. You see that man there?" He inched closer, manoeuvring me with his body until I saw the couple sitting on the edge of a fountain, happily taking selfies.

"They look happy, don't they?" Rain asked, a hint of amusement in his tone. I turned towards him and found his curious eyes studying me.

My breath hitched, I nodded. “Yes.”

“The man’s name is Albert. He’s an old client of ours. The fun bit is, though he’s married, that’s not his wife. Love looks better in theory only, Jennise. It’s not something that’s realistically achievable forever, if at all. No one loves anyone. This man doesn’t love his wife. My parents don’t love each other. It’s always the same.”

I felt my heart fall in my chest. The shiver of a smile was gone. Back was the unattached smirk, the cold distant look in those pretty black marble eyes of his.

“Then why are you marrying Miss Ferna?” I turned away from him, hoping that I had been able to hide the pain it caused me to say that name.

“Because she’s signing a prenuptial agreement, she’s sterile, and I’ll get 70% of the shares of the art gallery that is under her name right now.”

Suddenly, he stopped and immediately, so did I.

A car soon rolled to a stop in front of us, and quickly, Jefferson got out of the passenger’s seat, opening the back door wide.

When River took a step to get into the car, so did I. Instantly he stopped, turning his head—his stern eyes found mine.

“Oh, Jennise, get these bags delivered to Ferna safely. Text me as soon as you’re done. You know how. I’ll see you at home.”

I watched the car drive by until the only thing I could make out was a blurry shine while it continued to move further and further away from me. As he continued to move further and further away from me.

I sighed, my grasp on the bags loosened and I almost let them fall.

If only he knew . . . if only I could tell him.

A sigh slipped from my quivering lips and I turned around, blinking the tears away as quickly as I could. My hand moved up to hail a taxi.

“Where would you like to go today, young lady?”

My eyes snapped up and I gave the driver a sorry excuse of a smile.

“Riverstone Avenue, please.” And then the taxi took off.

You know you love someone when you can’t explain what you feel for them. That feeling, you only get that feeling when you’re with them. You only get that rush in your chest from them. Every time you see that person, it brings a smile on your face naturally. They are like your instant mood booster.

Even when you’re upset at them, your heart is content in their

company. You want to know what they are doing when you're not with them. You wonder if they are happy, or sad, or even stupid things like whether they have been eating well. You're concerned about the challenges they face, and their achievements make you proud. You're kind to people they hold dear to their heart because you don't want them upset. When they smile, you do too. When they cry, you want to cry too. You don't think about what they can offer you; you care for them regardless. You get jealous, you get protective. Love is selfless and love is kind.

But then, love isn't always reciprocated. Sometimes, you love from the shadows. Sometimes, you love from the crowd. After all, love is an endless amount of emotion. And sometimes, that emotion is pain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

One Day When Loved and Love Shook Hands

*Love. Just a word;
Love—why is so difficult to express?
Love. Just a word;
Love—why is so difficult to understand?*

We, humans, are curious by nature. There are plenty of questions we like to ask. Plenty of things we like to question. Somehow though, in certain moments, we also overlook them. Sometimes, we even keep quiet because we don't want to face what will happen if we do ask. Sometimes, we don't care enough to ask. Humans are curious by nature. I am human too.

There are many questions that I want to ask right now. Right now, as I'm sitting in the middle of my living room in the darkness with only the light from the television aiding to illuminate the house, I am alone, but I wish I wasn't. I have a lot to ask.

Like, 'Why did Saara invite Declan over without telling me?', 'Did William meet Shirley or not?', and if he did, 'Why?'

I wouldn't like to say that this is how I've always been, I have not. I was a very inquisitive child. I guess that trait has just gotten lost while growing up. It's a shame. Now, I'm mostly left to sigh the corner with me and my missed opportunities.

"What are you thinking about?"

The question is asked just as the sky claps outside. The first sounds of a storm beginning echoes around us as I find myself turning to face a calm-looking August.

If I turn my gaze to the wall clock on my further left, I'll know that it's almost eleven o'clock, but I don't, so I don't know, so I don't ask August why he has stayed behind so late tonight.

"I'm thinking about questions I should have asked but never did," I reply with a tired sigh. Am I tired because I am disappointed? Or am I tired because I've worked non-stop today on the manuscript that only leaves me emotionally drained? Perhaps both.

"Questions like?" August steps forward and lowers himself on the sofa a few spaces away from me. Raindrops begin to fall now, creating a soothing melody as it hits the tiled roof. I smile, hearing the raging song of the storm outside.

"Questions like, why did Saara not tell me about Declan? Or how the world can be this small? William and I are together, and somehow, both our exes are as well. It's funny when you think about it, isn't it?" I turn towards the man with a soft smile on my face.

"He told her he's just coming over to personally hand you the wedding invitation and to make things right between you because he wants you to attend his wedding with good feelings." August tilts his head to the side, his deep brown eyes peers down at me through the distance with a comforting warmth. Somehow, I feel comfortable in his presence. I suppose we've grown on each other over the past few months.

"As if I'd want to attend his wedding," I grumble, scrunching my face grumpily at August.

"Yeah, I wouldn't want to as well." August shrugs, letting out a long breath.

"Is that why she's being so nice to me ever since?" I ask, glancing at August with a soft look.

"Yeah," he admits, the corners of his lips tilting in amusement.

I nod. It makes sense. My cousin has been doing everything for me ever since. She even went shopping by herself—in disguise—and bought me all the things I've always liked to eat but she never let me.

"I'm so tired," I say after a while as I let out a loud sigh. I turn my gaze to the television screen.

"Are you worried about his ex-wife?"

My eyes snap to August's. In the dark living room, even though I can't see his face as clearly as I wish I could, I still stare at him silently. He's

asked me the thing I'm actually worried about. Shirley.

"Yeah, I'm worried," I admit, my voice is barely audible but I know he heard.

"What about her is worrying you?" August asks, and for a second, I don't even know what to answer him. There is so much I'm worried about.

"I'm worried she'll be just like Declan and want William back. I'm scared she'll want Isaac back." I look back to the TV screen, but honestly, I just can't look August in the eye right now.

"What will you do if she does?"

I bite my lip, letting my mind wander to the possibility and immediately trying to shove the thought away. "I don't know."

"What will you do if William does as well?"

This one stills me. What will I do if William wants his family back together again? What will I do? I try to think.

In the end, my mind goes back to the manuscript I'm editing right now. Particularly to one line.

Nothing good lasts forever.

I find myself looking back at August. "I'll step back."

This seems to catch August off guard. "Step . . . back?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"Just like that?" He blinks.

"What good will anything else do?" I ask, looking at August patiently. He's silent for a few minutes.

"Man, I could sure use some chocolate cake right now," August mumbles, shaking his head. "This is getting depressing."

"High-five." I scoff, leaning forward with my palm stretched forward.

August immediately leans forward and pats his much larger palm against mine, which suddenly looks almost hobbit-sized in front of his. "High-five." He groans, mirroring my less than perfect enthusiasm.

"So by what time is he coming?"

"Why do you think he's coming over?" I glance at August curiously.

August gives me a small knowing smile. "Nevermind then."

With a smile on my face as well, I slowly turn back to the TV. My smile slowly dampens.

I sent a silent prayer to God. *Please don't let that happen.*

* * *

“Yes, I’m taking her home now.”

William’s low voice drifts from his seat beside me to my ears, and I shoot him a shy glance as he continues to talk on his phone with Nathan.

How this happened is a long story to tell. In fact, this entire situation still seems like a wild dream to me, but it has happened and so I cannot escape. Maybe this is something I can tell my nieces in the future.

Everything was going great all day. Over the past week, Declan’s incident had frizzled in everyone’s mind, and we had all gotten back to how we were before that.

We were back in William’s home, much to William’s parents’ delight and the beginning of today was just like any other day.

I woke up first and William woke up an instant later like he always does. We both spent time outside in the garden until Mrs. Noo arrived, then William began getting ready for work, and I helped out in the kitchen with breakfast and lunch. Waking up Isaac was a challenge, but he woke up eventually and got dressed for school. By this time, William had left for work already. I got ready with Isaac and we both left for our destinations for the day. Him, for school. And me, for work.

Work was fine, for a Tuesday, it was as just well—humming with the working office population and yet quiet as well. We all worked peacefully until lunch arrived.

Surprisingly, I got a call from William. He asked if I wanted to have lunch together. I said yes. And that is how we found ourselves here in the Chinese restaurant that’s near my office.

Lunch was going great; William told me that this was his friend’s family restaurant and he often came here even before we met. The food was amazing, and I was having a great time . . . until I finally realised why my lower back was aching so badly all of a sudden. I got my period.

My periods are never a great experience. They are hell during the first four days, and I have them for seven. They are also never on time so predicting them is useless.

Thankfully, I’ve always kept reinforcements for emergencies after experiencing some embarrassing accidents in college.

I quickly excused myself, freshened up in the bathroom, and took the painkillers.

Today though, even my usual prescribed medications aren't even helping.

Maybe it's because William's a doctor, or perhaps it's because he's always so observant, but all it took him was once glance at me while I tried to discreetly wince in my chair and he knew.

It was like a switch turning on. I witnessed it on his face. Suddenly, as realisation struck him, his jaw tightened and his eyes blazed with something I've still not put a finger on.

"Sure, I'll do that. Thanks," William speaks into his cell phone before placing it back on the table in front of us. Immediately, his attention turns to me and I feel his strong hand on my back pressing against the aching part of my body.

"I've talked to Nathan, I'm dropping you home now, okay?" William asks as he bends his head down until it's in the same line of sight as mine. I can't help but look at him now.

"Mmm." I nod weakly, trying to bite away the hellish pain.

Somehow, this makes William happy. Reaching forward, he places a small peck on my forehead.

"Okay, I'll just pack all these. Are you having cravings? We'll get the stuff on our way ho—"

"William?"

Instantly, two dark orbs snap up and come face-to-face with a beautiful woman standing before us.

"Funny running into you again." She grins at the man beside me. I stare at the white pearls of her teeth that glisten brightly under the bright lights when she smiles. She's beautiful, I won't lie. Unlike Cecelia, her sharp features and slim figure look regal even under the softest of pink dress she is wearing.

My heart hammers in my chest. It won't take an idiot to tell me who this is. I am currently staring at the birth mother of Isaac. The ex-wife of William. William's first love . . . Shirley.

"Oh, you know how this restaurant was our favourite. I missed the food here, so I decided to come to have lunch. May I sit?" She smiles brightly at William before she finally acknowledges me.

Her eyes drift to mine and I'm surprised when her smile remains.

"I'm sorry, am I disturbing something?" she asks politely and then immediately extends her hand towards mine. "Hi! I'm Shirley, William's ex-wife."

I feel William's hand tighten around my waist but I don't dare look at him right now. I can't do anything but smile at the woman.

"Hi, I'm Gemma, William's fiancée."

Shirley's eyes widen, and she blinks at William in her visible surprise. "So this is the fiancée you told me about! I have to say, you've gotten very lucky this time."

"So when's the wedding?" she asks, her eyes now on mine.

Surprisingly, even though her eyes are kind, I'm kind of intimidated by the woman.

"Soon," William replies before I can. "We'll send you an invite when the dates are confirmed."

"Don't forget to bring a heavy red packet to mine, okay?" Shirley laughs good-naturedly. Again, her gaze turns to mine. "Don't let him be stingy. He always liked to put twenty-dollar bills in red packets before."

I blink and find myself simply nodding at the woman. "Don't worry, you won't find a twenty-dollar note in yours." I smile at her. "Congratulations, by the way."

"Oh thank you!" She smiles at me, then turns to William again. "Don't keep her locked up at home like you did with me. Continue taking her out like this after you get married, okay?"

Her eyes sparkle when she turns to me, not at all waiting for William's reply. "Honestly, he was such a charmer when we were dating. I swear he spoiled me rotten! Of course, the whole college knew he loved me like crazy, but then we got married. I'll tell you a secret, he can be a sweetheart when he wants to be, but you better not be an extrovert or you'll have a hard time."

"Oh don't worry, I'm okay. I know how busy his profession keeps him, so any amount of time he can spend on us is precious enough." I simply smile back at her instead of diving too deep into it. I really don't want to do this here right now in my condition. Beside me, William is as stiff as a log. I can't help but imagine how awkward he must be feeling right now.

"Well, congratulations, ex-husband." Shirley chuckles happily at

William. “You’ve finally found someone who is willing to revolve her world around your home.”

“Thank you,” William replies politely, and I wince as another round of pain hits my lower back and abdomen.

Immediately, William’s attention turns to me and I feel him massaging my back again.

Extending a hand up, he quickly calls over a server. “Could you pack all these, please?”

“Sure, sir.”

“I’m sorry but we won’t be able to stick around, Shirley.” William turns to his ex-wife. I look away. “Gemma’s sick so I’m taking her back home.”

“Oh! Oh, okay!” Shirley straightens in her seat, suddenly looking worried. Her eyes roam over me and I flinch when my abdomen begins to cramp. *Ugh, how I hate periods!*

“Ah, congratulations again on your wedding!” I smile at her awkwardly.

“Aww thank you,” Shirley beams at me as her eyes glance down at the sparkling rock on her finger.

“Here you go, sir.” The server arrives with a plastic bag containing takeaway containers.

“Thanks.” I smile up at the boy before glancing at William.

“Let’s go home.” He smiles at me softly as his eyes peer into my soul again. Smiling back at him, I nod.

“Hold on tightly,” William whispers into my ear before he stands up and pulls me up carefully with him. Immediately, he wraps his arm around my shoulder.

I glance back at Shirley, only to catch her looking at my ring finger. Feeling my eyes on her, her black orbs snap immediately to mine. The smile flashes across her face once again.

“Bye!” I wave at her awkwardly.

She brightens her smile. “See you!”

I bite my lip, noticing how she said ‘see you’ instead of ‘goodbye’. Dark dread begins to settle in my pores.

Saying it like that, does she not mean to leave our lives any time soon?

“I love you,” William whispers into my ear as we pass the table. It makes me smile. Has he been so awkward because he’s worried about me and my feelings? Is this why he’s reminding me of who he loves? Well, after Cecelia . . . it makes sense.

“I love you t—” I smile brightly up at him.

“Oh, and William?”

Both William and I freeze in our steps. Both of our heads snap around towards the woman now looking at us with a small smile on her lips.

“I want to see my son.”

* * *

“So you’re telling me your ex showed up?” Sean blinks heavily as he drops down on the sofa beside me.

The drive back home was silent, although it wasn’t cold. When Shirley had finally voiced her intention, William simply turned around again and kept going.

Of course, I was a nervous wreck. The thought of Isaac with Shirley was nerve-racking, but of course, I couldn’t stop the small boy from deciding if he wanted to have his real mother in his life or not.

I suppose William knew the storm that was brewing in my mind. That was why he immediately tried to change the topic. In the end, we came back home with bags full of things I usually crave during my period.

Right now, it’s almost six in the evening and I am forbidden to move a lot from my place on the living room sofa.

Mr. Noo Sr. got a call earlier on, and now, he’s preparing to fly back to China in the last flight tonight. Mrs. Noo is still staying back longer this time, and currently, she’s helping her husband pack.

William’s back in the hospital and Isaac is doing his homework in his room with Mary.

I was very surprised when Sean paid me a visit, but very touched that he cared enough for my health to visit after I had to come back home after a half-day.

So here I am, settled on the sofa with my scandalised-looking friend staring back at me in shock.

“And he’s marrying William’s ex-wife,” he whispers urgently,

grasping me by my leg.

“And you and William just met her in the restaurant a few hours ago during lunch?”

I can only nod.

“AND YOU GUYS THEN HAD LUNCH?”

This time, I shook my head.

“She said she wants to meet Isaac.”

“Oii, you crazy woman! Are you out of your mind?”

“I think so.” I groan out loud this time. “I really think so!”

“This is not good. So not good!” Sean huffs, rubbing his face frustratingly.

Not knowing what else to do, I smack my face against my sweaty palms.

“She didn’t seem like she minded my relationship with William,” I try to reason with myself.

“I think she’s seen you two together, and now, she’s going to get jealous and want everything that belonged to her back.” My heart falters in my chest. I open my mouth and close it a few times—that’s how speechless I am.

“She’s getting married!” I try to reason. I try to wave the doubt that’s also erupting in my mind away.

“That didn’t stop Declan from being completely ready to stop his marriage at your one word. It’s not about love, Gemma. It’s about not being able to see someone you once loved and had with you now being happy with someone else.”

I sigh. What else can I do except that? I know Sean’s right. That didn’t stop Declan, and it won’t stop Shirley if she doesn’t want to. Suddenly, I can’t help but think of the conversation August and I had a week ago. Will William really want to go back to Shirley?

“You better watch your man, that’s all I’m saying.” Sean shrugs lamely.

“Don’t worry, young man.”

Both my and Sean’s heads turn sharply at the sound of the strong voice.

William’s mother and father stand a few distances away from us, their aged and resolute eyes on us.

“We trust our son. As for our family, your friend is already a part of it and we won’t let anyone else replace her.”

I can’t believe my ears. It’s Mr. Noo who’s speaking. Beside him, Mrs. Noo smiles at us brightly.

“Yes, don’t worry, dear. Your father-in-law and I won’t let anything like that happen.”

* * *

“Gemma?”

I turn my head towards the closed bathroom door. “Hey! You’re back.”

“I want to take a shower too.”

In the shower, under the drizzle of warm water that is falling on my body, I can’t help but stifle a laugh. *You wish.*

“Go shower in your own bathroom,” I call out to the man who is probably leaning his forehead against the wooden bathroom door with a sad expression.

“Heartless.” William’s amused voice travels into the bathroom. This time I can’t stop myself. I laugh freely and then continue washing my hair.

Will it be shameful if I agree? If I agree with William and let him join me right now, but then . . . I am also beginning to feel heartless.

Ever since I woke up this morning, I noticed a slight change in the man who must now be taking his shower elsewhere. Initially, I didn’t take much thought to it.

When I stirred awake in the morning, I found that he was already awake. From the dull but gradually increasing light from the awakening skies outside, I could make out his features as he laid on his side, bracing his head with his arm and looked at me with his deep eyes.

When, without a word, he leaned down and dipped his lips until it touched the burning skin of my cheek, I ignored that it was unusual of him to behave this way and merely basked in his gentle show of affection as I lifted my face up and also did the same.

When I found myself dragging myself downstairs after freshening up and then had William joining me on the sofa a few minutes later with two mugs of sweet-smelling tea, I thought he just wanted to enjoy his free day by

waking up early and breathing in the clean morning air.

When he suddenly got up from his corner of the couch and came to stand before me, I simply thought he felt a little neglected and wanted my attention. I suppose that is why I silently closed my laptop and put it away before lifting up my head, I stretched up my arms to him. I overlooked the spark of happiness that flashed across his dark eyes as he bent over and picked me up, then settled himself on the couch with me on his lap.

Although I noticed him gently twirling the ring on my finger while we sat there until Mrs. Noo arrived downstairs as well, I didn't notice the strong arm that slid around my waist when I shifted myself off his lap and settled down beside him.

When Mrs. Noo invited me to water the garden with her, William also trailed along behind me. Have I ever seen him in the garden on his own accord before this?

When did I realise that he was being clingy? Sometime just before lunch when Mrs. Noo teased him about it. At that time, he was sitting beside me at the dining table, silently watching me peel some potatoes.

At first, I was surprised. My wide eyes snapped from Mrs. Noo's to William's face. When I turned to him and he smiled at me softly, his chin resting atop his hands, I was amused.

Then I got sad.

A soft sigh slips from my mouth, and I slowly turn the shower's knob off. Still standing in the same spot, my fingers tighten around my hair and I begin twisting it, trying to remove all the excess water from my dark wet locks.

Wrapping a towel around my hair, I carefully wipe my body dry with another one. After wrapping the towel around my body, I slowly begin moving my body out of the shower and into the bedroom in sluggish movements.

A few minutes later finds me walking out of the closet, dressed in comfortable short cotton shorts and a plain tank top. It's a little hot tonight. It's been a little hot for the last few nights.

When I feel his arms carefully slide over my arms and wrap around me from the back and I feel him silently rest his chin on my shoulder and softly bump his head against mine, this time, I don't overlook it. This time, I feel sad.

William has been clingy all day because my and Saara's vacation starts tomorrow. A man who is always respectful of people around him, abandoned all shame today and followed me around like a puppy. In front of his family, in front of his employees.

"How did it go?" I ask him about the emergency case he suddenly got called in for a few hours ago.

"Good," he replies simply, not indulging me with the details. I nod, not pushing for more.

"What time is Saara picking you up?"

"7AM," I answer softly, turning my face a little until my cheeks are brushing against him. I close my eyes when he presses his lips against it.

"You could've gone home today, left together from there tomorrow," he murmurs slowly.

"Mmm," I agree. "I could have."

"But then I'd miss you," I add. My whisper hangs from the humidity of the night and floats around us in slow circles. I lift my hand up to hold the arm he has wrapped around me. He says nothing in return; he just tilts his face and kisses my cheek again. Still, in this silence, I am happy. I press my cheeks against his lovingly.

"Gemma?" he whispers a few minutes of silence, his soft boyish voice brushes against my cheek in warm puffs of air.

"Hmm?" I turn my head a little towards him.

"I'll miss you."

I take a sharp breath in.

"I already do," he continues, pressing his forehead on my shoulder. "It hurts."

* * *

"How did my nephew take it?"

I turn my head towards my cousin, who looks as fresh and fair as ever. Being a celebrity, her airport fashion is on point. Her makeup is fresh and youthful, and her outfit is comfortable enough to survive the next few hours of travelling easily. Thankfully, the seats on this private jet are a lot more comfortable than the economy class seats I've always been accustomed to.

“We let him sleep when I was leaving,” I confess, nibbling on my bottom lip for the tenth time as I think about the phone that’s currently in my backpack on aeroplane mode and just how many missed calls I must have gotten from Isaac already.

“Oh come on, don’t you dare look like that!” Saara snaps, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I look up at her guilty, but still ask as if I’m ignorant. “Like what?”

“Like a mother!” Saara groans. Again, I bite my lip.

Beside me, my cousin lets out a pitiful sigh. “Like a guilty mother who can’t have fun without her baby.”

“This is about us, Gem.” She turns towards me and grasps on to my hands. “We’re twenty-four, we need to have some time for just us. That is how we can be happy. And this is how we will be able to keep everyone else happy. If we are happy and relaxed ourselves. Okay?”

My gaze drops to my pants. Hearing what she’s saying, I can only nod. Saara’s right, of course. Even though I miss Isaac and William. I do need this. I need some time for myself.

“Okay,” I answer slowly, nodding once again. My eyes turn and I look out of the small window. The world looks very different from up here. I’ve seen this scene a lot of times before, but no matter how many times I witness this, I’m always left fascinated.

“Why do we have to have two rooms? It’s too expensive, we can just share one,” I whisper frantically into Saara’s ears as I tug at her arm, trying to stop her from removing the credit card from her wallet.

“Oh, ssh!” She smacks my hand away before handing the card to the smiling attendant, then she turns back to me and throws her arm around my shoulder. “Let’s go explore the resort after checking in, okay?”

Although I can’t see her face behind her black face mask and black cap, I’m pretty sure she’s grinning her branded mischievous smile. I wish I could just smack her head like I always do, but we’re in public, so I resort to shaking my head in a disappointed manner and silently agreeing.

“Here are your keys, ma’am,” the attendant speaks up brightly and both my and Saara’s attentions move back to the lady behind her counter.

“Thank you.” I smile at the lady before reaching out and taking the keys from her.

“Have a lovely time here! It’s a wonderful place for a romantic

retreat.”

“Thank you s—”

I freeze. *Wait . . . what?*

I want to ask the attendant what she just said, but Saara beats me to the reaction. Surprisingly, her reaction is even more surprising.

“Thank you! I’m sure we’ll enjoy this place a lot!”

We move away from the lobby and towards the path that leads to the rooms that are scattered around the resort, amongst the luscious tropical plantation.

“I got us rooms right in front of the beach,” Saara whispers excitedly as we begin to drag our luggage along the trail, following the man who is showing us to our rooms.

“The swimming pool here is shallow enough for you to take a dip in,” Saara continues her excited babble, glancing at me with stars in her eyes. I can’t help but absorb her enthusiasm, even my body is tingling with excitement. The air here smells so much crispier.

“It’s beautiful here.” I turn to my cousin with a wide grin and she squeals, throwing her arm awkwardly around my shoulder.

“I know right! I think so too! Glad I picked this place!”

“I thought you said you two booked rooms, Poofy,” I hiss a few minutes later as I stand staring at the two tiny villa-like apartments that are situational beside each other with a good amount of space between them.

“Hey, we both need some quality relaxing time. That also means some time away from each other.” Saara pokes her tongue out at me.

“I’m going to go explore my place now.” She grins at me, almost vibrating with excitement as she begins to turn away. “See you in half an hour, neighbour!”

I continue to stand in my spot, just watching as my cousin drags her luggage over to her place and excitedly getting in after giving me a big wave.

My head slowly turns back to the villa-and-tiny-house hybrid before me.

“Okay.” I let off a deep breath. “Be good to me,” I speak to the house before I begin dragging my own luggage towards the door, all the way praying in my head that the place isn’t haunted and no one has ever died in this place.

The door opens nicely under my hands, and I push the door open

slowly only to be left a little breathless. So far, in my life, I've only lived in one place that looked like it could be from a decor magazine—William's home. Now, this place in front of me could also be a cover of an interior design magazine.

A smile flutters on my lips as I take in the beautiful decor in front of me and I take an excited step into the house, pulling my bag behind me.

Maybe having this place to myself really isn't a bad thing after all.

* * *

"How did my nephew take it?" Saara asks as he turns her head towards me from where she's sitting on the bench in the pool.

"He took it surprisingly well," I reply with wide eyes, once again finding myself surprised when recalling Isaac calmly asking me how I am and if this place is beautiful.

"Good," Saara beams, clapping her hands together happily. "Someone has had a talk with him I think."

I nod. Actually, that's what I've been thinking as well. "Maybe it's Ma."

"Ma?" Saara looks at me with a face.

"William's mother ordered me to call her Ma," I reply sheepishly.

"I wonder what your own ma will think about this relationship." Saara looks at me with her worried eyes. "Have you told anyone that you're getting married soon?"

My head snaps towards Saara and I let my jaw drop in surprise.

"We're not getting married . . . yet," I hiss, immediately turning away and looking at the vast empty beach. Inhaling a deep breath of the crisp early-morning air, I dig my toes further into the sand and smile.

It's beautiful here. Right now. At this moment with no one around us, just the white sand and the clear water. The calm serenity. It's beautiful. I'm happy.

As I feel the water drag forward another branch of seaweed against my thigh, I look down at the brown plant and slowly pull it out of the water. The soft tumbling waves of the ocean are playing with us. As we're sitting here in the shallow waters of the sea, the waves are toying with us—slowly touching us and retreating and then repeating its actions, as if comforting us.

As if pulling away from the stress that both Saara and I have silently brought with us from home and absorbing it within itself.

I look at the seaweed in my hand and smile. Sometimes it brings along a gift too.

The fishes, too, are playing with us. My gaze lowers to my legs and I watch as a school of small fish merrily continues to just pass it. It's a little fascinating, sitting here with these fish just going about doing their own thing without paying us any mind. It's a little fascinating feeling connected with nature.

"Gem. Gem! GEMMA!"

"H-huh?" My eyes snap up to my cousin, and when I see her eyes twinkling with amusement, I throw the seaweed I'm still holding on to her face.

"Stop! You scared me," I whine, ignoring my flushed cheeks as my cousin lets out a shriek in front of me and falls back into the shallow water. Her loose white shirt instantly becomes transparent. I can't help but giggle when she lifts her head up from her chest and pouts at me, then she throws the seaweed back smack against my cheek. It makes my skin crawl.

"You didn't answer my question," my cousin huffs just as the rest of the resort slowly begins to come alive. I let out a small sigh and turn back to her eventually.

"What was your question?"

"Yeah," I admit softly when she just makes a face at me. "I told Dad when it happened."

"How did he take it? What about Khala?" This time, my head drops a bit shamefully.

"I'm still thinking how to break it to her," I reveal in a small forlorn voice. Truthfully, I'm scared sh*tless of my mother's reaction. My mother can be overbearing.

"How did Khalu take it?" Maybe Saara sees the distress on my face because she immediately moves the spotlight to a much safer topic—my dad.

"Well . . . he freaked out a bit, then he demanded to talk to William. William handled it from there. They seem fine with each other now."

"How fine? As fine as your mother-in-law and you?" Saara glances at me with a grin.

I can't help but chuckle at her teasing.

“Stop,” I whine a little, splashing the warm water on her.

It’s almost like an instant—the moment when a scary look flashes across her eyes. And then my cousin is leaping on me, pushing me down into the shallow water and sand.

“Stoopp!” I squeal before turning us over quickly and handling the seaweed over her.

Soon, the quiet morning beach is suddenly filled with shrill squeals and giggles coming out of the mouths of twenty-four-year-old children who’ve both visited the beach after a very, very long time.

I just wish Isaac was here too.

* * *

“Aren’t you glad this place has an indoor pool in every premium room? Cause I am!” Saara giggles as she twirls in the indoor pool in her matching black one-piece. We’re both wearing the same bikini right now. Honestly, my millionaire celebrity sister really spoils me a lot.

I lift my gaze up from my phone and grin at my giddy-looking cousin twirling in the pool before looking back to the screen.

“She seems happy.” William smiles. On the screen, he seems to still be at the hospital. My smile fades a little when I notice the slight dark pits forming under his eyes.

“Will, are you taking care of yourself nicely?” I ask softly, turning away from Saara and slowly making my way out of the pool room and downstairs into the living room. When I find a spot that is well-lit, I stop. My eyes trace along the planes of William’s face.

“You’ve not been sleeping well,” I state a matter of factly.

“It’s just been busier here at the hospital lately.” William chuckles dismissively, and even though I don’t buy it, I let him be.

It’s been three days since we’ve arrived here, and he’s already looking so haggard.

Just then, a sea breeze blows into the living room through the open windows. I find myself visibly shivering, immediately pulling my free hand up to check on the goose bumps left by this invasion.

“Gem.” William’s suddenly quiet.

“Hmm?” My eyes snap up to my phone’s screen again and I tilt my

head, waiting for William to continue.

“What are you wearing?”

I freeze a little. My gaze flutters to my phone’s screen again and I try to smile. I try to act nonchalantly.

“We were going for a dip, so . . . a bikini?”

I grin. My mind flashes a dozen times when I’ve caught the tip of William’s ears becoming as red as a ripe pomegranate whenever I’ve worn smaller clothes at home.

“Wanna see?” I ask teasingly before lifting my hand a little and tilting my phone until the rest of my body is showing.

When I bring my phone back up in front of my face, true to speculation, William’s ears are burning up. His eyes, this time, are shooting flames into mine through the screen.

“I miss your mole.”

I frown. I drop my gaze to my exposed body and I stop when I spot a black beauty spot just on the left side of my hip.

“The one on my hip?” I ask cheerfully as I stand there completely oblivious to my feelings, then he clears his throat.

“Yeah . . . that one.”

“Dr. Noo, you’re needed in the ER. There’s an accident case that just came in.”

I watch as William’s eyes lift up to the person behind the cell phone and he nods, beginning to get up. His gaze turns back to the screen and I smile brightly at him.

“Go on!” I urge him with a bright smile.

He nods, turning around and picking up his white coat and stethoscope. He glances back into his phone and gives me a small smile. “We’ll talk later.”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod enthusiastically. “I love you,” I remind him softly, readying myself to disconnect the call as he walks past the nurse who glances into the screen when she gets a chance.

“Gem!” I turn my head towards Saara’s voice and quickly disconnect the call, rushing back to her excitedly.

“I am back!” I call out happily as I enter the indoor pool area once again.

“You look happy after talking to your husband.” Saara hands smirks

at me, wiggling her eyebrows when I blush and putting my cell phone on my T-shirt that's lying on the floor a few distances away from the pool as I begin to join Saara.

“Ah, it's so cold!” I squeal. “Why didn't we take that jacuzzi thing!”

Saara stills. “Hold up . . . you're right!” She groans, facepalming herself. I don't know whether I should cry or laugh.

Suddenly, a loud ping echoes around the room and I turn towards my phone.

“Maybe Isaac's finally awake?” Saara suggests, referring to earlier when I had called home and Mary told me that he was asleep.

“Yeah.” I throw her a grin and quickly getting to the edge of the pool, climb over the tiles on my stomach and begin to reach forward for the phone.

Quickly unlocking my iPhone, I smile when I see who the message is from.

I love you

“Hey! You never told me you have a beauty spot near your vagina. I told you I have one on my butt!”

I freeze.

I miss your mole.

I can't help it. I drop my phone like it's a hot potato and quickly cover my face with my hands.

Oh . . . my gosh.

* * *

“It's so calming here, isn't it?”

Saara's happy voice floats with the salty breeze and I turn my head in her direction just as her bicycle stops in front of me.

“How were the activities?”

“So much fun! You should have joined us! I don't know why you want to work here as well. Isn't that what you've come to take a break from here?”

I can't help but give my cousin a knowing smile. Of course, she's caught on to the fact that I'm still working on manuscripts here.

“Aren't you taking pictures for your Instagram as well? Doing promos for those skincare products you're a spokesperson of?” I wink at her

playfully.

Saara sighs, poking her tongue out at me. “Okay. Okay! You win!”

“Where are Dom and Jerred?” I look around us, looking for her bodyguards.

“At the restaurant. They were hungry.”

“Ah.” I nod, grinning to myself. “They’re always at the restaurant if they’re not with you.”

“Let them be, they have to maintain their high-calorie diet or whatever.” Saara chuckles as she drops on the chair beside me.

We sit here in silence for a while, then I glance at my radiant-looking best friend.

“How’s Dante?” I ask softly. Truthfully, I’ve been scared to ask her this. Ever since we arrived here three days ago, I’ve talked to Isaac and William at least once almost every day. I’ve never seen her talk to Dante, but then . . . we don’t stay in the same room so I’ve always put it down to ‘maybe he calls her before bed’.

Now, looking at the small smile on her face that doesn’t reach her eyes, I can’t help but wonder if everything isn’t fine at all.

Saara and I, at first glance, are very similar. We have the same taste in a lot of things, we have the same viewpoint as well, but in actuality, we’re very different too. Saara likes to know everything about people she loves, and she asks them too. If something is my problem, it is her problem as well, and she’ll actively keep asking me and trying to fix it until the matter is over with.

I, on the other hand, am always worried but too foolish to ask or butt in. Somehow, my brain is wired in such a way that I feel like I’m butting into someone else’s personal space when they probably might not like me too. This often leads me to stay silent for a long time before I’m able to ask someone something. Like right now.

“He’s fine.” She glances at me with that same smile on her face.

For a moment, I remain silent. My eyes wander carefully over her face. Does she mean it?

“What’s wrong?” I decide to push a little. On the outside, I’m sure I look just as calm and composed as I usually look, but on the inside, I’m already compartmentalising and sorting through my memory trying to find possible problems and how I fixed them the first time.

“Trust me.” Saara’s gaze snaps to mine. This time, she’s smarter. She gives me a bigger smile. Until it slowly fades . . . and she sighs.

“He’s trying,” Saara breathes. “A lot.” Suddenly, I know what’s wrong here.

You can forgive, but you can’t forget. And if you can’t forget . . . can you every truly mend the brokenness? If you can’t ever forget, if you can’t ever mend the brokenness, if you can’t ever stop hurting . . . what should you do?

“But you— “

“But I just can’t.” Saara nods slowly, looking away from me and towards the waves that are crashing against the black rocks in the distance.

“You know . . .” I shift in my seat a little so that I’m facing her. “Sometimes we mix fondness with love.”

Saara turns to look at me, and I smile at her warmly.

Right now, she doesn’t need my judgment. Right now, she doesn’t need me telling her that I always knew her decision of taking him back was absolutely stupid. She’s probably beating herself over it herself, so instead, I decide to give her some clarity.

“Seven years is not a short amount of time. Most marriages don’t even last this long. And if you love someone for seven years, if you take care of someone for seven years, of course, you come to be fond of them. It’s hard to stop caring about someone at home just because they’ve hurt us, right? But fondness and love are two different things. We can be fond of someone we love, but don’t necessarily have to love someone we are fond of. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Saara stares at me for a few seconds, blinking at me innocently, then she groans. “Noo. I don’t understand what you’re saying.” She runs her hand over her face.

“You don’t love Dante anymore.” I decide to just say it out loud.

“You’re just hung up because you two have spent so much time with each other. You care about him regardless of what he did so you don’t want to hurt him. It’s not love. There’s a difference,” I finish, wondering if she’s going to tell me to mind my own business and just assume what she’s feeling.

“What’s the difference?” Saara asks haughtily, huffing as she folds her arms in front of her.

“The difference is that if you loved him right now, you wouldn’t go

looking around your Instagram story views trying to see if that CEO Khristian viewed your post or not. You'd see Dante's views and be happy with it. Don't try to deny it. I'm quiet, not blind."

"I should break up with him, shouldn't I?" Saara whispers after a long while.

Once again, I turn to look at my radiant cousin. This time, I notice the tiredness she's been hiding behind her sparkling eyes.

Usually, if someone asks me questions like this, I'd just tell them to do what they feel is right. I don't want to intrude in their life and give them the opportunity to be swayed by a third point of view when all they need is their own. However, this time . . . it's different.

"Yes, you should," I reply bluntly. "You should break up once we get back."

Saara lets out a loud sigh, and I watch as her shoulders slouch forward.

"And then what should I do?" she mumbles hesitantly.

Hearing the indecisiveness in her voice, I tilt my head a little and think about the answer.

"Give your heart a break, "I finally declare.

"A break?" Saara smiles softly, looking at me once again.

"Mmm," I bob my head in confirmation.

"Okay." My cousin suddenly grins. Somehow, she suddenly looks like a weight has been lifted from her shoulders, then she jumps on her feet and makes a grab for me. I can only giggle when she begins pulling me towards the beach.

"Let's go heal my heart in the sea!"

* * *

"Let's go tour the city tomorrow, what do you say?" I ask Saara as I turn towards her. Her face is illuminated by the moonlight and the soft glowing lights of the resort. Saara thought it would be great to come and sit by the sea after dinner. Now here we are, on this swing. Under the moonlight. Breathing in the salty night breeze.

"I've been thinking about that too," Saara agrees immediately. "Yeah! Let's do it!"

“Okay, great!” I quip up, throwing my arm around Saara and pulling her close.

“You missing your man?” Saara giggles suggestively as she wraps her arm around my waist.

For a moment I’m silent. *I am, but . . .*

I lift my head up towards the big white moon and smile.

“I miss Isaac.”

This seems to calm Saara down as well. I hear her release a soft sigh beside me, and her arm around my waist tightens.

“Yeah.” She sighs again. “I miss him too.”

I can only nod and lean my head on hers in comfort. “I’ll call him before school tomorrow.”

“Yeah, do that. I’ll make a guest appearance as well,” Saara replies. From her voice, I can tell that she’s grinning again. Somehow this makes my mood lighter as well.

“I was thinking . . .”

I tilt my head, trying to glance down at Saara. “Hmm?”

“Earlier when we were talking about . . .” she hesitates. I wait. “You know, that thing,” Saara finally blurts it out.

“Yeah?”

“What do you think about ‘Leaving My Heart in the Sea’?”

I frown. *What?* Then it hits me. “New song?”

