

The CEO

Prologue

Without thinking twice, I removed the cap of the pen and signed. I signed my life away. I signed myself away.

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Alice was a hardworking woman who was scraping the bottom of the barrel. Despite wanting to enjoy life, Alice was stuck working two low paying jobs in order to earn money for her little brother's surgery, but to no avail.

Alice needed money and she needed it fast. Otherwise, she would lose her brother. So when a once in lifetime opportunity presents itself in a form of a newspaper advertisement, Alice

jumps at the chance.

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Chris Palmer is the owner of the world biggest business empire, palmer Enterprises. He is ruthless and had the power to destroy anyone with just a snap of his fingers. In his circle, he is regarded as Dark Royalty. Despite having everything, what he wanted was an heir, who would inherit his empire when the time came. So he holds interviews in order to find the perfect wife who is going to give him an heir.

When Chris interviews Alice, he believes that Alice does not fit his standards of a wife at all, but can he be wrong?

When Alice leaves Palmer Enterprises, she thinks that she won't ever see Chris Palmer ever again, but her beliefs are shattered when

she sees him again and realizes that he has no intention of letting her go.

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Warning: mature content!

The CEO

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I crossed my right leg over my left one, glancing at the clock which told me I had been sitting here for an hour. Clutching my file with my hands, I waited for my turn to go into the CEO's office for my interview. But as I looked around me, taking note of nearly fifty women sitting waiting for their turns, I knew it was going to be a long time before I was allowed to go in, which

didn't help lessen my anxiety in the least. I needed to get this interview over with as soon as possible, my little brother was at home, alone, which was not ideal for his current condition, and I needed to go to him.

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The door of the CEO's office opened and a woman with blonde hair exited crying her eyes out. Her mascara was running down in thin, black streams while her gray eyes were bloodshot. Without saying a word, the woman stormed towards the lone elevator that was present on the floor and stabbed the call button repeatedly until the elevator arrived. Entering the elevator, her existence vanished as the doors closed.

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"Number twenty seven, Ms. Hannah, Mr. Palmer will see you now," the lady at the reception said

in a monotone.

A lady with jet black hair with green cat-like eyes stood up gracefully and smoothed her already smooth pink dress. Pasting on a seductive smile, she confidently sashayed inside the office. I didn't understand how she was not freezing in that flimsy dress?

My confidence faltered for the twenty seventh time as I saw yet another beautiful woman go for her interview. Even though I had absolutely zero interest in the man himself, I was interested in what he was offering. Money.

Chris Palmer owned the world's biggest business empire, and was the very definition of rich, he was practically royalty. There was nothing in this world that the man couldn't buy. He owned five private islands and was planning

on buying one of the Bahamas; something I got to know after doing some research on him when I saw the newspaper advertisement.

It was just another day when I was scanning the newspaper searching for a third job, when I came across an unusual advertisement.

'Bride Wanted'

Palmer Chris, a world renowned entrepreneur is in need of a potential bride who can provide him with an heir in less than a year, who will inherit his empire in the future. Mr. Palmer will pay the woman one million pounds in cash after the baby is born and the year long contract is over.

Interviews for Mr. Smith's potential bride will start from December 6th, 2017 till December

7th, 2018. All interested candidates must bring their résumés containing every little detail about themselves; their age, race, background, genetic diseases, etc. Candidates with forged information will be disqualified.

For more information contact, Palmer Enterprises Headquarters.

Contact number: xxx-xxxxxx'

Seeing the hefty amount the man was paying was the only reason I was sitting outside his office, waiting for my turn, ignoring the cramps in my butt for sitting for so long. When I saw the amount, I knew the money would be enough for my brother's surgery, and I needed to do everything I could to make sure Mr. Palmer picked me to be his wife. All I had to do was give him an heir, and then I would be able to save my brother's life. I just wished he picked

me.