“Kinda.” Saara chuckles awkwardly. “Maybe it’s too long for a song’s name, huh?”

“I don’t think so,” I encourage her, squeezing her shoulder comfortingly.

“I think it sounds very whimsical,” I continue, then pause for a bit. “And sad.”

“Thanks.” Saara chuckles again. She sounds more at ease this time. I’m happy.

“Hey, can I sleep at yours tonight? I don’t want to be alone.”

I understand. Saara has always been like this. When she’s upset or troubled, it’s always best not to leave her alone. Because when she’s alone, it gets worse.

Come to think of it, after her mood today, I think it’s a good idea if she stays over as well.

“Okay, let’s go then!” I pat her back before getting up on my feet. “Let’s go sleep. We’re going to need it for tomorrow.”

“You’re reading my mind.” Saara breaks out into a yawn somewhere in the middle, standing up as well and slowly shuffling her way over to me. Again, I wrap my arm around her shoulder, then we begin walking back to my villa.

“It’s cooler tonight compared to other days, huh?” Saara acknowledges as walks out of the bathroom in a pair of my short cotton shorts and tiny tank. Once again, we’re twinning. Usually, Saara’s the type that sleeps in a full pyjama set, but here, in the tropical environment, she has to make do with my less-is-more-in-bed style.

Already snuggled in bed and half-asleep, I can only push my leg out of my blanket and ‘hmm’ at my cousin while she continues to babble excitedly.

“My body feels like it’s going to break into two.” Saara groans as she jumps into the large bed and immediately gets under the blanket, then throws her leg over me.

“Just sleep, okay?” I mumble stupidly while shoving my face closer into my pillow and snuggling into my blanket. Honestly, I’m exhausted. I don’t even care anymore. I’m going to bed.

Thankfully, everything seems to be calm afterwards. The dark room is peaceful and cool; I am almost inside dreamland. And beside me, Saara seems to be falling asleep as well.

That is until her phone suddenly rings in the middle of the night.

“Mmm, halo.” She groans when she picks up her phone, then she immediately jumps up into a sitting position on the bed.

“Gem . . . Gem!” she whispers urgently, tapping me on my face until I finally slap her hand away and groan, completely having no intention of paying her any attention.

“Dante called. I’m going outside to talk to him for a bit.”

Dante? I quickly put the face that comes up whenever I think about this name . . . away. And giving my cousin a half-thought-out ‘hmm’ and go back to sleep.

I don’t know what time it is when the sound of the bedroom door opening echoes around the walls of this bedroom again. Actually, I’m pretty sure I’m already in dreamland by this time, but then the door shuts with a

surprising loud bang and I'm pulled back sharply into the world of lucidity.

Eyes now wide open, I turn my head around towards the door and I try to make out where Saara is standing.

Maybe she's upset about Dante? Did they have a fight? I let out a slow sigh. That piece of sh*t.

"I'll think about this tomorrow," I promise myself and let my head fall back on the pillow in front of me.

"Just come here. Let's sleep," I grumble into my pillow as I pat the pillow beside me one or two times. "We'll talk about this tomorrow, okay?" I try to comfort her.

It seems like it's no time before I feel the bed begin to dip again. I feel as she gets herself under the blanket.

But then . . .

"Mummy . . . I missed you!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

One Stormy Afternoon When All the Love . . . Blew Away

“Why do these clear teardrops fall from your eyes?” the sea asks the lonely girl that visits him every night.

He reaches for her with his arms—extended as waves crashing with might

“Why do you always cry here, in front of me?”

“I am sorry,” she apologises.

“For every tear of mine that has fallen into you.

For every tear that you have drunk from my eyes.

For every pain of mine, you have swallowed.

I apologise.”

Another tear drops into the sea;

Another tear, the waves swallow.

“But if not in front of you, then who?”

“In front of you, I can be the most hopeless version of me.

Even when before the entire world I smile with indifference.

Even when before the entire world I draw thick curtains around my heart.

Before you, I can slowly open them.

I am filled with loneliness, And yet you help me not feel it.

When I have no one to share my weaknesses,

I let you see this damaged heart, and you furiously swallow my tears.”

Under the bright moonlight, before the dark glistening sea,

*a tear slides down the lonely girl's cheeks yet her lips—they smile. Her smile. It is broken yet her lips—they smile.
The sea drinks another tear.
"If not you, then who?"
Nobody.*

Is this what suddenly getting sober after a night of drinking spree feels like?

One moment, there is only a mellow haze, the darkness is calming and the voices around you are only a soft buzzing, and the next, you're pulled out of the embrace of fuzziness into loud reality.

I don't know how else to explain it. It feels like being drenched in icy cold water, but somehow not feeling the cold?

For a moment, I am hanging between disbelief and sleep.

"Mummy." The sweet-honeyed words echo in my mind, the soft lips that press against my mouth is the last veil and it's violently pulled away, leaving me blinking rapidly, looking wide-eyed at the small being on the bed beside me.

"Isaac?" I croak, my voice still raw with sleep as I reach out and touch the shadow of the child in the dark room.

"Mummy, you're awake!" Isaac exclaims excitedly, instantly sitting up and reaching for me again.

"Isaac, I told you to let your mother sleep when we get here."

The new voice has my head snapping to my left. My wide eyes fall on the tall shadow standing by the bed, and I, too, quickly sit up on the bed, looking between father and son.

"I'll just turn the lights on." William's voice travels around the room to my ears, and I can only blink before the blinding bright lights are turned on, washing the entire room in it.

Immediately, I turn my head to Isaac, who jumps on to my lap and wraps his arms around my neck.

"Mummy, I missed you!" Isaac giggles giddily as he looks at me with those big innocent eyes of his.

For a second, I can only stare into his bright sparkling orbs, then I'm pulling him closer into my embrace and sobbing. Loudly. Like an absolute idiot without a single sense of shame.

Isaac's surprised. I can feel it in the way the small boy has tensed in my embrace. I'm sure even William is shocked at my reaction, but I'm not sparing him a glance. I'm too busy releasing the knot I'm just realising has been growing in my chest for the past couple of days.

"I missed you too," I sob bitterly with no sign of stopping as I crush a surprised Isaac against my chest. The stricken child slowly begins rubbing my back, probably trying to comfort me in the way that I and everyone else around him have always comforted him. This action of his makes me want to laugh and cry harder at the same time. A child comforting a wailing adult. What a scene to see.

"Err . . . bad news." I hear Saara's voice again. "I think your son has stolen your wife."

By this time, my sobbing has thankfully subsided into small snuffles. Hearing Saara's statement, though, I finally muster enough courage to look up at the two people who are now standing at the foot of my bed, looking at me with two completely different expressions. Somehow, Saara's words make Isaac even giddier.

"Really?" He jumps around when I loosen my arms around his small frame. "I like that!"

"Ooi, he likes it too," Saara teases, nudging a stoic-looking William who just remains standing in front of us with a blank look in his eyes. "Thankfully both of you come in the same package, huh?"

"Right," he replies blandly, his eyes staring at me for another second before he simply turns around and begins walking back out of the bedroom door.

I blink. Warning bells are ringing in my mind now. *He's at it again*, I think frantically as I quickly begin shuffling out of bed with Isaac still in my arms.

"Be with your aunt, okay? I have to go pacify your dad," I whisper hurriedly in Isaac's ear as I hand him over into a willing Saara's arms.

The little monster seems to know exactly why I'm rushing out of the bedroom because he only nods at me with a wide victorious grin on his face. Of course, though. Of course, he'll know. It's happened so many times before.

When I'm rushing out of the door, I am feeling slightly sheepish. How can I keep forgetting how needy William secretly is? I let out a sigh as I

pass the door but falter a little when I hear Isaac ask his aunt a question in a low voice.

“What’s pacify?”

I can almost picture Saara’s happiness in my head. After all, she always gets excited when William’s like this. How can I forget how much of a little demon my cousin sister really is?

Not surprisingly, Saara’s giddy laughter rings in the silent room behind us right after Isaac’s question is asked.

“Your dad’s jealous again, pudding!”

It’s slightly irritating. Hearing both aunt and nephew giggle amongst themselves after Saara’s answer, but I can’t help but grin just as giddily at these two as I begin to find my way to William once again.

I find him outside, on the first-floor balcony, sitting on a chair and staring at the sea that is illuminated by the glowing moon up in the sky.

The sea brings in a chilly breeze that leaves me with goose bumps and the taste of salt in my mouth. Standing at the doorway, I silently cuss myself for having forgotten to grab a large shirt or something before rushing out of the room. Still though, looking at William’s figure sitting outside silently, my feet begin to walk on their own.

I walk towards the man who is currently not acknowledging me. “Hey,” I say lightly after I silently come to stand behind him.

Hearing me, William scoffs and shakes his head. “Hey? That’s all I get, huh?”

I won’t lie. Even after this has happened so many times before, I should be used to this. Still, for a moment, I’m stunned. Somehow, I still can never get my head around this situation. No matter how many times it happens. No matter how many times William gets jealous of me. Whether rational or irrational. I just cannot get used to his brooding self.

Thankfully, since it’s such a frequent occurrence, I also know how to pacify William really well. All he wants is for me to love him the most. In times like this, hugs, kisses, and extra attention always work.

“I missed you too,” I say to him softly as I lean over him from the back and drape my arms on both sides of his shoulders.

When he doesn’t respond the way I expect him to, I begin to get nervous. Maybe it won’t work this time.

A dozen more plan Bs are running through my mind and I’m

scrambling through them, trying to pick the best one when I feel the man's shoulder slump. Slowly, he nods.

"I know." He sighs.

I know he's still grumpy, but I'm happy. At least he's showing me he knows. That's progress.

A soft smile bubbles on my lips. I tighten my arms around him.

"Didn't you miss me?" I ask, then impulsively move to stand in front of him.

William's head tilts up at my sudden movement, and soon, his dark orbs are looking up at me without a hint of emotion in them. During times like this, I almost hate how unreadable he is. Sometimes, I want to blame his profession for this quality. At the hospital, he needs to keep himself detached and unreadable in order to do his best, but can't he at least leave that habit when he's coming home? Ugh.

Fine. If he's stubborn, then so am I. I don't give up.

"Hmm?" I bend until my face is just in line with his.

For a second, we just stay here. I bend until our faces are at a level, and William stares at me with a tight jaw and unwavering dark eyes.

Then it's something that happens too quickly for me to understand. All of a sudden, William's hand shoots out and wraps around my waist, pulling me down on him.

With this action, his mouth immediately finds my neck. Instantly, I let out a shaky gasp when I feel his lips parting and pulling my sensitive skin between his teeth.

Suddenly, I can't feel my feet. His arms are around me, holding me in an embrace. His mouth is on my neck. His warm breath hits my sensitive skin. I can only grip his shirt tightly and rest my face on his shoulder. The world's turning. It's twirling around me.

"STOP!"

What?

Both William and I still. Shocked, our heads snap towards the aggravated voice. My heart is pounding in my chest. *Who was that?*

Underneath the moonlight and amongst the beautiful outdoor lights the resort has set up everywhere, a couple is having a lover's quarrel.

I turn around to give William a silent glance, then silently turn around on his lap until both of us can see the commotion. Our own issue is

suddenly forgotten. My attention shifts to the scene occurring right in front of our villa.

“KATESARA!” the man yells louder, seemingly throwing away all of his reservations.

What an unusual name, I think to myself.

A few steps in front of him, a girl suddenly stops and turns around just as my eyes turn to her. With her turning around in the direction of the light post, I can clearly see her face now.

My eyes widen. Katesara.

An unusual name for such a beautiful face. Even the darkness of the night fails to hide her beauty. This girl. She’s extremely beautiful.

“I told you in the beginning. I told you I won’t love you,” the man exclaims frustratedly. “I told you this won’t be a real marriage.”

Bewildered at the man’s words, my gaze snaps from the man to the girl. I hurriedly try to focus on her face again. I want to know if she’s crying. This man is being awfully rude.

Surprisingly, she isn’t crying. I blink.

In fact, under the soft lights of the resort and the moon, the girl’s beautiful face is expressionless. Her eyes are unreadable as she stands there and looks at the tall man who is apparently her husband.

The tall man is clearly frustrated. He lets out a huff of breath as he brings up his large hand and rubs it down his face.

“I told you I won’t love you.” He sighs, looking extremely exasperated.

“Why does he keep repeating that?” I hiss under my breath, becoming irritated at the man. “As if once wasn’t rude enough! Why did he even marry her then?”

“Ssh, ssh.” William tries to comfort me as he rubs my arms, pressing another kiss against my neck.

“Forget him! I’ll marry her. She’s so beautiful!” I continue to hiss though. *This husband is a piece of crap!*

The girl speaks. And both William and I are left speechless.

“Okay,” the beautiful woman says only this one word. Her voice is soft and sweet, like molasses, but her word is cold. Without an ounce of emotion.

Somehow, this seems to upset the man even more.

Suddenly, he takes a large stride forward and bends down forward until his face is at the same level as the girl.

“Just what are you playing at?” the tall man hisses. I can’t help but shudder when the night breeze carries the coldness in his voice—to me.

“Why are you so upset?” the girl asks calmly.

“I’m not.” He shrugs.

“You’re more upset than I am.” Her voice is clear and unbothered. As clear as the sounds of the sea crashing against the rocks a few meters away.

“It’s almost midnight! How can you roam outside all alone?” the man snaps at the girl, and I find my grip on William getting tighter. I want to shake the man and ask why he’s being this way if he doesn’t like her! Doesn’t he know being nice to her will only give her hope?

I can only blink though when the girl, in return, smiles at the man and calmly brings her hands up to remove his hands from her.

“Oh don’t worry, I won’t get hurt. I was just going to sit by the sea. We’ve been here for a week now, and I’ve always hung around the resort by myself.” The girl, Katesara, almost comforts the guy. To me, though, it seems like it only makes the guy even more upset.

“This isn’t really our honeymoon, right? We don’t have to be together at all. So don’t worry, I won’t get lost or hurt. You should go back to your friends, they must be wondering where you are,” Katesara finishes, her smile brightening at the man in front of her—her husband.

Truth be told, I’ve never been so surprised by someone’s calm attitude like this. If that was me there, I would have caught the next flight back to my house and slapped the divorce papers across his face. Here, it seems like she’s the one who’s okay with the whole situation and he’s the one who isn’t. Which is strange, from their conversation, he seems to be the one who set the boundaries in the first place.

“What a bastard,” William says under his breath as we watch the man just stand in front of his wife, stunned.

For a moment there, the tall man’s shoulders are tense; I’m absolutely sure that he’s going to haul her over his shoulders and take her back. I’m left surprised when, instead, he only turns around and storms away, leaving a single word hanging in the frigid night air behind him.

“Fine!”

There is only silence once the man’s back has turned towards the girl

and he's moving further and further away from her. I almost run downstairs to comfort her, but William's arms around me remain tight and unyielding. In the end, I can only resort to sitting here and watching her silently.

A few minutes pass, and the girl still stands there, looking at the path that once had her husband. The path that is now empty.

The sea blows a chilly breeze, and the coconut trees rustle their leaves in happiness. It is in this moment that I watch, with my breath held, as the girl who had just been as cold as this breeze that's touched my skin, as the strong and unbothered girl . . . slowly lets the curtain around her crumble down to the ground. Her shoulders that had remained so straight and proud until now, I watch as it begins to tremble.

I can only stare helplessly as the girl that was as expressionless as clear water just a few moments ago begins to silently cry.

Just what is this feeling in my chest? I am sad and yet stunned that this girl who looked so unbothered and emotionally unavailable on the outside was actually so hurt inside.

My eyes wander to the path that is now empty and dark, the path that once had this girl's husband. Does he know how much he's really hurting her? Does he know?

When my eyes return to the girl, I am stunned because she picks exactly this moment to tilt her beautiful head back and painfully wipe her tears away.

Her shoulders are still slumped, her eyes are still brimmed with red, and her face is still blotchy. When after a few minutes, she slowly turns around and begins walking away towards the beach.

"She's not going to commit suicide, is she?" I look back at William and whisper urgently. I'm sure there's probably panic in my eyes.

"No, she's not," William replies evenly, and I can't help but stare at him with my sharp gaze.

"You're just assuming this, aren't you?" I accuse my fiancé haughtily. I really want to run down there and comfort the girl before she disappears into the darkness of the night.

"She'll be fine, Gem. Trust me." William sighs as he glances at me and softly twirls a lock of my hair behind my ear.

I'm still not convinced. Honestly, how is she okay? I just saw the poor girl throw away her mask and cry like a child.

“Because he’s looking after her.”

I still. My head snaps back down and I try to look at who William’s talking about. “What? Who?”

“Him.” William sighs, extending his hand forward and pointing at a direction. I snap my head towards it immediately.

I see him then—the tall silent man walking behind the crying girl.

Unlike William, though, I can’t help but panic even more. “What if he’s a serial killer?” I gape at the two people getting further and further away from us.

“They clearly know each other,” William answers with a sigh, bringing his hand up and patting me on my head. It reminds me of how I was treated in kindergarten. This only dampens my mood.

“Again, you’re assuming!” I grumble at the man, crossing my arms in front of me.

William’s response is ever patient. His hand, which was gently patting my head, carefully turns my head back around. I witness as the guy who’s walking in the shadows, silently looking over the girl, takes out his phone and typing something on it places it against his ear. A moment later, a shrill but dull sound of the ringtone echoes around the silent night and the girl quickly picks up her phone, and the two begin talking.

I blink, biting my bottom lip as I watch the scene before me. “Oh.”

“See.” William’s hot breath touches the soft shell of my ear. I can’t help but shiver from the thousand tingles it produces all along my body. “She’s fine,” William comforts me. Again, his deep voice and hot breath hit me without mercy. I turn my head to look at him and find his dark peering eyes already looking at me.

“Can you hug me? Please?” I blurt out as I stare up at the man whose lap I’m sitting on. Being like this, feeling his touch and smelling his scent, sitting on his lap . . . it’s only right now that I’m realising just how much I’ve missed him over the past few days.

My request seems to surprise him. For a minute or two, he’s frozen stiff, looking down at me with his dark unreadable eyes, then he wordlessly nods, and I immediately find myself turning around on his lap. I lift my thigh up and frame the other side of his waist until I’m straddling him. I feel him as he straightens on the chair and brings his arms to silently wrap around my waist over the thin material of my tank top. The smile that washes over my

face is something beyond my control. I really feel happy right now. I feel so happy being in his arms.

With the bright smile on my lips, I instantly lean into my fiancé and wrap my own arms around his neck, pushing myself against him until there is absolutely no space between us. At this moment, I somewhat feel like a spoilt child craving for some attention, but I realise I don't exactly care right now. Right now, all I want is William. All I want is to stay here like this until the sun rises.

"I missed you too, Gem," William whispers into our hug, answering my question from earlier. "Very, very much."

* * *

"Mummy, it's so green here!" Isaac shouts excitedly as he runs down the path towards the entrance of the resort.

Saara and I chuckle looking at the bouncing bundle of joy in front of us as we continue to pursue the little fella, making sure he doesn't fall and get hurt.

"Isaac, walk a little slower please!" Saara calls out after the boy. Not too far behind us, a group of bulky men is trailing after us. Glancing back at them, my eyes meet Olly's—who is getting along quite well with Saara's bodyguards—and we share a happy grin. Clearly, even Olly is happy at being able to relax here.

"He's enjoying himself as well," William comments from beside me, his eyes glancing back at the happy group of men.

Tilting my head up to look at the man walking beside me, I can't help but smile brightly at him as I shuffle closer to him while tightening my grip on his hand.

"Did I ever tell you?" I ask, my eyes grazing over the sharp features of William.

"What?" he asks me, clearly looking amused.

"You're very handsome," I reply, nodding to myself in agreement before looking back up and beaming at the man.

This seems to take William by surprise. For a second, there's a blank look on his face, then slowly, the corners of his mouth begin to curl up into a sheepish smile; he looks away, shaking his head.

Seeing him blushing shyly from my sudden compliment, even I can't help the grin that forms on my lips.

Feeling such happiness from this moment, I can only continue to grin and swing our locked arms happily, walking towards the vehicles we've rented for the duration of our stay . . . together.

I sneak a look at the taller man beside me. My smile brightens when they fall on the smile adorning his handsome face.

I sigh happily. *Ah, I really love this man.*

"Mummy, can I get one more?" Isaac whispers into my ear as he continues to pull me down to his level with his small hands.

My eyes wander to the child's food tray, and I see that he's not left a single thing on the tray save his drink. A smile pops on my lips. I immediately put my hand on the small child's head, caressing his hair lovingly.

"Of course, bubba," I reply before tapping his father's thighs until he slides out of the booth and then sliding out myself.

"He wants more," I whisper into William's ear as I pass the silent but curious-looking man.

"Okay." William nods before grabbing my hand, obviously aiming to tag along.

Behind us, I hear Isaac ask Saara. "Why is Pa going too? Is he hungry too?"

"I'm not hungry, I just don't like how that manager looks at you," William answers for Saara. His hot breath washes over my ear, and I shiver as I glance up at him and then in the direction of the man he's speaking about.

The man in question is standing behind the cashier's, talking to one of the employees. Adorned with deep black tattoos along his arms, his dark cropped hair contrasts beautifully against his golden skin. He's muscular. Very muscular. Very tall too.

Simply put, it's true what Saara keeps saying—islander men are absolutely gorgeous. It's like fate. As if noticing my eyes on him, the muscular man turns his sharp gaze to me. He smiles softly.

Too bad I'm already in love.

"He is very good looking," I comment without much thought.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

I don't even notice when William simply turns around and walks back to our booth.

* * *

"Is Pa mad at you?" Isaac whispers into my ear as we wade in the shallow waters of the sea, Saara and I on our feet and Isaac carefully held in my arms.

Saara has been nagging me to let Isaac play a little on his own, but I've turned a deaf ear to her on this. A very big part of me is having absolutely zero tolerance of letting Isaac get anywhere near the sea without my, Saara, or his father's arms around him all the time.

My eyes turn towards the man simply sitting a few meters away from us with the bodyguards.

"Maybe," I whisper back, then smile at the child. Just then, a thought comes to my mind. For a second, I wonder if I should tell Isaac or not, then I decide to just say it. Someone should tell him. He does deserve to know.

"Isaac." I turn the boy around to face me.

"Hmm?" He looks at me expectantly, his big almond eyes shining brightly at me with adoration and love. I can't help but pull the child closer to me and give him a loud, sloppy kiss on his forehead.

"I have something to tell you." I try to edge into this nicely.

Isaac nods, waiting for me to say it. I take a deep breath, then glance at this father seated a few meters away.

"Your mum wants to meet you," I finally whisper into the boy's ear.

For a moment, he's silent. Absolutely silent.

"No!" Isaac's big eyes stare at me with absolute fear as he begins to claw at my tank top.

"I don't want her! I want you!"

"I kn—"

"You can't leave me! You promised!" He begins to panic, cutting me off before I can even assure him.

"Okay, okay." I quickly pull him as close as I can into a hug. "I'm not going to let you meet her," I assure the heaving boy as I send a glance in a worried-looking Saara's way before we both begin to wade our way out of the water.

“P-promise?” Isaac looks up at me with his teary eyes. I can’t look away.

“I promise.”

“Okay.” Isaac nods trustingly, then he glances at Saara and winks.

“Then . . . I go stay with Aunt Saara today.” Isaac suddenly grins and leans towards Saara, who excitedly takes him from my arms. Exactly what has this aunt-and-nephew duo been up to behind my back? I look curiously from one suspect to the other.

“Mummy, can go and make up with Pa now!” Isaac grins brightly at me.

This small man. Once again, I feel my heart melt because of him. I can’t help but wonder what I would have done if he had wanted to meet Shirley? What would I do if he wanted her back? Would I be able to live without this sweet smile?

I beam back at the devoted-looking boy, I’m sure looking equally devoted.

“I love you.”

Isaac dazzles with happiness. “I love you too, Mummy!”

* * *

“Let’s go for a walk.”

William’s head snaps up, his eyes first meeting mine and then moving to the hand I have extended towards him.

At the same time, Saara and Isaac come to stand behind me.

“My nephew and I are going to participate in some activities,” she announces casually.

Immediately, her bodyguards stand up on their feet and begin dusting off the sand. Even Olly follows their action—apparently deciding that it’s better to guard Isaac than William and I.

A very smart man.

Looking at everyone standing up, my gaze moves back to a silent William who’s still seated on his spot.

“Don’t wanna go?” I ask, letting my hands fall to my side as Saara pats my back and whispers “good luck” in my ear.

On the inside, I want to laugh bitterly. *Good luck? Thank you. I sure*

as hell seem to need it.

On the outside though, I turn around and place a kiss on Isaac's cheek.

"Take care of my baby," I request Saara as I smile down at my child.

"Be good," I remind the beaming boy who immediately nods obediently, earning another kiss from me.

"Take care of him." William's arm touches my back, and I tilt my head back in surprise to see him glancing between Olly and Saara. Both of who nod seriously.

"Don't worry, sir. He'll be okay," Olly assures William before William turns to his son.

"Have fun, kiddo." He smiles down at the wide-eyed child, extending his hand to ruffle his hair.

This seems to make Isaac a little needy.

"Pa!" he whines, pouting as he extends his hands towards his father who immediately takes him into his arms and places a kiss on his head.

This seems to be exactly what Isaac wanted because his smile only widens and he shoots forward to smack his own small lips against his father's face. Turning around, he extends his arms back towards his aunt who dutifully takes him from his slightly stunned father.

"Well then, guys, have fun! We'll see you later!" Saara declares before she, Isaac, and the group of men begin to excitedly make their way towards the activity area.

I remain standing here, watching the group for a while. I watch them getting further and further away—my eyes carefully trained on the young boy who seems to be having a very good time.

"AAAAH!" A shrill scream rips out of my throat when I'm suddenly picked up and hurled over a solid shoulder as if I'm no heavier than a sack of potatoes.

"William! What's . . . what are you doing?" I squeak as I swing slightly with every stride he takes forward.

"Going for a walk," he replies simply.

"What? Like this? Where?" I try to lift my head and look around if there are other people around here looking at us. Thankfully, I'm spared. There's no one around here right now.

"The villa."

This time, I can only shut my mouth and hide my suddenly red face against the back of my fiancé.

“Umph!” I let out a groan as my back hits the cold surface of the bedroom wall and I jolt forward a little with the impact.

However, before I can even have the opportunity to move, William’s hard body is already pressed against me, trapping me between the wall and his hard body.

His eyes. They leave me speechless. They look fierce. So different than they usually look like. Even in our most vulnerable of moments.

Right now, he looks wild. His lips. My eyes widen when they land on his lips. This mischievous smirk on his face. It looks brazen. My heart jumps in my chest. I look back up to the eyes of the smirking man holding me hostage between his arms and the wall.

“Breathe.” William tilts his head to the side so that his lips are just a breath away from mine. When a deep breath releases itself from my slightly parted lips and I feel the tightness in my chest release, I realise he’s right. *I wasn’t even breathing! How long wasn’t I breathing?*

Seeing my reaction, William’s smirk deepens, and a chuckle tumbles out of his throat. This sound, this sexy sound instantly shoots me in my chest, leaving me with a visible tremble.

“I’m going to shower,” William whispers, clearly amused by my reaction. I can only grasp the loose material of my skirt when William leans forward and presses his lips against my cheek and then, just as easily, steps back and walks into the bathroom. As if nothing has happened right now. As if I’m not still standing here. Breathless and with a drumming heart.

I don’t know how long I stand here, leaning against this wall behind me, holding my hand to my chest, just trying to calm myself down . . . until a loud ringtone begins blaring around the room.

“Get that for me please!” William’s voice suddenly sounds from the bathroom, further shaking away all the butterflies that were keeping me stunned on my feet, and immediately, I find myself moving forward, towards the cell phone lying on the bed.

“Okay!” I yell back softly as my gaze moves to the cell phone that is still ringing loudly.

The number isn’t saved. Maybe it’s someone from the hospital.

My hand limply grasps for the device. I quickly slide across the

screen before placing the iPhone against my ear.

“After all these years, you’ve still not changed your number, huh?”

I freeze. Shirley.

The woman on the other side of the line let outs a pleased but mischievous laugh. My grip on the phone tightens as I listen to her soft laughter, then she speaks again.

“Just like you promised me you would. William . . . I can’t believe you’ve been waiting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

One Day When the Past Smiled Smugly & the Present Cried Bitterly

The yellow rose watches a girl who sits on the grass, a few steps away.

He watches as her brown hair flows softly with the wind.

Her eyes that sparkle under bright lights of the sky.

The yellow rose, he watches.

Every day, as long as she stays.

Some days she simply sits there, some days she waters him too.

Some days she bends down and touches his petals and whispers how beautiful he is to her.

Oh, if only she had a clue.

This pitiful yellow rose, he watches her until it begins to hurt;

until he begins to wish he was human and not a flower instead.

If he were human perhaps then,

he would be able to hold her;

Perhaps then,

he would be able to cry.

Cry and say what he's been wanting to, cry and say goodbye.

His petals are getting brown,

His body is going limp;

He is soon going to wilt away,

*blown away by a chilly spring breeze one afternoon,
without a trace;
Mere rubble underneath her windowsill.
The rose, the dying yellow rose,
He wishes he could hold her.
He wishes he could cry,
Cry,
& yet,
he can never even tell her.
He can't even be upset.
Wasn't this what was written since the beginning?
A love that was bound to end in the fires of silence and
longing.
A love that was meant to stay mute under the heavyweight of
the noise of the traffic from the streets,
the chirping of the birds,
the pitter-patter of the afternoon rain?
Would she even hear him if he said?
Would she answer him?
Would she be able to tell?
Oh, how he wishes . . .
that even for a few minutes . . . he was human as well?
So instead, he remains,
giving her a parting gift.
The last thing he can still find some power to give.
Although he wilts, he holds on to his fragrance.
The sweet smell is the only thing that he can hold on to, the
only way he can speak words that he otherwise cannot;
He hopes she can understand him.
He hopes she understands what it means.
The only words he's wanted to tell her.
Oh, how he wishes he was human as well.
Goodbye.
I truly loved you.*

“Hello?” Shirley speaks again when I find my tongue glued to the

roof of my palate. “Will?”

I cringe, remembering the countless amounts of times I have also called William ‘Will’.

“William?” Shirley’s voice sounds concerned now, and somehow, that makes me angry. I frown, suddenly surprised at my own reaction. What am I feeling? This need to lock William up and away from this woman. *Am I . . . am I being possessive right now?*

“Wil—”

“I hope when I disconnect this phone call, you’ll sit down and reflect on yourself,” I cut her mid-sentence. I don’t know how I’ll act if I hear her say William’s name one more time. I might just start screaming. And suddenly knowing I am capable of that reaction scares me.

I hear her gasp on the other side. Her clear shock makes me smile.

“Gemma?”

“Who else?” I ask blandly, feeling my irritation float to the surface once again. Shouldn’t she apologise and disconnect the line?

Well, she doesn’t. Instead, she laughs.

“Oh hey! Oh, don’t be mad. I was just kidding with him. It’s how we always were with each other, back in the day.”

She’s trying to cover her actions up. Haven’t I read this scenario in so many manuscripts?

“Stop.” I sigh tiredly. “I’m not an idiot. It doesn’t take too much to understand what you were trying to do. Who are you kidding?”

For a moment, there is only silence on the other side of the line as if she’s trying to decide how to react, then finally, she does. I feel my legs give away. She scoffs.

“Are you sure you’re not an idiot, Gemma?” she asks.

Stunned, I remain silent.

“Do you think this is the first time William and I have broken up?” she continues, but I notice that her voice sounds amused now—taunting. I clench the cell phone tighter with my hand.

“William and I have a long history, Gemma. Since the beginning, he’s always spoilt me. He took me back every time. Every single time. You know why? He’s addicted to me. He can’t live without me.”

My heart drops, but I still clench my hand. “Stop being delusional,” I reply.

“Maybe it’s you who should stop being delusional,” Shirley replies with her words dripping with pity. “When I left the last time, William called and begged me to come back. He promised me he wouldn’t change his number. That he would wait for me to come home. It’s been years. Why hasn’t he changed his number?”

What do I tell her? When I don’t even know the answer to this when this also hits me square in the chest. What do I tell her?

Still, I glance at the closed bathroom door and spit back a reply into the iPhone. I can’t act like an impulsive idiot but I can’t let her win.

“That was before he agreed to divorce you, though, right?”

This seems to stun her. Finally, I can afford to smirk. *I must be right!*

“Alright,” she replies, and something about her voice makes me suddenly feel alert. “I didn’t plan on breaking your heart like this, but I’ll prove you wrong.”

This time, I find myself not paying her words any attention, so I scoff.

“Aren’t you getting married?” I ask her, not hiding the taunt in my voice.

“I am,” Shirley replies. “I love Declan.”

“Good, then no need to keep buzzing around William like a filthy fly,” I retort, then immediately disconnect the call.

“Who was it?” William asks as he comes out of the bathroom just as I place his phone on the bed and turn around.

Our eyes meet. I can’t help the words that float in my mind.

He promised me he wouldn’t change his number. That he would wait for me to come home.

A little sigh slips from my lips, and I simply turn around to pick up my towel.

He’s addicted to me. He can’t live without me.

Our eyes meet again when I turn around. William’s eyes are filled with confusion as he looks from me to the phone. I can only nudge my head towards his phone with a tired smile on my face.

“It’s in the call history. You can call back if you want,” I mumble as I pass the confused half-naked man and get into the bathroom, shutting the door.

In the solitude of the bathroom, somehow, I feel like all the weight

that one smile put on me slowly begins to melt away . . . until I am left with only a grimace.

“Oh boy,” I whisper to myself as I begin to undress almost robotically, and with blank strides, I move under the shower. Maybe the cold water will make me feel calm.

He took me back every time.

He’s addicted to me. He can’t live without me.

I let out a groan. My fingers find my damp hair and I brush it back as I turn to face the tiled wall.

I should stop thinking about it. I should stop. Ugh. Why did I tell William to call her back? What am I doing here?

Being so stupid?

Maybe it’s because I’m so lost in the storm that’s raging in my brain, maybe it’s because I’m just beginning to let the damp feeling of fear leak into my heart, that I do not notice when the bathroom door silently opens and a tall figure enters the bathroom again. Maybe that’s why I’m not able to witness the dark depths of his eyes that usually peer into my soul have an entirely different emotion swirling in it right now. Guilt. Maybe even sadness too.

I notice him first when the shower’s door slides open and he steps into the small space without a single word. I’m stunned. My heart has begun to pound against the walls of my chest. Despite the warm water flowing down from the shower, a dozen goose bumps have suddenly popped down the length of my arm as I feel his domineering heat now almost scorching my back.

I know. I should say something. This isn’t as much of a big deal as my ego will probably make it if I don’t stop right now. I should think calmly. There is no need to fight with William. He’s here right now. With me. We’re here at a resort with Isaac and Saara and everyone else. We can’t fight right now. It’s okay, I’ll just pretend I don’t know anything.

Suddenly, strong fingers curl against the moist softness of my bare waist and strong arms pull me back against an equally naked chest. It’s something I’m not prepared for.

When William’s large hand wraps around my waist and I feel myself meld into the large frame of his body as if I am only a small child until he is almost covering me like a large blanket and the bathroom suddenly feels

warmer, I can only shudder in the hold but remain silent.

“I love you,” he mumbles into my hair as he bends his body forward, taking me with him.

I should say it back. On any other day, I would, but right now . . . I’m distracted.

So I remain silent, letting myself lean against the tall man lightly.

“I love you,” William repeats after a while. This time, he lowers his head and presses his lips on my bare shoulder. I can’t help but shudder again because his lips are strangely cold. Again though, I can’t bring myself to say anything back.

What do I say? I want to bring up the phone call, but then I also don’t. I don’t want to fight and I know that I’m not the best speaker when I’m troubled and have to express myself.

I’ll end up saying something that will hurt him, and things will just get way out of proportion.

I don’t want that.

Somehow, silence seems to cause the same outcome.

“Gem,” he whispers. Suddenly, I feel as his arms tighten around me, and he presses himself closer until I can feel all of him clearly against my skin.

“Are you mad?” William asks, whirling me around as I begin to hear the panic in his tone. It surprises me. *What is he so panicked about?*

I lift my eyes up until I can see his blazing dark orbs peering down at me. Just as quickly as I look at him, I look away.

This doesn’t seem to be the right choice. Maybe we shouldn’t talk at all right now. Maybe all I need is to sit down somewhere, alone, and just think about things.

I’m in the middle of contemplating how I should slip out of this place before everything gets worse when, suddenly, I can’t feel the floor beneath my feet.

Suddenly, William wraps his arms around me before I can even fathom what he’s doing and pulls me up, pushing my legs back as he does so, to wrap around his waist.

I automatically wrap my arms around his neck. I can only stare at the milky white expanse of the chest I can see from my level now. I don’t want to look him in the eye. I don’t want to initiate the talk that me looking at him

would create. The talk I'm so desperately avoiding because I know this might not end well.

"You're mad," William whispers into my ear. I remain quiet. I wonder if I should at least say no. Maybe that will stop this. Maybe then we won't get into an argument.

"I'm not," I reply, managing to look at him and smile softly, then I focus my attention on the tiles of the bathroom.

"It's getting cold in here, I'm gonna go get dressed." I hear the voice that speaks these words. They sound carefree and soft. Like the breeze I feel against my skin every morning in my garden back home, and for the first time, I realise that maybe the breeze feels just as sad as I do right now. Soft and carefree on the outside but heavy and sad inside.

"You should too," I add impulsively as I turn around a little and turn the shower off, beginning to push against his shoulders so that he can let me down.

"What will you do if Shirley wants to come back?" His words catch me off guard.

My eyes snap to his and I feel my body stiffen; I'm sure he does too.

"Would you want her to come back?" I ask, looking at nothing in particular. As long as I'm not looking at him, I'll be fine. William presses us against a wall.

"What if I'm confused?"

He took me back every time. He can't live without me.

It hurts. So much. It hurts until I feel like it would be better if I lose consciousness right now and everything stops. Until I can't feel a single thing. It hurts that much.

What if I'm confused?

He took me back every time. He can't live without me. What will I do? What will I do then?

"Then I'll leave," I reply. As I say it, I know that's exactly what I will do.

For a few seconds, William is silent. Until he finally speaks.

"Leave?"

I nod, my resolve becoming stronger. "I'm not going to beg you or pull after you, I'm not that stupid. I'll just think that I've never met you before."

“You’ll leave me?” William peers up into my eyes, and I finally find myself being able to look him in the eye. My heart is hammering inside my chest, clutching to his neck. My palms have begun to sweat.

I nod. “Yes.”

William says nothing, and for a second, I almost regret saying it. *Maybe I shouldn—*

No, I tell myself. It’s what I’ll really do. I love William, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love myself. What’s the use of saying where you aren’t loved completely?

I love Isaac too. Thinking of leaving him . . . I’ll just ask Mrs. Noo to help me meet him from time to time so that he knows I love him. So that he doesn’t forget about me.

“AHH!” A loud gasp rips out of my lips when I’m suddenly whirled around in William’s arm, and he begins striding out of the bathroom, then he drops me right on the bed.

I can’t help but let out an ‘oof’ when my head bounces on the sturdy mattress, but my words are swallowed by William’s mouth as he covers me instantly after dropping me on the bed.

“Do you think I’ll ever let you leave me?” William hisses as he tugs at my earlobe with his teeth. His hot breath makes me shiver. I want to run away right now. I’m so confused. I feel sad and scared, but I can’t help how my body reacts to him. I can’t help how nice it feels to have his large hands rubbing down my side. How nice it feels to have his weight on me. To have him here. With me.

“Do you think I’ll ever let you leave me?” William asks again as he suddenly hooks his arms around my thighs and pulls me up until I can feel him exactly where I am the most sensitive.

“Keep. Dreaming.”

By this time, I can’t feel my legs anymore.

* * *

“Are you doing well, beta?”

Hearing my mother’s voice over the phone, I can’t help but feel warm inside.

“Yeah, Ma. I’m fine. Have you and Dad been taking care of

yourselves?” I ask, grinning as I grasp on to my phone and press it closer against my ear.

“Yeah, don’t worry. We just miss you a lot, bubba. Can’t you come stay with us for a bit?” Mum asks softly, and for a few seconds, I’m surprised. My mum usually isn’t the type to ask me to come visit. That’s what my dad usually does. So right now, hearing her say this . . . I can’t help but feel sad.

Maybe I’ve not been a good daughter lately.

“Hmm, Ma, don’t worry. I’ll come over ASAP, okay? I’ll stay for a bit,” I reply earnestly. My cousin, who’s watching me in silence, nods in approval and I smile at her.

“Okay. Make sure. Your dad misses you a lot.” Mum clears her throat, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“I miss Dad and you too, Ma,” I mumble.

“Good. I’ll be expecting you then, okay?”

I grin. “Okay.”

“Okay, bye then. I have to get back to work.” Mum clears her throat again.

“Bye, Ma,” I reply just in time before she disconnects the phone.

“You better visit them soon, man.” Saara sighs, and I do too, nodding.

“Yeah, I know I should,” I reply, slouching my shoulders at the admission.

“Good girl. OKAY!” Saara claps her hands together loudly. “Where were we? Oh, yes! So you’re telling me that you guys were MIA because you said you’ll leave him if Shirley comes back?”

I clear my throat, feeling myself flush furiously under Saraa’s knowing gaze. *Ugh, I was hoping she wouldn’t bring it up.* Suddenly feeling overwhelmed, I nod quickly.

“So you’re telling me he has that much stamina?” Saara smirks, looking over my probably haggard-looking form as I just remain lying down on the mattress on my stomach. I feel like pressing myself down until I become one with this bed.

It’s been a day since we’ve come back. Two days since . . . that day. We didn’t talk much after that incident. Well, maybe more like I didn’t talk and William decided to silently stick himself to me like glue. Neither pushing

me to talk to me nor leaving my side.

Everyone noticed—the subtle change in William as he lingered around me or kept his eyes on me otherwise.

After landing back at the airport, there was no use trying to escape back to my home. I had a feeling William would just come with me, so I came back to his.

“Shut up, you know how it works, okay!” I let out a groan as I continue to lie on the bed, rubbing my hand across my face tiredly.

“You know how he gets when you talk about breaking up.” Saara sighs, rubbing her face as she slumps further on the bed. “Haven’t you already seen his reaction whenever someone jokes about it?”

“I was just being honest,” I grumble. Honestly, I’m feeling stupid myself. Of course, I know how sensitive he is about me leaving him. Of course, I know.

I must be wearing a very pitiful look in my face right now because Saara’s eyes soften when they meet mine again.

“You look horrible. Have you even been sleeping?” she asks, reaching forward to run her hand down my hair.

Feeling the heat bubble up in my cheeks again, I look up at her and nod softly.

“I’m becoming a little paranoid, Poofy. I can’t sleep until he’s back home. I keep worrying about where he is and if he’s with her or something.”

“That’s normal. I’d do that too. Ugh! Did he have to ask those questions and mention being confused? What’s there to be confused about?” Saara sighs, running her fingers across her hair frustratedly.

“He was just asking me.” I bite my lips, defending William while I’m hoping that I’m being right about this. My mind can’t help but remember the new expression he has in his eyes for the past few days when he’s looking at me. He looks a little volatile. Like he’s waiting for me to disappear and to run after me.

“I don’t think he’s confused between her and me. Maybe he was just hypothesising.”

“Then can you explain why he still has the same number, huh?” Saara’s getting angrier and angrier by the minute, I can tell. It’s been this way since she came back and broke up with Dante. Although she was very happy the afternoon she called me to tell me that she’d just broken up with him. I

have a feeling this new sense of frustration of men has something to do with her CEO.

“He said at first he did keep it because of the promise, then it just didn’t matter anymore whether she came back or not, so he just kept the number,” I reply with a soft voice, feeling myself cringe from the bitter taste this answer brings to my mouth every time I think about it.

“No wonder you’re still paranoid. That reason is bullsh*t.” Saara scoffs, and I find myself wishing once again that I could just melt into this bed.

“Maybe I should talk to Dec.” Saara’s eyes narrow as she says this.

My eyes snap to my cousin and I find myself feeling light-headed. “What if Declan breaks up with her and she comes at William and me in full force?”

“So?” Saara scoffs. “What’s that going to do?”

I blink. She’s right. What will that do?

I let out a small sigh.

Am I really this scared? Do I really not have even this much of faith in William? Am I this scared that she’ll be able to snatch him away from me?

Letting out a sigh, I let my head lower to the dazzling ring on my left hand.

“Yes, please. Tell him to control his fiancée,” I beg her shamelessly instead.

“Don’t worry, I will.”

“He better keep her in control.” I groan, throwing my head back on my pillow as I turn over until I’m on my back. “He owes me this much at least!”

“Oh yeah! Speaking of which, Dec’s been asking me for your number. He said he came across as impulsive the last time and he wants to apologise.”

“Apologise?” I blink. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Yeah,” Saara replies sheepishly, scratching her head a little as she agrees. “Me too.”

“Hey, listen. About that day . . . I wanted to let you know but he said that he would just talk to you in the living room, and he just wanted to give you his wedding invite and make things better. I thought that since you are engaged as well and he’s getting married, and we all have so much history—I

thought it would be alright. I'm sorry about that. I didn't know it would create such a huge issue."

I don't know what to say. Truthfully, I'd forgotten about that awkward incident days ago. I'd never been upset at Saara in the first place, but now that she's mentioning it on her own, I can't help but feel awkward again. As if that day is happening all over again.

"Ah." I shake my head dismissively. "Ah, just let it be! Let's not talk about that day. I didn't even care anyway."

Saara's eyes light up at my words and I can see that she's clearly feeling relieved. Somehow that makes me laugh.

"Really?" she asks.

I nod, the amused smile still on my face. "Yep!"

"Thanks, man," Saara beams at me, and I can't help but beam back at my cousin.

"Mummy!"

I've only turned my head when the bedroom door bursts open and Isaac runs in barefoot but still in his kindergarten uniform, his eyes shining brightly as he jumps on the bed, crawls over Saara and then spreads himself on me while resting his face on my chest.

"I'm home! Did you miss me?" Isaac grumbles, lifting his head and peeking up at me.

My arm leaves my side and automatically wraps around the small child. Looking at him, right now as he's looking at me with love in his eyes. Suddenly, I realise who I'm really more scared of losing.

"Of course, bubba. How was your day at school?"

"Oiii, look at these two!" Saara exclaims from her spot, making both Isaac and I turn to her with large grins on our mouth.

"I'm here as well, okay?" she continues, looking at Isaac with a wounded expression.

"How could you forget your aunty Saara, huh?"

"Sowee." Isaac pouts, getting off me and crawling back to Saara. "Mummy's been sad lately, so I just missed Mummy a lot."

Hearing Isaac's words, Saara gives me a secret look—as if berating me for being so transparent that even Isaac's been worried. I can't help but let my head drop, the feeling of guilt is suddenly overwhelming. Have I been this transparent? Has everyone in the house noticed?

* * *

It's raining. Around me. On me. A million raindrops like tears are falling down—icy cold but still comforting.

I've been lying down here for . . . how long has it been? I don't even know.

How long has it been?

The skies are getting darker now. The house inside is empty save me. Mrs. Noo has gone to a family friend's house. Isaac, Olly, and Mary have accompanied her. The help is back home.

Right now, I'm all alone.

There's thunder roaring somewhere. The sky is lightning up and then dying down to black. However, I'm still here, lying on this freshly mowed lawn, amongst the comforting fragrance of roses and the rain.

Why am I here? Right now, I can't remember clearly. The dull ache in my chest is trying to remind me, but oh god, I really don't want to remember why I'm here, lying in the rain is something I really want to forget. I really, really want to forget.

It's been a month. A month since we've come back from vacation. A month since I've started to want to keep forgetting things.

It started with a phone call. Was I supposed to pick that call that day? I wasn't, but I did. It began with a phone call I wasn't supposed to pick up.

I'll admit. After the call, I was scared. I was scared I was going to lose William. That I was going to lose Isaac. However, it got better . . . for a while.

Two weeks have passed and I didn't hear from her again.

Slowly, I began to ease back into my sense of security. After all, she's getting married and so are we.

William was trying. I could see that he was. He was trying to keep me from feeling insecure about us. And I believed him. I really did.

Then she came back.

A message. A message one afternoon was all it took to grasp any security I felt and throw it out the window.

The message didn't contain much. Just a picture. Of his shoes. Inside an apartment. That picture . . . it showed me . . . he was at her home.

Did I leave then? I didn't. I couldn't. Did I confront William? I didn't. I couldn't. I really couldn't. The fear that he might actually admit to it. That he might actually tell me that he's thought it over and he still loves her. I was scared.

I showed the picture to Mrs. Noo instead. She took it better than I did. Actually, she scoffed and waved it off saying that her son was not a cheater. She told me to trust him. It made me feel a little guilty. It made me think, "Am I really this scared? Do I really not trust William?"

I decided to ignore her. How did she even get my number?

No matter how I looked at it, it was clearly a dirty trick to break William and me up.

That's until she messaged again. This time, it was a single sentence.

I love the smell of his cologne.

The next day while taking the laundry out, I found a lipstick stain on William's shirt.

It was harder to ignore her this time, so I confronted William.

He said it was a misunderstanding. He was meeting her with a lawyer during the first text because she's been wanting to meet Isaac again, and the second time, she tripped and fell on him.

I felt like a fool. Of course, I had read so many of these things happening in a lot of novels. How could I not realise what she was doing?

As the realization hits me and shame clouded my being, William held me close and told me he loves me. Over and over again.

Maybe he knew as well. Just how much I needed to hear him say that.

I thought it was all okay. That everything was going to be okay.

Until I got a call from Sean. A call telling me that he's looking at William having dinner with a woman right now.

The pictures came when the call ended.

There they were, sitting across the table from each other, enjoying a meal.

Right now, I'm here. All alone with the roses and the rain.

And William . . . he's enjoying dinner with his ex-wife, Shirley.

"You have to be kidding me. That's his ex-wife?" Sean hisses as the rest of our group hurdles around me, their expression ranging from bewildered to downright pissed off.

"What? Are they planning on ditching you and getting back

together?” Tully says, gritting her teeth as she looks at Sean’s phone screen with a disgusted look on her face.

“I don’t know,” I admit, then look amongst my friends with a soft expression on my face. “I don’t think William is like that.”

“Yes, I think you should calm down and wait for him to approach you about this.” Wendina nods with her arms folded in front of her as she’s glancing between the phone screen and my face. “You did say they are talking about Isaac right now because the ex-wife wants her son back in her life or something. Maybe they are meeting because of that?”

“Meet in a frigging courtroom then. Why over dinner?” Sean snaps back, locking his phone and putting it away.

“What will you do if he wants her back?”

The rest of us four turn towards Jennie when she asks this question. For a few seconds, I can only stare at her.

What should I do if he doesn’t want me anymore?

“What can I do if he doesn’t want me anymore? I’ll leave.”

“What?” Tully shrieks in a hushed tone, her wide eyes staring at me. “I’d ruin his life!”

“I’d be surprised if he wanted to leave you and get back with her. Your fiancé doesn’t strike me as an idiot.”

Sean rolls his eyes at this. Turning towards Wendina, he rolls his eyes again. “Thanks for your faith, Wendy, but William’s a man. Most men are idiots.”

“Exactly.” Wendina nods. “Most men. It doesn’t mean Gemma’s fiancé is.”

“Oooi!” Sean heaves out a frustrated groan. “Who has the time to figure out which one is an idiot and which one isn’t?”

Wendina stops. Her eyes blink blankly, then she nods. “Touché.”

“Guys! Office dinner tonight! Remember!”

Our five heads poke out of our circle to see Nathan striding towards his office.

“Come to dinner tonight. You need a break,” Sean suggests immediately. Tully and Jennie nod enthusiastically.

I think about it. The more I think about it, the more appealing it seems. Maybe I do need to just get out for a bit and unwind.

“Okay,” I agree. “Let me just text him.”

I can hear Sean's irritated groan in the background, but I've zoned all that out as I pull out my iPhone and begin typing down a text to William.

Gemma: I'm joining the office dinner tonight.

His reply comes instantly. I'm a little surprised. Usually, he takes an hour or two.

William: What time will you be home by

Gemma: Around 9:30 or 10. What about you?

Pressing send, I wait for his reply. Around me, I feel my group disband and move back on to their seats.

William: Same here. Where will the dinner be? I'll pick you up on my way.

I don't know why him offering to help me still manages to make me smile. Even after being under so much stress.

Still, with the foolish smile on my lips, I type back a reply and press send.

Gemma: Okay ^_^ . I'll send you the location once it's finalised.

"It's done. Let's have fun tonight," I tell my friends with a grin after putting my iPhone down.

"Good!" Jennie grins, and I grin back.

Somehow, talking to William has made me feel ten times lighter. I can't argue that I don't like it.

I do. I like it a lot. Just like I like William. A lot. A whole lot.

* * *

"Hey, Gem, I think someone's calling you," Jace calls to me from across the table, making me turn my attention from whatever Tully's saying to my phone that's placed on the table before me.

"Thanks." I grin at Jace before glancing back down at my phone and unlocking it. It's not a call but a text message.

Somehow, seeing the sender's name already leaves a pit in my stomach.

Slowly, I click on the notification.

William: Baby I'm sorry I won't be able to pick you up tonight. Something came up at the hospital.

As I read through each word, somehow, I am not even surprised. Maybe unconsciously I had expected this.

Nothing has been going my way lately anyway.

“Hey, you okay?”

My eyes dart up and I smile at a concerned-looking Jennie.

“Yeah, I’m okay. William suddenly got something important so he won’t be able to pick me up,” I inform her. My voice sounds casual, as if I’m alright about it, but what do I feel inside?

I still when I realise I feel nothing. Strangely, because I had already predicted this, I feel nothing.

My eyes find the words on the screen once again, and this time, with a soft sigh, I type back a reply.

Gemma: Oh, okay. Don’t worry!! Sean can drop me home.

You take care :)

Again, his reply is really fast.

William: I love you

I read these three words over and over again.

I love you.

I love you.

“Hey, are you okay?” Sean asks, and my head snaps up just as he comes to stand behind me, his nose self staring down at my iPhone screen now.

He glances from the screen to me. “Reply.”

“Huh?” I stare at him.

“Reply to his text, woman.” Sean rolls his eyes, urging me on until I really turn back to my phone and type back a reply.

Gemma: I love you too, William

“Good,” Sean says just as I press send.

I only tilt my head up to look at him when his hand finds my shoulder and he tugs me up, “Now you’re going home. ASAP.”

“Huh?” I blink. “What are you talking about? Why would I go—”

“Just go home right now, Gem,” Sean hisses, pulling me out of my seat. “He said he was going to pick you up, then says something came up. I don’t know why but my sixth sense is yelling right now!”

“Where are you guys going?” Jennie stops us as we make a move to get up.

“Gem doesn’t feel good so I’m dropping her home,” Sean replies before I can. I can only stare at the man I’ve known since college as he hands Jennie a lie and immediately begins to pull me away.

“Oh, okay! Take care, Gem! I’ll let everyone else know!” Jennie yells from behind us as we continue striding towards Sean’s car at a great speed.

“This is crazy.” I groan as I strap the seatbelt and shuffle in the passenger’s seat.

“See?” Sean sighs. “I’m hoping my sixth sense is wrong, but I really feel like you should go home. I smell something really fishy. You know, once, my uncle did something similar with my aunt. Turns out he had his mistress over at this place. RIP.”

No. No way.

I shake my head. No way will William do something like this. No way.

I can’t help but chuckle at how ridiculous this seems all of a sudden.

“Alright.” I grin at Sean. “Let’s have it your way.”

“Isn’t that William’s car?” Sean asks when we come to a stop in front of the house.

Sean’s right. It is William’s car.

“I’ll go inside now,” I inform Sean quietly. My hand is already reaching forward and grasping the doorknob.

“I’ll be here in case. Just text me if everything is fine, okay?”

“Oh, don’t worry.” I smile at Sean as I wave off his concern. “I think William’s back because Isaac is throwing a fit again. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine!”

Sean doesn’t look the least bit convinced.

“You have to be sh*tting me if you expect me to believe that.”

“Trust me! It’s probably because Isaac is throwing a fit cause I’m not home yet, and William doesn’t want to trouble me!” I blow him off, the smile on my face widening as my heartbeat quickens.

This time, I don’t wait for a reply. I just turn around and get out of the car. The night air is chilly against my suddenly hot face, but I’m thankful. It’s keeping me grounded right now.

“I’ll call you if something is wrong, okay?” I assure Sean with a smile and wave.

For a few seconds, Sean just sits there and looks at me. I can't really understand what the expression on his face is, but I know deep down he isn't believing a single word I am spewing out of my mouth.

"Alright." Sean shrugs after a while. "You call me if you need me. I'll be here ASAP. Okay?"

I nod enthusiastically. "Okay!"

Again, Sean stares at me for a few seconds, then he nods, as if to himself, and turns to the road.

"Alright. Remember, call me."

"I will," I answer as I wave my friend away, then I'm turning around and making my way into the property.

Unlike all the other nights, the security guards let me as their heads hang low, not a single word of greeting.

I can only push down my crazily beating heart and push myself on.

My shoes clank on the pavement as I walk towards the house. When I unlock the front door and walk in, my heartbeat is louder than the sound of my footsteps.

I lied. I lied to Sean.

Isaac isn't even home tonight. A fit? What fit? Mrs. Noo's taken him to her sister's place for dinner.

I'm only removing my shoes and placing my handbag on the side when Ren walks out from a corner and freezes when he spots me.

The panic in his eyes. The panic in his eyes is what solidifies the inconsolable dark pit in my stomach.

This is it. What I was scared of for the past month. What I was waiting for.

I begin walking. My feet begin to carry me forward. Slow lifeless strides, until I'm passing Ren, and he shoots his hand forward to grasp mine.

"Don't," Ren says softly and I can't help but laugh. This is the softest he's ever talked to me. Tonight.

"It's okay," I whisper as I tilt my head up and look at him with the smile.

Wordlessly, Ren's hand falls away and he takes a step back, his head dropping just like the security guards.

"I'm sorry," he whispers and again I smile.

"It's okay," I repeat before turning around. I begin walking away

again.

“Are you done? Now, get out.” I hear as I reach the door—William’s bedroom door. They are in his room right now.

The door is open. Does that help? Does it help make it hurt less? I don’t know.

The help that is standing in the shadows of the doorway spot me and freeze. Just like Ren, they look away. Shame and pity washing over their faces.

I wish I could acknowledge them like I did with Ren. I wish I could smile at them too, but right now, I can’t. Right now, I’m standing outside the bedroom while Shirley is inside.

“You’ve changed the bed.” Shirley chuckles inside the bedroom. “Hmm, I like this one better!”

I walk in.

“Oh, look! Gemma’s home!” Shirley spots me first. Her eyes flash with excitement and mockery as she sits on the bed. As if it’s hers. As if it’s always been hers.

“Hey!” she greets me with her excited voice. “Guess who’s moving back in?”

I stare at her, my eyes running over her image for a second before I look away.

“Stop talking.” I sigh as I bring my hand up and rub the bridge of my nose.

“Gem.”

“Hold on, who the hell do you think you are, huh?” Shirley cuts William off. She suddenly stands up and begins striding towards me.

Immediately, William comes and stands in front of me, shielding me away from Shirley.

“NO! WIL! YOU STEP AWAY! WHAT DID SHE SAY, HUH?” Shirley is yelling now, creating a scene while I’m still standing here, motionless.

“I said stop talking.” I sighed once again, moving out from behind William’s tall shadow. “Your voice is so annoying.”

My uninterested eyes pierce through Shirley’s enraged ones.

“Gem, go out. Let me handle this please,” William whispers desperately as he reaches his hand forward and grabs mine, trying to pull me

back behind him.

“Ha!” Shirley scoffs. “What are you protecting her for? Come on, William. You can’t be so stupid. I’m saying I’ll come back. We don’t have to take this to court again. Isaac can have his real mother again. Isn’t that what’s best for a child? We could be a family again.”

Real mother? A family again? What? Is she going to take Isaac away from me?

My eyes snap to William’s tall figure before I turn to glare at Shirley. I can’t help it. I scoff out loud.

“What?” Shirley demands. “Do you have something to say, huh?”

“Mother?” I scoff again. “As far as I know, I’m the one who he calls Mum.”

I smile at the enraged-looking woman.

“I wonder what he’ll call you then . . . Aunty?”

“YOU BITC—”

“OH SHUT U—”

“GEMMA, PLEASE JUST GO OUT! THIS IS OUR PRIVATE MATTER! I SAID I’LL HANDLE IT!”

He stills in front of me as soon as he yells it. *Private matter . . . Private matter.*

The one he’s asked to leave. It’s not her . . . it’s me.

I can’t believe it. The humiliation I am feeling. The disbelief and pain I am feeling. Still, what else could I have expected? He loved her for years. Shirley’s right. He probably still does.

He said it’s their private matter. Privacy. That’s right.

She’s family. William, Isaac, and her.

Me? I’m an outsider. Just someone who wears a rock on her finger and takes care of his son. Like a personalised nanny. Just a personalised nanny who substituted as a mum for his son and then his lover . . . for his loneliness. In the end, he still loves her. The original woman. Not her substitute.

My eyes fall from his face to my feet and I take a step back.

I can’t bring myself to speak. I’m so shocked right now. It hurts too much.

For a moment, I wonder about all the times we’ve spent together. Was that all because he wanted to fill the lonely hole in his life? He wanted

me to fill the gap she had left behind? And now she's back . . . she's family, and I am an outsider?

Fool. I feel the embarrassment curling into my system.

I've been such a fool. An absolute idiot.

I can feel Shirley's smug smile drilling into my face from where she stands. My eyes turn towards the open door. I know everyone is hiding outside, hearing in on us.

Still, I must leave. This is no place for me. I'm an outsider. This is no place I'll come to ever again. I'll ask Mary or Mrs. Noo to help me meet Isaac somewhere out whenever I miss him.

At least they consider me their own. At least their emotions for me aren't just because they see me as a substitute.

The door becomes clearer with my resolve, and I turn around and begin to walk away.

Instantly, a hand grips mine and pulls me back to a hard chest, wrapping his other arm around me.

I can feel his chest move against my back every time he breathes.

I know he regrets it. He regrets saying it. That's why he's holding me like this. He's done this before. He's asking for forgiveness. I know. Even though he's not saying it. He's sorry and wants to apologise.

This time though . . . I can't bring myself to understand his wild mouth when he's angry. I just can't.

My hand moves up and finds his. "Let go," I whisper as I grip his fingers and try to uncurl it off me. His fingers curl over mine, holding my hand there.

His head falls on my shoulder in reply. He doesn't want to . . . let go. I sigh.

"It's fine. I don't blame you," I whisper as I just stand there, limp in his arms. "You have important family matters to discuss, and I need to go home to my own."

Instantly, William's arms around me tighten and he moves closer.

"Gem," he whispers. He's pleading. Even though he's not. He is.

I ignore him. My eyes move to Shirley's blazing ones instead. Her eyes are fixed on William's arm around me.

"I'm sorry for interfering in your family's life, Shirley. I was wrong to try to think that I could have a place that has always been and will be

yours.”

I rip myself away from William with all the power I have and rush out of the room.

I can feel the help’s pitying gazes as I rush by them. They don’t even try to hide that they were listening.

I stop when I pass Mary when her hand reaches out and stops me in my place.

“Gemma,” she whispers, her voice shakes and her eyes are teary. I turn to glance at the woman, a soft broken smile graces my lips as the first tears slip down my cheeks, then I rip myself away from her as well. I run.

I have imagined this moment a thousand times for the past two months—in a thousand different ways—but I had never thought it to be so . . . hurtful. So humiliating.

My shoes clunk against the pavement as I rush along the driveway and through the tall front gates.

I stop when I step outside the gates. Turning around, I spare one last glance at the house I’ve had so many memories in. The house where Isaac and I have so many memories in, then I turn around and begin walking away.

Nothing good lasts forever.

CHAPTER THIRTY

One Day When Love Was Selfish

Would you believe me if I said I have never loved anyone like I have loved you?

Would you believe me as I stand, barefoot, on the remains of my shattered heart and confess the one thing I've always wished I could say?

My feet are bleeding, can't you see?

This heart is bleeding too.

In my eyes,

In the tears that are falling so shamelessly before you, can you see the pain?

Before you,

I have abandoned every shame;

Before you,

as I cry,

my tears are saying things my lips can never say.

I am begging you to stay.

Would you believe me as I stand here, barefoot on the remains of my shattered bleeding heart and ask for the one thing I've always wished to ask for. Can you wash the pool of blood I am standing on, away?

Please, don't leave me. Please, let me be enough.

I want to apologise.

I glance up at the sky. The stars seem scarce, but I know that somewhere, they are glistening vividly, brightening up the night sky and

perhaps also someone's life.

In the silence of the night, under the brightness of the street light, the soles of my sneakers crunch over dried leaves lying on the sidewalk as I continue to make my way down the road, away from the house I've just left behind.

As I'm walking away right now, I want to apologise. To William for maybe getting too ahead of myself with him. For believing that I would be picked over someone he has loved wholeheartedly, his first love. The woman he loved enough to marry and start a family with.

I want to apologise . . . to myself for many things, but mostly for wanting to stay despite walking away from William.

I want to apologise to myself for being weak enough to wish for William to ask me to stay, to pick me . . . even while I was walking away from him. Even as I was leaving.

"Gemma?"

My name being called out has me twirling my head in the direction of the caller. My head turns to my right, and I blink when I bend a little and see a concerned August staring at me from the driver's seat.

Maybe it's meeting someone I know . . . in such a broken state. Maybe it's meeting someone I know while my chest is hurting so much that makes me want to reach out and just hide my face away in August's chest. Hide it away and cry.

As much as I want.

Still, I don't do that. Instead, I just stare at the man.

I'm silently hoping that he does something, anything to give me a genuine reaction as my vision gets gradually blurrier.

I blink. Two streams of tears fall down my cheek as I stare down at the man who continues to just look me over while his face hardens slowly as maybe realisation settles in.

August grits his teeth as he reaches forward and opens the passenger door.

"Get in."

I blink. Tears slide down my cheek again. *What did he say?* I ask myself as I just continue to stand here on the sidewalk, facing his opened door.

"Get in," August snaps, and I barely have time to react this time

before he reaches forward and grasps my hand, pulling me into the passenger's seat.

"August," I breathe dumbly as I stare at the irritated, concerned-looking man.

Instead of replying, August only reaches forward and turns me around until I'm properly seated on the seat, then he silently buckles down the seatbelt before getting the car on the road again. All this while, I have my head turned towards the window. My eyes are looking outside. At what? I don't know yet. All I know is that I'm biting down on my trembling lips, praying that I don't cry in front of August.

Had I wanted to hide away in August's chest a few minutes ago? Right now, I want to find somewhere quiet and just sit there for a long, long while.

"I'm taking you home."

Home? That's right. I have a house.

My soft chuckle rings out in the silence of the car before it suddenly dies down and it's silent again. Like I had never laughed at all.

I can feel August's gaze on me in the darkness. Every single time he glances my way before looking back at the road. Every single time his eyes lingers on the outlines of my face as if trying to see a tear on my cheek, I can feel those eyes.

"Do you want to go somewhere else?" he asks me after a while.

We're still on the road, surrounded by cars that are driving right beside us—cars in which there are drivers who are also feeling just as complex emotions as I am right now. Some are wondering whether they should feel happy, some are wondering what they are happy about, some are just happy, then there are some who are feeling the worst they have felt in their entire life, some are driving home after a disappointing day at work or school, some are escaping from home to drink their pain away. Some . . . maybe some are even heartbroken . . . like me.

Right now, I am surrounded by people who are also in pain . . . just as I am. Perhaps there are also some who are even more heartbroken than me, but somehow, that doesn't lessen my pain at all.

I suppose that is how life is; there are always people who are in worse condition than you, but that doesn't mean your pain is any better. Pain is pain, no matter in which intensity it is felt. It still hurts in the end.

The feeling of a pair of intense eyes on me brings me back to the world. I find myself glancing at August, feeling a little embarrassed for zoning out.

“I’m sorry. Did you say something?” I clear my throat awkwardly. A glance his way, and I see the small smirk that has the corner of his lips curled up. He seems amused by my jadedness.

“Well, I suppose it’s better than you crying,” August remarks. I tilt my head in contemplation when he stops the car at a red light, then he turns to face me. For the first time, I realize just how distinctive August’s facial structure is. Sharp. Angular. His facial features don’t match his name at all. I’ve never noticed . . . does his personality?

“Do you want to go somewhere else?” He brings me back to the earth once again. This time, however, I’ve heard exactly what he’s asked.

I think about it. Actually, I don’t.

“Somewhere quiet,” I blurt out. I don’t want to go home. I just need somewhere to think. Away from everything.

“Okay,” August replies just before the light turns green and he takes a left turn.

“You should message Saara and let her know what’s going on.”

I shake my head at the advice.

“She’ll just worry for nothing,” I mumble, looking back out of the windows.

“What if he drives over to your place looking for you?” August asks quietly as I see more and more trees on the highway compared to buildings.

August’s one word brings back all the hurt I was somehow managing not to think about; it brings back the one person I was somehow managing not to think about.

It’s like my body goes through a flashback in a millisecond. The entire rush of feelings that I felt a few minutes ago, in that house, all comes rushing back. Subconsciously, my fingers grip on to the material of my dress, and I let my head drop until I’m looking at the darkness, pretending I’m able to see my lap, but in reality, I’m just trying not to think about William again because I don’t want to cry.

Truthfully, what hurts isn’t that William lied to me about meeting his ex-wife but that he chose to tell me to leave the room instead of telling her. He chose to push me away. In front of her. This clearly . . . doesn’t that mean

he picked her over me? Doesn't that mean he values her more than me?

Truthfully, the more I think about it, the more it hurts that in that room, between me and her, William decided to ask me to leave. Maybe it's because I'm being egoistic, but . . . I can't accept it.

"It's not like I'm running away." I lift my eyes and stare at the empty highway in front of us. "I just need to think."

No one says another word. For the rest of the trip, the car is filled with silence and unasked questions. August doesn't ask me what actually happened, and I don't ask August where he is taking me. Somehow, the both of us decide to find comfort in the ambiguity of tonight.

Somehow, like this, the both of us are content.

When the car stops, I get out of it slowly. My bare shoulders shiver slightly as the night air brushes against my skin, leaving goose pimples along the way, but I shut the car's door behind me and continue to walk forward.

A few steps forward, a gasp escapes my lips as I look down at the dazzling world in the distance.

"Is that—"

"The city?" August smiles as he settles behind me on a bench that is near the edge of the hill.

"Yeah?" I ask, hesitantly ripping my eyes away from the dazzling view and look back at the sharp-faced man.

"Yeah," he echoes me, and I simply nod before turning back to the lights.

Somewhere during the night there, I moved to sit on the bench as well. We spend the rest of the night in silence, just sitting there beside each other, each one waltzing with our own thoughts. Being each other's company and yet letting each other be alone.

Somewhere during the night, when the air around us began to get colder, August simply stood up and walked back to the car. When he came and sat back on the bench, he wordlessly wrapped a shawl around me, and we resumed to the lonely but not alone state we were in before.

I don't know long we sat there. I don't know how many times I fell asleep and woke up to find August still sitting beside me, patiently looking out at the dazzling scenery before him. Suddenly, the skies were lightening; suddenly, the world was waking up. Slowly, the birds began to chirp, and one by one, the stars in the distance turned off until the sun was completely up in

the sky, greeting everyone with its warmth.

“Slept well?”

My head shifts on the shoulder it's leaning on, and I come face-to-face with a calm-looking August who's still gazing out at the city. As if sensing my eyes on him, he turns his head and the corner of his lips curl when I blink at him with shocked wide eyes, my head still resting on his shoulder.

The winds pick up when I move back slowly. Giving him an embarrassed smile, I nod at him silently.

“Think you can go home now?”

I look up at his question and our eyes meet.

“Yeah,” I reply after a few moments of silence.

“Once you're inside, you should go take a hot bath. I'll explain everything to Saara.”

I don't want to, but I laugh a little.

“What will you explain when you don't know what's happened?” I ask. We're currently outside my home's front gate, which is surprisingly wide open.

Hearing my reply, August scoffs at me loudly and then drives into the driveway, parking in his usual spot.

“It doesn't take a genius to know what's happened. His ex-wife showed up. What could happen in such a situation?”

I hate to admit it, but he's right. It's so easy to see what's happened here. Was it so easily predictable? Wasn't I then just setting myself up for a heartbreak?

“GEMMA! WHERE THE HECK HAVE YOU BEEN?”

Hearing the furious sharp voice tear through their eardrums, both August and I stop dead in our tracks and look up at a livid-looking Saara standing at the door with her hand holding the wooden contraption open.

“Where has your f*cking phone been, huh? William's been calling you all night! He was here till a few minutes ago too! He's been here all night, sitting outside the house like a crazy person! Gem! Gem, what happened, huh? What happened?”

Again. It happens all over again. The pain that I had managed to temporarily stop thinking about. The man who I had just managed to stop myself from thinking about; once again, he is mentioned. Once again, last

night comes back and I am left shivering in front of everyone.

All of a sudden, I feel a push on my back. It doesn't take me a second to know who it is.

"Go take a shower," August states as he gives me another push. "I'll handle her."

I don't think it's a good idea. August doesn't even know what's happened exactly. Only I do. But still, I let him push me away while a stunned Saara now stands staring at us in frustration.

"What's going on?" she demands out loud. "Why did you drop her?"

Her eyes snap between August and me. "Were you together all night? WHY? Did you call August? Why did you call him and not me? Can someone tell me what's going on?"

Saara's losing it by the minute, and by the minute, her questions are getting harder and harder to answer. So selfishly, I just follow what August has said and walk away from a frustratingly confused Saara and her loud questions.

When I walk back out—brushed, bathed, and dressed—the house is surprisingly silent again.

As I'm walking towards the kitchen, the phone that I'm holding on to is getting warmer in my hands. I forgot about this phone yesterday. Silent and left in the car, I hadn't touched it ever since I left Sean's car last night.

William's been calling you all night!

Had he? I wasn't even able to gather enough courage to check. Right now, as it's held firmly in my shaking hands, I still can't gather enough courage to check.

The kitchen is clean, save a covered plate and mug on the kitchen island. Walking over to it, I slowly realise that it's breakfast Saara has made for me. A small smile gathers on my lips at the sight of the slightly burnt toast and the avocado spread on it. The cocoa in the mug doesn't even seem like it's hot anymore, but still . . . in my chest, it's warm. Being cared for.

The awareness of the device that's on the kitchen island right beside my plate, as I'm munching down on my toast, is quite acute. I find myself glancing from my plate to the black screen after small intervals until I can't take it anymore.

William's been calling you all night!

My hand reaches for the iPhone even before I can decide that I want

to or not, and I'm unlocking the device and staring down at the notifications with increasingly widening eyes. My breathing . . . is it quickening or has it stopped? I can't tell. Maybe it's a bit of both happening at the same time. At this point, I don't even know how I'm alive.

Seventy missed calls.

Fifty-five messages.

From William.

All night.

My fingers are shaking when I click on the last message's notification.

I'm looking at the screen, but I can't bring myself to read what's written in the blue bubbles when the screen loads up. Did he cry? Did he cry as much as I did? Is he regretting what he said? Is he regretting letting me walk out of that room? Did . . . Isaac meet Shirley? Is Isaac okay?

"Why is this so difficult?" I ask out loud as I let out a sigh and put the phone facedown. Another sigh leaves my lips before I bring the toast to my mouth and take a big bite of it. Right now, I'm realising I am more angry than hurt. I am hurt, yes . . . I still am, but I am much angrier. Just thinking about Shirley still being in that house, just thinking of how William told me to go, that it was their private matter—I take another big bite of the toast and begin munching it down aggressively.

Does William not love me? I will never believe that he doesn't. Can William cheat on me? I will never want to believe that he can, but this is Shirley. Does my faith have any standing when it comes to her?

If someone asked me this question a few days ago, I would have said yes. My faith does have a chance when it comes to her, but after yesterday . . . I don't know. I don't think so.

In the silent and empty small kitchen that has no one but a sad me, I freeze when I feel two small arms wrapping around my right leg before a small body hugs my limb tightly.

Instantly, my head snaps downwards. I find myself sliding off the kitchen stool, down to the floor where the child is standing looking at me with his big watery eyes.

"Mummy."

It's like a dam explodes. A dam that has been on the brink of overflowing since last night. And I'm left bawling my eyes out, crying

shamelessly as I pull the child to my chest.

I can't recognise the loud heart-wrenching cries that are echoing around the walls of the kitchen; I can't even bring myself to look up and see if there is anyone else in the kitchen witnessing this or wonder how Isaac got here in the first place. All I know is that I'm suddenly so desperate. So desperate not to lose Isaac.

"Mummy," the little guy whispers again, and I nod bravely as I hide my face on the small shoulder of the child, still sobbing helplessly.

I can't lose Isaac. I can't lose Isaac. I can lose anything . . . but not Isaac. Definitely not Isaac.

"Why is Mummy crying? Look, I'm here! Is Mummy sick? Mummy?" my son asks patiently as I keep him tightly in my embrace, on the floor.

Isaac seems oblivious to what happened. I suddenly don't know if I should be grateful or afraid.

A hand on my shoulder stuns the storm I have in my mind, and my head snaps up to find a silently crying older woman looking down at me and Isaac.

"Mum," I choke out, feeling even more tears pouring down my cheeks as I look up at the woman.

"Oh, Gemma," Mrs. Noo coos as she drops down on her knees and wraps her arms around me. "Oh my child, there is no need to be like this."

"I don't want to lose Isaac," I confess, sobbing harder when the clueless but clearly worried child wraps his arms around me and plants a kiss on my cheek, as if that's going to make everything better and as if that's going to make this mess go away.

"And what about William?"

This time, I'm silent. For a long while, I don't say anything at all, then finally, I whisper. "I don't know."

"This isn't some teenage romance, Gemma," Saara speaks up after she exhales loudly. "You're both engaged. Trust me, you didn't see how he looked last night. I'm telling you, he definitely loves you. He looked like he was losing his mind! Don't you think you two should at least talk to each other face-to-face?"

My eyes snap to my cousin but instead meet not hers but a different pair of eyes looking down at me intently. A calm-looking August is standing

behind a very worried Saara, his light brown orbs are gazing into my darker pools from the distance—looking between me and the child in my arms.

“I agree with Saara.” He tilts his head to the side, as if in thought. “It will be childish to just ignore him without taking it out. After all, it’s not just you two that’s on the line here; he is too.”

I glance at the silent child in my arms, who, noticing my eyes on him, looks up and beams at me so brightly his eyes almost close. I immediately feel a smile blossom on my lips at his antics. Reflectively, I lean down and place a kiss on his soft hair.