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The door opened once again and the lady Hannah stormed out looking livid. Her lips were pulled back in a snarl. Grunting angrily, she stormed towards the elevator.

Lady:"That tosser rejected me because I'm not a virgin! What planet is he from?!" she shouted, earning gasps from a few women. The elevator doors opened and Hannah wasted little time in getting in.

Once the elevator doors closed, I sighed in relief, glad for the fact that I was still a virgin. I begun fiddling with the necklace around my neck. Nico, my little brother, had given me the necklace on my nineteenth birthday. It was nothing extravegant, just a simple rose gold charm with a thin gold plated chain, but it meant the world to me. It had been four years and I never took it

off, it was like my lucky charm.

"Number twenty eight, Ms. Alice, Mr. Palmer will see you now," the lady at the reception said in the same flat voice.

My heart started thumping as I slowly stood up, trying my best to look graceful, doing it just like the other women, but I knew I wasn't exactly successful. Tightening the belt of my coat around my waist, I clutched my file to my chest and slowly walked towards the wooden door that might or might not help save my brother's life, my heart hammering against my ribcage.

Taking a deep breath, I gently turned the knob and entered the office. The office was beautiful to say the least. The interior wasn't fancy but it looked expensive. There were two white, full size couches, one in front of the huge floor to

ceiling glass window, and the other across from the first one, with a glass table in the middle. On my right, there was a desk with all the office supplies neatly placed with a big, dark brown swivel chair behind it. Against the wall there were several large cabinets made out of dark wood, and a few potted plants placed expertly in the room completed the look.

Sitting on the couch against the glass window were four immaculately dressed men. All of them were wearing expensive designer suits. The one sitting on the left corner looked to be the oldest with dark brown hair which was slightly graying on the edges, with piercing brown eyes. His face was hard, with only a few wrinkles that hinted at his old age.

Next to the oldest man sat a young man who

looked no older than twenty. He looked similar to the man on the left, except he had curly, blonde hair and sea green eyes. His face was smooth with a lean body.

Besides the young man, sat a man who was about twenty seven. He had a sharp jawline, with thick brown hair and piercing sea green eyes. He looked vaguely familiar, however, I couldn't recall where I had seen him. Just looking at him had a shiver running down my spine. The man looked deadly, ready to strike. I knew he was the kind of man who wouldn't hesitate to take down his opponent, no matter who it was.

The next man in line, looked to be around twenty five with curly brown hair and soft brown eyes. His handsome face was supporting a soft smile, which strangely put me at ease. He looked a little bulky, as if he worked out a lot.

But, I really liked him; out of the four of them, the last one was the one who didn't make me feel as if I had just entered the lion's den.

"Sit down, Miss, we don't have much time," the deadly man spoke.

I quickly sat on the opposite couch and put my file on the glass table, which the deadly man instantly took, opening it while quickly scanning its contents, his face void of emotions.

"What's your name?" the oldest of the four men asked. He had a deep voice, and he talked with purpose.

"Alice Milligan, sir," I answered politely, digging my nails in my palm to stop my heart from pounding.

"Where are you from?" the same man questioned.

"East End London, sir," I replied.

"You're poor," the deadly man with sea green eyes stated. His voice was rich and smooth, like melted chocolate, but he spoke with a dangerous tint in his voice. His eyes were hard as they scrutinized me, making me feel like a rat under observation.

"I-I-" I was at a loss for words. I couldn't deny the fact that I was indeed very poor. But hearing it being said in such a derogatory manner made me feel stupid for ever thinking about coming here.

"Why did you come here?" the youngest of the

four enquired.

My hand instantly flew to my necklace as I felt overwhelmed sitting in front of these rich men. "I need the money," I answered honestly.

"Wow, honest much, and here we thought you would profess your undying love for my brother," the bulky man stated with an amused smile on his face.

Lowering my gaze as a blush colored my cheeks, I continued fiddling with my necklace. "With all due respect, sir, how can I profess my love for a man I had no clue even existed until two days ago," I blurted out, then cursed myself for babbling.