“Love you,” I mumble and am rewarded with a smile so bright I could go blind before the boy hides his face in my neck.

“Love you too, Mummy,” he whispers against me a few seconds later. Hearing this, I place another kiss on his forehead.

Meanwhile, I silently contemplate what my cousin and her manager are saying. The more I think over it, the more I know they are right. I’m his fiancée. He asked me to marry him. How easy can it be to just stop without talking it out?

My eyes fall on the oblivious little boy on my lap, who is now looking like he’s halfway to dreamland.

Then there is Isaac as well. How was I able to rationalise that I will ask Mary or Mrs. Noo to let me meet him sometimes when I was leaving the house? Can I really stand not seeing him every day like I’m used to right now? This child . . . can I stand not having him in my life, like I do right now? Is sometimes really going to be enough?

Now that I’ve slept through the high of my pain, now that I think back to it, I don’t have to think to know the answer. *No, I can’t.*

Maybe she sees the resolve in my expression. Maybe she sees the way I’m holding on to the little boy, or how the child is holding on to me. Mrs. Noo silently extends my phone towards me.

“Call him, child,” Mrs. Noo encourages me softly, nudging the phone under my chin. I find myself dazedly accepting it from her hands.

Once again, I find my fingers unlocking the phone. Once again, I find them pressing on the messages section. Once again, I’m staring down at a string of messages that I can’t bring myself to process.

My eyes catch glimpses of texts as I scroll through the endless blue bubbles.

William: I'm sorry.

William: Gemma, we need to talk. Please pick up your phone!

William: Gemma.

William: Please.

William: I'm outside your house. Where are you, Gemma????

William: I'm not leaving until I talk to you!

William: Are you okay? Don't do anything stupid!

William: Gemma!

William: Gemma, I swear to God if you don't pick up right now, I'll call your dad!

William: It was a misunderstanding. Please. Hear me out. Tell me where you are.

William: GEMMA, I SWEAR TO GOD!

William: I'm sorry. Please . . . baby . . .

I run my hand across my hair as I exit the chat tab. My heart is jumping in my chest like crazy. The texts . . . I can't bring myself to read them all. He sounds so desperate . . . so sad.

Maybe . . . everyone's right. Maybe I should talk to William. We're engaged. This is serious. This is hardly anything causal that can be tossed to the side, right?

I glance back down to my phone and begin to exit the messaging tab when I spot another message that was sent to me last night. Immediately, I feel myself freezing at the sight of the unread message.

My fingers fumble stupidly with each other as I click on the unread message; the message opens up until it's displayed on the screen. My breath hitches in my throat, my grasp on the device tightness until it's almost painful. Still, I can't look away.

Shirley: Thank you for coming to your senses and realising that the family you thought was your own, always belonged and will always belong to me.

Also thank you for making me realise where my heart has always been. If it wasn't for meeting you and William at that restaurant that day, I wouldn't have realised that I still love him and that I want my baby boy in my life.

At first, I didn't want to hurt you. You seemed like a nice person. But you were so stuck up in that phone call.

I'm sorry, I wish yesterday didn't have to happen like that. I told you, didn't I? William is addicted to me. He's always taken me back.

This family is mine, Gemma. Both William and Isaac.

You're best backing off. Let William and I be happy. Let Isaac have his true mother, not some substitute.

Good luck with your future.

-Shirley Noo

My emotions must have shown on my face because I gradually feel all three adults move closer to me, trying to see what's wrong with my phone.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Noo asks, leaning forward and also looking down at my phone screen.

Saara and August also come and surround me, bending over to read the text.

"I can't believe this," Mrs. Noo breathes, shaking her head in her shock.

"When did she turn this way?"

"I'm sorry, Aunty, but I want to slap your son instead. She wouldn't have so much confidence if your son didn't tell my cousin to get out and not meddle in their private matter last night right in front of his ex."

I flinch at the reminder and immediately feel a now sleeping Isaac twist in my arms, probably feeling uncomfortable.

My attention moves to the small boy. To *my* small boy. "What will you do now?"

This question is asked by August, who is now sitting at one of the kitchen island chairs.

I glance over the text messages again and then look up at Mrs. Noo.

"What do I do?" I ask dumbly, even though on the inside, a selfish part of me wants to scoff and tell Shirley to seek help because being delusional is a serious problem.

Even though a selfish part of me wants to text William that it's over so that he rushes over here and cries in front of mine like how I cried last night.

Even though a selfish part of me wants to torture William so that he

panics and grovels after me until Shirley can finally see who he really can't live without. Until he can understand how much it hurt me to be abandoned in front of his ex.

As for Isaac? There is no way I'm giving him back to a woman who picked her need for freedom and adventure over him.

"I think you should tell William you're leaving for a while." Mrs. Noo suddenly smiles down at me, patting down on my hair in a motherly way. I'm a little stunned. Is she . . . is she saying what I think she's saying?

"How is that going to help?" August, who seems confused, asks Mrs. Noo.

Saara seems to be getting on to the idea. Her eyes snap to Mrs. Noo's, suddenly sparkling with excitement. "Oh sh*t!"

"I know my son, dear boy." Mrs. Noo smiles at August. "He can't live without your friend. How it's going to help is that if she leaves him for a while, he is going to go crazy and will finally realise what he did wrong. When he will be reminded of how important she is to him, he will go running after her and stop entertaining whatever it is that Shirley is holding in front of him. The lawyers can handle whatever she wants to create issues about."

"Wow . . . Aunty, that's your own son." Saara's mouth falls open as she regards the woman in front of her with new respect in her eyes.

I, on the other hand, can't stop flinching all of a sudden.

Of course, I know how William gets when we're having issues. Even when I stop talking to him for a few days, he ends up working himself off the ground and getting sick.

Somehow, being reminded of how inconsolable he gets, I really don't want to hurt him deliberately. I don't want to make him get to that condition. To hurt himself. To be in so much pain. Despite everything . . . I don't want to hurt William.

"Ooohh, Gem, I think you should go back home for a few weeks! Hasn't Khala and Khalu just asked you to visit them yesterday? I think you should totally do it, dude!" Saara claps her hands together in excitement. Once again, I flinch.

"I don't want to hurt William," I admit, letting my head bow in front of everyone because I'm feeling so stupid suddenly. I really can't stand thinking of William being in pain because of me. Especially something I am intentionally doing.

“Oh tch tch, don’t think like that, darling.” Mrs. Noo shakes her head. Her hard eyes land on my phone screen before she speaks again. “When it comes to learning, sometimes, pain is the best teacher.”

“Some lessons are only learnt when being in pain,” Saara echoes after William’s mother, nodding in agreement as she does so.

I can only look between the two women when my eyes suddenly land on the calm light brown orbs. I watch as the corner of August’s lip tilts up.

“Some lessons are only learnt when being in pain,” he simply repeats Saara’s words, all the while looking down at me with his calm eyes.

Some lessons are only learnt when being in pain.

Three hours later finds Isaac asleep in my bedroom, and the rest of us four adults seated on the sofa in the living room.

A loud round of ringing is echoing around the silent living room as I continue to hold on to the iPhone that’s on loudspeaker . . . in my hand.

“Come on! Pick up! Pick up!” Saara whispers desperately as the ringtone continues to go through. The same classic ring.

Ring-ring. Ring-ring. Ring-ri—

“Baby.”

Saara immediately makes a puking expression, but I’m too busy all of a sudden to respond to her. Suddenly, all my attention is on how tired William sounds now, how croaky his voice sounds. Was he really crying all night? Is he crying right now?

“I’m going away for a while,” I mumble into my phone after a long while of silence.

“You’re leaving me,” William whispers weakly, and I almost bend over from the pain I’m physically feeling in my chest.

“I’ve left the ring with Mum.” I avoid his previous words, biting my lips when I realise what I’m feeling is actually a mixture of hurt and guilt.

“Gem!” William seems to start panicking. I feel my heart begin to beat wildly. “I’m sorry! Look, let’s please talk. I’m coming over. Let’s meet and talk, okay?”

“After yesterday . . . I need time to think things through, William.” I look away from all the pitiful gaze and whisper the words into my phone, turning off the loudspeaker and putting the phone against my ears.

“Can’t anything I say make this better?”

I close my eyes before the tears fall and look down at my lap.

“No,” I confess. “Not right now.”

For a while, there is only silence. Around me. On the other side of the call.

Finally, William speaks again.

“I don’t want the ring back, Gemma. Please don’t take it off.”

“I’ve left the ring with Mum,” I repeat the words I said a few minutes ago.

On the other side of the line, William is silent again. “I—” he stops, as if short for words.

“I love you.”

This time, I can’t stop myself. I let out a small sob, shaking my head as if to chase away the words I’ve just heard. To un-hear it. To un-hear it because the words he had said to me yesterday were suddenly echoing in my head.

“After last night . . .” I choke out, subconsciously tightening my grip on my iPhone. “I don’t believe you.”

Again, there is silence.

“I’ve got to go. Take care of yourself and Isaac,” I whisper after a while.

“I’m not letting you leave me!” William almost yells out. I can only shake my head, feeling hopeless.

“Goodbye.” Then I cut the line.

Truthfully, it feels like I’ve just cut my heart instead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

One Day After Many, Many Days

*How can I explain pain?
Are there enough words in this world that can explain my
pain?*

I can only feel it.

*I can only try to express the bitterness of this open wound
through the tears that cannot stop sliding down these cheeks
and the muffled sobs.*

*I waste each night on my pillows,
the long sighs I give to the wind.*

I think I've read a scene like this once in some manuscript—a girl returning home after being broken by life. In the book, the female protagonist comes back home with the brightest of smiles. She pretends to be happy as if her life is going well and her husband is cherishing her. All because she doesn't want to trouble her parents, but truthfully, her husband is a sexist bastard who keeps mentally abusing her. She has had to quit her job three years ago because "who will take care of the house?"

Still, she comes back home, to her parents, with a big smile. She pretends to be happy, but she's not happy. She's not happy at all.

I think it's a condition we develop as we grow older—to not want to trouble our parents with our problems.

Right now, I can't help but wonder. Is it because we really do not want to burden our parents? Or are we ashamed? Ashamed that we are not doing well on our own? Maybe it's a bit of both. A mixture of two things born out of both selfishness and selflessness until, in the end, we are

incapable of sharing our pain with the very two people who have been the closest to us ever since we came to be on this earth.

Right now, as I'm standing here on the front steps of my home, grasping my coat close to my body in this cold, wet night and staring at my parents who are holding each other and the open front door, I can't help but wonder if despite it all, do they know?

Even though we try so hard to keep our problems silent, even though we smile at the face of our parents while hiding a hurricane inside our brains, does it all make no difference to them? Do they still see through every little one of our facades? Just like . . . my parents are seeing through my wide smile right now?

Even though as my father is reaching out to me and pulling me in his arms, a laugh leaving his lips and these bright lights twinkling in his eyes, even though as my mother is rubbing my hair and telling me how happy she is with my surprise, how much they both have missed me and are glad I am here now—can they see through this smile?

Can they see that the tears that are falling down my cheeks aren't only because I have missed them, but also because I have been hurting so much today and it feels so good to be able to bury my head in their chest, to have them pat my back and tell me how much they love me, to stop crying because now that I'm here—with them—everything's fine? Just like old times. When I was young.

When no matter what it was that made me cry, everything got better once I was in my dad's arms.

I think they can. I think they can always tell.

* * *

In life, there are many ways in which you will meet people. Some arrive like the soft falling snowflakes that disappear just as soon as they touch your skin. Some arrive like the hurricane, they take you up with their winds and leave you on the ground—disoriented and confused once they leave. Some arrive and yet they don't, like the person you sit beside in the train and talk to throughout the journey as if you could be soulmates, but then say goodbye to once you have reached your stop.

William came into mine like the cool breeze. The one that arrives

suddenly at the peak of a very hot day, like the sweetest of dreams after nights of blank darkness.

I just wish it didn't take me this long to realize that sometimes dreams don't occur to help you sleep . . . but to wake you up instead.

"So when are you going to come back?"

Lying here with my toes curled into the luscious green that cushions my body from underneath, I can only let out a soft sigh and close my eyes.

"Give me at least two to three weeks," I reply. On the other side of the line, Sean just scoffs.

"Are you sure you're going to come back? It's already been two weeks," he asks after a moment, breaking the comfortable silence that had settled between us.

Has it been two weeks already? It has felt like months, really. But I guess, yes, two weeks have passed.

I still remember the night I just dropped here, unannounced. I took a cab from the airport, dragging my luggage into my driveway without making noise was a challenge, considering I had to fish for my keys for a whole five minutes before I found them and managed to unlock the front gate. However, I couldn't bring myself to just unlock the front door and walk in, so instead, I rang the bell.

It was around 11PM on a weekday, and I was not sure if they were awake or not considering they both had work the next day, but I found the door opening only minutes after ringing the bell.

For a few seconds, my parents and I just stood there staring at each other. I didn't know when I began to cry, but I was crying when I was standing there smiling at them. I was crying when Dad pulled me into his arms, and I was crying for the rest of the night when I lay cuddled beside my mother and father on the living room floor like we always used to do when I was a little kid.

I told my parents that it was because I missed them so much. I did. I did miss them. A lot. But I was crying because I missed someone else as well. And maybe . . . I missed his father too.

Even though I shouldn't.

He hasn't called or texted after I left. Not even once.

"Gemma?"

The badly hidden concern in Sean's voice makes the edges of my lips

curl up into a smile until I am completely grinning with my teeth while lying in the shade of the large mango tree in my backyard.

“I don’t know, Sean. I’m feeling really comfortable here,” I tease my friend and hear him scoff again.

“You have a life here, Gemma.”

I can imagine him rolling his eyes right now. That makes me want to grin wider, but the reminder his words bring dampens my carefree mood until it is just as good as the wet sheet of paper lying in a pool of muddy water—absolutely useless.

Of course, I have a life in another city. I have a job, a house, and people waiting for me there, but . . . I came here for something, didn’t I? Didn’t I come here to ease my mind? Didn’t I come here to give William some time to think and realise what he really wants?

He hasn’t contacted me since. Not even once. It’s been two weeks.

I know I asked him for a break. I know I was the one who walked away. At that time, in the mind frame that I was in, it all seemed worth it. It seemed like I was doing the right thing.

I know, I still know that I did the right thing. I should have left him then. I was right to do it, but this decision . . . why does it hurt so much then?

I hate to think about it. I hate to face this possibility, but him being silent . . . does this mean he’s realised what he wants? And . . . that’s not me?

“I know,” I mumble into the cell phone, a sigh leaving my lips as I bring my hand up and place it over my eyes.

Suddenly, the light fluttering down on me through the spaces in the branches of the mango tree doesn’t seem beautiful anymore.

“See! You idiot! You hurt her feelings!” I hear someone hiss in the background and am only beginning to guess just who it is when the sound of the front gate rattling loudly reaches me.

“I think someone’s here,” I say out loud. Maybe to myself, maybe to Sean and the girls that are probably eavesdropping behind him. Looking back, in the direction of the front gate, I quickly get up with a huff once the rattling continues.

“Gemma?”

“Yeah?” I reply when I hear Sean taking my name again.

“What are you doing? I’m hearing a lot of noise in the background,” Sean asks, sounding concerned once again.

“I think someone’s come over,” I reply, already walking towards the front yard. “I think it’s our neighbour. She likes to come over on the weekends.”

“Wow, neighbours still communicate there?” Sean wonders out loud, and again, his words bring a smile to my lips. Sometimes, Sean can really be an ignorant little baby.

“Yes, they do,” I reply, chuckling at my friend. “Hey listen, I’ll go see what’s up, okay? You and the girls have fun. Tell them not to worry too much about me.”

There’s silence that follows my words from the other side of the line as I continue to make my way around the house and towards the front gate.

“Okay,” Sean finally replies. “We’ll call later. Take care! We love you!”

His words make me stop on my track. My grip on my phone tightens as I just stand here and take in their words of care. My bright smile burns out a little and I take a breath in before I speak again.

“I love you all too,” I mumble into my phone before I disconnect the line.

Who would have thought . . . that I would have such good friends?

“Who’s here?” I ask my mother as I come to stand behind her quietly. In this sense, our family is quite typically brown. Whenever there is someone knocking at the gate, all three of us get out of the house to see who’s here.

“Oh, it’s just Uncle Benjy again.” Ma nudges her head towards the gate just as my dad’s best friend walks in with a paper bag full of snacks. As usual.

“Your dad and uncle are having a boy’s day today,” Ma mumbles under her breath.

“Ah.” I nod, looking over my dad and then at Uncle Benjy, who turns towards me and grins.

“Gemma! It’s been so long! You’ve gotten thin!” he exclaims, looking over me with his wide worried eyes. “Don’t overwork yourself, okay?”

“I won’t, I won’t, that’s why I’m here.” I sigh lamely, a stupid grin on my face as Uncle Benjamin ruffles my hair into a mess—just as he always has done since I was little.

“Alright, I believe you, kiddo.” He waves his hands in the air

dramatically before wrapping it around Dad's shoulder and beginning to steer him towards the house.

"Sometimes, I wonder if they use to date before," Ma whispers into my ear as we watch the two men move into the house, already talking about something someone did over the week.

"What?" My head snaps towards my mum.

"I mean, it could be a possibility?" my mother whispers scandalously, making me shake my head with urgency.

"Ewww, Mummm!" I cringe as I shake my head, refusing to listen while beginning to turn away from my mum's hushed whisper and towards the front gate.

I freeze.

My breath stills while I stare right ahead, then my breathing begins to quicken with the same pace my heart is now drumming at aggressively in my chest.

Unknowingly, as if automatically, I take a step forward. My arm extends as I open my mouth, but I choke out the sob that suddenly erupts from my throat. I stop. My hand falls to my side limply. The tears start falling, but I can only stand and stare at the round face that's outside the gate.

"Gem . . . Gemma, *baccha*?" Mummy frowns as she quickly reaches for me. Her eyes move from the little boy standing outside the gate to me.

I, on the other hand, just stand here. Too scared to move forward. What if he disappears? Like he does in my dreams?

The tears, they fall, flooding my eyes and pouring all over my cheeks, like a stream of hope that is just hopelessly kept. Too fearful to wish. Too wishful to stop.

So I just stand here and stare at the small milk-faced boy who is still standing outside the gate with his pink lips trembling, fear shining brightly in his eyes in the form of unshed tears.

He looks scared. My little Isaac. Is he scared . . . of me?

These past two weeks, I couldn't even bring myself to call him. Even though I had come here on her advice, I couldn't even bring myself to accept Mrs. Noo's calls.

I purse my lips when my heart twists inside my chest and my eyes get wetter.

He's not scared of me; he's scared I'll reject him.

“Gemma, do you know them?” my mother asks again, her voice hushed as she tries to look me in the eye, but I’m already gone. My eyes can’t move away from the tiny boy standing outside the gate. I’m clutching at the hem of my clothes. I’m clutching until I can’t anymore, then I’m walking. I’m walking stupidly towards the gate. The loud screeching of the sliding gate doesn’t even reach my ears and I’m down on my knees, in front of the little boy—my little boy.

“Isaac.”

I bite my lip as I stare up at the boy’s face.

“Gemma?”

I ignore my mother, my eyes never leaving the little boy whose face is quickly reddening as his lips begin to tremble dangerously.

Seeing this, another sob retches out of my mouth. I reach forward and pull him into my chest just as the little boy begins to wail loudly.

His tiny hands clench at my clothes as I wrap my arm around his frail body, trying to hide him or hold him close enough so that I’ll start believing he’s real—I don’t know.

“Isaac . . . I’m sorry,” I cry as I hold the boy closer and feel his wails get louder.

He’s crying. It kills a part of me. I feel so guilty for not calling. No matter how much I was hurt, no matter what . . . I should have called. I should not have made Isaac so sad.

Didn’t I promise him I won’t leave? Didn’t I promise him?

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. Mummy’s sorry, Isaac. Mummy’s sorry.”

“Mummmmyyy,” Isaac cries, clutching my shirt harder as he pushes his head into my chest.

“Mummy’s sorry,” I whisper brokenly, crying with the child as I let him push his head into my chest even though it’s beginning to hurt. I know he’s trying to punish me for making him feel like I’ve left. I know he’s trying to punish me because he’s been so scared; he’s still so scared.

“There, there.” A warm hand suddenly comes and caresses my hair comfortingly. I tilt my head up until I’m looking at Mrs. Noo. I can’t help the trembling lips that break out into a sob at the sight of the warm expressed woman looking down at me with love. My hand reaches up and grasps at hers.

“I’m sorry,” I apologise for ignoring her calls. She must have been

worried as well.

“Let’s not cry on the streets, okay?” she says lovingly. “I know the separation was long, but you’re both together now, aren’t you?”

“Gemma, stop crying, please, or else your spoilt little son will continue to act like this.”

I nod, sniffing as I quickly begin wiping away my tears and pick up a limp little Isaac in my arms before standing up. I notice that he’s gotten lighter. That makes me feel even worse.

Isaac immediately wraps his arms tightly around me and hides his face into my neck, his loud wails also slowly turning into soft sniffles.

“Gemma.”

I stiffen. My father’s voice breaks me out of the little bubble that had formed around Isaac, Mrs. Noo, and me. My head snaps around and my eyes move from my mother to my father and my uncle’s shocked faces.

“Hello, I’m Bao Anh Noo. May we talk inside?” Mrs. Noo walks in front of me and smiles at my parents as she speaks. Somehow, while I’m standing behind her right now, it feels like she’s protecting me. She’s cooling the situation.

Wordlessly, I accept her care with a full heart. My arms tighten around the still sniffing and hiccupping child.

I watch silently as my father’s gaze darts from Isaac to me and understanding slowly settles into his light-green orbs, before his shoulders slowly slump and he takes a step back, pulling my mother, who he has held by her shoulder, with him.

“Please, come in,” he says under his breath before he walks in with my mother, leaving Uncle Benjy, Mrs. Noo, Isaac and me behind.

Uncle Benjy spares me a confused glance before he, too, follows behind my parents.

“Ma,” I croak out when there’s only Isaac, Mrs. Noo, and me left outside.

“It’s going to be okay.” Mrs. Noo smiles calmly, caressing my head warmly when she looks back at me.

“You’re engaged?”

I glance at my dad nervously, who’s sitting beside my mother with a nervous expression on his face, then look back at my mother and nod timidly.

“Yes.”

“When did this happen?” my mother asks another question, her eyes motioning towards the now sleeping child who, even in his sleep, is still refusing to let go of me as he clings on to me desperately.

“A few months ago,” I reply, looking down at the puffy-eyed boy who’s pouting moodily even in his sleep. I can’t help but smile.

“You’re getting married to a divorcee with a child?”

I blink. My face twists into something slightly ugly as I stare at my straight-faced mother.

At this point, I don’t know if I’m going to marry William or not. I don’t even know what’s going to happen between him and me.

“I’m going to get married to the man I love. He’s not just a divorcee, Ma. And even though he has a son, I don’t mind. I love Isaac much more than I love him.”

“Clearly,” Ma commented dryly as her sharp light-brown eyes sweep over Isaac and I.

She looks away. “You got engaged without even talking to your dad and I about this, Gem. Is this what we amount to in your life?”

This time, I let my head drop.

That’s right. I took such a big step without even asking my parents. Of course, I’m twenty-four and don’t really need my parents’s say to do things, but it sure would have helped me if I had both Mum and Dad’s guidance. I don’t even look at Dad this time. I don’t want Mum to find out that he already knew. They will just fight because of it anyways. I don’t want them to fight.

“I’m sorry,” I admit my fault softly. “I got greedy.”

As I say these words, I realise that I really did get greedy.

For a while there, I was so happy. I was so happy that I dared to believe that the happiness that was holding me in his arms—the happiness that was smiling at me, that made me smile—was mine to keep. That he was mine. Forever.

“When were you going to introduce him to us?” My mother shakes her head, then looks at me with worried eyes. “Did he do something to you? Is that why you’re here? Is that why you’ve been so sad ever since you got here?”

“I—” I try to croak out before shutting my mouth when my words get stuck in my throat instead. I want to lie. I want to say everything’s fine. My

arms around Isaac's small body tightens and I pull him closer to my chest.

"My son's ex-wife came around causing trouble."

Four different pairs of eyes snap in Mrs. Noo's direction, but I find hers trained solely on my mother's.

"Yes, she came back threatening to fight for Isaac's custody once again. My son and Gemma had a misunderstanding about this."

"And you're sure your son's not having an affair with his ex-wife?" my mother asks Mrs. Noo with a blank expression on her face.

"No, he isn't. In fact, he is currently working on maximum hours of shift at the hospital with less than three hours of sleep every day. Without your daughter, my son is overworking himself to death, and my grandson had stopped talking to everyone. Even my husband was furious when he found out. You have raised your daughter very well, Mrs. Windly. Everybody can't help but fall in love with her. Do you see how important your daughter is to both my son and grandson? To everyone in my family?"

"I—" My mother stops, unable to say anything.

"Gemma, take Isaac up into your room and tuck him in. We elders will have a talk amongst ourselves here."

"Yes," Uncle Benjy agrees. "Go up, darling. We'll sort everything out here."

I nod but my eyes just shift on my mother instead, waiting for her to say something. Anything. Even if it's to forbid me from walking even one step towards my bedroom. Anything at all.

"Do you really want to be with this man even when he's a divorcee with a kid and has his ex-wife flying around him like a fly, Gem?" my mother asks me with a straight expression on her face.

Our eyes are staring into each other. Neither are looking away. Finally, I nod.

"You can make me leave William, Ma, but not Isaac. That's not possible."

"Woiiii, acha, fine!" My mother heaves out a loud sigh as she waves her hand in the air, motioning me away. "Go, go! Go upstairs and put him to bed. I don't even know if she's in love with the father or the son."

A soft sigh leaves my lips as I walk into my quiet room and softly close the door behind me. My eyes drop down on the puffy-faced child in my arms who's still fast asleep. My mind can't help but wander back to what

Mrs. Noo said a few minutes ago. Did Isaac really shut everyone out when I was gone? The dull ache in my chest twists painfully as I try to imagine the always cheerful boy ignoring everyone around him. The frightened way he was standing outside the gate, so still, as if I was going to tell him to get lost if he even moved an inch. I didn't plan on this happening. Wasn't I supposed to only punish William? Why couldn't I think enough to know me leaving would affect Isaac more? How could I be this selfish?

Putting him softly on my queen-sized bed, I carefully pull the blanket up until his shoulder before impulsively lowering my face and kissing the sleeping child on his head, pushing his hair away from his eyes.

Slowly, I make my way around the bed and sit down on the space beside him.

I don't know exactly what to do right now. My mother has found out about William and Isaac only a few minutes ago, even Mrs. Noo is here. What must they be talking about right now? I also can't forget what Mrs. Noo said about William.

Is he . . . is he really becoming self-destructive?

I bite my bottom lip as the dull ache again begins to throb, and I feel a headache flaring in the back of my head.

No. No, it can't be. I shake my head and scoff pitifully.

Of course, on the inside, I know he can be like this. He's been like this before when we got into a fight and I ignored him. He can totally become self-destructive. Overworking himself until he ends up on the hospital bed, sick. Isn't this what we wanted? To have him hurt so that he can understand my pain?

I shake my head, we did . . . we did want him to hurt, that's why I came here. That's why . . . but I don't want him dying.

He clearly sounds like he's destroying himself. Did I stay here too long? Should I go back? Can I even bring myself to talk to him if I do? When this bitterness in my heart has still not gone?

I don't know how but my hand finds my phone on its own accord and I find myself pulling up my and Saara's chat conversation. Maybe I'll ask her to check up on William for me. Besides, I really need to tell her how scared I am right now.

Gemma: Poofy . . . I think mum is going to kill me

I press send and wait for her reply, which, unsurprisingly, is quite

quick.

Saara: What happened?

Saara: Did she find out?

Saara: Are you okay?

I feel my palm begin to sweat as I hurriedly type back a reply. My mind wanders back to what's happening out in the living room.

Gemma: Mrs. Noo . . . brought Isaac over.

I glance at Isaac for a moment before pursing my lips and looking back at my phone's screen.

Gemma: Poofy . . . the child . . . he was scared of me. He was scared I'll send him away.

Gemma: I swore I wouldn't leave him and I did . . . I feel so guilty

Again, her reply comes really quick. I tap on the message notification and feel my entire body still.

Saara: Wait till you hear about William then

Gemma: what?

Even though I'm asking her, I already have a feeling I know what's going on. Mrs. Noo wasn't lying. William . . . the fool.

My phone pings out a notification for a message received.

Saara: The dude's killing himself. Dr. Kris has been wanting to call you for ages now but William has begged him not to call you because he doesn't want you to think that he's trying emotionally manipulate you

My chest aches. He doesn't want me to find out because he doesn't want me to think he's trying to manipulate me? He's not let me know he's sick because of such a stupid reason?! I . . . I feel guilty. And stupid. And upset . . . but mostly guilty.

"Ugh! Kill me!" I groan before meekly typing back a stupid response.

Gemma: How do you know?

Saara: William told him not to call you, not me! So he called me to tell me to tell you

I blink. My thumbs are already typing back a reply.

Gemma: . . . when was this?

This time, she replies after a while, as if she was hesitant about the answer.

When I read the message, I understand why.

Saara: A week ago

*Saara: And before you tell me that I didn't tell you. I did!
And you told me to stop joking*

Gemma: Did I really say that?

A week ago . . . a week ago and I really brushed it off. I want to die. My chest is beating like crazy right now. I can't control it. A dozen thoughts are going through my mind.

Should I call William? Is he fine? Should I call Kris? Who do I even call? Is William okay? The ping notifying me of a new message echoes around the silent room and I immediately open the new message, staring at the screen and feeling worse by the second.

Saara: YES

Saara: That was a week ago! I am praying William is alive still!

By how Kris was telling me he was barely eating barely sleeping barely going home, just bunking in his own office

This makes me feel even worse. Of course he's alive. He can't die. Of course he can't. He picked Shirley, didn't he? Why would he . . . oh god, I'm so stupid. How could I leave him like that and just run away like this? Of course I should have known he'd overwork himself to death.

Saara: The dude is killing himself without you, Gem .

Gemma: Are you trying to guilt trip me?

I know she's not. She's not trying to guilt trip me, but why am I feeling so guilty all of a sudden? Wasn't it right that I came here? Wasn't I the victim? Wasn't he the one who made me cry? The one in the wrong? When did this change?

Maybe when I decided to knowingly hurt him as punishment? Maybe I always knew how destructive he would get without me. Did I really get that selfish in my pain? To want to cause him pain too?

Saara: I'm just telling you what's happening with him. If you're feeling guilty, that's on you, bro.

Saara: You're there being able to eat, sleep, even laugh when you talk to me and others~ Willian can't even do that.

*Saara: William**

Saara: Stupid autocorrect!

I don't know what to do. At this point my hands are shaking, I can barely breathe over the crazy beating of my heart, I almost want to vomit. Is she right? Isn't she right?

I'm able to smile here and William is over there slowly overworking himself to death. What do I do?

Gemma: What do I do?

I blink back my tears as I slowly type back the one thing I want to know the most right now.

Another minute, another message.

Saara: Dude, be selfish. If you want William, to hell with Shirley Whirley! Grab your man and don't let her have him! It's obvious William literally goes self-destructive mode without you, that proves a lot! He loves you, Gem. He can't function without you. Mistakes happen. I know he spoke badly to you in front of the last person he should have. I know it really hurt you, but you can't just walk out because of one mistake, you know?

Relationships are a work in progress. All the time. That's how it works.

Gemma: I want to. I want to be with him . . . but it still hurts, Poofy. It still hurts. Am I too egoistic?

I'm crying now. These tears that had taken me days to finish and put away. These tears that only belong to William. They come back with a vengeance.

Saara: Will you take him back before or after he kills himself?

Saara: Please, let me know, I want to know.

Gemma: Don't say it like that . . .

But this time, I'm the bad guy. I'm the bad guy who's hurting the other person. I'm the cruel one here. It's me.

Even through this all . . . I can't bring myself to type out a message to William. I can't.

Then a string of messages begins to arrive.

Saara: Get your life together, Jen

Saara: Gem Man, this f*cking autocorrect!*

Saara: Okay I have to go now, the MD is calling me back

into the recording studio

Saara: I'm your cousin and I love you, Gemma. Just know that I won't ever wish bad things on you and whatever I do is for your best interest.

As I read the messages, I bite my trembling lips, refusing to cry out loud, but my tears keep falling.

She's right. Will it ever work out if I keep walking away after he makes mistakes?

My thoughts are stopped when another two messages arrive, and my eyes stare down at the screen once again, reading the text.

Saara: Also, I was the one who gave Mrs. Noo your address. My nephew had stopped talking to everyone and closed himself off. Obviously like father like son. And I can't stand seeing my nephew like this. So enjoy. And be a good ducking mum.

Saara: I give up with autocorrect.

I sigh and rub my hand down my face. Maybe I've stayed here for too long. It even hurt Isaac. Maybe I really have stayed back for too long. Should I go back?

Gemma: Sigh. Take care. I'll think about the William thing. I don't want him dead. Take care, Poofy. Love you

Saara: Love you too, bro. I'll always do what's best for you.

I stare at her message for a while. Just reading it over and over again. In the end, I'm only able to type back two simple words.

Gemma: I know ❓❓

* * *

How many times are there in a person's life where they are confused? Perhaps a lot too many. Maybe some people even function in a pile of confusion on the daily.

How many times are people sad in their life? I think too many to count. Perhaps it is not that we are happy people who get sad sometimes, but sad people who sometimes feel happy.

Yes, maybe that's it.

And if I see things that way, if I see things in that perspective,

wouldn't it be better to pay more attention to the happiness and not the sadness? Because it is not the happiness that is a constant, that is but purely a fleeting gift. It is sadness that is always there.

So maybe . . . that's why it is not sadness that we should be busy chasing away because that is always going to be here with us, but happiness that we should reach for and capture when it does come fluttering its wings into our life.

So maybe . . . if I see it this way, is it okay for me to reach forward and grasp William? Is it really okay?

A soft sigh leaves my lips and I slowly turn around and close the shower, getting out of the space when the warm water stops falling on my naked skin, and the cold air immediately begins to envelop itself around me.

Stepping out of the shower, I carefully reach for my towel and wrap it around me, walking towards the vanity where I can see my wet hair plastered against my flushed pale-pink cheeks.

"Will it be okay? If I call William?" I ask the girl looking back at me in the mirror. The girl whose eyes are puffy and lips are swollen pink. The girl who clearly has been crying.

Another sigh slips from my lips and I turn away, then quickly begin wiping my body dry with the towel. I should go out and see what's happening between my parents and Mrs. Noo.

After putting Isaac to bed and texting Saara, I decide to take a bath and cool down for a bit. That, and I suddenly really needed a place to cry in silence. The guilt and regret is making my insides turn.

I walk out of the bathroom a couple of minutes later with a dry towel twisted around my hair, bare-faced with a lanky jumper and short cotton shorts on.

As I carefully close the door and turn around to walk into the bedroom, I stop dead in my tracks when I spot the tiny child sitting quietly on my bed, wide awake and looking at me silently with the same scared look on his face.

"Bubba?"

I take a step towards my bed and watch the child stiffen in front of me.

"It's okay," I reassure him, taking another step towards the boy whose lips have now begun to tremble. He's about to cry. He's about to cry

again.

“Come here.” I smile at him as I open my arms and move towards the bed. For a few seconds, Isaac stares at my arms with big misty eyes, then he slowly begins to crawl his way towards me while sniffing quietly.

As soon as he’s at arm’s reach, I quickly pick him up and plaster him to my chest, rubbing my hand over his hair comfortingly while he clutches to my clothes tightly, his sniffing getting louder and louder.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” I whisper into Isaac’s ears as I warmly rock him in my arms while patting his back. He really does feel lighter since the last time I held him.

Somehow, this makes me feel even more guilty than I am feeling.

“Okay, let’s go get something to eat, okay?” I say softly and wait until I feel Isaac nodding against my skin before I tighten my arms around him and begin to move out of the room and towards the kitchen.

I don’t know if my parents and Mrs. Noo have talked things out and what has happened, but I need to get Isaac fed. He’s too light now. He’s too light for my liking.

“Gemma! I see Isaac’s up again.” Mrs. Noo smiles at us when we enter the kitchen and stop, spotting both Mrs. Noo and my mother standing in the kitchen, making dinner.

“Yeah.” I clear my throat as I try to blink away my surprise. “Is Isaac’s luggage in the van? I wanted to have him freshen up.”

“Your father has brought in all the luggage, it’s in the guest room,” my mother replies instead of Mrs. Noo, and once again, I’m left surprised.

Still, I can only nod and put a reluctant Isaac down on a highchair, begin making my way around the kitchen island as I pull out stuff to fix something up for him.

“So . . . is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine. What? Did you think we’d make you break the engagement after seeing how much you cling to the child like he’s your own?”

Hearing my mother’s dry sarcastic tone, I can’t help but smile.

I turn towards Isaac who has his eyes trained on me. The smile still on my face brightens when I look at the child. “Isaac, this is Mummy’s mum.”

Isaac bites his lips and slowly looks up at my mother for the very first

time since he's arrived.

"Hello . . . Grandma."

For a minute, my mother is stunned, standing frozen in her spot beside Mrs. Noo who turns to look at me with a soft smile.

I watch as my mother suddenly walks around the kitchen island, and after a second of hesitation, she reaches forward and brings him up into her arms.

"Hello, it is very nice to meet you too. You can call me Nani, sweetheart. It means grandma in our language."

The night is always quiet here in my neighbourhood. Despite the traffic from the road out front, it's still very quiet after ten, almost so much that sometimes we can even hear our neighbours next door going to the bathroom.

Tonight, though, it's not like every other night.

Somehow, the traffic outside is loud and busy even at this time of the night. I suppose it is because of the carnival that has just started tonight at the large park a street away.

Surprisingly, I don't mind the noise. Somehow, it is managing to push down the noise in my brain. In the darkness of the room, I turn my head to look at the shadowy outline of the small boy sleeping on the bed beside me. There is music blaring at a distance, probably from the carnival. The night is usually so silent here, but tonight, I can even hear the song playing quite clearly. Although, I don't know the name of the song. I can still hear it clearly.

In the darkness of the room, I shuffle to find my phone and slowly unlock it, staring down at the lit screen.

"Maybe I should call him instead?" I ask myself as I tap on his contact. His face stares back at me from his contact picture, and for a few seconds, I can only stare at him. It's been so long since I've seen him face-to-face.

"Stop." I turn my face away and slam the phone back into the bed. This is ridiculous. This is absolutely ridiculous.

My heart is thumping crazily. My hands are shaking and I can't seem to breathe nicely. Why is it so hard to call him? Is it because he hasn't contacted me at all ever since I came here? Is it because of that? Or am I feeling guilty? For holding off until he became like this? Is that it?

I'm cut away from my thoughts when a loud doorbell rings around the house. My eyes lift up and I stare at the bedroom door, wondering if anyone else is awake or not.

A glance at my phone's lock screen and I shake my head with a sigh, beginning to get out of bed. It's almost midnight; my parents usually fall asleep by eleven. I'm probably the only person awake.

The doorbell rings again. By this time, I'm already pulling open the door and walking out of the room and towards the front door.

Surprisingly, when I reach the living room, I find my dad already standing in front of it, peeking through the tiny hole we have on the door.

I watch as he straightens up. His eyes meet mine and I feel my heart leap in my chest. *No way.*

"Open the door," he says simply before turning around and beginning to walk back upstairs, towards his room.

Leaving me completely alone in the dark living room.

I turn back towards the closed front door. My heart has begun drumming in my chest, my palms are now sweaty against my short cotton pyjama.

Is it him? Is it . . . no, it can't be. It's him, isn't it?

Before I can stop myself, I've leapt towards the door and grasped the metal knob in my hand. I bite my lip and take a deep breath in as I try to calm down my breath.

I wish it's not him. I wish . . . I wish it's not him. I wish it's him.

I twist the knob and pull the door open.

The chilly night breeze welcomes me while I stand here with the front door open, looking up into a pair of dark eyes. A pair of dark eyes I've missed so much.

My vision is getting blurry. I'm biting my bottom lip to keep it from trembling, but I'm still standing here. Staring into these two dark eyes.

And then these eyes close, and the owner sways. Before he falls to his knees. Right in front of me.

My heart stops.

"WILLIAM!"

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

One Day When Love Was There but Forgiveness Wasn't

*When I returned home from work today,
I left my heart with the setting sun.
My tears I left with the fumes from the rumbling bus,
and the quiet neighbourhood streets.
The curtains that swayed when I reached home,
The simmering fragrant smoke from the kitchen outside,
My eyelashes held the heaviest weight,
the sight of your crying face.
I wish we weren't fighting.
Can we just stop fighting?
I want to love you again.*

“William!”

Has anyone ever explained what death feels like? I suppose I've read such a description in a dozen paragraphs of a dozen manuscripts. Somewhere, it's described to be like a tight hug and then a gentle release; somewhere, it feels like you're falling. Somewhere, it feels like falling asleep with a little bit of difficulty at first and then all at once without knowing. I've read this, too, in one too many books, where it's like your entire life flashes before your eyes right before you die.

But if that's true . . . then am I dying right now? Spread on the floor of my home's front door, holding on to a limp William like my world depends on it, I can't help but see every single memory of me and him in my

mind. The first time I saw him, the first time our eyes met and we smiled at each other. Every smile. Every hug.

“William!” I shake the man desperately. *This can't be happening! This can't be happening!*

“William! Wake up!” I almost choke out trying to shake him into consciousness. He's really scaring me. *What do I do? I turn my head to look at the stairs. Should I call my dad? That's right! I should wake everyone up and take him to the hosp—*

“Ah!” I yelp out loud when I feel William's arms wrap around me suddenly and pull me close. Looking down at him, I find his dazed-looking eyes staring up at me. *He's awake! Oh, thank God!*

“Gemma.” His voice . . .

My heart aches. “Gemma.”

I bite my lips and look away. Does God have to test me this way? Looking at him like this is making me weak. The realisation . . . the realisation of how much I missed him.

Despite being so mad at him. Despite him making me so sad. I missed him. So much. And that scares me. Because suddenly, everything that happened two weeks ago doesn't matter. I just want to hold him and tell him I love him. I want to forgive everything. Because him being here, looking so lost and weak without me, it makes me sadder than when I'm the one crying, when I'm the one in pain.

But strangely, this . . . how he is right now . . . it also makes me happy. I'm happy. I'm happy he's here. I'm happy he's looking so hurt without me. What does that make me? Oh God, I'm so selfish.

“You're burning up,” I mumble, ignoring the expression in his eyes. I don't want to see the hurt in them as I'm saying these words. As I'm ignoring how he's clearly begging me to forgive him. Even though he's not saying it. Him being here, like this, the tone of his voice, I know he wants me to forgive him.

“Gemma,” William croaks out loud, the desperation in his voice makes me shiver in his embrace.

“Look at me, please,” he begs me softly, and I shake my head immediately. I don't want to look at him because I know I want to forgive him. I know I'll just hug him and say those words. It's alright. Because I love him. And as much as I'm hurting right now, I'm happy. I'm selfishly happy

that William wasn't happy without me. Because . . . I wasn't either. I wasn't happy without him.

One minute, we're on the floor of my home's entrance, and the next, I'm suddenly being pulled up. The chilly night air is greeting my soft warm skin, leaving little goose bumps along the way.

"William!" I gasp as I'm pulled outside by a suddenly straight-faced William, and the front door is slammed shut right behind me.

"We're going home!" William grits out loud, and for the first time, I notice the black Jeep parked in front of our front gate. I tug at the hand that's currently grabbing my hand and is pulling me away from my house.

"Stop!" I almost scream desperately against the sudden brutish strength William has even though he's still looking as pale and tired as ever. "Isaac's inside!"

Instantly, William stills in front of me. His dark eyes snap back to mine and I find myself gulping and freezing on my feet when I realise how red his eyes are against the sparkling moisture that's slowly flowing down his eyes and cheeks.

William's . . . "William."

Unknowingly, I take a step forward. My wide eyes are now trained on the face of the broken man standing in front of me, looking down at me and silently crying.

"Go back," I whisper these broken words.

I want to hit myself. I love him. It's hurting me to see him cry. So much. I'm happy he's here. That he's been so sad without me. I want to forgive him. Isn't this much enough? Isn't this what we wanted? To see if he can be without me? Isn't this much enough? Him standing in front of me, looking visibly thinner and sleep-deprived and crying. So why? Why can't I just stop . . . and forgive him? Why am I hurting him more? Why?

William takes an unsteady step forward, and I find my eyes meeting his when he carefully frames my face with his trembling hands and tilts it up until we're looking at each other in the eyes.

"Not without you," William whispers softly, a small broken smile cracks upon his face. I immediately find myself looking away, unable to stand the twisting in my heart.

"I don't want to go back with you."

His thumbs slowly caress my cheek before I feel him take another

step forward and gently pull me in his arms, wrapping himself around me until my head's resting on his chest.

"Then why are you crying?"

I stiffen. My hand automatically lifts up and I touch my face.

He's . . . right.

I fall limp against his chest. When did I start crying? My fingers grasp at his shirt.

Maybe this is fine? Holding him like this and just silently crying? Maybe I can just hold him right now and let it all out. He can allow me this much right? This is alright, right?

I don't know how long we stand here, feeling our clothes fluttering gently with the night breeze while I'm hiding my face against his chest and he's holding me as if trying to shield away all the cold.

It makes me cry harder. Even while he's clearly so weak, he's trying to protect me from the wind.

It feels like forever while we're standing here, then I softly speak.

"Let's go inside, you're sick."

"William?" Mrs. Noo whispers as she rushes forward after William and I get into the house and closing the door, begin making our way into the living room.

"Oh my God, didn't I tell you to rest? You foolish boy! How are you here? Where did you get her address from?" Mrs. Noo fusses as she leaps forward and grasps the other side of William's arm.

"Help me take him to my room, Gemma dear," Mrs. Noo asks me, and I nod, numbly beginning to walk towards Mrs. Noo's room when William suddenly stiffens, stopping both me and his mother in our steps.

"I'm not leaving her," he mutters gruffly before wrapping his arm around my waist.

I can't help but bite back a gasp when he does this, my wide eyes darts to Mrs. Noo and I blink when I see a secret smile fluttering on the corner of her lips.

William's mother nods. "Alright—"

"But Isaac— " I try to protest when Mrs. Noo speaks above me.

"I'll let Isaac sleep with me tonight." She looks at me assuringly.

"He'll get upset when he wakes up." I sigh, knowing well how delicate Isaac is right now. In fact, I'm stuck between two very delicate boys

right now. Both want my attention. Both want my love. Both are scared I don't love them anymore. Both are scared I'm going to leave them. I love both of them. Even though . . . even though I'm upset at one of them, I love them. Both of them.

"I'll come get him before he wakes up." I nod when Mrs. Noo doesn't say anything, probably letting me decide on my own. William leans on me unknowingly.

Of course, he looks so weak. What exactly has he been doing for these past two weeks that he got this weak? Has he been fasting this entire time?

Once again, guilt begins to brush over my soul. It's my fault. I could have called him when he didn't. I shouldn't have come here just to punish him. I hurt Isaac in the process as well.

"Take care of him." Mrs. Noo motions towards his son, who is currently leaning against me, looking down at his feet.

"I'll come get Isaac in the morning." I nod, looking at the sleeping boy in Mrs. Noo's arms.

"Yes, come before he wakes up. Our family has very problematic men," Mrs. Noo comments out of the blue, chuckling to herself.

I, on the other hand, find myself stiffening. *Our family . . .*

I feel the corner of my lips lift themselves up at the warmth that covers my heart.

I nod.

"Sweet dreams, Ma." I smile at Mrs. Noo gratefully. I hope she can see just how thankful I am of her. If she wasn't here to support me, I don't know what I would be doing now. "Thank you for loving me as your own, Ma."

"Sweet dreams, sweetie." Mrs. Noo reaches forward and caresses my head, then she turns to her son. "Be good."

William simply stays silent.

"Did you bring change?" I ask once we're inside the silence of my room. A few steps away, the bedsheet is ruffled in the space where Isaac was lying down.

Hearing my question, an even more tired-looking William simply nods this time and continues to stand beside me, slightly leaning his weight on me.

“Go take a bath. I’ll go get your luggage,” I mumble, carefully removing myself from the warm heaviness of his body and turning towards the bedroom door, which is still open right now.

“The bathroom is the door on the right.” I walk out of the room.

I’m sorry. I love you, but I can’t let you know that I’ve forgiven you already. I can’t let you know how easily I give in to you. I’m scared. I’m scared that if you know . . . you’ll do this again. You’ll hurt me again.

I’m sorry . . . because even I am hurting you this way as well.

* * *

There’s something touching me. A soft butterfly against my chin. My forehead. My cheek.

It feels nice.

“Mmm.” I let out a moody groan and turn to my side, a soft smile forming on my lips as I snuggle closer to a warm pillow, trying to get even more comfortable. The pillow smells nice. My smile increases as I throw my leg widely and tuck my leg between something warm.

It’s really warm today. I like it. Usually, I’m so cold in the mornings. Suddenly, I can’t help but wonder . . . what’s the time now?

There it is again. The butterflies against my skin. My temple, my nose, my right eye, my chin.

Suddenly, I stiffen as lucidity comes crashing in like the waves of the sea against the bottom of a rocky cliff.

My eyes snap open, and even though for a few seconds I can’t see anything but a blur, I know exactly who is looking down at me; his nose is just a breath’s distance away from mine.

We stay this way, staring at each other. When my vision clears, I blink and so does he, but he doesn’t move away. He continues to look down at me with a dazed look in his eyes.

Still, he looks better than yesterday. He looks like he’s actually had some sleep. I look at the dark hollows under his eyes. Yes, they do look lighter.

The man quietly staring down at me suddenly pulls up his hand. My eyes snap up to him when he gently frames my face with his large palm.

When his lips touch mine, I want to die.

It's gentle. So gentle. Just a soft pressing against my mouth. To assure me that he loves me. To assure himself that I am here.

The guilt, happiness, and fear I felt right until I fell asleep last night all rush into my system. I feel my chest twist until it's physically hurting again.

William pulls away just as softly as he kissed me—slowly while caressing the side of my face with his thumb. I really think I'm going to cry right now. He's treating me so gently, so gently while he looks so fragile himself. While I should be treating him like that myself.

I can't take it anymore. I shut my eyes and turn away. I press my palms against him, and I limply push him until I can get a gap to escape. When I see it, I take it. I shoot up from the bed as if it's on fire and look at the bathroom door where I want to run off to.

OH MY GOSH, I scream in my head when I realise that my leg is tucked in between his and quickly pull it out, beginning to swing it over the bed and flee.

That is until his hand wraps around my wrist and I freeze, not being able to move at all.

My breath hitches in my throat. His thumb caresses the inside of my wrist; his body carefully straightening up until he's towering me from the back. My back stiffens when I feel his chin rest on the top of my head.

"I was wrong. I shouldn't have said it like that."

I freeze. My gaze snaps down, to my hand that now has a ring tucked snugly on the wedding finger. William's hands softly wrap around my waist.

I blink. Silent tears quickly drop on my blanket. My ring.

"I was wrong. I am sorry," William mumbles again. This time, his voice is quieter, almost hesitant. I want to hold him. I want to hug him and cry out loud. I want to cry out loud so badly my throat is beginning to ache. Why? Why did he have to say that? Why did he have to say that in front of Shirley? Wasn't it clear he was picking her over me? So now what? Why this?

"No, I was wrong—" The bitter words leave my lips. I choke back a sob when I feel William stiffening behind me. I'm hurting him. I'm hurting him. I shouldn't have said it. I shouldn't hurt him. I don't want to hurt him.

"From the beginning, it was me. I was wrong."

Still, these words . . . these words that are so bitter, so hurtful, they

leave my lips. The man behind me stiffens, his arms around my waist falls, and I instantly find myself recoiling from everything. I leap out of the bed and rush across the bedroom and out of the bedroom door. I'm leaving behind a hurt man inside. He's hurt. William's hurt. Just like me. Just like me. And that hurts me even more.

Why am I such a fool?

* * *

*You must be wondering, how I turned so cold?
This heart that is still beating,
This blood that it keeps bleeding. They are warm.
My darling, I am sorry.
My pride is freezing cold.*

I've never thought of myself as a bad person.

It is true, I am no saint. Being alive, I have lied, I have been opportunistic, I have been ethically questionable. But I always thought that despite all my faults, it was all okay. It was all okay as long as I did not hurt anyone.

I have never hurt someone knowingly. I have never gone out of my way to make someone feel pain. It was something I was proud of. Being a good person. Because isn't that what a good person is? Someone who doesn't actively hurt others?

A good person . . .

I have always felt like a good person. Until today.

"Is he okay?"

My head snaps up when I hear the dry question. My gaze stops on my parents, and I instantly find myself taking a step forward, away from the closed bedroom door behind me.

Oh god . . .

"We didn't sleep tog—" I begin to blurt out stupidly when my mother cuts me off.

"Go freshen up. Your father and I need to talk to the boy."

Again, I instantly find myself taking another step forward.

"Mum! He's not even fresh—"

My dad stops me this time. When my head desperately turns towards

him and our eyes meet, I find myself giving in.

“This is important, sweetheart.”

I blink, my dad’s gaze brushes against my hands. I stiffen when I know exactly what he’s looking at.

“Go now. Isaac is already having his breakfast.”

Isaac! I had to get him before he woke up. Ah, how did I oversleep? I never oversleep!

“Okay,” I give in after a few moments’ silence. I turn around and glance at the closed door for a second. *William will be fine, right?*

“It’s okay, we won’t kill him.” My mother seems to have lost all her patience as she suddenly groans these words out and grabs my shirt, twirling me around and beginning to push me towards their bedroom.

“Your washed clothes are in the laundry. We have a spare toothbrush in the bathroom,” she urges me as she gives me one last shove and quickly rushes back towards the bedroom door.

I can only watch with a thumping heart as my parents suddenly knock on the door and, without waiting for an answer, step right in.

For a few moments, I can’t move. I can’t help but stand here and stare at the closed door a few steps away from me.

They are fine, right? I can’t help but think this question over and over again. That is until I hear something clattering in the kitchen and quickly begin to move towards the laundry room. I need to get to Isaac.

* * *

“Is Pa here?”

I’m caught off guard by this question. My wide eyes flutter between the older lady and the small child seated on the table with what looks like a chicken sandwich and a cup of tea in front of them.

I let my eyes drop, my fingers rubbing against the freshly washed plain white T-shirt that still has the lingering smell of the fruity detergent we use. It has been an hour—an hour after my mother and father entered my bedroom to talk to William. I’ve bathed, brushed, dressed up, done everything I could to freshen up and even just arrived here in the kitchen, but they are still not out.

“Yeah.” I nod dumbly. I don’t know what else to say. Somehow, I

feel accountable towards the little boy, who doesn't seem like he's upset or anything. In fact, he looks as happy as he can be.

"That's why you gave me to Grandma?" Isaac asks again, and this time, I glance at Mrs. Noo nervously before nodding again.

"Your pa is very sick so I had to ask Grandma to let you sleep with her so that you don't get sick."

"Mummy isn't scared of getting sick?"

This makes me smile. This sweet child. So innocent. Stepping further into the kitchen, I remain silent until I'm near the cabinets and then I glance back at Isaac and shake my head.

"Nope, Mummy won't get sick because Mummy had her vaccinations," I reply before turning back towards the cabinet and pulling out a wooden tray.

"Vasination." Isaac nods with a thoughtful look on his face. He suddenly looks up at me. "I want vasination too."

Both Mrs. Noo and I can't help but laugh at the resolute tone Isaac has when he says this.

"And why is that, sweetie?" Mrs. Noo asks with a bright smile on her face.

With a smile on my face too, I wait for the answer as I begin assembling some chicken sandwiches and salad on a plate before putting it on the tray.

"So that I can stay with Mummy even when she is sick."

I freeze. I lift my head up immediately and I stare at the proud-looking boy beaming at his grandma, who seems just as shocked as me.

I don't know what to do.

"Oh, you sweet child!" Mrs. Noo coos as she grabs Isaac and brings him into her arms. "What a filial child! What a filial child!"

* * *

Five minutes later finds me with cheeks flushed, holding a tray full of sandwiches, salad, and a cup of tea, as I walk towards my bedroom.

Mum and Dad are still in the room, but right now, I'm too anxious to hold myself back anymore. I don't know what they are talking about inside the room that's taking so long, but William is sick and despite everything, he

does need rest.

“It can’t be helped. I’m going in,” I breathe out under my breath, and quickly twisting the doorknob, I walk into the bedroom that turns silent instantly at my arrival.

I stop, one arm holding on to the tray against me while the other hand is still holding the open door. Three pairs of surprised eyes land on me from the small sofa set in the corner of my bedroom.

“Gemma.” My dad frowns. “You can’t just walk in like that, pudding.”

“He’s sick,” I reply simply, not making an effort to look anywhere except my dad.

“Yeah, well, we’re not murdering him, are we?” my mother shoots back in a snarky manner.

“I’m sorry,” I apologise even though I don’t feel sorry at all. In fact, I don’t quite feel anything right now, except a little worried . . . for him.

“I brought breakfast,” I mumble but don’t look at him even though I can feel his eyes burrowing a hole in my face.

“William has asked us to let him stay here for a few days,” my dad declares, ignoring whatever I’ve said before this.

At my father’s words, my head snaps up, and I look at the older man with eyes wide open.

“He has said that he won’t leave until everything is sorted out between you both,” my father continues, looking into my eyes as he says these words as if trying to tell me something with his gaze.

“I think . . . we think you two should speak to each other.” My mother suddenly laughs awkwardly. It distracts me. My mother is not one to ever look as uncomfortable and nervous as she is right now. Has William made her as unnerved as he made the first few times we met? Have his piercing eyes also affected my usually straightforward and strict mother?

Still, this thought only lingers for a minute.

“Yes,” my dad agrees with my mother easily.

“Isaac has school tomorrow but he’s here because of this. You both are also hurting. We think it’s best if you both clear things out amongst yourselves. If you need your mother, Mrs. Noo, and me, we’re here to sit in and mediate, but before that, try to talk to each other at least. Because despite this fight, it doesn’t seem that either of you is cancelling the marriage plans

so just talk it out. Believe me, a lot of problems only happen because couples don't talk. Communication is very important, kids." Reaching for my mother, Dad easily turns both of them towards the door.

A minute later, the bedroom's door is closed again. There is only silence in the room save the soft thuds of our heartbeats.

William remains silent and so do I. There is so much to say. We have so much to say. So much that neither of us says a word at all.

I can stand here. I feel like I can stand here all day.

Holding on to this tray and my pride. I can stand here with a heart full of longing and this tray full of my large ego.

We're engaged, aren't we? We love each other, don't we?

Doesn't he? Don't I?

* * *

It takes seven steps to get to the coffee table in front of the sofa before I find myself quietly putting down the tray in front of him. My nimble fingers uncurl around the wooden handles of the tray just as his slender ones curl around my wrist.

We're both silent. Even now, none of us dares to say anything. I expect a tug, but I receive nothing.

William just continues to keep his hand there, wrapped around my wrist. It is obvious. He's waiting for me to pull my arm away.

I don't.

Instead, I sink down on to the sofa. Beside him.

"The first time. The first time when I picked up the call I wasn't supposed to and she told me that you always take her back, that you can't leave her, I decided to believe you. Even when you followed me into the bathroom afterwards but didn't explain why she called, I decided to believe you," I begin speaking. My words are trembling with emotions I am trying so hard to push back in. My right hand is clutching at the hem of my shirt because I'm too scared that my fingers will tremble if I don't.

"I knew. I knew every time you met her. Every time she'd text me about it, she'd tell me how much she loves your cologne that day. She'd send me pictures of your shoes, your hands just near hers, or you looking down at your phone to probably text me that you're at the hospital but you were

sitting right in front of her. She'd tell me you smiled at her that night and that you had a dish that was too spicy just because she wanted to eat it and to give you something sweet to eat when you got back home . . . when you lied to me. When you kept things from me instead of sharing it. Even when I felt like an absolute idiot, I still decided to believe you."

I feel William's grip on my wrist tightens, but I keep looking away from his face and speak up again. If I . . . if I don't say it right now, I won't ever be able to say it.

"That day at the resort when you asked me what I would do if Shirley wanted to come back and if you were confused, didn't I tell you? That I would leave if you were confused? Even though . . ." I stop as I choke out the words. "Even though I love you so much. Even though I don't want to let you go, that I wouldn't fight, I wouldn't create a scene, I'll just walk away? Isn't that what I did? I didn't create a scene. I didn't yell or cry or hit anyone. I even left quietly when you yelled at me too. Shouldn't you be happy right now? What are you doing here looking like this, huh?" I sob out, finally turning my head and looking at him.

"Just what am I supposed to do now?"

Throughout my life, I have wondered what the hardest part of loving another person is.

Right now, I'm realising that it is vulnerability. The vulnerability of loving someone perhaps more than loving yourself and the vulnerability in letting them know.

I wish . . . I wish I could continue to act angry. I know that I deserve to. I deserve to be angry, and I deserve to show him that I am angry, but instead . . . why am I just so sad? And right now, why am I sadder seeing William in this condition?

Wasn't this what we had hoped William would be like when I came here? Wasn't this the objective? Hadn't it felt good there for a few moments, seeing him like this without me? But now . . . why does it feel like I'm dying inside.

Had I even expected him to be so weak? I hadn't, had I? I had never expected him to be . . . like this. Now, seeing him in front of me so weak and visibly thinner, how can I be angry at him? How can I be angry knowing he's so weak and it's probably hurting him so badly?

"Tell me . . . what am I supposed to do now?" I ask again, letting my

head drop and my hair sticks to the side of my wet face. William's still holding my hand. Until he lets go.

"Here," William mumbles as he places his cell phone quietly on my lap and I can only stare at it.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

You didn't change your number ...

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I'm sorry, I called earlier and Gemma picked up the call. I guess she didn't tell you. She got very upset with me. I'm sorry if that creates issues. Could you please tell her that I don't want to steal you from her like she was screaming saying I was going to do

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

William, are you going to be this way now?

My eyes widen when I realise just who this conversation thread belongs to, then I frown. So . . . she and William hadn't talked before that day when I picked up that call?

And William hadn't called her back? Also . . . exactly when did I scream at her? My frown gets darker, but I don't linger. I scroll instead.

Ah, I think as I stare at the date stamp on the screen.

The next message is probably a week later.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

My lawyer is going to pay you a visit tomorrow with the appeal papers. I'm getting married and I want all my family with me. My son included.

From: William

Fine. Give me his number. My lawyers will schedule a meeting with your lawyer. Also, you gave me full custody, Shirley. You can't take Isaac away from me anymore.

This woman . . .

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Don't you know the law favours mothers? I'm successful in my career, and now, I'm getting married as well. Don't you think Isaac should be with his birth mom?

From: William.

Send me the lawyer's contact. My lawyers and I will speak to him. Oh and please don't contact me again. I don't want Gemma to get the wrong idea.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Ah yes, your fiancée. How is she doing? I heard she's an editor or something. ☺

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Sounds like a . . . fun career. A neurosurgeon and an editor.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Somehow I had expected you to find another doctor or nurse or something. I must say, you surprised me, William.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Still, I guess this is better, somehow this doesn't make me feel as bad as it would have had you gone with a doctor or nurse.

My eyes glide over her message over and over again.

Somehow, for the first time in my life, I feel embarrassed. Until now, I had never considered William's social status and mine. I had never tried to weigh us on the basis of our profession or wealth. I had just . . . loved.

Somehow, now, I can't help but feel . . . inadequate.

I shake my head, trying to file away the distracting thought for later. Right now, I need to keep reading.

From: William.

This is my lawyer's number: xxx-xxx-xxx. You can tell your lawyer to contact her.

From: William.

Also, I fell in love with Gemma first, and not because of her profession but because it's her. I care about her and her feelings so please don't contact me again directly. Everything we have to talk about from this point forward we can do through our lawyers.

I'm stunned. I can feel my face heating in the privacy of all the hair that's framing my face right now. Somehow, I'm grateful I didn't tie my hair up. I don't think I'd be able to look at William right now.

Feeling my heart beat faster and faster, I can't help but bite my lips and quickly look at the next text.

It's from two days after the previous text.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

It was nice seeing you today, Will.

"Ah." My eyebrows nudge up. "They met . . . with their lawyers."

Two hours later, there's another text message.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Are you really going to be this way?

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

You know I met Cece a while back. I asked her for your number and she gave me Gemma's number instead!

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I don't know how you made your die-hard fangirl stop loving you and support Gemma so much, Will. It's so funny I couldn't even get her off our backs when we were together

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Maybe I should message Gemma and tell her that we met behind her back last night

I have honestly never thought I could dislike anyone as much as I disliked Alicia, but I really, really, really don't like Shirley right now.

Somehow though, I can't help but smile a little because Cecelia gave her my number instead of William's. At least this says that she likes me better than Shirley, right?

My smile, however, falls as soon as I read the next text.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Guess what happened today. I somehow bumped into mom and she confessed the funniest thing to me!

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I bet Isaac doesn't know that I'm his real mom, huh?

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I can't believe you'd lie to our son this way, William

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

How could you bring in some girl and tell our son that she's me?

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Maybe I should tell my son who his real mom is. Then I'd like to see what you and that girlfriend of yours will say to

him

From: William.

I'm not surprised you're still as self-centred and manipulative as before. Can you please focus on your marriage and leave my family alone? I'm warning you, Shirley.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I'm not leaving my son with you and that girl. The Ivy Garden. 6PM. Bring your lawyer.

A few hours later, there are more messages from her.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I'm sorry I tripped on you, I hope you don't mind.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

The Moments Cafe. 12 PM. See you there.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

It felt nice eating with you after so long.

Five days later . . . another message.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Let's meet.

The cold noodle place we used to like a lot. I called and asked the hospital, you get off at 10 right?

Two hours later . . .

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

you didn't show up huh. So cruel.

Three days later.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Are you ignoring me now?

Two days later.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

You didn't come with your lawyers today. I was hoping . . . never-mind.

Five hours later.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

William . . . don't you miss me at all?

Two hours later.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I gave birth to your son, William.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Can't we be a family again?

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Let's be a family again, can't we? Can't we be together again? Please don't ignore me, Will. I realised I still miss you . . . please don't ignore me, you know that drives me crazy.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

Will . . . I still love you. Don't you still love me? Three days later.

From: xxx-xxx-xxx

I'm at the house.

I let my hand drop to my lap, taking with it William's cell phone that is still on-screen flashing brightly underneath my eyes.

Beside me, William lets out a slow breath and slowly begins to speak.

"I lied to you, yes, but the only reason I did that was because I didn't want you to start feeling scared of losing Isaac. I know how important he is to you and I get how stressful it must be for you to know that Shirley came back and wants to see Isaac, who thinks that you're his real mother. I felt guilty of pulling you into this situation just because I was selfish. Just because I didn't want to let you go. If she told Isaac, and he . . . he went to her . . . I was scared it would really hurt you." He stops, seeming hesitant. I, on the other hand, remain here, numbly sitting beside him with my suddenly mute self.

"We needed to meet her at first to negotiate before my lawyers began to take any actions against her appeal, but she kept using it as a way to meet. It was useless, so my lawyers decided to go on ahead anyway. I never met her without the lawyers. Just that once when she called me for lunch. Strangely, I was hoping that if I talked to her privately, she would understand. I really was coming to pick you up that night, but then she texted me that she's at home. I wanted to get her out of there before you or Isaac got back but . . . I'm sorry. I was wrong. I shouldn't have said it like that in front of her. I wasn't . . . I wasn't thinking. All I could think about was to not let her tell you that she knows we've let Isaac think you're his birth mother. I-I really wasn't thinking nicely at that time."

I can only blink dumbly. My mind moves over everything he's just

said. *He was scared I'll lose Isaac? He was scared Isaac will leave me when he finds out that . . . oh, William.* I let my head drop in sudden shame.

Oh, William.

Isaac already knows.

We've been such idiots.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

One Day, One Night By the Lake

*When I returned back home from work today, I left my heart
with the setting sun.
In the sighs of people who crossed with streets with me.
In the flickering traffic lights.
I left my heart in the tears your eyes held in when you told
me you love me.
Please. I want to love you without hurting.
I want to love you.*

“But William . . . Isaac already knows.”

I’ve never seen a person’s expression change as quickly as William’s does right before my eyes right now.

From helplessness, straight to confusion, then understanding and then disbelief. All the expressions flutter across his face in a matter of seconds before he’s finally looking at me with a blank look on his face and his wild piercing eyes that leave me a little shaken; it’s the same way he looked at me when we first met like he was trying to look right into my soul.

“That you’re not Shirley?” he asks me, his calm voice unsettles me. I can’t help but feel like there was a storm brewing behind the peace.

I hesitate, clenching and then unclenching at the hem of my shirt while trying to decide how to say it.

“Yes.”

The silence that lingers between us after my admission becomes thicker and thicker by the second until I’m almost quivering with the pent-up tension I’m suddenly feeling in my warm veins.

“Since when?”

My eyes snap up to William’s, and I can’t help but bite my lips when I see him looking away. I’m getting a little scared. It makes my throat dry. Can I even talk anymore?

“Since the beginning,” I manage to whisper. Impulsively, I turn my body around in the seat so that my knees are facing his left thigh. I look at the side of his face, finally having the opportunity to see him from so closely again after so long.

He turns his head to look at me. I suddenly feel the need to reach out and hold him. All the pain and anger I had felt until a few minutes ago has evaporated away into nothingness, and I’m left here suddenly feeling like throwing myself in the arms of the man in front of me. *Ah, I have been such a fool.*

“How long have you known?”

Truthfully, I don’t feel like telling him. I can’t help but feel like a naughty child caught in her mischief all of a sudden. I feel like I’m going to face punishment.

“How long?”

His voice is gentle, and yet, I feel like I’ve just touched the thin edge of a sword that can pierce through my skin at any second.

I don’t want to answer. I’m scared to answer. Why am I scared to answer? I’m scared to lose him. We’ve been fighting for too long. I just want to love him without hurting. I just want to love him without feeling scared.

“Since the allergy incident.”

“So why wasn’t I told?”

“He made me promise not to. He’s scared you’ll make me leave if you find out.”

“Wha . . . why would I?” William blurts out, throwing his hands up in the air and taking mine with him too—the one he’s still holding onto.

“I feel like such an idiot,” he mumbles, lowering his face to his hands, bringing my hand again with him as well.

I understand what he’s talking about. Actually, normally, I’d be asking him why he didn’t tell me about Shirley and why he didn’t share his problems with me, but I realise that he’s already explained why he didn’t; he didn’t want Isaac to find out that I’m not his mother and to leave. He didn’t want me to worry that Isaac would hate me and go to Shirley. Truthfully, the

more I think about it, the more I realise the weight of the burden William had been carrying on his back when Shirley was borderline blackmailing him to keep meeting her. This thought only makes me feel even more regretful.

I suppose it's because I had more time to tell him about Isaac knowing. If I had just told him about it, he wouldn't have felt pressured to hide Shirley's off-handedness and deal with it alone. Instead, I had just been so happy with the natural progression of our relationship that I hadn't felt the need to tell him anything when I should have. After all, didn't I know better than to believe that William would have kicked me out if he found out that Isaac already knew I wasn't his real mum?

Ah, if I had just told him then we wouldn't have gone through this whole ordeal.

"If I'd just told you what Shirley is up to, you'd tell me about Isaac sooner and we wouldn't fight for so long."

His words surprise me. For the first time, I realise just how different the thought processes are of people. Two people standing opposite each other could silently be putting themselves down for the same thing at the same time.

"I had a lot more time to tell you though. I just . . . I was just so happy. I forgot. I'm . . . I'm the idiot here."

I think today is also the first time I've realised how two people standing opposite each other could also be the biggest idiots at the same time.

"So are you both okay now?"

The new voice catches both William and me off guard. Our heads snap in the direction of the speaker to find Mrs. Noo and my parents standing at the door, looking at us expectedly. Just how long have they been standing there? Just how were we not able to hear them come in? I glance at William from the corner of my eyes. Are we okay now? This . . . are we really okay now? Is the problem really over?

When I'd seen his text thread a few minutes ago, it was clear that the conversation hadn't just ended with that "I'm at the house" text. In fact, she'd sent a lot of texts afterwards. None that William had replied to, but I remember one catching my eye. It said, "Why aren't you picking up your phone? I called the hospital, why aren't you at work?"

Knowing the answer already, I sigh as I pull my bottom lip between my teeth. We may be okay now—William and I—but the problem really isn't

over yet, is it? It will be wishful thinking to believe that everything's going to be better now that William and I are not fighting anymore. Shirley is a person of her own after all. And that aside, somehow, even though William and I aren't fighting now, things still feel . . . a little awkward. Somehow, I still feel jittery and conscious of the man; somehow, I feel like being extra polite with him too.

Maybe it's because I feel guilty about everything. Seeing that I'm keeping silent, William decides to reply.

"We have talked." The tall man sitting beside me answers the elders with a clear tone. I even notice his back straightening, and yet, his fingers still remain curled around my wrist.

"So everything is okay now?" my mother asks, eyeing William and me hopefully. I can't help but nod at her with her smile.

"Between us, yes," I answer, giving William a nervous glance before looking back at our parents.

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Noo frowns, and all three elders begin to walk into the room with hurried steps. I, on the other hand, find myself panicking about something else.

"Mum, where's Isaac?"

"Oh, he's in the living room!"

"He's in the living room."

Both women answer at the same time.

This is awkward. I silently begin to panic. Truthfully, I've been a bit conscious of how to address Mrs. Noo in front of my mother. Naturally, I've only addressed my mother as Mum or any of its synonyms for as long as I have been alive. This word "Mum" has always been my mother, and yet, coming to this stage in my life, where I am accepting another family as my own, another woman who is gaining me as her daughter and I am gaining as another mother . . . is it okay to call her "Mum" too? Somehow, I feel like I'm cheating on my mother. Somehow, I feel like it will hurt her hearing me call someone else the same thing I call her too.

"Ah!" My mother and Mrs. Noo's eyes snap to each other's and everyone else in the room seems to stiffen as we watch the two wide-eyed ladies look at each other awkwardly.

"Ah . . . we are going to get confused a lot now, aren't we?" My mother breaks the ice and I visibly see Mrs. Noo relax in front of her. I

suppose even William's mother went through this at some point in her life, didn't she? Come to think of it, so did my mother I suppose.

"You're right." Mrs. Noo chuckles, reaching forward and putting her hand on my mother's. "Remember our time?"

"Oh, I do! My mother-in-law absolutely hated it when I still called her aunty after Gemma's father proposed." My mother giggles with Mrs. Noo, squeezing Mrs. Noo's hand comfortingly with her fingers.

"Mine too! She specifically told me that she would not talk to me if I didn't call her 'Mum'," Mrs. Noo immediately agrees, and I, definitely feeling better now, stand up and look at the still open bedroom door.

"I'm going to go get Isaac," I speak out casually. I feel William's grip on my hand—which was still tight until now—immediately loosen.

"Auh, no stay here, I'll go get him." Mrs. Noo shakes her head, cutting me off as she begins to turn towards the bedroom door.

"Wait, so are you going back since things are fine between you two?" My mother looks at me curiously, and I stiffen immediately at her question. I've not thought about going back, to be honest. Somehow, I don't really want to. Things have just gotten better . . . and . . . Shirley's there. I don't want to face her.

"And Isaac has school tomorrow, right?" my dad adds, looking between William and I. Somehow, what he says pulls me back to reality. There I was—being selfish again. How could I forget that Isaac can't just stay here? He has school. In fact, don't Mrs. Noo and William have to go back home? Don't I have a life back in Toronto as well? Ah, I've been selfish again, haven't I?

I look up and meet my dad's eyes. I'm about to reply when I feel William's fingers interlocking with mine. I look up at him when he comes to stand beside me, towering me in his shadow. He looks down at me, a soft smile on his lips.

"It's fine, I think we all need a break. We'll go back when Gemma's okay."

* * *

It's dark right now, the clouds have gathered above my home. I can almost smell the rain, the smell of wet soil. I can almost feel the rain, the

tingles that arrive with the wind. It's going to rain soon and my heart is dancing.

It's dark right now. Save the lights my dad and I have set in our backyard and the light coming from me and my neighbours's homes, the rest of the night is bathed in black. The dark clouds have gathered above me and it has brought with it the tiny stars that are playing hide and seek.

Sitting here, on the wooden dock in my backyard, I can almost smell the rain; I can almost feel the rain against my fingertips. My family home is situated in the suburbs, right beside a large river. Thankfully, crocodiles have never been an issue, and so I've been able to come to this dock growing up, when things have gotten harsh and I've needed to relax. Tonight though, I'm here because I'm happy. That, and I needed to make a decision.

William was in the shower and Isaac was having snacks when I decided to come and sit here. I suppose since it's going to rain soon, I should head back up but the sound of the quiet water lapping against the dock only pulls me back to remain sitting here. I can't help the smile that is fluttering on my lips as I lean back on my arms and rest against the dock's steady floor. Impulsively, I turn my head to look at my house. My eyes widen when I see William standing on the back porch looking back at me.

Our smiles widen as we continue to look at each other from the distance.

I suppose, even though all the hurt that both William and I have gone through could have been changed had we been a little more open with each other, but I'm secretly glad it happened anyway. With the smile still brightly hanging on my lips, I turn back around to stare into the lightly glistening waters of the slowly flowing river.

Sometimes, pain is the best teacher and I sure have learned my lesson.

I'm going to tell William everything now.

I snap my head up when I feel someone tapping on my sweater-clad shoulder. I turn around to see Isaac and William smiling down at me in the dull light from the backyard lamps. I can't help but grin at my two boys as I extend my arms up to receive Isaac from William and quickly settle the pouting little guy on to my lap.

"Having fun?" William asks me, lowering himself down beside me before wrapping an arm around my shoulder in one fluid motion.

“Yes, but I’m sleepy,” Isaac replies instead as he leans his head against my chest. I wrap the shawl I had around me over him as well, shielding him with my arms, all the while chuckling at the moody-looking child.

“Yeah,” I whisper my reply to William as I lean my head back as well, resting it on his shoulder.

“Let’s go back tomorrow.”

The silence my words bring dances in the crisp air around us; it floats on the slowly moving water beneath us, and yet, we remain casually attached by our beings, just sitting here and staring out into the distance where there are small glistening lights from someone else’s house across the wide river.

Finally, after what seems like minutes, I sense William turning around to face me.

“Really?”

I tilt my head back to look at him. In the dull lights that are touching and reflecting against our skin, we both look at each other in the eyes.