"Ouch, that must've hurt, eh Chris," the bulky man taunted, glancing at his brother, who looked as if he wanted to murder me.

My eyes widened slightly. This was Chris? The Chris Palmer?! No wonder he looked familiar. I had seen his pictures on the internet. He really did look like one of London's most eligible bachelors.

"Why do you want the money?" Chris questioned.

"My little brother, has VSD, Ventricular Septal Defect, he has a hole in his heart and I need money for his surgery," I responded, my fingers not leaving my necklace.

"So you're willing to marry me and provide me

with an heir in order to get money for your little brother's surgery, is that right?" he asked, as if confirming what I just said.

I nodded, hoping he would agree to the marriage. "Yes, sir."

"What makes you think I would marry you?" he enquired arrogantly.

"Pardon me?"

"After going through your information, I am not really convinced that I want you as my wife. Both of your parents died due to heart diseases, and your brother is also suffering from a heart disease, which means in the future there is a strong possibility that you too will suffer from a heart disease, and I don't want my child to have a defective heart," he stated.

"It's not necessary that I will suffer from a heart disease," I argued.

"Yes, you might not, but there are also other things. You are only a high school graduate, which means you're not highly educated either. You work at a trashy bar and at a gas station, meaning unhygienic environment, meaning your body is flowing with all sorts of toxic chemicals that you're inhaling, not to mention the fact that you live in East End London, a place for the poor," he countered, making me feel small after every word.

"The only reason I didn't go to college was because both my parents passed away and I had to take care of my younger brother. I have to work two jobs in order to buy medicines for my brother and still need to save some money

for his surgery, East End London is the place I was born and grew up in, I can't and won't apologize for that," I explained, desperately wanting to run away.

"Tell me, have you ever eaten at an expensive restaurant? Have you ever been to a charity event?" he questioned.

"I don't have that kind of money, sir, and if I did the first thing I would do is get my brother the surgery he needs," I responded firmly.

"Your hair color, is it natural?" Chris asked.

Running a hand through my wavy, strawberry blonde hair, I nodded. "Yes, it's natural, my mum had strawberry blonde hair as well." I answered with a smile, my mum's angelic face flashing before my eyes.

"Interesting, however, I must say there is nothing about you, other than the fact that you're a virgin, is appealing to me. Not your genetics, not your financial status, nothing. I'm looking for a woman with class and status, and unfortunately, you lack these traits. I'm not looking for a one night stand, I'm looking for a wife, and I just don't see a wife in you," he stated, his eyes not showing a hint of emotion.

"I know how to be a wife," I defended, trying to find some way in which I could convince him to marry me. I needed the money for Nico, I promised myself when I left my apartment that I would do whatever it took to convince him to marry me.

"Do you now? If you become my wife, I am going to be your priority, not your brother, not

anyone else, me, do you realize that?" He questioned.

"I know how to divide my time according to my priorities, I'm telling you, you will not be disappointed," I stated firmly.

He shook his head and I knew that there was no convincing him. My heart sank, I had to find some other way to get the money. I couldn't let Nico, my little brother, my only family suffer for much longer, I was just going to have to find a decent paying job.

"I'm sorry Ms. Alice, I just don't think you're the right woman for me. However, I can pay for your brother's surgery," He offered.

Shaking my head I smiled and stood up. "Thank

you, but no thanks, I would prefer to earn money for my brother's surgery. I might not be rich, Mr. Palmer , but I'm not a charity case either." Taking my file from him, I clutched it to my chest.

"You sure? It would benefit you and your brother greatly," He persisted, but I wasn't going to budge.

"I may lack class and status, but I do have dignity and self respect. Thank you for your time, Mr. Palmer, I'll be going now, goodbye Mr. Palmer," I stated. Turning on my heel, making sure to keep my head held high, I walked out of his office, and out of his life.

Exiting the lofty building which was Palmer Enterprises, I begun fiddling with my necklace again, as the weight of my problems and

responsibilities threatened to pull me down.
Looking around the busy London street I had
only one thought swirling in my head.

How was I going to pay for Nico's surgery now?

What was I going to do now?

The CEO

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I knocked on my apartment door and waited for
Nico to come and open the door. Anxiety and
desperation were eating at my insides, what
was I going to do now? Where would I find a

lucrative job? All the companies preferred college graduates, whereas I was only a high school graduate. If only my father never got sick and my mother had a lucrative job, then today I would be working in some successful company. But if I started wondering about all the what ifs then I would lose everything, and even though I didn't have much to lose, I had enough.

The door of my apartment opened with Nico standing in front of me, grinning. His green eyes, very much like my own, were sparkling. His blonde hair a mess. Just seeing him happy made my lips curve in an involuntary smile. Even though my little brother didn't exactly have a normal life, he was always happy, always optimistic. I tried my best not to let anything worry him, but he was happy without me even doing much.

"Hey, Nico, how are you?" I asked with a smile, even though anxiety had my heart pounding. I quickly ran my eyes over Nico, making sure he was alright.

"I'm great, how are you? Did you get the job you wanted?" he queried, raising his head a little to look me in the eyes. Even though he was only ten years old, Nico was already as tall as me, however, thanks to my high heels I appeared a little taller.

I shook my head in response. "No, they had already hired someone before I had a chance," I lied, not wanting him to worry.

"Oh, well it's okay, I'm sure there are better jobs for you," he replied with a smile.

"Yeah, I hope so," I muttered the last part to myself, not wanting Nico to see me upset; his

heart would not be able to handle the stress and anxiety.

"Can we go out today? I am bored," Nico complained.

My heart clenched in sorrow. Because of his heart condition, I tried my best to make sure Nico didn't exert himself; five times he had suffered from an attack and I had to rush him to the hospital, praying to God to let him be alright, and everytime the doctors instructed me to make sure Nico didn't engage in a lot of physical activity and to get his surgery done as soon as possible. If only the doctors knew just how difficult it was to get money.

"We can do something at home, you know you're not suppose to exert yourself," I suggested, wishing that somehow, from

somewhere I would get the money for Nico's surgery so he could go out and run around with kids his own age, instead of staying cooped up in the apartment.

Guilt and desperation stabbed my heart when the smile on Nico's face fell. The sparkle in his eyes dulled as he sighed audibly. "It's been three weeks since I went out, please Alice, just for twenty minutes, take me to the park, anywhere," Nico pleaded, his eyes begging me to give in.

Sighing in defeat, I looked my brother in the eyes. "Okay fine, we'll go to the library, you can read books," I conceded. Library was the only place I could think of where Nico would be able to spend time without exerting himself.

Nico smiled, a full megawatt smile that I loved

so much. Punching in the air, Nico hooted in excitement. "Yes! I'll go get my jacket," he stated, then jogged over to his room.

"Don't run," I chided. Shaking my head, I went to my room to get my wallet. Since I was already wearing my trench coat, I just had to get my woollen cap and my gloves out of the closet. Even though it was afternoon, I made sure to remain protected, London winter could be vicious. Exchanging my high heels with comfortable trainers, I shut my closet and made my way out of my room where Nico was already standing.

"Hurry up, Alice, we don't want the library to close up," Nico said in a rush.

"It's not going to close up this early and where is your backpack?" I questioned.

"On the chair." I picked up the black backpack and slung it over my shoulder. I had to take the backpack to the library so Nico wouldn't have to carry heavy books.

"Let's go," I stated. Nico wasted no time in running out of the apartment, giving my heart a sudden jolt. "Stop running!" I scolded, following after him, making sure to lock the front door.