“Yeah.” I smile softly. “Isaac has school, and I have an exam next week Monday for my master’s degree.”

My dark orbs flash and I immediately begin to add in another thing.

“That doesn’t mean you’re allowed to go back to the hospital. You’re still taking time off until you’re feeling and looking healthier, okay?”

I can feel William stiffen against me at my words. “My patients need me, Gem,” he mumbles softly. The manner in which he says this already tells me that he knows I’m right. He needs rest.

“Your patients need you healthy, Will,” I reprimand him, still looking up at him with my tilted face.

Suddenly, I jolt up a little, my mind completely alert all of a sudden.

“Hey! You called me babe that night. Why aren’t you calling me babe now, huh?”

“Oh, I did it for you to forgive me more quickly,” William replies sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

I gape at the man. “What’s your logic?”

William blinks for a second, then looks away, clearing his throat awkwardly.

“To be too loving to resist.”

* * *

When the sun begins to rise, I am up with it. Quietly manoeuvring my way out of the bed from between the clutches of two very cuddly boys isn't really what most will call a yoga workout, but to me, it sure does feel that way right now.

Somehow, the fact that William doesn't wake up as I'm moving out of his hold is very surprising to me, and yet, I can't help but think that maybe the reason why he's not having a problem sleeping through my movements is because he's not been sleeping much at all the last few weeks. This thought makes me sad.

A sigh leaves my lips as I finally manage to stand beside the bed and turn to look at the two sleeping boys that are still on it. A smile paints itself across my lips, and I quickly lean forward and pull the blanket up until both the boys are tucked in nicely, then I turn around and start my day.

I brush and wash my hair in the shower, then quietly move around the room and carefully begin assembling my things and putting them into the suitcase that I had brought from Toronto. Tiptoeing around the two still asleep boys, I carefully bring the pile of clothes, accessories, toiletries, and ransom stuff I had brought and one by one place it into the suitcase. It feels like forever, but it's only been thirty minutes until everything is packed. I must have glanced in the direction of the boys at least a hundred times to make sure I've not woken them up. As I'm pulling the zip of the suitcase to a close, I spare the boys the last glance before picking the suitcase up and taking it with me outside of the room, carefully closing the door behind me.

I then go overdoing my usual morning routine while the house still sleeps around me. This is how an hour later finds me in the backyard, sitting on the dock by the river once again with a cup of tea in my hand while I'm looking up at the sky that's still mixed with yellow and hues of blue.

I curl my fingers around the warm mug as I let myself just breathe and take in the peace and quiet. Today, we're going back to Toronto. I don't really know if I'm ready to face all the people that are there. I don't know how I'm going to face Mary or Shirley. It doesn't feel like Shirley is going to give up, and I'm not sure if I am ready to leave this peace and face the hurricane there.

Here . . . it's been nice here. With Isaac and William, my parents, and

Mrs. Noo, everything has been nice. Quiet. Almost dream-like. I've almost forgotten that there is still a reality waiting for me to face back in Toronto. Toronto . . . the city where I have built my life.

I don't want to go. Truthfully, I want to shamelessly keep William and Isaac here with me—just me—but I know it doesn't work that way. Sooner or later, Shirley will send her lawyers here. Maybe this will even strengthen her case.

Who knows? Even when William seems confident that everything will be fine, I can't help but feel illogically worried.

I know that instead of sitting here and waiting for the storm to reach, I should just go back and face it head-on. It seems hard, but I know that's what I have to do. Didn't I already try letting William be? Didn't I already try that option and look how that turned out. My mind wanders to the man who's probably still sleeping in my bedroom. I let out a soft smile and bring my mug up to my lips. I take a sip of the hot liquid and slowly lower the mug back down to the wooden floor. A soft clank tells me that it's not safely placed on the dock.

Yeah, leaving William isn't an option anymore. I was never going to give Isaac up in the first place, but I did give William a choice, didn't I? And he's still here. With me.

So be it. I'm not going to be so selfless again. Giving up William and Isaac really isn't an option anymore. I'm not going to do it no matter who begs. No matter who puts me down. No matter who calls me the other woman or the stepmother. No matter who tries to put me in my place, I know who I am.

I am going to marry William. I am going to be Isaac's mother. I am going to be with the two boys for the rest of my life.

"I'll miss you."

My head snaps up at the sound of the voice. I turn my head around to see my dad standing at the edge of the dock with a mug of his own in his hand and a smile in his eyes.

"Paaa," I mumble softly as I let my smile slip a little.

My eyes water all of a sudden.

"Have you packed? Your flight's around two, you know? You have to check-in by twelve-thirty."

"Yeah," I mumble. "I know."

“William asked your mother and me to come be with you for a few weeks. He’s worried you’re stressed out and need us there with you right now,” my father says after he sits down beside me and lazily stretches his legs out on to the dock, throwing both his arms back to brace himself on the steady structure.

Somehow his words, despite my tears, makes me grunt out an amused scoff. Why is it that people think that the older children grow, the less they need their parents in their life? In my twenty-four years of life, I have never once felt like I didn’t need my parents. In fact, I even begged them to move to Toronto with me after I graduated from college and got a job.

I suppose I should be fair. Maybe the dynamics are different from family to family. Some children, as they grow older, really don’t need nor want their parents in their life as much. For me, though, growing older filled me with endless worry when I realised for the first time that my parents are growing older with me. My parents are growing older. They are growing old. I realised this for the first time when I saw my dad’s facial hair grey instead of black. I stood there for a while. My eyes move over my father’s face, and for the first time, I realise just how worn out he looks. I notice the bags under his eyes, the once smooth cheeks are now more textured with age. It takes a few minutes for the veil to lift and for me to realise that my parents are getting old.

I cried that night; I was so terrified of them growing old and dying. I tried to imagine my life without them, but I couldn’t even try. In the darkroom, under my blanket that was making me sweat profusely in the summer heat, I promised myself that I would die with them. I promised myself and I promised myself. Until I fell asleep.

“I always need you both with me.”

For a few minutes, my father and I sit here in silence. I suppose none of us know what to say after my admission. It’s in times like these when I feel like holding my dad and crying because I’m suddenly so scared again. I don’t want to leave my parents. Suddenly, I don’t want to leave them here and go back to Toronto.

“Oh, pumpkin.” My dad sighs softly, wrapping his arm around my shoulder and pulling me carefully against him. “Your mother and I are always going to be with you.”

I can't help it, I'm crying now. The sun is rising on the horizon and I'm leaning against my dad and sobbing loudly.

I don't want you and Mum to grow old. I want to wail these words out loud.

I want time to move back so that I'm a little girl again. This time . . . this time, I'll treat them better. This time, I'll study harder. I'll make them prouder. I'll spend more time with them. This time, I'll definitely force them to go to Toronto with me. Or I'll stay with them here. We'll grow old together. They'll wait for me to turn old, too, and then we'll leave together.

I want to say all of this to him. I want to grab him by the shirt like I used to do as a child and cry until everything gets better.

"Come on. Don't cry like this, okay?" My father squeezes my shoulder and tilts me to his side playfully. "You have a family of your own now. A man to spend your life with, a son to cherish you just as you've cherished us so far. You can't cry like this for us, Gemma."

"Why can't I?" I sob moodily. "You're my father, Pa!"

"Gem, is everything okay?" My father turns to me worriedly. "Is William forcing you to go with him?"

Despite my nonsensical hysteria, I still manage to shake my head, not able to bear any misunderstanding between my parents and William.

"Wouldn't it be great if we all lived together, Pa?"

I'll admit it. I've grown up very attached to my parents. Life without them is impossible. Before I met William and Isaac, I had actually thought about putting the house up for rent someday and moving back home to be with them. I had thought I'd spend my life this way— just them and me—and then Isaac found me one rainy afternoon.

It's easier for guys, isn't it? Society and tradition have made things so much easier for them, hasn't it? But for us girls, it feels so hard building a family of our own while being expected to leave behind our parents and forming bonds with our husband's family.

Selfishly, I want to gather everyone and keep all of us together. I don't want to sacrifice anyone. I refuse to sacrifice anyone.

"Okay, okay," my father blurts out suddenly. "Your mother and I are coming to stay over for a month, fine? We both have underused holiday days at work anyways."

His words make me freeze in my spot. My wide eyes turn to him

slowly. “Really?” I ask, my voice trembles a little, but my mouth is already cracking into a large smile.

“Really.” My father nods with a heavy sigh as if he’s really tired of my whining, but I catch the corners of his lips curling up in happiness and so I wrap my arm around his neck from the side and pull him down to put sloppy kisses on his cheeks.

Sure, they aren’t moving in forever, but one month seems like so much time, and for the rest, I’ll see about it when the time comes. For now, I just want to enjoy my time with all the people I love. William, Isaac, my mother, and father.

As I cling to my father, the clouds have turned white up in the sky.

Although years have passed and I have grown older. Although I have a family of my own to care for. I’ll still treat you both right. I’ll be the best I can. We’re always going to be a family. And even though I can’t turn back time, I’ll cherish every moment we have together. I’ll cherish you.

Let’s grow old together, Papa. Let’s live together for a long, long time.

* * *

“You promise, right?”

“Yes, sweetheart. We promise! We’ll be there by the coming Saturday. And we’re staying for a month, so be happy!” My mother smiles, rubbing her hand lovingly down my hair. I know it’s clear by my flushed face, puffy eyes, and pink nose that I’ve cried.

“I am!” I give my mother a toothy grin as we stand outside the house in front of the vehicle William had brought with him. “I’m very happy. I’ll be waiting!”

“Mm-hmm!” My mother nods as she wraps her arms around me and pulls me in for a hug. I feel my eyes water when I sense her lips on my hair pressing kisses on my head. I quickly wrap both my arms around her waist until my father also joins our hug. I pull out one arm and wrap it around him as well.

“Call us as soon as you land!” my dad calls out while William reverses the vehicle out of the parking lot and into the road.

“I will!” I yell back, waving enthusiastically from the front

passenger's seat, avoiding the pained smile Mrs. Noo is giving me from the back passenger's seat. I only smile at her softly and then try to glance at Isaac to see if he's comfortable.

"You okay, bubba?"

Immediately, Isaac nods and then turns the table on me.

"Mummy okay?"

I can feel William's eyes glance on me before moving back to the road.

"Your mother's fine." Mrs. Noo saves me from Isaac's inquisition, and I'm silently grateful that she's allowed me this moment because, honestly, I'm not fine; I'm excited to be back home and meet everyone, but I'm also nervous of all the drama that is waiting for us there as well.

After my dad and I had a talk this morning, I'll admit that I've been doing a lot of thinking. A lot of decisions that should have been made ages ago, but I kept pushing it off until I just couldn't anymore. Decisions that need to be made before I get back to Toronto. All these decisions feel like a mess now. It's like one of those situations, like putting off decluttering your phone's gallery for months until it's just too much to ignore anymore. Yes, something like that.

William and I are engaged, which means that at some point in time, we will marry. That aside, without even taking that into consideration, we're already living together and most of the time at his place. Saara has also been searching for a space for her own place to stay, and this means that the house will be empty most of the time now.

In the end, I've decided to rent the place out. Since I got it from my aunt, of course, I won't sell it, so renting it out seems like the best option at this point, really. A new person will be able to take care of it while I'm gone.

Secondly, of course, I need to get back to work.

I have manuscripts I need to submit and co-workers and friends I need to convince that I'm not spoilt and unprofessional. This might be the time where I stop hiding and face my responsibilities. This job . . . it's my passion, isn't it? It's what I've been studying all these years for. I can't help but feel guilty that I just managed to leave it when something dramatic happened in my life. Then again, I also can't help but empathize with myself. At that time, I really needed a break. I really did.

And then there is Shirley. Now, this is something I'm not very sure

about completely.

Shirley. I wish I could say that she's stopped contacting William . . . but I can't ignore the constantly vibrating cell phone every time she texted William or tried to call him last night. I don't know what she will do. I don't know how she will react, but I do know that she's far from gone. And I do know that this time, I won't back off because of her.

William and Isaac. This family—it was hers. It *was* hers.

But now, it's mine.

And even if I have to talk to Declan, even if I have to ask him to keep her at bay, I'm going to do it. However, I'm not going to let her ruin my family anymore. I am not a thief. I am not her substitute.

Still, I'm a little worried about going back home.

Truthfully, it's because of the help. Hadn't I let them think I was Shirley? That night, with the adrenaline pumping through my chest, I had barely given this factor a thought. When I had collided with Ren, when I had looked at him in the eye and he had stopped me from entering the room, I had forgotten to consider that maybe the pity on his face was not just because there was Shirley in William's room, but because it was someone who I had let him believe I was till then. And now, I was caught.

"You okay?"

My gaze snaps to the milky hand on my thigh, and I look up at the man the hand belongs to with a smile.

"You're here," I reply softly. "So I'm fine."

I mean it.

* * *

Poofy: When are you going to land here?

Gemma: Did Mum tell you I'm coming? Sometime around 1:30 in the afternoon ^_^

Pressing send, I glance at the man sitting beside me, his own attention on the cell phone in his hand.

His cell phone. My eyes dart to the screen of the device awkwardly before I instantly pull them away and look elsewhere. I really don't want to look and invade his privacy. I really don't, but it's the fact that William is sitting so close to me, that he's almost leaning on me, so in the end, I can't

help my eyes from going there.

“Kris is going to pick us up.”

“Ah okay.” I nod lightly, giving William a soft smile. He surprises me when he leans closer and places a chaste kiss on my temple before turning back to his cell phone.

I’m grinning when I turn back to my conversation with Saara. Looking down at my phone, I see that she’s replied.

Poofy: Yes. I was coming by the afternoon flight today. I called Khala to let her know but she told me you’re already on your way to the airport. How dare you not tell me. >_<

Oh my god. I’m a little stunned. She was going to come pay me a visit? Right now, when she’s currently in the phase of writing for her new album? I quickly begin typing.

Gemma: ^^ ' ^^ ' ^^ '

Gemma: Love you

Poofy: Want me to come get you guys at the airport?

“Ah.” I blink, but I still can’t wash away the smile that forms on my lips as I read her offer over and over again. She’s so busy right now, but she’s still offering to come pick me up from the airport. That, and even when she’s such a celebrity. Kris is also coming to pick us up. Somehow, I can’t just tell her not to come because someone else is coming.

Gemma: No, no, don’t worry yourself. I think you’ve forgotten but you can’t just go around picking people from the airport anymore, madame celebrity. Let’s meet at home, okay?

Her reply arrives immediately.

Poofy: <image of Powerpuff girl Blossom staring at phone>

Poofy: <image of Powerpuff girl Blossom throwing the phone>

I blink at the screen until another image pops up.

Poofy: <image of a crying cat saying “Fine”>

Gemma: :L :L :L so overdramatic. I’ll see you at home okay?

Poofy: Wait wait, home, as in your home or William’s home?

The grin on my lips return.

Gemma: William’s, dude

Poofy: Okay, good! Speaking of William, you have to tell me everything, Gemma!

Seeing her reply, I quickly begin typing back.

*Gemma: -.- I know you're the one who gave him my address. Stop pretending you little sh*t, obviously, you know how he was before he got there.*

I'm still staring at our chat tab when her reply arrives.

Poofy: <image of a crying cat saying "Fine">

Poofy: Gemma . . . I'm sorry. It was all my idea. That day . . . when I saw him standing outside the house . . . dude, he looked like he . . . you have no idea how scared I was. Dude, you should cherish him more now. Sigh. Where are you right now? When are they calling you to check in?

Ah . . .

Gemma: Listen, it's okay. Even Mrs. Noo thought it was the right thing. And for your information, I didn't just do it because you told me to. I did it because she told me to and because I wanted to. It's all of our fault. Let's just move forward, okay?

Gemma: Also, you have to tell me everything. What happened and how you gave away my address.

Gemma: Also, also, we're at the airport right now. Just about to check in, so I'll talk to you when I get there <3

Poofy: <image of a crying cat saying "Fine">

Poofy: See you in a few hours. I have things to tell you about me too~

Gemma: Did you propose to Khristian?

I text her back without much thought, but somehow, I just know that that's what she's done.

Poofy: <image of a sad Spongebob>

I stare at Spongebob's face while shaking my head.

Gemma: You're such a mess.

Gemma: See you at home.

Gemma: Love you!

Her reply comes almost instantly.

Poofy: Love you too T_T

Poofy: Safe travels <3
What is going on in your life right now, Poofy?

* * *

“Can you see him?” Mrs. Noo whispers as she clutches my hand in hers while I hold on to Isaac’s hand as we walk towards the waiting area in the airport. William, on the other hand, after taking over everything in his sudden burst of happy excitement, is pushing all our luggage beside Mrs. Noo.

“Not yet,” I whisper back, trying to look around the crowd of people.

“He’s there.” William nudges in a direction before quickening his pace and beginning to move in the direction. Mrs. Noo, Isaac, and I simply follow behind him, still not being able to see Kris.

“Welcome back!” Kris’s voice rings out loudly before I’m pulled into two strong arms, a big hand patting my head.

“It’s good to be back.” I laugh, patting Kris on the back until I’m gently pulled out of his embrace and the big trolley is pushed towards him instead.

“Push this.” William glances at Kris dryly before wrapping his arm around my shoulder and starting to walk away.

“Still so jealous,” I tease William, looking up at him with a soft smile on my lips.

William’s eyes dart to me awkwardly before looking away.

“Of course.”

It’s sunny outside today. When we step outside of the building, the slightly crispy air greets me against my skin, welcoming me back to the city.

“Where’ve you parke—” Mrs. Noo suddenly stops, and I find myself looking in the direction she is looking at.

“Cecelia,” I blurt out as I stare at the pretty girl standing beside the Tesla SUV waiting for us.

* * *

The ride back home is slightly awkward. For one, cramming in between Cecelia and Mrs. Noo in the backseat while holding a giddy Isaac

who keeps bouncing on my lap, making me bump into Cecelia, is not exactly fun. Secondly, I have a feeling Isaac is doing this knowingly. The sly smile on his little face doesn't look innocent at all. Right now, as we're driving through the driveway of the house and Isaac looks up at me with a gloating smirk, I can't help but wonder if I'm raising a little troublemaker.

"We're here!" Kris grins back at us after parking the SUV in front of the garage.

"You guys go inside, we'll get the luggage." William smiles at his mum, who in turn looks back at me and nods.

"I'll help Pa!" Isaac quickly jumps off my arms and runs to his dad's side, who lovingly puts his hand over the little boy's hair.

"Okay, Isaac can help us carry the luggage." Kris grins at the enthusiastic child.

"Alright, we'll go inside then." Mrs. Noo nods thoughtfully. I watch as she glances at Cecelia awkwardly, glances at me and then begins walking towards the front door.

I guess it must be awkward for her to be around the girl who she thought to get her son married to, and the girl that he is getting married to now. I guess it must be awkward for her knowing that Cecelia is here despite being heartbroken.

Just how it's awkward for me.

The house is empty today. I suppose without everyone, the help was given weekends off. In the end, after putting away our luggage, Mrs. Noo and I decided to order lunch from a popular Chinese restaurant Mrs. Noo wanted to eat from. On the other side of the kitchen, Kris and William set about making lemonade while talking about what's going on at the hospital. I sent Isaac to take a bath and freshen up.

This is how an hour later finds me, making my way out of the living room and into the garden outside where the quiet girl is sitting, looking at the flowers.

"They're setting up lunch now," I say softly, approaching her as carefully as I can.

Cecelia doesn't turn to look at me. That's fine. It isn't like I was expecting her to.

"I want to thank you." I'm nervous. Cecelia still doesn't say anything, and so I take it as a cue to continue.

I find myself sitting on the chair beside her. Still, I can't bring myself to look at the pretty girl. I'm sure she's still staring at the flowers in the garden. That's fine. Somehow, this is comfortable. At least she's not telling me to stop talking.

"I want to thank you." It begins drizzling.

I take in a deep breath and look down at my lap. "For giving Shirley my number instead."

The light shower brings in the scent of the drenched soil and roses. And then there is also silence. Neither of us speaks after my silent thanks. Neither does Cecelia acknowledge my gratitude nor do I say anything else.

Instead, I suppose we—who are finding peace from this light shower, the floral scent in the air, and in this quietness—don't mind just sitting here in each other's comforting silence. Wordlessly understanding each other. Wordlessly being thankful and pitiful at the same time.

"I just want him happy and he's happy with you. That's why I did it. You're better than her."

I'm a little speechless. My gaze darts to the pretty girl who's still looking away at the garden.

"Cecelia . . ." I blink. "Thank you."

"I'm going to China next, I've been thinking of opening a boutique there and this seems like a good time. Maybe this way . . . I'll be able to find myself." Cecelia looks at me and I find my eyes widening at how radiant she looks, wearing a pale mint-green floral dress, seated on the white chair with flowers and rain in the background.

"I suppose I also wanted to apologise." She looks away, the smile on her pink lips falters but I just can't look away. "It was wrong of me to beg you that day. I made a fool out of myself by putting you in such a tough position. I am sorry."

I'm a little stunned. I guess no matter what I was thinking, I really didn't expect her to bring that day up. Or apologise.

Slowly, I jerk my head towards the garden as well, staring at the rain and the leaves swaying in it. "I know we can't be best friends, but . . . maybe if you don't mind, can you tell me when you open your boutique? Maybe send pictures too."

"I-I'd like that." My fingers clench the hem of my dress when I hear her voice tremble. She turns to me and our eyes meet. A smile flutters on

both our lips at the same time.

I'd like that too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

One Day When He Wished to be the Wind

*I have stopped writing poetry, ever since I have felt the wind.
Now, I roam cobblestoned roads,
my toes curling inside my white running shoes that are
soaked in the colour blue.
And yet I remain here, drenched,
drinking monsoon rain on this summer day.
I have stopped writing poetry.
Instead, I speak your name.
There are monsoon winds in my mouth on summer mornings.
Summer afternoons dripping with my tears.
Let's name it rain.
I have stopped writing poetry, darling.
But you always remain.*

If I look at the sky long enough . . . will it begin to rain?

“It’s going to rain soon. I hope you have an umbrella.”

I turn my head towards the stranger, silently blinking at the girl who is standing beside me looking straight ahead as it begins to rain loudly. A high-bridge nose and warm brown eyes hidden behind round-rimmed glasses, and wavy dark hair that’s pulled up into a ponytail. This girl is adorable. Surprisingly, she looks too young to be a college student. Maybe she’s a freshman?

“I don’t . . .” I confess, watching the girl’s blank face give no evidence of ever hearing me at all. She looks . . . cold. A few seconds pass when suddenly she looks at me; I almost take a step back, albeit embarrassed

at being caught staring and also because there is now a soft smile on her lips. Had I ever thought she looked cold? Suddenly, I don't know.

"Here." I look down when the girl extends a clear umbrella that I had not seen till now, towards me. "I have a spare."

A spare.

"Oh." I can only blink as the umbrella is shoved into my hands.

"Thank you." I smile at the girl sincerely. "I'm Gemma."

"It's no problem." The girl smiles, glancing at the umbrella in my hand before turning to look out into the rain again. "I'm Viyada."

And then she just walks out. Out into the rain. I can only stand here, staring at the wet back of the girl who's walking away from me completely carefree and unafraid.

She's getting drenched in the thunderous waters pouring on her, walking wherever she's going.

When her figure disappears in the distance, my eyes snap down to the umbrella in my hand. She said this is a spare. *This isn't a spare . . . is it?*

I look up, she's long gone, and yet I still can't help but wonder.

Is she okay?

Suddenly, my bag begins to vibrate, the muffled yet crisp sound of the device shaking against my things immensely pulls my attention towards it. I hurriedly rummage through my tote bag that I usually bring to Uni when I have classes and pull out my phone.

"Hello?" I speak almost breathlessly, pressing the phone against my ear.

"Hi."

The voice from the other side of the call makes me smile. The deep and yet clear voice that belongs to only one man alone, the only voice that makes my heart flutter just by saying hi over the phone.

"Will." I grin, turning on my feet aimlessly while glancing at people moving around me in the Uni hallway, busy with their own lives.

"Is the lecture over? I miss you. When are you coming home today?"

"Oi, get in!"

My head snaps up hearing Sean's loud voice, my eyes landing on the man who pushes out his hand and waves me over from the SUV he's parked right in front of our Uni's entrance.

"Sean's here, there's a new restaurant open near campus. We're

going to check it out for a bit,” I speak into my cell phone animatedly while quickly making my way to Sean’s vehicle and getting in.

As I close the door behind me and settle in, William clears begins speaking again.

“Oh! Oh, that’s great! Have fun, okay?”

I beam, “I will, I’m really excited.”

“That’s good! I’m glad.” I hear William say, his voice sounds light and carefree, it makes my smile brighten.

“So by what time will you be home?”

My smile widens, and I feel four pairs of eyes watching me. I glance at Sean, grinning when I see him cock an eyebrow up, waiting for me to answer.

“I don’t know yet.” I glance at my wristwatch. 5PM. “Probably by ten.”

There is silence for a few seconds and all of us in the SUV wait impatiently for William’s response.

“Okay, have fun. I’ll wait for you at home.”

“Love youuu,” I shoot back happily.

On the other side of the line, William chuckles and I can almost picture him shaking his head at my silliness.

“I love you.”

“Okayyy, let’s get the party started!” Sean yells excitedly, rolling the vehicle out of the Uni’s driveway and towards the main entrance

“He sounded low-key devastated.” Wendina sighs, an air of solemnness in her words. Somehow, that pulls away at my smile a little but only for a moment. Soon, I’m smiling again.

“I’d be worried, too, if my ex-wife had a reputation of going out partying every night until late night.” Tully scoffs from the backseat.

“Yes but Gem isn’t that thing,” Sean reminds Tully, wavering his hand in dismissal as he does so. We’re out on the highway now, moving steadily towards our destination. Outside the SUV, the rain is persisting, hitting the SUV’s window.

“Honestly though, it’s been almost two weeks since you guys got back. Hasn’t she come around again? No calls?”

This time, my smile really does drop. A sigh slips out of my lips and I look out of the SUV’s window, out into the storming rain.

“She still calls, but it just gets forwarded to the lawyers now. William is still taking some time off from the hospital to recoup his health so he’s usually at home during the day time. She also showed up once, yeah.”

Beside me, Sean—who already knows about this—scoffs and continues driving.

“Why am I not surprised anymore?” Tully says flatly.

“I didn’t know they decided to remove the word ‘shame’ from the English language.” Wendina sighs. Hearing her, Sean can’t help but snort again.

“Good one.” Jennie laughs out loud, almost hysterically. “That woman clearly doesn’t know what that is.”

“By the way, have you told William you’ve found a tenant?” Wendina asks.

“Ahh.” I breathe softly as I remember the fact that I have to meet and finalize everything with the boy. Actually, this has been something that William and I already discussed after we had come back. We’re getting married, and so, of course, we can’t live in two separate houses. I don’t want to sell my house; it was given to me by my aunt after all, so I think renting it out is a much better option.

Putting out an advertisement online was easy, but screening people out of all the applicants have really been a much-tiring process. In fact, for the past two weeks, I have been meeting and interviewing a lot of people after work almost every day. Thankfully, I found the perfect applicant yesterday. In his early twenties, the boy actually looks like a twelve-year-old. In fact, when I first saw him yesterday, I had to ask him to show me his ID to believe that he’s actually twenty years old. By the end of our interview, I was ready to adopt him.

The boy has an adorable name as well—Palm. He’s actually a college student, double majoring in English and Mandarin. He told me he wants to become a translator when he goes back to his country, which I find extremely cute for some reason, but then again, I was quite ready to adopt him yesterday after all. Thankfully, he’s a very soft, introverted person who likes to cook at home and plant flowers in his spare time, so I’m very sure my house and garden will be in good condition in his hands. Maybe because those characteristics of his remind me of myself.

“You haven’t, huh?” Sean chuckles knowingly.

“She so totally forgot to tell him.” Wendina laughs along, joining Sean in teasing me.

“Did you tell your husband that you were ready to adopt the boy?” Jennie joins in as well, and by this time, I’m pouting at all my friends.

“Excuse me?” Tully huffs out indignantly. “Did you guys not see the boy? He’s so cute and tiny and fluffy! I wanted to adopt him too!”

“He’s only five years younger than you, Tuls,” Sean says from beside me as he rolls his eyes.

“So what?” I blurt out. “We can still be his super young mums!”

“These two have lost it,” Jennie says, making me snap my head around and stare at her with narrowed eyes.

“Yes, we have.”

Jennie shakes her head. “I give up.”

* * *

“We’re here,” Sean announces as we drive into the parking lot of the restaurant.

“Oh boy . . . my hands are shaking,” Wendina says as she lets out a shaky breath.

“Ready to get this party started?” Sean parks the car and turns towards me, pushing down the foot brake and pulling out the SUV’s key.

“Wait, wait. Are you sure, Gemma?” Jennie asks me suddenly, making me turn around and look into her waiting eyes.

“I don’t know,” I confess slowly. “But honestly, he deserves to know, and I don’t think he does. His fiancée isn’t telling him what she’s going around doing behind his back, so I will.”

“You’re sure, right?” Wendina asks.

This time, my nod is more affirmative, my smile surer. “Yes, let’s just go get this over with. I want to go back home as soon as possible. William’s waiting for me.”

The door opens and closes silently as we walk into the restaurant. He’s already here, seated on the further end of the seating area. I watch as his head tilts up from the menu when he senses my arrival, and I watch as his eyes sparkle for a second before he realizes how many extras I have brought

along with me. For a second, I almost feel guilty . . . but then again, we're past the time where we could sit and have dinner together. Times are different now. And so are we.

"Hi," I greet him first with a soft smile on my lips as I slide on to the chair in front of him. Sean and the girls, on the other hand, move towards the counter. Actually, we're going to get takeaways. It's not like Declan and I can sit down and have any conversation over dinner anyway.

"Hey." Declan smiles back at me brightly, pushing forward on his chair as we sit face-to-face. "I honestly didn't expect you to ever call me out for dinner, to be honest."

"About that . . . I didn't exactly call you out to have dinner." I watch as Declan's gaze becomes serious, quickly understanding my implication. "Actually, I have to talk to you about your fiancée."

For a few seconds, there is an extremely awkward silence that hangs between Declan and I. Quite frankly, in these thirty seconds or so, I even consider getting up and leaving.

"Oh."

I blink, awkwardly looking down at the empty table before me.

"I don't know how to put it," I start, seemingly finding this begin to get awkward. Maybe I should have just asked William to come with me, but Mrs. Noo and my mother thought it was a bad idea—as in William would just throw tantrums if I brought this up.

Had they said this before I had left for home, I wouldn't have agreed with them. William could never be this unreasonable.

Now, I went along with them. William has been a little clingy and unreasonable ever since we got back.

Although I'd like to think that it's because he's stuck at home recuperating and feels without a purpose, so he's moody.

Actually, right now, there's very little difference between Isaac and his dad. If both of them were given a chance, I am sure they would wish to superglue themselves to me.

"It's okay." Declan clears his throat awkwardly. "Just say it."

Just say it.

My eyes snap up. Our gaze freezes on each other for a moment before I glance away.

"Here," I speak slowly, picking up the iPad from my purse and

sliding it across the table towards him.

“What is this?” Declan frowns, picking up the iPad and bringing it closer to him, then everything between us is silent again.

This silence remains until I’m almost unsure if Declan is ever going to look up and acknowledge the situation. Is he even reading the messages?

“I feel like an idiot.”

My eyes snap up from my fingers to my ex-boyfriend’s face.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I don’t know what I should do.”

“Do you . . . still want to—”

“Yes,” Declan cuts me off.

For a moment, I’m a little surprised. Does he still want to be with her even after this? He still wants to . . . marry her?

Even though there is a hurricane in my mind, I nod and simply look back at my fingers.

“Then all I can ask from you is to please stop her because I really can’t tolerate this anymore.”

The silence returns, and this time, a waiter walks up to our table as well.

“Have you decided yet, ma’am?” the young boy asks professionally, standing tall beside the table with a notepad in his hand.

“Erm.” I look down at the menu card lying in front of Declan and swiftly pull it towards me. Running my eyes through the menu hastily, I suddenly spot something that I find myself having a sudden desire to taste. I lift my attention back to the young man.

“Can I please get a bubble tea, please?”

“Sure, ma’am!” The boy smiles, looking down into his pad as he scribbles away.

“Could you put it in a takeaway cup, please?”

“No worries, ma’am.”

“Gemma.”

“Hmm,” I reply reflexively as my gaze snaps to the man who’s sitting across the table.

“I’m sorry.”

I blink. *Sorry.*

“For back then, and that day, everything. I’m sorry.”

I'm sorry. These two words have been the only two words that I have ever wanted to hear from this man in front of me. Even when we were still together. Even when I loved him. When I hadn't thought about leaving him, I had at least hoped that he would say these two words—I'm sorry.

Every time something happened, every time he hurt me, I had always thought that if he says he's sorry, if he just wakes up and says he's sorry, it'll all get better. I will be alright.

Now, years later, at this moment . . . I realise that these two words that I had yearned for so much have absolutely become useless to me.

"If you're sorry, be aware of what your fiancée is doing and keep her in line, please. She's running after something that's long gone. She even walks into our property as if she owns it. That's trespassing, Declan. I thought that you didn't know how she was like so it would be best if you knew what she was doing behind your back, but since it doesn't make a difference to you, just . . . control your person."

"I love her." I blink.

"I love her . . . that's why I can't leave her," Declan blurts out. I watch as his shoulder slouch forward and he lets out a deep sigh, turning his head away.

"I get her," he mumbles. "Seeing someone who once loved and cherished you, who you had once been happy with someone else is hard, and it makes you act irrationally. I did that too, so I get her. I'll . . . I'll talk to her. She'll stop. I'll make sure. I'm sorry."

Yes . . . these two words have really become useless to me.

* * *

"Bye, Gem!"

I let out a soft laugh as I wave at my bright-eyed friends waving at me from the car parked in front of the gate. "See you guys at work tomorrow!"

"Yeah! Goodnight!" Jennie calls back, waving widely before Sean honks the car and starts driving it down the road, away from me.

"Thank you." I smile at the security guard as I walk into the gate that he's holding open for me.

"No problems! I think everyone went to sleep an hour ago," the tall

man replies in a light-hearted tone, pulling the gate to a close behind me. I hear as the metal lock clicks to a lock rings around the night air. I pull my coat closer to me. It's chillier tonight for some reason.

"Haha, okay." I nod before thanking the guard again. "I'm just going to head in now, do you need anything?" I call out as I hold on to the open front door and look back at the security guard almost about to enter his booth.

"No, no. Paul's going to sign in, in a few minutes. He's bringing takeout so I'm good. Thank you for asking."

I chuckle softly, nodding in understanding as I take a step into the house and turn around to close the door. "Alright, goodnight!"

"Goodnight, Gemma!"

When the door closes behind me, I am left in dull darkness. Only a few lamps turned on as if left to guide me around the house. As I take off my shoes and slip into my pair of slippers, I wonder if William really is asleep. The house is quiet but I still can't stop smiling as I walk around the living room and begin walking towards the bedrooms.

I take my last few steps very carefully as I near Isaac's. Seeing the door wide open as it always is for his room, I slip into the softly lit bedroom where a small bundle is sleeping in the middle of the bed with a single leg thrown out of the blanket.

I let a knee sink into the mattress as I climb on to the bed and look over the sleeping child. A warm smile flutters over my lips as I glance to my right and gently pull the blanket over his leg, tucking it carefully before moving my hand over his head and brushing away his thick mop of hair out of his forehead.

"Goodnight, my love." I caress his hair, leaning down as I place a kiss on his forehead and then slowly getting out of the bed and begin walking out of the bedroom and into the hallway.

When I reach the next room's door, it is slightly open. As I push the door forward, I'm glad it doesn't creak. My eyes wander around the darkroom, and for a second, I contemplate between turning the lights on before proceeding or just navigating myself around the darkness until I shower and get into bed. From the large unmoving shadow on the left side of the bed, it seems like William is asleep. He's a very light sleeper, so I'm sure he'll wake up if I turn on the lights.

In the end, as I begin making my way into the darkroom and drop my

bag on to what I'm sure is a sofa, I carefully edge my way towards the bathroom.

The door clicks closed behind me just as I turn on the bathroom lights and begin moving towards the vanity, carefully taking off my wristwatch and earrings before making my way towards the door that's adjoined to the closet.

I'm pretty sure that when I open the bathroom's doors after what seems like a while and walk into the bedroom, a gust of steam escapes out into the bedroom behind me as well.

When I had come into the room, it had been dark and shadowy, but right now, walking out of the bathroom, the moon outside has escaped the clouds and is shining right into the room through the ceiling to floor glass windows.

I glance towards the bed that's now visible under the light of the moonlight and slowly begin padding my way towards it, slipping out of the slippers and carefully climbing into it when I reach the edge as I pull the comfortable blanket over me.

In this bedroom, right now, there is no one except this dazzling moonlight, William, and me. The night is quiet and light. A soft breeze moves into the bedroom right at this moment as I turn my head and glance at the shape of the man sleeping right beside me.

As if feeling my eyes on him, William turns over until he's facing me, snaking his hand underneath the edge of my pillow. As for me, I can only continue to stare at the shadowy features of the man beside me.

He's so close. I can almost touch him. I can smell him.

His aftershave.

Without realizing, I begin wiggling closer to the sleeping man. When the tips of my fingers come in contact with William's warm skin, I feel the same sort of calmness that always engulfs me when he's here. With me. A content sigh leaves my lips as I snuggle closer and closer until I have my entire arm wrapped around him and my forehead is touching the tip of his nose. Tilting my head, I press my lips against his skin.

"You came home earlier than I thought you would. Had a good night?"

His husky voice rumbles softly in the otherwise silent bedroom, his warm breath hitting slightly cool cheeks. I find myself freezing, hearing the man release a soft sigh as his arms tighten around me and he pulls me into

arms. “Hmm?”

I blink, taking in a shaky breath and bringing the scent of his cologne with it too.

“Declan and I met tonight,” I mumble softly. While I’m telling William this, I’m also trying to gauge his reaction, already preparing myself to speak more carefully if he reacts badly.

When he doesn’t respond, I bite my lips nervously and continue, “I told him about what has been happening for the past few weeks.”

There’s silence in the room afterwards. Neither he speaks nor do I push him to. Realistically speaking, I am kind of expecting this, aren’t I? Who would like their lover meeting someone they had loved at one time? I hadn’t liked it too, right?

Still, no matter how many times I think about it, I know it had to be done. Declan needed to know. He’ll definitely keep her away.

“Did Sean drop you there?”

I immediately shake my head at his question, completely disregarding the fact that my face is violently rubbing against his shirt.

“Everyone came along.”

I can imagine William cocking an eyebrow up when he asks, “Everyone?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod. “Sean, Jennie, Wendi, and even Tulli.”

“Why didn’t you take me?”

“Would you let me do it if I did?”

“Yes!”

My eyes snap up to the man’s in the dark. “Really?”

We stare at each other for a blink or two, then he lets out a sigh and pulls me closer into his arms. “Just go to sleep.”

In the darkness of the room, in the arms of a salted fish, I can’t help but let out a grin and then slowly fall off to sleep.

* * *

“Have you two thought about marriage yet?”

Early mornings at the Noo’s are almost the same old affair. The house starts waking up from as early as four-thirty; the kitchen is the first room in the house to come alive. Of course, I’m always up when the help is

clocking in, and now that Mrs. Xi is gone, I make sure to help Mrs. Noo around in the kitchen a lot more.