Outside was fairly chilly, but that was to be expected. Even though Nico and I lived in one of the poor areas of London, there was a lot of crowd. People were milling about, rushing here and there. It was nearly time for lunch which explained the crowd. I made sure to hold Nico's hand tightly, to make sure he wouldn't get lost.

After about twenty minutes of weaving in and out of the East End London crowd, Nico and I finally arrived at the library. Nico wasted no time in going inside and immediately rushing off to the Biology aisle, leaving me alone.

Wanting to make sure that he was okay, I followed Nico to the Biology section only to find him sitting on one of the many beanbags in a corner, reading a big, fat book, while a whole bunch of books were placed beside him on the small table.

"You seem to have an obsession with Biology," I commented, looking over to see Nico reading about the heart. Whenever Nico and I visited the library, he always opted to read science books, mainly Biology, which I found strange yet impressive, as a boy his age wanted to read about super heroes and stuff.

"I want to be a doctor, Alice, this is why I need to study a lot, so I can help people with heart diseases, then no one would have to stay home because of a bad heart," he answered, a

determined look in his eyes.

Unwanted tears pricked my eyes at hearing my brother's answer. His heart condition was effecting him so much, both physically and emotionally, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Blinking my eyes rapidly to stop the tears from falling, I reached for my necklace and begun fiddlin with it. "You stay here and read, I'm going to go do some research, okay?"

"Okay, but please can we stay here for a few hours, I want to sit and read here," Nico requested.

I nodded with a smile. "We'll leave when you want to," I replied, then turned and walked to the check-out desk.

"Hi, are any of the computers available?" I asked

the cute burnette sitting behind the desk, typing away on the keyboard.

"Sure, there are a few computers that are free, you can go and see," she answered politely.

"Thanks." I turned and strode to the computer area. The computer area had lots of computers, which were arranged five to a table, each with its own mini cubicle. Which was amazing as one would have complete privacy when working.

Finding an empty cubicle, I sat on the swivel chair and turned on the computer. As soon as I opened the internet tab, I hurriedly searched for lucrative online jobs. I would prefer to get an online job, so I could work from home, that way I wouldn't have to leave Nico alone and would be able to take care of him.

When I turned on the computer, I was full of hope, but now, after searching through nearly fifty links, I was starting to lose hope. No online

job was paying more than what I was already earning at the bar and the gas station. Even if I did opt for an online job, I realized now that I wouldn't be able to manage working online due to my odd hours at the bar and the gas station. However, I continued searching link after link, praying to God to get me a job.

"Hey, Alice?" Nico's voice startled me. I looked to my right to see Nico standing with his arms folded across his chest.

"Yeah, what is it, are you alright?" I asked concerned.

"Yes, I just wanted to tell you that I think we should go, your shift is about to start," he told me.

Looking at my wrist watch, I cursed under my breath. It had been five hours since Nico and I had been here, and he was right, my shift at the gas station was about to start.

Hurriedly turning off the computer, I stood up and grabbed the backpack. "Did you borrow any books?" I asked Nico.

He nodded. "Yeah, there are at the check-out desk," he answered.

Taking his hand, I walked to the check-out desk to see the lady checking out the last book and stacking it on top of the already big pile.

Without saying anything, I unzipped the bag and put all the eight, fat books in it. Once all the books were in, I zipped the bag shut and slung it over my shoulder, making sure not to let anyone see how uncomfortable I was with the heavy bag. Bidding our farewells to the librarian, Nico and I left the library.

The crowd had thinned considerably in a span of five hours. Not many people were seen wandering around, which prevented me from holding on to Nico's hand. Despite that, I made sure to have Nico walk as closely to me as

possible. I couldn't risk him walking at a distance; his heart disease had turned me into an anxious, worrisome mess.

We reached our apartment in less than twenty minutes. Unlocking the front door, I hurried inside and put the backpack in Nico's bedroom. I didn't want him to carry it or anything, if I put the bag in his bedroom, then Nico could simply unzip the bag and read whatever book he wanted. If someday I did become rich, I would buy a book shelf for Nico where he would be able to put his books and other knick knacks.

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Rolling my shoulder to alleviate the pain, I left Nico's room and went to the kitchen to prepare Nico's dinner. I still had an hour before my shift actually started, which was enough to make some Italian vegetable soup. I wanted to make Nico something like a grilled burger or something as it was easier, but it wasn't good

for his heart and I would never put Nico's health in jeopardy just to make my life easier.

The door bell rang as I was cutting the vegetables. I frowned, curiosity blooming inside me. Who would visit us at this hour? It was no time for the milk man or the landlord to arrive, then who was at the door? I put the knife down and was about to go and see who it was, but Nico beat me to it.

"I got it, Alice, you make dinner," Nico bellowed. I reluctantly picked the knife again and went back to cutting, however, my mind was wondering who was at the door, as I strained my ears to listen to anything strange.

When all I heard were strange, incomprehensible words, I put the knife down again and went to check what or who exactly Nico was talking to.

"Nico, who is—" my words died in my throat as I took in the men standing at the threshold of my apartment.

Chris Palmer along with his brother and the older man, who I presumed was his father, was standing at the threshold of my apartment, looking as deadly as ever; his eyes unreadable.

"Wow, you're even shorter than I thought," Chris brother commented.

Ignoring his comment, I turned my attention to Chris. "I—Is everything alright?"

"Aren't you going to invite us in, young lady?" His father queried.

My cheeks heated in embarrassment. "Of course, my apologies, please come in," I stated politely.

All three men entered my apartment as Nico closed the door. "Alice, do you know these people?" Nico enquired.

"Yes, I do, Nico, why don't you go in your room while I talk to them," I told him.

"Are you in danger?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no, not at all, I just need to talk to them about something important, that's all, I'll call you out as soon as they leave," I responded.

"Okay, but you call me if you're in danger," he stated.

"I will," I replied.

"Promise?" he held up his pinkie finger.

Linking my pinkie finger with his I smiled.

"Promise."

Satisfied, Nico sauntered in his room, closing the door softly behind him. While I went in the

living room where Chris was sitting with the other two men.

"So, shortcake, what are you, 4'8, 4'10?" His brother enquired.

"I'm 5'0," I stated. "Would you like something to drink?" I asked them, not forgetting my manners.

"No, go and pack your bags," Chris ordered, locking his sea green eyes with mine. My heart flipped as he stared me, his eyes willing me to submit.

"Why?" I questioned, dread creeping up my spine. If he had any intentions of separating me from my brother then he had another thing coming.

"Because I said so," He stated simply.

I shook my head. "I'm sorry Mr. Palmer, but I will not do anything you tell me if I don't get a proper reasonable answer," I stated.

Chris eyes hardened, resembling green shards. "Do as I say," he commanded.

"First give me a valid reason," I demanded.

"Wow, you're quite wilful," His brother piped in.

"Shut up, Keiran," Chris snapped. Oh, so that was his name. I liked Keiran, he was not as intimidating as Chris, I wondered where the younger one was?

Standing up, Chris strode over to me until he

was standing just a few inches from me. I raised my head to look at him. Without high heels, He towered over me, making me feel vulnerable.

"Go and pack your bags, little peach, I won't tell you again," he stated in a dark tone, threatening.

"Why?" I questioned, not letting myself back down. I was not his slave, he had to give me a reason before I did anything he requested.

His next words had my eyes widening in shock.

"We are getting married.

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"I am telling you, Mr. Palmer that I'm not going to marry you if you're only marrying me out of pity, I told you before I'm not a charity case, so please, don't waste your time on someone like me, I'm sure you got other girls to interview," I rattled out, wanting the three millionaires that were currently occupying the sofa of my living room, to leave. Their authoritative and grand presence in my living room made me feel

slightly claustrophobic. Men like him looked way out of place in my apartment. Men like him belonged in grand mansions, not in tiny, cramped apartments.