Usually, William wakes up right when I do, although it takes him some time to get ready and make his way downstairs. Isaac is usually next, tumbling down the stairs still half asleep, in his pyjamas. Today, however, something really different is currently happening.

Hearing the elder woman's question, I stay quiet. Biting my lip, I glance at William as discreetly as I can. William glances at me before turning back to his mother.

"Ma, I was thinking . . . maybe we should wait for some time and ease in slowly."

"Aiya, wait for what? Son, Ma thinks that the sooner the better." Mrs. Noo glances between William and me before softly adding, "You're both living like a married couple anyway. Can you please not be this careless with Gemma?"

Actually, I understand where Mrs. Noo is coming from.

Although I've been born and raised in a biracial family, due to my dad often adopting my mother's culture and let her raise me how she was raised, I understand why Mrs. Noo thinks that marriage is more secure and respectful than just living together. Although this is something that is happening a lot in the world, a lot of couples do not think marriage is a requirement when all they need to do is love each other and be loyal. I am one of the people who do think marriage is important.

Although . . . William is right as well. Marrying right now, wouldn't it feel too rushed?

"Okay, okay. About this matter . . . I'll let you two decide for yourself. Now have your breakfast. Both of you have work today, right?"

I smile at Mrs. Noo sweetly as I nod in reply. "What time do you get off today?"

My head turns to William, who's looking at me as he sips on his cup of tea. "Around 4:30. Why?"

William nods, putting down the black mug on the table. "I'll pick you up."

My head snaps up, my eyes looking towards Mrs. Noo before turning back to William. It's his first day after returning to the hospital, isn't he going to stay till late?

“Okay.” *I guess this is fine.* I smile at the man sitting beside me as I take in his still slightly hollowed cheeks. He should take it easy for now.

A week has passed like this—a week since William has resumed work and I have gone to the office every day. I’m a little scared to say it, but we might have fallen into a daily routine.

Every morning, William drops me to work before he leaves for the hospital, Olly takes Isaac to school, and Mrs. Noo invites her friends—Aunty Ying and Aunty Tiffany—over to spend some time together doing all sorts of things. In fact, yesterday, I reached home after work to find the three ladies sitting outside in the backyard, huddled around the table trying to make Thai flower garlands for Aunty Ying.

Within this week, William has gone back into the “great doctor” mode. Isaac has also gradually gotten more at ease with his father going back to work, me not working from home the majority of the time, and his grandma bringing her friends over every day. In fact, he also asked me if he could have his best friends over to play after school. Of course, the smart little kid even made me call their parents and ask permission on their behalf. He had written a small script for me and everything. That and my parents have also come around to visit.

They arrived on Saturday, wanting to surprise me, and were slightly surprised to find Palm at my house instead of me. It was Mrs. Red who told them that I had actually given the home for rent since I stayed at William’s most of the time anyway. Yeah . . . that day I was reminded once again of why living in an even remotely brown household, not telling your parents things that were happening in your life was a really, really bad idea. That day, while I was scolded by my father in the living room of William’s house—William who was sitting with Isaac on the side—was actually chuckling sneakily at my misery. Isaac, on the other hand, looks like he was about to cry.

If the two of them fell into the sea, I wonder who exactly I would save? Ha. ha. ha. William slept in the room alone that weekend.

* * *

This past week, everything has actually turned out really well. I smile brightly as I hold the warm mug and bring it to my lips. I guess talking to

Declan actually worked. Ever since that evening, there has not been a sign of Declan or Shirley. No missed calls, no texts, no emails, no attempted property entry. Although . . . I do miss Mary.

“You seem to be in a good mood.” A mug slides on the table in front of my seat, and the handsome man in a blue and white suit settles into the chair across from me.

I lift my eyes up from my tea mug to the man’s bright eyes. “I’m happy,” I reply simply, smiling at my superior.

At my admission, a pleased-looking Nathan leans back into his chair. “You know, I’ve noticed that while the rest of the editing team has been segregated according to genres, you have never been asked for one or allocated one, am I correct?”

Ah . . . well yes, Alicia always tried to hand me manuscripts with topics she thought I would absolutely not like to read through, so I was never asked. Although, I can’t just say that to Nathan. Instead, I let my smile widen and reply, “Yeah.”

“Well, we already have a good small team who prefers to edit autobiographies and other non-fiction, so would you like to continue this way or do you want a list of genres you’re okay with?”

I blink. He didn’t even ask me why it was that way with only me in the office?

“I’d like to pick genres please.”

“Sure.” Nathan brings his Starbucks cup to his lips and takes in a big gulp. “After lunch ends, I’ll give you a form to fill out and you can make your selection then.”

“Thank you.” *I mean it.* In my years of working in this office, this is the first time a superior has asked me what I want to do. It means a lot, to be honest.

“No need to thank me. I’m supposed to take care of you.”

I blink. Unable to figure out what to do with my suddenly shaking fingers, I hurriedly grab on to my tea mug. Why does the atmosphere feel so different all of a sudden?

“Because I’m your employee, right?” I chuckle out awkwardly before I can even help myself. The moment I let out the word vomit, I know I should have just played ignorant, but it’s weird. I have been noticing . . . Nathan likes to take care of me and then Sean likes to try and kill me. It’s a never-

ending cycle. For instance, he always tells me to go have lunch if I'm trying to work during lunch hours and then surprisingly buys Subway for the editing team. Of course, Sean being Sean reads between the lines and then sends me death glares for the entire day.

"Well . . . it's not entirely because of that." Nathan smiles at me awkwardly. "My friend has asked me to. Say, I never told you who bought your portraits, right?"

The portraits.

"Yeah, I don't think you ever did. Were you the one who bought them?" I ask, tilting my head a little to the side in curiosity.

Hearing my question, Nathan's face breaks out into a bright grin. "I think I told you before that it's not me."

"Oh." I really can't remember anything, to be honest. "Then who bought my portraits? Your friend?"

Nathan smiles at me for a second. An awkward silence settles between us during this time, but then he replies, "My best friend did."

"Oh! Well, tell him I said thank you. The proceeds really helped my cousin and went to a good cause. I remember I think there were more than three of my portraits on the exhibit. Which one did he buy?"

"All of them. He bought all of them." *All . . . of them.*

"Oh . . . erm, well—"

"Boss! Mr. Archinson is here!"

Two heads snap towards the slightly open door of the office kitchen. Looking in is Dylan, Nathan's assistant, his eyes moving between our superior and me. Feeling awkward about Dylan's gaze, I turn my gaze at Nathan, who stands up with a relaxed sort of ease and then glances at me with a smile on his lips. "Tea doesn't fill the stomach." He turns around and, just like that, walks out of the kitchen, leaving me and my slightly cooler mug of milk tea behind.

* * *

Saara: PenPen, I need advice! Help me!

Gemma: What's wrong? Are you back in Toronto?

Saara: Not yet, my flight's on Friday. But like help me!!

Gemma: What happened?

Saara: How does one chase a guy?

Gemma: SAARA MALIK! WHAT ARE YOU UP TO?!

Saara: Come on! Tell me, please! I need help!

Gemma: Is this about the CEO?

My eyes light up when the ping of a new message echoes in the otherwise silent car. Tearing my eyes away from the passing scenery outside, I quickly glance down at my phone screen and try to forget about the conversation that Nathan and I had during lunchtime today.

Saara: . . . maybe.

My grin widens. *Ah, so she's finally decided to run after Khristian.*

Gemma: Just don't offer him your body or blackmail him or threaten him to murder his loved ones. Everything else is fine.

Saara: <sad looking dog meme face>

Saara: You're not helping at all dude

I let out a sigh and stare at the screen for a few minutes before typing again. Honestly, I don't know what I'm telling her and if it will work out, but I'm trying my best to allow her to do something stupid.

Gemma: Okay okay

Gemma: First, figure out if he still loves you, then observe if he's trying to let you know that he loves you. If he is, let him love you and don't push him away. Then if he'll see you're not pushing him away, he'll start to have an idea that maybe you love him too. And if you see that he's gotten that idea, then slowly start showing him you like him too.

Gemma: If he doesn't like you; don't waste your time and respect him as a human who has a right to love and not love someone.

Saara: <crying cat meme face>

Saara: After I chose Dante back there, he's been ignoring me.

Ah. Well . . . I would do that too if I were him.

Gemma: I would too, to be honest.

Saara: <crying cat meme face saying "fine then">

Saara: I'm doomed.

Gemma: He's angry, dude. That doesn't mean he doesn't

love you anymore. You did mess up there on a very big level.

The reply comes instantly.

Saara: What do I doooo

Another sigh lost to the wind.

Gemma: Okay okay

Gemma: First, figure out if he still loves you. Then observe if he's trying to let you know that he loves you. If he is, let him love you and don't push him away. Then if he'll see you're not pushing him away he'll start to have an idea that maybe you love him too. And if you see that he's gotten that idea then slowly start showing him you like him too.

Gemma: If he doesn't like you; don't waste your time and respect him as a human who has a right to love and not love someone.

Saara: <clown meme>

“Miss Gemma.”

I look up, my eyes finding the driver, Robert, who motions outside of the car.

Looking out of the car, the first thing I realise is that we're home, then I see something else. I see the real thing Robert wants me to see. The sleek white SUV parked outside of the front gate blocking us from driving in.

I stare at the vehicle, my eyebrows gathering in the middle as I try to remember just who this vehicle belongs to and why no one has come out and received this visitor. In fact, even the security guards are ignoring this person, as if this person isn't even here.

Maybe the driver of the SUV saw me or knew who I was because it doesn't take too long before the sound of the vehicle's door open and shut close echoes in the air, and a tall man in a suit steps forward, coming and standing in front of our vehicle. I can't help but notice the large brown envelope he has in his hand as he just stands there, peering into our vehicle, as if looking right at me.

“Do I tell the security to escort him away?”

I hear Robert's question, but I don't reply. Instead, I watch as the tall man pulls out a phone from his pocket and dialling in something, then brings it up to his ear.

Immediately, the sound of my ringtone fills the entire vehicle.

I stare at the screen of my phone. It's an unknown number. I pick it up.

"Hello, Miss Windly, could you please come out of your vehicle? I have been waiting here for you for an hour. I have a document I need to deliver to you."

He cuts the line without waiting for my reply. The small smile on the corner of his left lip pulls up until the expression of mockery he has on his face isn't able to be concealed anymore.

"Don't go out," Robert speaks quickly. "I'll give the security the go."

Immediately, I watch as an armed Olly and two more guards walk out of the front gate and come to stand before the man in the suit. They seem to have a conversation between them before two men seem to go and walk around the SUV, and Olly—to my surprise—does a frisk check on the man, then he turns and begins walking towards our vehicle.

"He's clear, you can come out. He's supposed to meet either you or William."

Walking out of the vehicle, I can't shake off the ominous feeling that I have on the back of my head. Maybe it's something about the man's face, the tall man who is standing in front of the gate—despite being frisked and questioned like a criminal—smiles at me silently. Maybe it's something about that smile. It's scaring me.

"Hello, I'm Gemma," I greet him awkwardly once I come to a stop before him.

It's as if a light switch is turned off at my greeting.

Immediately, his smile drops, and he extends the envelope towards me.

I'm a little stunned, but I still manage to take the steady envelope out of his hands. I glance down at the brown paper.

"Mrs. Shirley Pattinson has filed an appeal for her son, Isaac Noo's custody. Inside the envelope are the legal documents for negotiation if you wish to settle this outside of the court. Please feel free to contact me with your lawyers."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

One Day, Just One Day Once Upon a Time

When the rain stops and so have we when the gardenia blossoms under the shade of the magnolia tree.

*The river flows southwards, and we go north,
taking with us only rags of cloth loose cotton strings
dangling in the wind cotton that holds the story of our
silence;*

*the wind listens and our tears sing when the rain stops and
so have we.*

*When the umbrella opens above your head, the street light is
green and then it is red,*

there are so many feelings, but no one to tell;

*Many hands to hold, but none that want to be held the sea is
rough,*

the waves tumble against the songs of our silent love.

*When the rain stops and so have we when we have stopped
beside the sea,*

and when you slowly turn to me,

will you answer this one question, please?

What is larger—the sky or the sea?

The lawyer leaves as soon as he has handed me the envelope. I can hear as the car rumbles down the road, away from me, and yet, I continue to stand here with this envelope in my hand.

This envelope that feels like it's burning in my grasp, scorching against the skin of my palm until I can't feel when I have let it slip through

my grasp and crashes against the concrete of the driveway . . . without a single sound.

“Gemma . . . let’s get inside.” I feel as Olly wraps his hand around my arm. I glance at him, still feeling dazed, as he bends down and picks up the envelope, then nodding to the men still standing beside us. They carefully begin to pull me through the suddenly open gates and towards the large house.

I blink. I lift my head as I look at the house before us, and yet, I am not really seeing anything. Instead, my mind is running a mile a minute. I’m thinking, I’m thinking of what has just happened. I’m thinking . . . I’m thinking. What now?

“Should I call boss?”

This sentence brings me back to reality. Instantly, I’m looking up at Olly and shaking my head with a smile forcing its way on my lips.

“No, no! It’s okay,” I reply casually as I take off my sandals and slip into the indoor slippers before proceeding to walk into the house.

Olly doesn’t seem convinced, his gaze not even moving an inch away from me. “You seem—”

My smile brightens, and I even manage to let out a little laugh. “It’s nothing! I was just shocked for a bit. I’ve never had that happen to me before so . . . I was just a bit shocked. I’m fine, I know William can handle it. I’ll tell him when he comes home, don’t worry.”

“I don’t believe you.”

The blank look and blunt words that slip from Olly’s lips actually make me want to laugh for real. He’s really not buying it, I realise, so I come clean.

“I don’t want to stress him out while he’s at the hospital. You can give him the envelope yourself when he comes home if you don’t trust me.”

“It’s not that.” Olly’s lips purse before he pushes me down gently so that I’m sitting on the sofa. “I’m worried about you stressing over this too much. You look like you’ve seen a g—”

“What’s wrong?”

The curious voice makes both Olly and I turn towards it instantly to find Mrs. Noo standing before us with a stunned look as she looks from Olly who has knelt down before me now, to me. Seeing her expression, I begin to realize how this scene may look like to her, but Olly seems absolutely

oblivious as he takes the envelope from my hand and straightens up, extending it towards the older woman.

“Mrs. Shirley’s lawyer came. She’s appealed for Isaac’s custody.”

Life is like this. There are often times when things are going at a steady pace and then suddenly everything changes. You know what has happened in your past and are at terms with it; you are at peace and in control of your today, and you feel like you’ve successfully planned the future, then one day, in an instant, one single factor in your plan shifts from its axis and everything is suddenly different.

Suddenly, you find yourself in unclear waters, unable to figure out your surroundings or how to get to safe grounds. You don’t even know if someone will come if you scream for help. What about your plans? What about your hopes? Suddenly, you have to realign your life. You have to think of ways to adapt to the situation the changed variable has created. It’s hard. It’s scary.

I got too comfortable—comfortable with the idea that after I had told Declan, everything was under control.

Now . . . here we are with me sitting here all alone with the brown envelope on the bed beside me, there are a thousand thoughts going around in my brain right now. *How do I tell William? What are we going to do now? Does Shirley really have a chance? After all, doesn’t the law favour biological mothers when it comes to things such as custody? Will we tell Isaac about this?*

When this last thought finds its way in my brain, my eyes snap towards my wristwatch and I let out a shaky breath when I realise it’s almost time Isaac wakes up from his nap. On a normal day, I’d be in the kitchen making something for him . . . but today, I can’t make myself walk down the stairs and smile at everyone’s faces. I don’t feel like smiling.

Right now, all I want to do is gather myself into William’s arms and have him tell me everything will be alright. To have him tell me that he’s got this under control.

Truthfully, I can’t shake this feeling off even though I know that William will really be able to take care of this, even though I know that William already has full custody of Isaac and that Shirley can’t take him away, but fear is like this; when all rationality points towards a solution, fear will fog the view. Even though the solution is there, even though the road to

that solution isn't hard, fear makes it seem like the most impossible thing, it makes the solution seem unattainable.

I can't stop myself. I'm scared. Right now, I only know these two facts. I don't want to lose Isaac, and Shirley is his birth mother. Even though Isaac calls me 'Mum', the law won't. William and I aren't even married yet.

"Mummy!"

It's like a switch that just flips all of a sudden. The smile that appears on my face is dazzling. My entire person seems to have changed within the one second that Isaac's sleepy call echoes through my ears, and opening the door the half-awake, the boy tumbles into the room before climbing on to my lap with a pout on his lips. Behind him, a surprising presence also walks into the bedroom. My eyes widen as I stare up at the bright eyes of William. He, on the other hand, just looks at me with those bright and yet piercing eyes of his, and it doesn't take me even a second to realise that he knows. Oliver's already told him everything.

Somehow, I find myself directing my bright smile at him as well. Why don't I want to show him how I am really feeling? I'm worried; I am terrified of losing the child in my arms. I glance down at the little bundle on my lap who's like always calmed down and has settled his head against my chest, probably already falling asleep again.

"Hi," I greet the man who's still standing in front of me and the sleeping child. I glance towards the papers beside me, and Isaac lets out a small groan, snuggling his face closer into my chest. "The papers are here."

"Hmm." William steps closer, leans forward, and reaches for the papers. His gaze, however, remains on me. Somehow, it's getting more and more uncomfortable for me . . . being under his steel-like gaze.

"You know I was expecting this, right?"

I can't say anything. I'm too afraid of breaking down right now and frightening both William and Isaac. In a situation like this, where my reaction can influence these two boys so greatly, can I really afford to act scared?

Looking at William dumbly, I nod.

"You know I won't let anyone take Isaac away from us, right?"

I nod harder. My arms around the sleeping boy tighten as I feel my eyes betray me and begin to water.

"Do you trust me?"

Again, I can only move my head up and down. I trust him. I do trust

him.

My mind begins to clear slowly. I know I'm thinking too much about it. Maybe I should calm down and just trust William. He's not really powerless . . . right?

Even though the law favours birth mothers, especially if they aren't single and are financially stable, even when William is a single father who is also a busy surgeon . . . and when compared to a now married and financially stable Shirley, seems to have less time to devote to the upbringing and welfare of his child . . . William must surely still have things under control, right?

Suddenly, my head snaps up. The metal band around my ring finger feels much heavier than it did a second ago.

Marriage. *Hey, even William can get married! We're engaged anyway? Isn't this what people get engaged for? To get married? Why does it matter if it just so happens to happen now rather than later!*

"Let's get married tomorrow."

The words that are spoken to the wind, the feelings that are floating hand in hand with it, I watch as the man in front of me stiffens at my sentence. I watch as the sentence melts into the silence.

"Why do you want to marry me?"

I look at William when he asks this question, lifting his head and his calm eyes meeting my surprised ones.

"Because I love—"

"Me or Isaac?"

Words suddenly tangle in my throat, the 'you' that I was about to say also melts into the silence.

Instead, I do a double take of the man whose one hand is still placed on my hair and the other on his son's back.

"Is this any time to be jealous?" I frown at the man, and immediately, a smile breaks into his face.

"I was just joking," William assures me softly, his hand gently rubbing down my hair.

"Mmm." I nod, giving in. "Let's get married tomorrow, okay?"

"Let's wait until this is over, please?" William tries to persuade me, lowering himself down until his eyes peers into mine earnestly.

"I don't want to use you in this dirty game of hers." The corner of his

lips curls up helplessly.

Oh lord . . . I don't care about that! I begin shaking my head. “Will, it’s not li—”

“Let’s wait until this is over, okay?” William cuts me off again. “I want to marry you because I love you. I won’t marry you just to use our marriage as a pathetic means to get an upper hand.”

I . . .

My gaze slowly trails over the man knelt down in front of me, and for the first time, I notice just how exhausted he looks.

Realising how tired he looks, it’s as if all my intentions of refuting him blows with the cool breeze.

How could I have forgotten . . . even he must be feeling stressed. Even he must be feeling burdened and worried. That, and his entire day at the hospital . . . it’s really been hard on him.

I decide not to trouble him. In the end, I find myself nodding, taking in his scent when he instantly pulls me forward into his embrace. His hand braces the back of my head and the other wraps around Isaac and my upper back.

“I love you.”

I can’t help but smile sadly.

It’s okay. Today, I will give in to you. Today, I will let you have your way. Today, the biggest thing you need is comfort, so let’s forget about everything else for a few minutes and remain here. In this embrace. Just you and I. And our son. Our small family.

“I love you.”

* * *

When the sun rises, I find myself in a bed that has become just as familiar as the one back at my place. The child that was sleeping beside me is now nowhere to be seen, and instead, a milky white naked back is the first view my eyes greet, just as equally as a fair arm is thrown over my chest. As consciousness becomes more and more solid, the warm face that’s snuggled against my neck also becomes something that I cannot avoid.

My arm falls over the heavier one on my waist, and I lovingly rub the slightly cool skin with the pads of my fingers.

“Mm.” The man beside me groans in his sleep and then shuffles closer as if there already wasn’t any space left between him and me.

Today is another day. Another day when the sun is out.

Another day when people will get out of bed and go to work. Today is another day, and just like yesterday, today will pass in a few hours. My anxiety and worries, the fear in my heart that is sitting in my chest as if this organ is a sofa and my body a home. No matter if it will remain . . . this day will not. And neither will tomorrow. These days will not wait for me nor will the people that progress with these days. Everything will move forward and I will remain here—me and my anxiety.

I know this truth, and that is the reason why I can’t let myself remain in the same mind frame I was in yesterday. I guess it’s right when they say to sleep it off. Waking up, right now, things don’t seem as chaotic as they did yesterday. The day is moving forward, and I feel like I am going to move with it too.

Slipping out of the strong arm feels harder today when William shuffles closer and pulls me back into his arms as soon as I move an inch. It takes me three times before I manage to successfully escape to the bathroom. Somehow, I feel like I have a very long day ahead of me.

“What are you planning on doing now?”

Thirty minutes later finds my eyes fluttering towards the older woman seated opposite me on the breakfast table with a cup of tea in her hand. It’s six in the morning right now and, except for the housekeepers, Mrs. Noo and I are the only ones awake right now.

At the sound of her soft voice, the tension that I have been subconsciously feeling melts out of the tips of my toes and I let out a slow sigh, allowing the older lady to see my vulnerability.

“I don’t really know yet.”

I expect a pitiful smile from Mrs. Noo at my response. Instead, her eyes twinkle and the bright red lips part to show the dazzling white set of teeth. “I have lived more than you have, child. This matter . . . leave it to this old mother here.”

My eyes widen in surprise and I lean towards the table. “You have a plan?”

“Come sit beside me and I’ll tell you.” Mrs. Noo smiles at me, her eyes twinkling again.

“What are you two ladies talking about so early in the morning?”

Hearing the curious voice, Mrs. Noo and I move our heads back and look up at the man who has just walked in.

“Ma was just telling Gem about the event we have to attend tonight.”

“Oh.” William’s eyebrows crinkle in confusion and he strides into the kitchen, settling into the seat in front of us. “What event?”

“The Waticharit’s heir has gotten married recently, and they are holding a function here for families and friends to celebrate and introduce the daughter-in-law into the high society.”

“Waticharit . . . Saran got married? When?”

William blinks, looking visibly surprised as he pours himself a cup of tea and looks up at his mother expectantly.

“A few months ago, but the girl was doing her master’s so they officially did everything recently. Everyone says that she’s a true beauty.”

“Is the reception today?” William asks.

“Yes. Yuvina personally called so I could not say no. Besides, they won’t be here for too long. They are planning to go back next week.”

“They came to another country just to celebrate the son’s wedding?” I ask incredulously, unable to keep myself from butting in.

“The high society does a lot of nonsensical things, dear.” Mrs. Noo smirks at me, waving her hand dismissively in front of her face.

Well, that makes sense. “Okay, let’s go then.”

“Great! It’s a plan. You, Gemma, Isaac, and I.”

“Me?” I glance between the mother and son. Actually, will this be a good idea? I am clearly not from the high society. Lord knows the etiquette they need to follow at events like these? There’s only so much that novels and dramas can teach.

“You’re my fiancée.” William’s sharp eyes fix on me. “Who else will I take?”

I feel my cheeks begin to warm. Mrs. Noo dramatically clears her throat. “Alright then, it’s decided.”

It turns out that the event is held at one of the most expensive places in the city.

As the car rolls down the curvy driveway and stops in front of the main entrance, I marvel at the luxurious feel of the entire place and the rich-looking people carefully getting out of their vehicles in front of the entrance.

I didn't think the high society would look so closely like it does in movies. I guess we can sometimes believe what we see on TV screens.

"Nervous?" Mrs. Noo whispers beside me. I glance at her and smile nervously.

"A little," I admit.

Immediately, five warm fingers slide between my own. "If you're uncomfortable, then you and Isaac can just stay up in one of the rooms until it's over and we will come to pick you."

His warm consideration makes me smile. This intention that I have in my heart becomes even stronger, and I tighten my hold on his hand. "It's okay. I can handle this."

This place is dazzling, heavy with the fragrance of affluence and money. Everyone around me is elegantly dressed from their head to their toes and mingling around very respectfully. There's soft piano music playing in the background.

"Let's go meet the bride and groom." I feel William's warm breath against my ear and tilt my face a little towards him to nod. The tip of my nose brushes against his cheek, making him smile.

A small tug on my dress pulls my attention away from the man to the pouting child standing beside me.

Softly untangling his small fingers from my dress, I wrap my fingers around his tiny hand. "Let's go in and have a good time, okay?"

Seeing my attention back on him, Isaac grins happily and gives me an enthusiastic nod. My smile brightens, and I lift my head to look at the space where the bride and groom are seated.

As we walk closer and closer to the couple, I can't help but feel more and more confused. The clearer the features of the two people get, the more I stare at the absolutely gorgeous girl who, only a few weeks ago, I had seen crying at that resort.

"Isn't she—" I turn my head and whisper when William's fingers squeeze my hand softly.

"I think so," he mumbles back. "Let's pretend we don't know."

I silently agree. It's only going to be awkward for all of us otherwise. My gaze once again moves to the girl and observes her silently as she smiles at everyone who comes and blesses her, closing her eyes when an elder puts their hand on her head and wishes her and that toadstool of a husband well.

The girl, she looks sincere, but why exactly did they get married for nothing but pretence? I turn towards the man just as he glances at the girl beside him.

I watch as he watches the girl beside him while she laughs with the elder lady who comes to wish her. I watch as the corner of his lip tilts up when the elder lady puts her hand on the girl's head and she closes her eyes and smiles brightly.

So . . . he likes her, doesn't he?

"You got married without telling me," William speaks in a reprimanding manner when we reach the couple and it is our turn. Saran's grin widens and he quickly stands up, giving William a hug.

"It happened too quickly. I wanted to grab your sister-in-law before anyone else did," Saran jokes, patting William on the back before turning towards the beautiful girl who is now bent down slightly and talking to a shy Isaac.

"Kad, this is my university senior, William, little master Isaac, and his —" He turns to me and I smile at him brightly.

"Fiancée, Gemma," I fill in for him, and immediately, his eyes twinkle and he looks at William with a surprised look.

"Who is the one here who isn't telling their friend big news?"

At this, William lets out a loud laugh and pats Saran on the back. "I guess we are even then."

He turns to the bride. "I wish you two many, many years of spring. My friend here can get bad sometimes, so don't worry and give him a hard time back when he's being dumb."

"Hey, are you my friend or hers?"

"I was your friend. Now, I am hers."

Saran blinks before he turns towards me. I have to rearrange my expression once again so that I'm not looking at him as harshly.

"Gemma, you and I have to band up then," he says with a bright smile. I can only laugh along.

"Congratulations," I beam at the beautiful girl who smiles back at me softly.

I hope you teach him a good lesson. I hope he falls in love with you and you make him run after you. I hope you always remember that the one who is lucky here, is him not you. You should not cry for him. I smile at the

dazzling girl.

“Thank you. You have a very adorable son,” she, who is ignorant to my silent words of advice, replies sweetly.

Looking down at Isaac and caressing his hair affectionately. “Thank you!” My smile brightens and then turn to Isaac as well, who is looking up at me with his soft eyes. “He is my heart.”

“Aoo, you’re on the short end here, Will.” William and Saran chuckle.

“Mummy, can I get that?”

I glance in the direction of Isaac’s attention and spot the server holding a tray full of snacks at a distance.

I look back to smile politely at Saran and Kad before tightening my hold on the child’s hand.

“Sure, darling, let’s go get it.”

“Isaac.”

My head shoots up at the stylish voice, my eyes snapping immediately to the side of the seat where a woman I don’t think I can ever forget is standing in front of Isaac.

Her hand is stretched out and resting on a suddenly scared-looking Isaac’s head. My gaze slowly moves from Isaac to Shirley and back to Isaac.

“Mummy misses you, baby.” She tries to smile, but I can see her eyes water as she looks down at the child. At the same time, Declan comes and stands behind her, his gaze moving from her back to me and then William.

I feel people that are standing close to us turning to look in our direction—probably curious about a showdown between an ex-wife and current partner.

Seeing the scene that is happening in front of me, even when I feel like sliding closer to Isaac and pulling him close, I find myself frozen in my place, unable to do anything except wonder exactly where William and Mum are and why this had to happen when they aren’t here.

While I’m still in my shameful state of frozen, a scared Isaac turns his head towards me and very strongly calls out, “Mummy!”

“Yes, bubba?” I find myself breathing out, shaken by the child’s voice.

“I don’t want to eat cake anymore.” Unlike the first time, this time, his words are almost a mumble. Still, it’s enough to get my limbs to work

again.

Immediately, I extend my hand and pull him close for me, leaving the other woman's hand frozen in the air. In the background, the music changes, and suddenly, a song I can't understand begins playing.

"Let's go find your grandma and dad, alright?" I coax the clearly disturbed child, feeling guilty for partially being the reason for him being this way.

Somehow, I feel like he's this scared because he's worried I'll disappear again like the last time I did when Shirley showed up.

"Have you been promoted yet or are you still just a fiancée? You know I've appealed for custody, right? I'll get him."

Shirley's words stop me in my tracks. For the first few seconds, I remain still, digesting her words, then I turn back to her.

Her beautiful peach flower-shaped eyes widen. A smile blossoms on my lips. My eyes drift to the man behind her. I nod at him cordially.

And then I turn around and walk away.

* * *

The sun rises again the next day at the same time. Just as it does every day. I am awake before it. Just as I always am every day. Looking into the mirror, I make sure my hair looks fine and my lipstick is in place before I give the two sleeping boys a final glance and slowly walk out of the room with my bag in my hand.

As I slip out of the front door and shut the door behind me, my phone begins to ring. Looking down at my phone, I quickly pull the ringing device out and accept the call, putting the phone against my ear.

"You're good to go?" Olly's reluctant voice sounds from the recurred. A smile forms on my lips and I cut the call after thanking him.

The black car in front of me is standing still. In my palm, the car keys suddenly begin feeling warm. I tighten my grasp around it subconsciously.

My legs stride towards the shining grey Audi. A press of a button and the car door unlocks with a click; I slide into the driver's seat. When the door clicks close beside me, I turn around and put my bag on the back seat, then slowly settle into the seat. Waiting.

My palms are a bit sweaty. A part of my brain wants to yell at me to

stop doing this and just go back into the house and pretend to be asleep, but if I don't do this; I'm afraid I'll be stuck on this spot forever.

The sound of an incoming call blares loudly within the confines of the car. I glance down at the lit screen, at the name that's flashing on it.

Unable to keep staring, my nimble fingers pick up the phone and place it against my ear.

"Why aren't you at home?" His question arrives before I can say anything.

Somehow, hearing the concern in his voice makes me smile.

"Good morning. I'm outside. You have ten minutes to get ready and get in the car."

"Gem . . . what is going on?"

"Nine minutes, fifty-five seconds," I reply softly.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!"

When the call disconnects and there is once again just me and the silence of this car, I dial another number and press on call.

The line connects not soon after as an excited voice sounds from the phone.

"Is it working?"

"Yeah," I whisper into the phone.

"Are you scared?" Mrs. Noo laughs.

"Mummm," I whine softly, feeling the tips of my fingers begin to tingle again.

"Don't worry, everything will be okay. He'll understand."

A sigh escapes my lips and I nod to myself. "Mmm."

"Okay, he's coming! Start the car! Good luck!" Mrs. Noo suddenly whispers excitedly and then cuts the call before I can even say anything.

My heart begins to drum. I let the phone fall on to my lap and quickly start the car, taking deep breaths until I see William open the front door and walk out.

Immediately, I let all my nervousness wash away. My face relaxes and I try to look as unreadable as possible.

Soon enough, the passenger side's door opens and William slips in, buckling up the seatbelt before turning to me.

Instead of looking at him or answering the questions that are simmering in his head, I simply begin driving.

Throughout the drive, there is only silence and my nervously beating heart. I don't know for how long I drove or anything before reaching the location, but soon enough, we're here. Now, Willis and I are seated in the parked car.

None of us knowing how to speak first.

"If we get out of this car, we will get married today. If we don't, then I will drive us back home and we can pretend this never happened."

"Gem—"

I cut him off. "We can't pretend that getting married right now won't help the situation, but you also can't keep behaving like me wanting to marry you is because I'm sympathetic towards the situation and not because I love you. Didn't I want to marry you before all of this happened? Don't you think you trying to put all of our parents's efforts off doesn't only disappoint them but also me?"

"Gemma, we can marry after everything is sorted. It's really not bad, I have it under control." William sighs, his tone is insistent like he's trying to persuade a child.

"I know it is," I reply gently. "But that is not the point. You have had me from the very moment Isaac ran up to me and called me his mum. Is our love really limited to our pride being above it?"

"When our parents wanted to finalise a date, I didn't say anything when you told them that you wanted to wait . . . but that doesn't mean that was what I wanted as well," I say clearly, my gaze on the old lady passing the parking lot in front of us.

"Weren't you the one who told me to tell you everything? To share things with you and not be afraid of what you think? Can you please extend that towards me too? Can you please not treat me like an outsider?"

I know William is looking at me right now. I know the emotion in his eyes is a surprise, but I can't make myself look him in the eye. I don't think I will be able to speak if I do.

"Gem," William breathes out, twisting in his seat to grab a hold of my hand on my lap. As soon as his fingers curl over my palm, I wrap my fingers around his and squeeze softly.

"We're here now. I'm telling you that I love you and I want to marry you. You can get out of this car together with me and get married right now or we can turn around and go back home." I glance up at him. "You decide."

A moment passes. Within this moment, I feel like I have waited an eternity, then the sound of the car's door opening echoes in my ear. My gaze snaps up just as William gets out of the car and turns back to look at me.

"Let's go."

Because endings are always just the beginnings.

EPILOGUE

10 years later

Shanghai Airport

On a Monday morning in the city of Shanghai, one could witness the usual organised flurry of people moving in and out of the extravagant building as the latest plane from many countries and cities landed and left the international airport. In this busy airport, a slim woman in a dusty blue dress is making her way towards the exit swiftly while pulling a trolley carrying her luggage behind her.

There is no one who had come to pick her up. No one is waiting to meet her with a wave. Still, the golden-coloured woman has a bright smile on her face, her fingers buzzing with excitement and eyes sparkling so brightly it doesn't fail to make a few people falter in their steps when they see her. Years later, even though she had grown much and her hairs now needed black retouches sometimes, the beauty of the woman has not faltered over the years but instead increased.

“Gemma, this way!” A tall muscular man steps forward and waves his hand, gathering her attention when she walks out of the main door.

For a moment, she's surprised, then she's almost flying closer to the man.

“How did you know?” Gemma almost yelled in surprise, stunned at finding the kind-looking bodyguard waiting for her before wrapping her arms around his torso and giving him a grateful hug.

Gemma thought it would be alright being able to do this alone. To be able to fly all the way from Toronto to Shanghai without anyone knowing.

“Saara gave me a call.” Olly chuckles fondly, not even giving her a

chance to refute when he quickly pulls the trolley from her after they broke their hug and he begins making his way towards a line of parked vehicles.

“You look lovely. Just like the last day I saw you.” Olly smiles at the younger woman as he holds on to the car’s door and she begins to slide into the back seat.

Even as Olly says those words, they both know the truth. Compared to the last day that they had seen each other at the airport in Toronto, Gemma has become drastically slimmer. Although right now, her face is sparkling with excitement and hope, making her flushed cheeks, rosy lips, and dainty figure allure almost every man to want to take care of her. She is still visibly lighter and with sharper features. It’s obvious that the separation has taken a toll on her.

Not knowing how to reply properly, Gemma shrugs away his compliment and, instead, looks at him earnestly with one leg inside the car and one still out. “He doesn’t know, does he?”

“Of course he does.”

It took four words, just four words for everything around Gemma to freeze for a moment. Her hands that were still lazily limp on her side begin to moisten from nervousness.

At this moment, a strong, cold hand wraps around her wrist and tugs her into the car. As Gemma feels herself suddenly tumble into the car, Oliver makes sure no part of her hits the door or gets hurt, then, the door is shut close in her face.

The cold silence in the car could trick anyone into thinking that there is no one in there with them. However, Gemma knows better. It’s hard to think she’s alone—being held so intimately, her back against a hard chest.

“I missed you.” The man’s voice was gruff and low, wrapping his arms around her waist and holding the weight of her breast over them.

When one hand untangles itself from the other and makes its way from her waist to touch her cheek, a platinum wedding band flashes in the corner of Gemma’s eyes before her cheek is caressed and head is turned to look at the man.

“Wife.” His voice is softer this time, so soft that Gemma feels like the chilly car suddenly feels warm against her skin.

His lips touching the corner of her lips is like a switch. As soon as the man’s arm tightens around her and his mouth shifts on top of hers, Gemma

finds herself turning in the seat and throwing her arms around William.

“I missed you too,” Gemma declares, burying her head against William’s neck as she hugs him harder.

A chuckle rumbles out of William’s chest, and he carefully tucks the smaller woman in his arms. A frown shadows his face for a moment when he notices just how much more fragile she feels in her arms, then he quickly files the concern away for later and places his chin on Gemma’s head.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming when I called?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise,” Gemma offers weakly.

She hasn’t been in these arms for a year now. Twelve months since she has seen her husband and her son.

What had started with William’s father wanting him to go back home and take care of his place as the family heir, and Gemma suddenly being promoted back in Toronto around the same time, somehow, it ended with everyone deciding that while everyone else would make their move back to China first, Gemma was going to stay back for a year while trying to apply and find work in China with a similar position to her promoted one.

At first, even more so than Isaac’s adamant disapproval of that decision, Gemma really hadn’t liked the idea as well. However, William was just as stubborn as mother and son, making Gemma agree to not compromise with her career as well as magically making Isaac understand somehow.

Gemma still didn’t know how he had done that.

At first, everyone was consoled by the prospect of spending holidays together and catching flights to visit each other often. However, life often works on the opposite team, and so, in the end, everyone got busy adjusting to the new workload and school, too caught up with situations to fly for hours in order to meet each other in person. While no one had flown over to see the other person, they had always managed to FaceTime and call each other. At least that way, it didn’t feel like they were too far apart.

Somehow . . . like this, a year had passed by before anyone knew it.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait at home?”

A sigh slips out of Gemma’s lips at the sound of that question. She turns slightly in her husband’s arms and shakes her head, a strained smile on her lips.

“You know he’s mad at me. He hasn’t talked to me properly ever since you all moved here.”

“Who would have thought that he’d be just as attached to you even now.” William scoffs, shaking his head as if remembering some good memory.

Gemma immediately pouts under husband’s teasing. “He’s still young.”