"And I'm telling you that I want to marry you, and it's not out of pity," he stated, staring down at me.

"Why? Just hours ago you told me I had no class or status, insulting not only my financial status but my genes as well, and now you're here telling me you want to marry me, are you even aware of how ridiculous that sounds?" I huffed, frowning at the rich giant in front of me...a very handsome giant.

"That time I didn't consider you wife material, and now I do, so go and pack your bags, we're getting married in three days," he answered smoothly, as if I would be okay with his constant change of decisions.

"No, I refuse to marry you," I stated, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Excuse me." he looked taken aback. "You can't refuse to marry me; you came to me, asking me to marry you," he said with a frown on his face.

"That time I wanted to marry you because I need money for my brother's surgery, and now I don't want to marry you," I responded coolly.

Keiran snickered from behind him. "Damn, you are so tiny but you have a huge ego," Keiran commented.

"I do not have a huge ego, I just have a preference, and you brother is not it," I replied.

"So you wanted to marry my brother only for the money?" Keiran questioned with an amused smile on his face.

"Yes, I told you that before," I answered.

"So where are you going to get the money from,

now?" he queried.

"I don't see how is that any of your business," I shot back, irritated. Truth was, I had no clue where I was going to get the money for my brother's surgery, but I also wasn't going to marry someone who thought I was a charity case. And I did not believe him when he said that he changed his mind, because men like him didn't just change their minds on the whim, there had to be a solid reason behind it.

"So in other words, what you're saying is, you don't have money for your brother's surgery and you refuse to marry Chris, who can easily provide you with financial support," Keiran said.

"Wow, not only you're short and egotistic, you are also selfish and stupid; Chris, are you sure you still want to marry her?" Keiran asked Chris who was standing in front of me with his eyes glued to my face. Keiran was starting to piss me off and I was so close to snapping at him

and telling him to get the hell out of my apartment, but my damn manners prevented me from doing so.

"I am not selfish," I gritted out, glaring at Keiran who sat on the sofa with a mischevious grin on his face.

"On the contrary, little mushroom, you are, you are so selfish; you are rejecting a perfectly good proposal all because you couldn't handle rejection, instead of thinking about your brother who can get a better life if you would just suck up your woman pride and marry Chris , you are telling us that you changed your mind, if that's not being selfish, then, little mushroom, tell me what is?"

"First of all, don't ever call me little mushroom, and second, shut the hell up, you don't know me, so you have no right to judge me on my decisions. Nico's surgery is my problem and where I'm going to get the money is also my

problem, so stay out of it," I hissed, my eyes narrowed at Keiran, who didn't seem effected

"Some people are so stupid, right Chris?" Keiran snickered, earning another glare from me. "The solution to their problems are right in front of them, literally knocking on their door, and all those people care about is their pride. I hope they know that pride comes before the fall."

Without thinking, I charged over to where Keiran was sitting, fully intending to strangle that judgmental asshole, but a strong arm wounding around my waist prevented me.

"Let go, I'm going to kill him!" I shrieked, struggling against the vice-like grip around my waist.

"Stop it," Chris ordered, before pulling me back and standing in front of Keiran, shielding him.

Taking a deep breath I composed myself but

did not stop glaring at Keiran. "Now, what Keiran said was right, why can't you just accept this and go pack your bags like a good little girl?" Chris enquired.

"Because, I don't understand why in the United Kingdom do you want to marry me? When you can have any girl you want; when there are hundreds of girls getting butt cramps for sitting in your waiting area waiting for their interview; why on Earth do you want to marry me?" I threw back at him.

"Do you want an answer for everything?" Chris asked.

"Yes," I stated.

"Well you're not getting one, now go and pack your bags, this apartment is making me claustrophobic." He unbuttoned the top of his shirt.