“He’s turned fifteen already, darling.”

“I think it’s better than if he’d behave like all these other teenagers his age.”

The car smoothly rolls down alien roads and streets, passing tall buildings and dazzling views of the large and glorious city of Beijing; Gemma looks out of the window in a bit of a wonder.

The entire month before finally moving to China is a bit of an emotional rollercoaster. Although she has an extra year to settle herself into this reality, leaving behind her friends and family was still hard in the end.

She has spent the past year trying to find a Chinese publishing house that would hire her, even with her beginner-level Mandarin skills and her clause to be able to work from home.

After many interviews and many emails, just when she finally found a place that she likes and who likes her as well, Nathan approaches her with a prospect that left her feeling weak limbed at that time.

The company was planning on expanding its market and had managed to acquire an already existing publishing house in Shanghai and had chosen Gemma to be in charge of the transition. In the following week after her new responsibility was given to her, Gemma had the opportunity of interviewing and picking her own team who was willing to move to the branch in Shanghai with Gemma.

In the end, Tully and Wendina ended up coming along. Sean had wanted to join the team as well, but well . . . a certain someone had not let him. Ehem. He never failed to complain about that in their group chat though. And Jennie . . . well, Jennie had finally been promoted to Gemma’s position; she and her family were very happy.

Now, they are going to work together to use the Shanghai branch to not only bring western literature to the Chinese people, but also Chinese literature to the western world.

Bottom line is . . . Gemma is glad that she has Tully and Wendina with her.

“It’s been a year,” William says out loud, his thumb slowly rubbing against the warm skin of Gemma’s inner wrist as they sit in the car, a little leaning in towards each other but still comfortable.

“A year, huh?” Gemma smiles, acknowledging the time that both the husband and wife had lost between them, and yet somehow, being in each other’s arms right now, feels like they have never been separated at all.

“Do you think he’ll forgive me?” Gemma’s whisper drifts in the air inside the car. The question breaks the heavy silence that has come to settle itself within the car after it had been parked by the school’s gate five minutes ago.

It’s raining outside. Although the sun is out and shining, fat drops of water continue to fall to the ground, making dozens of black umbrellas—which seem to be included in the dress code of the school—expand and move out of the gates in the hands of their owners. Each student is very smartly dressed in black and white from head to toe until their parents or drivers gather them from the gates and they proceed to move along.

Gemma’s eyes remain on the umbrellas, watching each child make their way out while searching for a very familiar face underneath it.

“He’ll forget about everything as soon as he sees you,” her husband comforts her, running his hand along the length of her arm softly. Just as he spoke these words, Gemma’s face softens as she sees what she had been waiting for.

Her eyes light up immediately, her hands reaching for the umbrella that is leaning against her knee. As the door behind her closes and the rain begins to clash against the yellow umbrella above her head, she finds herself taking long strides into the boy’s path.

Her feet stop in its tracks when he is a few steps away, his face becoming clearer and clearer underneath the umbrella as he comes closer.

Ah, long gone was the small little boy with chubby cheeks and stars in his eyes. Instead, now, walking towards her is a young man who is already taller than her. Gone are his chubby cheeks; now, there’s a sharp jaw and cheekbones that resembles his father’s.

There was a time, a few years back, when she had thought that she was going to lose him. It had taken months of arduous sessions with the lawyers and trips to the court for Gemma to finally be able to sleep well at night without the fear that he was going to be taken away from her.

Now, he really is legally her son and no one could show up and legally try to claim him as theirs. Gemma has sacrificed having her own child for him; there is no way she is going to lose him.

A soft smile blooms in the corners of her lips at that thought, uncurling itself until she is smiling excitedly without any restraints as her hand holding the umbrella is suddenly sweaty. She turns around to nervously glance at the black car that her husband is seated in. Seeing a large palm press against the tinted mirror made the short woman laugh; William always has his own special ways to give her assurance.

Feeling a lot lighter, Gemma turns back around just in time to see the tall boy's gaze lift up and land on her.

Around them, the rain continues to pour, students continue to walk—their loud laughter and excited mumbles rippling in the air around them. Gemma stands in her spot, unable to move an inch as she watches the boy's eyes widen with realisation, his lips tremble slightly and then his feet quicken in their motion as his hand gives away and his umbrella falls on the pavement . . . left behind and forgotten.

In just a few seconds, he's before her, his dark eyes peering into Gemma's soul, reminding her once again of her husband. Worried about him, Gemma quickly takes a step forward and brings the umbrella above his head.

"Bubba . . . Mummy found you." Gemma grins up at the wide-eyed boy.

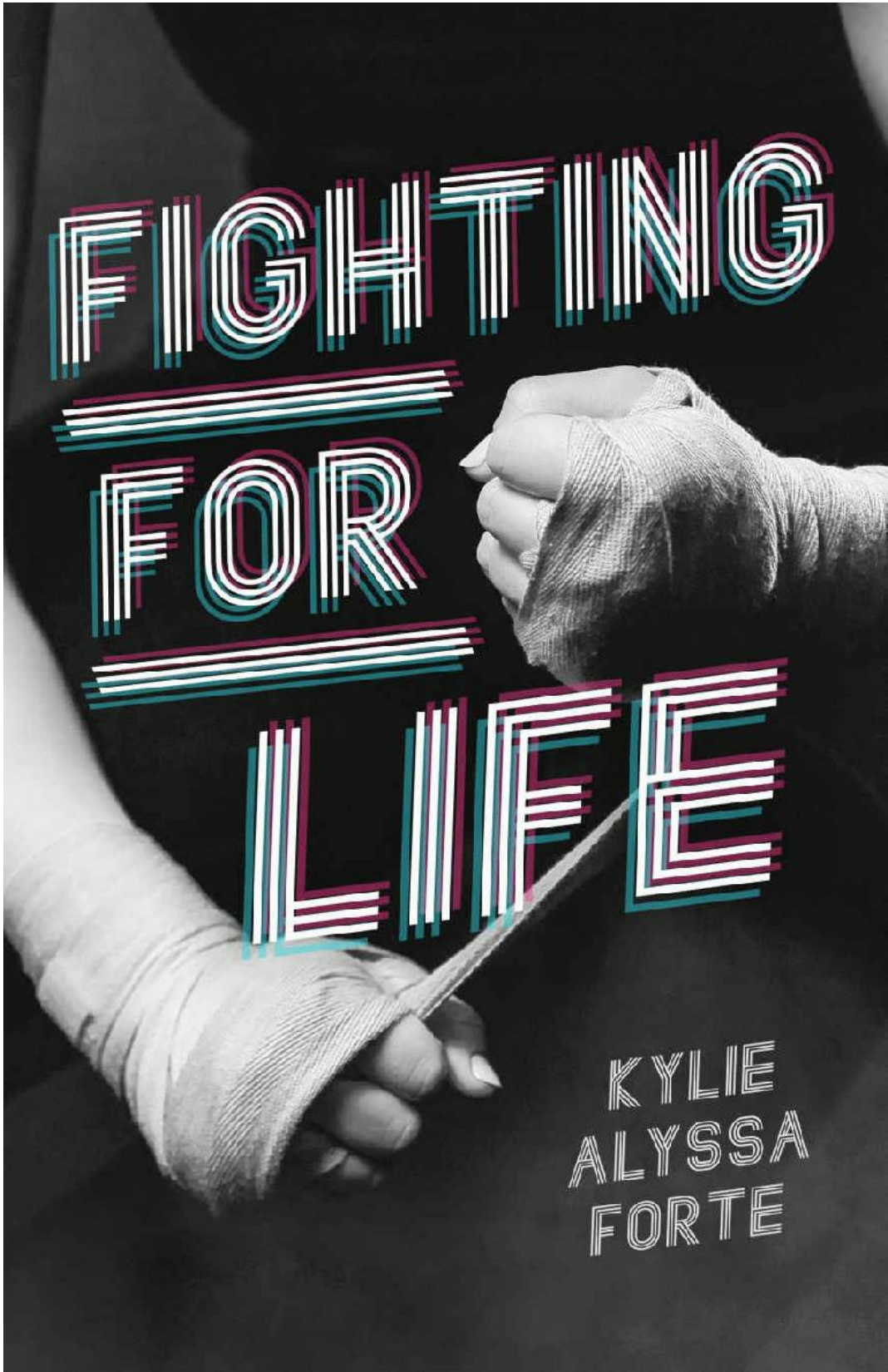
These words. As soon as these words leaves her lips, Isaac's face crumbles, and he immediately wraps his wet arms tightly around her.

"Ma, I miss you."

"I miss you too, Isaac."

I miss you too.

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you might enjoy!



FIGHTING

FOR

LIFE

KYLIE
ALYSSA
FORTE

CHAPTER ONE

Little Girl

AUBRY

I stared into his cold brown eyes, the ones that usually were bright with laughter as I handed him his money at the end of the month. I swallowed as he had his hands wrapped around my wrists tightly. Surely, he was leaving bruises.

“Where’s the money, little girl?” Demetri asked with venom laced in his voice.

“I-I-I don’t have it,” I stuttered out.

I closed my eyes tightly while wishing to not be in that situation anymore, wishing to be anywhere but there.

His breathing sped up, and I felt a hard punch to the right side of my jaw. My head jerked over as I inhaled sharply. It hurt like hell, but I wasn’t going to let him know that; I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. Besides, I’ve had a whole hell of a lot worse than that.

“Listen here you little bitch . . . I put my trust in you, gave you the benefit of the doubt, and supplied you multiple times with *my* drugs. Now you’re telling me you don’t have *my* money?” he said sharply.

Another blow came to the side of my head. It hurt a little less, but it still made my ears ring. I breathed in slowly, trying to calm down, trying to tell myself that everything was going to be fine. I knew it wasn’t going to be okay though, I messed with the wrong people.

“I-I’m s-sorry I was robbed, they stole everything,” I tried to plead with him so I could make him understand that it wasn’t my fault. It was my father and his demented friend’s fault, that’s why I hadn’t seen either of them for *three whole weeks*.

I could kill them. They were the reason I needed to do that bullshit in the first place! I should have just left like Kelsey did . . .

“No, I don’t want any of your damn excuses! They’re meaningless anyways. You were responsible for all of it. I trusted you to put them in a spot where no one could find them. I took pity upon you . . . a little fifteen-year-old girl coming to me, a drug lord, because she had nowhere else to turn to. I gave you the protection you asked for, yeah? How many times did anyone touch you after I told you I would take care of you?” He paused, waiting for me to answer.

“Um, n-none,” I stated as he grabbed my face in his hand.

“That’s right, none. I asked you to do one tiny little thing for me in return. Sell the supply and give me the profit, and this . . .” he gestured around the room for emphasis. “This is how you repay me? Making me track you down and telling me everything is gone?”

He slapped me this time on my left cheek. I couldn’t really feel it though. I was too worried about my fate and if I would even still be living when they left.

At that point, I was crying. For what? I don’t know. Maybe because this was all my father’s

fault; he was the one that stole the drugs, or maybe it was because this wasn't quite how I wanted to die. Either way, I was blubbering like a baby against the wall that was holding me up. I couldn't even stand up on my own because I was so scared.

"Do you know what I usually do to people who do this to me?" He moved my long hair out of my eye.

I shook my head "no" at him. I actually did know the answer—he usually killed them. I prayed silently that he wouldn't do that to me; I knew it was a lost cause though. I was as good as dead.

"I kill them. They die because of this." He paused as he took the gun from the holster on his hip and placed it upon my temple.

I started crying harder. I only had six more months 'til I was supposed to graduate, then I could've left that shitty town forever, but instead, I was going to die.

Six more months and everything could have been okay. Six more months, and I could have been free from the monsters that had control over me for my whole life.

I squeezed my eyes together tightly, waiting for him to pull the trigger. My breath was ragged, and my tears were soaking my shirt.

This was it . . . my death. It seemed so fucked up, the whole situation was fucked up.

"You look so much like your mother. She was one messed up bitch, but she was beautiful nonetheless, at least before the drugs. God, it sure would be a shame to blow your pretty little brains out." He removed the gun from my head, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Could it be? He wasn't going to kill me.

"What the fuck are you doing Demetri?" Daniel, Demetri's brother, asked from behind. He always did hate me ever since I went to Demetri's office and begged for help. Daniel was the one assigned to protect me, and he was not happy about that at all. As soon as he figured out that he couldn't treat me how he treated my sister *or* my mother, it all went downhill. I wasn't as agreeable as them. I wasn't as *weak* as they were, or maybe it was that I was actually way weaker than them. I wouldn't have been able to handle the things that they did or the things that they let happen to them.

I wasn't like that; I wasn't like them, and Daniel hated me for it.

"Look at her, she looks just like Jenny. I can't kill her. Besides, I always did like her . . ." Demetri stated with a sigh.

"Then give me the gun, and I'll do it. She fucked us! Twenty-five thousand dollars are gone because of that little bitch! Half a kilo of coke, two hundred and fifty G's of crystal, and a brick of green . . . It's all gone, and she let it happen!" He backhanded me across my face.

My face whipped to the side, and I bit back a scream.

"She deserves to die. I don't know what your little obsession over Jenny was, but she is dead, and this is not her." Daniel pointed to me and snarled. "This is a piece of shit that deserves what's coming to her."

Demetri put his hand up, silencing his younger brother instantly. "I know you feel strongly about this, but this is *my* business, and *I* have the final word."

Daniel scowled at me due to Demetri's words.

"So Aubry . . ." He gently ran his fingers down my tear-stained cheeks. I wanted to cringe, but I couldn't risk pissing him off. "You're seventeen, right?"

I nodded quickly.

"Graduating this year too?"

I nodded again.

"When is your graduation?" he asked.

"May thirty-first," I said slowly, trying to piece his questioning together.

"Excellent. You have until then to give me *my* money, little girl."

My eyes widened. *Six months to get twenty-five thousand dollars? That's more than some*

people make in a whole year!

I opened my mouth to protest, but he cut me off quickly.

“Don’t make me change my mind. If you don’t get the money to me by then, I’ll certainly take Daniel up on his offer. You’re pretty, but not that pretty.”

“So that’s it then? We just leave her alone for six months waiting for the money? You understand she crossed us, correct? You’re just letting her off the hook,” Daniel said to his brother angrily. He wanted to kill me; I saw the bloodlust in his eyes.

“You’re certainly right, brother. Teach her a lesson or two about not keeping her word and to take better care of things.” He then looked pointedly at me. “I will be keeping my eyes on you, so don’t even think about skipping town.”

He turned and walked back to the front door of my house and nodded at Daniel, “Have your fun.”

He looked at two of the several giant bodyguards. “Don’t let him kill her.”

With that, I heard the door open and close. He was gone, and I was in deep shit.

I pressed myself against the wall, firmly trying to blend in with it and praying that he wouldn’t go too hard on me. By the look in his eyes when he turned to me, I knew that prayer wasn’t going to be answered. His eyes held intense fury and hatred for me. He smirked at me, and I felt like throwing up, I knew this was going to be bad.

“Please, I am so sorry!” I screamed as he charged at me quickly. He hit me in the chest, and I fell against the wall, hard. All my breath was knocked out of my lungs, and my chest was on fire.

“No, you little bitch. My brother might have a soft spot for you, but I see what you are. You’re just like your father: unreliable, idiotic, and useless,” he said as he brought his fist down into my head. My vision blurred with his hard hit. “Your mother was a slut, just like you. How many guys have you fucked, huh?” He was taunting me while kicking me in the stomach.

I couldn’t breathe. I tried to gasp for air but every time I thought I was going to catch my breath, another blow came.

“Ten? Thirteen? No, maybe seventeen, one for every year of your life.” He spat on me in disgust.

My vision was becoming black from the lack of oxygen. Suddenly, he yanked me up by my hair. I was no longer crying, I could barely feel the blows to my body anymore. I just felt sick and really, really tired.

He yanked my head up to look at him in the eyes; it was too heavy for me to hold it up by myself. My breathing was coming back to me in little puffs, so the blackness was finally disappearing. When I could finally see clearly, I wished that I was blind. His face was so close to me, and his eyes held so much anger that I felt suffocated.

He wanted me dead. He smiled at me menacingly as he reached into his pocket. He was still holding me up by my hair so I couldn’t look down to see what it was, but one could only imagine.

“Remember what Demetri said, ‘You have to keep her alive’ so I suggest you don’t pull that out,” the tall bald man who was standing behind Daniel said gruffly.

“Chill, I know what I’m doing,” he snarled back at him and pulled the knife up to meet my face. I started to struggle some more, but he just pulled my hair tighter.

“Look here, *whore*, you’re going to be punished and by the time I’m done with you, you’ll wish you were never born,” he stated as he sliced the knife just underneath my collarbone.

Almost instantly, my white shirt was covered from the shoulder down with crimson blood. I felt like fainting but instead, I mustered up enough strength and smirked at him.

“It’s . . . a little t-too late for that . . . D-Daniel, I started wishing that *years* ago,” I croaked out, feeling like I was going to faint. The world was buzzing around me as he held me up. I knew I couldn’t take much more; my body was already trying to give out from the numerous hits it had already

endured. Just a few more hard hits, and I'd be out.

Out seemed to be a much better option than what I was going through at that point, though.

He practically growled at me as he smacked me with the knife handle on my cheek. I could feel the gash instantly, blood poured down my cheek and into my mouth. I fell to the ground as soon as he let go of me.

He kicked me as soon as I fell. "You stupid bitch. Don't you dare . . ." he emphasized each word with another kick to my body.

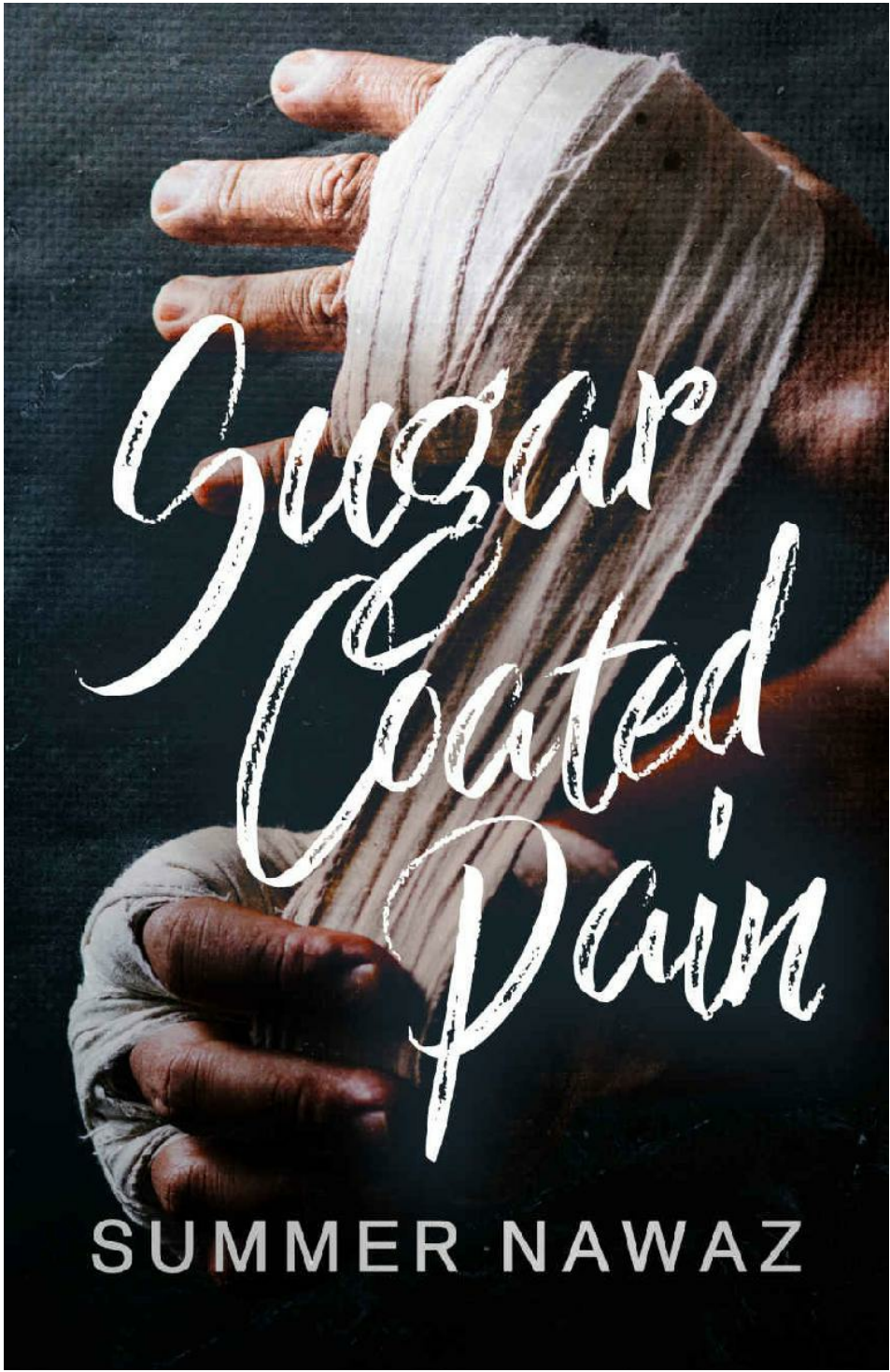
I could no longer hear after that, and to be honest, I couldn't even tell where the hits were going anymore. I was done and my body was too. It had taken too many hits to bear. I mean, I had been hit and beaten many times in my life, but this guy was trying to kill me.

I painfully turned over and tried to get into the fetal position, but my body protested. I couldn't move anymore; it was too painful. Everything was black, and I couldn't do anything but lay there.

I must have passed out completely soon after that because I have no recollection of anything that had happened after. I could only remember black, the cold and lonely black.

Did Daniel succeed in what his brother didn't do? Did he kill me?

If you enjoyed this sample, look for
Fighting For Life
on Amazon.



*Sugar
Coated
Pain*

SUMMER NAWAZ

CHAPTER ONE

The feel of the hardcover in her hands and the smell of new books that greeted her every time she picked them up comforted Noelle Simon as she continued her work. She was currently fixing up the horror or thriller section of the store she helped run, replacing the sold out books with copies she picked up from the inventory earlier. Once she was satisfied with how a shelf looked, she moved on to the next one.

While she normally enjoyed doing this, her sister talking her ear off made it difficult for Noelle to work peacefully.

“Come on, Elle,” her twenty-four-year-old sister, Beverly, whined to her left. “He just wants to take us out. You like Aiden. Why’re you being so difficult?”

“Because I don’t wanna be a third wheel,” Noelle replied, putting up copies of Bram Stoker novels as she shot her blonde sister a pointed look. “I do like Aiden, but you two end up in your own little world. I don’t wanna be sitting there all awkward and shit.”

Beverly huffed, glossy lips forming a pout. “I promise we’ll try to hold back on that,” she insisted, shuffling forward as Noelle moved further down the aisle. “Andrea loves going out with us, and it’s about time you come too. We’re not that bad, I swear,” she added with a laugh.

What Beverly said was true; Noelle liked Aiden. She had no reason not to. Knowing there was something special about him for her sister the day, almost a year ago, that Beverly called her up to gush about the absolutely divine—Beverly’s exact words—instructor who worked at the new gym she went to. They met last summer, right after Beverly graduated from college and was getting ready to fully run Simon’s Stories on her own. It was a miracle given that Beverly took a year off after high school to do some

traveling. She was convinced she didn't want to go back to college until she finally gave in on her own accord. Aiden had been a lender of support when she took over the business, which sometimes overwhelmed Beverly, and Noelle was too busy finishing up her own last year of college to be of much help. He was a good guy.

Not only did he treat Beverly well but Aiden also had a soft spot to their seventeen-year-old sister Andrea, bringing her along to nice outings as well. Noelle only met Aiden a handful of times despite him being with Beverly for the past year, but that was because Noelle was living in New Jersey for college. Now that she was back in the city and having just graduated a few weeks ago, Aiden wanted to take them out for dinner. While that wasn't strange and Noelle adored Aiden, she genuinely didn't want to be a third wheel.

When Beverly wanted something, she would insist and persuade until she would get it. Noelle could already feel her fight leaving her. She knew she was a bit of a pushover, especially when it came to her sisters, but Noelle didn't really care about that unless she absolutely had to stand her ground on something. Unfortunately, this didn't qualify.

"Why do we have to go to Brooklyn though?" she finally complained.

A smile began spreading on Beverly's lips, knowing she had talked her sister into dinner. "Because one of Aiden's friends opened up a restaurant there, and he hasn't tried it out yet." She smiled excitedly. "We'll get free dessert!"

Noelle shot her a dry smile, raising an eyebrow as she pushed the almost empty cart with her hip. "But dinner isn't free?" She clicked her tongue teasingly. "Then what's the point?"

"It is for us. It's Aiden's treat." Beverly laughed, shaking her head and walking past Noelle to go to the front of the store. "He'll pick us up at home at seven-thirty!"

* * *

Despite her initial hesitance, Noelle would be lying if she said she wasn't enjoying her time. It was nearing 9 PM, and she's been seated in the restaurant for about an hour and a half, finding it difficult to swallow a sip of

her wine as she laughed at yet another joke Aiden made. They were almost finished eating, and Noelle was savoring every taste of her Penne alla Vodka.

They were in an adorable and quaint Italian restaurant with sleek floors and dark walls that went nicely with the red chairs and white tables. The soft glow of the individual lamps hanging from the ceilings over each table provided a calming ambiance. The restaurant was right by the East River, and Aiden had gotten them a table on the upstairs patio that had fairy lights strung above their heads. The breeze was gentle against her skin, and the view of the Brooklyn Bridge kept demanding Noelle's attention.

"How much did you miss the city?" Aiden asked Noelle once they calmed down from their laughter, leaning back in his chair. "Or have you become a Jersey girl?"

Noelle snorted, picking up her almost empty glass of wine once more. "I'm always gonna be a city girl," she confirmed as Beverly smirked, "and I'm proud of it."

Aiden grinned, dimples in full view as he opened his mouth to say something, only to be cut off by the sound of his phone ringing. "Sorry." He shot Beverly and Noelle apologetic smiles as he answered the call, looking out over the railing they were sitting next to, towards the river.

"Hey, what's up?" The girls took this time to finish their food but didn't miss the sudden change of Aiden's tone as he practically hissed into the phone, "What?"

Noelle's eyes widened slightly at the harshness in Aiden's voice, drastically different than the usual excited, pleasant lilt his tone held whenever she talked to him. She glanced at Beverly, who didn't at all look fazed by his demeanor and instead had her eyebrows lowered in concern.

Am I missing something? Noelle thought.

"He's not scheduled for toni—" Aiden stopped, face contorted into a scowl as he listened to whoever was on the other end, still looking out towards the water. Noelle watched as Aiden clenched his jaw, his free hand running through his short curly hair, then he kept his fingers entangled at the back of his head. "Max, he's booked for the next two nights. He had tonight off for a goddamn reason."

Whatever Aiden was talking about sounded like some kind of work scheduling conflict to Noelle's ears. She knew Aiden was a fitness instructor at a gym in Manhattan, but the way he was speaking—the hard edge in his

voice and severe frustration on his face—made whatever he was talking about sound like a really big deal. When she looked at Beverly, Noelle saw realization flitter across her sister’s face, but there was still worry etched onto her features.

Aiden’s hazel eyes glanced over the two girls quickly. “I can’t. I’m in the middle of dinner,” he said into the phone before letting out a sigh and rubbing his hand down his face. He looked both riled up and defeated at the same time. “Fuck. Okay, alright. I’ll be there in ten.”

Noelle’s eyebrows shot up at that. *Is dinner over already?*

“I’m sorry to have to do this, girls,” Aiden apologized, his expression softening as he looked at them with a sheepish smile while pocketing his phone and taking out his wallet. “I have to get to Astros. It’s Car,” he said as his gaze met Beverly’s.

Beverly’s lips parted, evidently understanding what Aiden was talking about as he raised his hand for the waiter and gestured for the check while Noelle sat there, staring at the two of them in confusion. *What the hell is Astros and who is Car?*

“Um, what’s going on?” she questioned, letting her bewilderment be known as she shook her head slightly and persistently.

The check arrived promptly, and Aiden didn’t even bother looking at it as he put his credit card in and gave the little black folder back to the waiter. Noelle stared at her sister with a questioning raise of her eyebrows because, apparently, she knew exactly what was going on. “Oh, um . . . it’s just—”

“She’ll see when we get there, Bev,” Aiden cut her off, looking around impatiently for the waiter to return with his card. The muscle in his jaw was jumping, agitation practically radiating off of him. He looked so frantic, a complete deviation from his normal easy-going personality Noelle was used to.

Noelle watched as Beverly shot a wide-eyed look at the man. “Are you joking?” she demanded, her own tone taking a hard edge to it. Noelle blinked, not expecting her sister to suddenly get so disconcerted. Beverly leaned closer to Aiden. “Noelle isn’t going there,” she said, dropping her tone.

Aiden looked exasperated even as the waiter returned to give back the folder. Aiden quickly took out his card and shoved it back in his wallet. “I

have to get there ASAP, Bev. I'm not about to let either of you take the subway or Uber back home, okay? We don't have a choice, doll," he said to Beverly as he signed the receipt.

Okay. What the hell is going on? Noelle thought.

Aiden quickly stood up from his chair, looking like he couldn't get out of here fast enough. Beverly's jaw was clenched tightly, and she looked irritated as soon as Aiden said that Noelle would be coming with them. Meanwhile, the brunette slowly rose from her seat, trying to catch her sister's eye as she wondered why Beverly didn't want her going to this "Astro" place.

Noelle followed in silent bewilderment, frowning at the backs of Beverly and Aiden as they had an intense yet whispered conversation right in front of her while making their way out of the building. She was growing irritated at their lack of communication towards her, leaving her in the dark as they stepped out onto the sidewalk and approached Aiden's car. From the bits and pieces Noelle could gather, Beverly was still arguing that she didn't want Noelle to go to Astros, and Aiden was apologizing that there was no other way.

Beverly didn't bother hiding her distaste in the situation as they got in the car. "I don't like this." She heard her sister mutter as she slid in the back.

Don't like what? Noelle wanted to scream, watching Aiden let out a sigh as he buckled his seatbelt. "I know, doll. I'm sorry, but I have to go for Car."

Noelle clenched her jaw. She didn't like being in the dark. *Who the hell is Car?*

If you enjoyed this sample, look for
[**Sugar Coated Pain**](#)
on Amazon.



AMARA ROSE

his
EX-wife

CHAPTER ONE

MILLIANA

Once I heard the door open, I immediately ran to the entrance of the house. He was later than usual, and I was starting to get worried. He had been coming home late more and more often and was being distant towards me. It was making me anxious.

“Rafa, is that you?” I asked excitedly, but he walked in with a cold expression.

With one glance at his expression, I was confused. Usually, I’d be met with a charming smile, a kiss, and a comforting hug. Maybe a nice “I missed you today.” but never this.

“What happened?” I asked, worried and curious as to why he was acting so angry, so upset.

“Do you really want to know?” He spat coldly.

He sounded furious. But what was the reason for this?

“Yes, of course. You can tell me,” I insisted, taking another step towards him.

He could trust me. After all, I was his wife, his partner, for the last four years. He studied me intensely as if trying to find something. Then he let out a groan of frustration and looked away. Why was he acting like this?

“You. You just couldn’t be faithful, could you?” His words hit me like a smack in the face.

I looked at him in disbelief. How could he say that? I had been nothing but loyal for four years. I loved him and only him. How could he even imply that I was cheating? I loved him with everything I had. I felt my stomach clench, and my head spun from disgust and confusion.

“What?” I choked out, shocked.

My voice broke. This wasn't Rafa. This was someone else. It had to be. This couldn't be my husband.

“You wanted more, more, more! You're nothing but a gold-digger!” He shouted, and I gasped.

How could he say that? The clench in my stomach became stronger. I couldn't help but let the tears out of my eyes. The glue-like substance forcing its way up my throat was becoming harder to swallow.

“Rafa, how can you say this? I don't understand.” I was upset, scared, and confused. I felt betrayed.

“I bet that baby isn't even mine, is it?” He came closer to me, his face was inches away from mine. I smelt the alcohol on his breath. Was he drunk?

“Of course, this baby is yours. How dare you!” I cried.

I didn't think I'd ever felt so insulted. Our baby was the sweet fruit born from his very seed. He laughed savagely in my face. He quickly grabbed my jaw, making me look into his bloodshot eyes.

“Get out of my house, and don't come back.” He demanded with pure disgust.

I felt horrible. These words made me feel so dirty.

“Rafa, please tell me why you're acting like this,” I begged, wanting to know why he was treating me like this.

I didn't want to believe that this was happening. My body trembled with fear not only for me and our marriage but for our baby.

“Just get out!” he shouted in my face with finality.

“We can work this out. What's going on, my love? Please, tell me.” I held onto him, afraid I would lose him.

“You do not get the right to call me that! You are as dead to me as Lorenzo.”

I gasped. That was all it took for me to run upstairs. I entered our room and threw the door close. Once I heard the lock of the door click, I fell to my knees and let the tears come flowing down. I sobbed and pressed my hand against my chest. The pain was as brutal as someone was cutting my heart out.

It felt like my heart had been stabbed, the knife twisting its way deeper inside my chest. The anxiety attack hit me full force, and I couldn't breathe. I needed air. Quickly, I rushed to the open window and slowly took

large gulps of air.

After cooling down, I sat down on the plush bed. As I looked at the tiny bump that was my stomach, I smiled sadly. Did he not care about this innocent soul growing day by day? How it would want a father—actually, no. It would have me. A mother's love was everything.

My baby would have everything. I would give him or her the world. Grabbing an empty suitcase, I filled it with plain dresses, jeans, and tops. These were the only things I owned. Everything that was nice or fancy was bought by Rafael, and I could never take those. The thought of him already pained me.

I quickly changed into a black dress and fixed my hair up. I looked around the room and smiled wearily. I had designed our room, and I loved everything about it. I loved everything from the off-white walls to the cream furniture and the antique chandelier we imported from France to our black bedroom set.

On the marble drawer sat our wedding photos. We looked so happy, our smiles also showing in our eyes. I couldn't bear to leave without just one of those beloved photos, so I took one and put it into my bag. Then I opened my wallet, hoping to find my bus card. I hadn't used it for years, and if it were expired, I would have had to call a cab. Unfortunately, there were no cabs that I knew that drove so late at night, so finding this bus card was my only hope. Somehow I was lucky. It was going to expire in a few months, meaning I could put some money on it and take the bus to my mum's place.

"Are you done?" I heard from the other side of the door.

His voice penetrated the room, echoing with hatred. At the sound of his voice, my heart seized, and I wiped away a stray tear. I would be strong. He could believe what he wanted to. I had lived perfectly fine without him before. I could do it again.

A surge of confidence struck me, and I held my head high. Quickly wiping the rest of my tears away, I clutched the handle of my suitcase. After I took one last look at the room I had slept in for the last four years, I opened the door to see him. His head was down. Oh, so now he wouldn't look me in the eye?

He led the way, and I followed like a weeping willow being dragged by the wind. Once we reached the door, he handed me some papers. When I finished glancing at them, my breath caught in my throat. They were divorce

papers.

I was in disbelief. This felt like a horrible dream. I felt like I would wake up any second. But even as I fisted my hands so hard, I felt my nails pierced my palms, I didn't wake up. This was my reality now. He handed me a pen and looked at the blank line, waiting for me to sign my name on it.

"You will get nothing from me, not even a penny, so don't even ask. Sign them and make your way out."

After a few flicks of the pen, I looked to see my name written on the line. Twisting the handle, I looked him in the eye and cringed at the oath within.

"When you come to your senses, it'll be too late," I told him timidly even if I had wished it could have come out stronger and took my first step out the door.

He grabbed my arm so hard I winced. His grip was like a vengeful cobra.

"Ana, you're pathetic, small, and ugly. I'm so glad I'm getting rid of you."

Another piece of my heart shattered, falling into the pit of my stomach. I felt numb. All my past confidence went down the drain and was replaced by weakness.

Somehow I managed to say, "Please let go. You're hurting me."

He let go and left but not before saying ever so maliciously, "Get the fuck out."

He looked at me as I took another step. His eyes were full of regret. I didn't know why, but I wanted to leave. I took the last step and left the place I called home for four years.

* * *

RAFAEL

"Chris, I'll be in a meeting. Send any urgent emails to my phone. I'm hoping to get some confirmation checks from Davison's finance department, so keep a lookout." I commanded and made my way to the conference room.

As I sat down, I couldn't help but smile as I thought of Milliana and the baby. She had been having weird cravings late at night, and it was

adorable. I couldn't wait for Ariella or Adam to come into this world. As the few businessmen came strolling in, I stood up and began to greet them, but all I could think about was her, my stunning angel.

After an hour of negotiations, I finally finished the deal, and the meeting was over.

I pulled out my phone and looked at it to see if Milliana had called. She had left five voicemails, and I was itching to hear her sweet voice, but I had to check my emails. I strolled into my office and sat down on my leather office chair. I switched my computer on and checked my emails, but none of them were from the Davison's company. Gritting my teeth, I sighed. I really needed these confirmation checks to secure this deal.

My computer beeped, and I looked to see it was Ethan Layne. Why was that bastard emailing me? I opened the email, and there was a file attached.

When I clicked on the file, I was in shock. I shook my head. This wasn't real. It couldn't be.

"Sherry," I called through the intercom.

"Yes, sir?" She came in.

"Run this through the media department. There should be a Photoshop expert." I demanded, my voice harsh and cold.

She ran off to obey my orders and I sat down. I let out a long breath and rubbed my face. I couldn't do anything but sit and hope that I would be told it was false. It had to be. I eventually stood up to make my way to the mini bar, pouring whiskey into my glass continuously, letting the alcohol take away my stress.

* * *

Now, a few days after I had kicked my angel out of the house, I leaned back and took deep breaths, trying to steady my heartbeat. Feeling the wetness on my cheeks, I harshly wiped the tears away. How could my angel deceive me this way?

I almost wanted the baby to actually be mine. But that child was not mine; it was the result of her one-night stands. I loved her so much. What would I do without her?

I walked alone in the house I once shared with the love of my life. In

a flash of anger, I took all the photo frames and broke them, the shards of glass scattering across the floor. I already missed her. I wanted her back. I regretted it.

“Why?” I asked, shouting at no one but myself.

It hit me then that without her I was no one. I was just a half without its significant other.

But there was nothing I could do. I just had to accept it.

If you enjoyed this sample, look for
[**His Ex-Wife**](#)
on Amazon.

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Before anyone, I would like to thank everyone who has been on this journey with me while I was writing.

I am not a quick writer, and *Someone Like You* was not completed in a few months. Therefore, I am grateful to you if you have stayed with me from the beginning, or held my hand somewhere along the way. If we have read the words “The End” together, I thank you.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *Someone Like You*! I can't express how grateful I am for reading something that was once just a thought inside my head.

Please feel free to send me an email. Just know that my publisher filters these emails. Good news is always welcome.

jennise_k@awesomeauthors.org

I'd love to hear your thoughts on the book. Please leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads because I just love reading your comments and getting to know you!

Can't wait to hear from you!

Jennise K

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jennise comes from the beautiful country of Fiji, holds a Bachelors degree in Biology and Psychology, and is currently progressing towards eventually becoming a Dentist.

When she is not writing, she spends time with her family at home, either watching an Asian drama or up-taking one quiet hobby or another like the introvert she is.

In the future Jennise aims to work full time, write part time, and travel to other countries in order to taste their cuisine in her spare time... or well, whenever she can get some free time.