"Well then I'm not going to pack my bags," I

stated.

The door of Nico's room opened and Nico walked out. Running his eyes over the three men, his gaze landed on me. "Alice, is everything okay?"

"Yes, Nico, everything is perfectly fine," I answered immediately, walking over to him.

"I heard you screaming, are you okay? Did they hurt you?" Nico questioned, glaring at the three men.

"Yes, I'm perfectly fine, I was just surprised when Chris said something so I screamed," I reassured him, cringing at the awful lie.

"What did he say that surprised you so much?" Nico enquired.

I mentally shook my head. Nico asked a lot of questions. And sometimes these questions annoyed me; kind of like right now.

"We told your sister that you can have your surgery and get your heart fixed," Chris answered. His words made me close my eyes. The man had no clue when to keep his mouth shut. He was feeding Nico false hope, which would only create more problems for me.

Nico looked at me with hopeful eyes and guilt stabbed my heart when I realized how I was going to have to falsify Chris claims, which would break his already fragile heart.

"Is it true, Alice? Did he say that he can get my heart fixed?" Nico asked hopefully.

I was just about say no when Keiran spoke up. "Yes, but your sister here does not agree," he said.

Cursing under my breath I turned my head to glare at Keiran. The nerve of these men! Using my brother against me! I knew what they were doing. By telling Nico about getting surgery,

they were using Nico in order to make me agree to marriage with Chris.

The hope in Nico's eyes shattered as a frown marred his forehead. My heart cracked at seeing the look on Nico's face. "Why Alice? Do you not want me to get better?" Nico questioned.

"No, no, that's not true..." I trailed off, at a loss for words. There was no excuse for me to give Nico which would explain why I was not agreeing to all this. Damn these arrogant arseholes.

"So you do agree on getting my surgery, right?" Nico queried with a small smile, the hope back in his eyes.

"Uh, um, yeah, of course I do," I said hesitantly. "Why don't you go in your room while I sort this out with the men, hmm?" I really wanted to Nico

to leave so I could give Chris a piece of my mind.

"Okay." Kissing my cheek, Nico jogged back to his room and shut the door.

I whirled around, throwing the three men the most venomous glare I could muster, fury brewing in my heart. These manipulative bastards had crossed the line. Now, I was done being the nice girl.

"What's wrong, little fairy? You okay?" Chris asked with a victorious smile on his face.

"You are going to pay for this," I gritted out, my nails digging in my palms.

"Of course, I'll provide you with financial support, little peach, don't worry," he responded.

"I am going to ruin your life," I threatened.

"Oh, little dove, why don't you be a good girl and go pack your bags," Chris said, my threats not

fazing him in the least.

His words lit a fuse inside me. The brewing anger finally reached its peak and was now flowing like molten lava, heating my core.

"You son of a—" I screamed but was cut off by a booming voice.

"Silence!"

His father, who had been silent since the moment they came, rose from the sofa and strode over to where Chris was standing. All of a sudden I realized exactly how small I really was. I had two strong men standing in front of me, staring me down.

"You are forgetting your place. You are clearly disobeying my son and I am not going to tolerate that; do as he says and go pack your bags, because trust me if you make me angry then you should know that I am going to crush you," Mr. Palmer threatened.

"Dad you don't have to threaten her, she is going to go pack her bags, don't scare her," Chris reasoned with his father.

"If she is going to be your wife, she needs to know what is expected of her, and this blatant display of disrespect is going to cost her in the future," Mr. Palmer said.

By now I had tears in my eyes. My courage and strength deserted me as the three men cornered me. While two of them stared me down, the other one was sitting looking relaxed. There was no way out. They had turned my own brother against me; using his hopes and wishes against me. I was regretting going for the interview, I did not know that I would end up being threatened into this marriage.

"Chris, you can find other women, better women, don't waste your time on me," I said, trying my best to convince him not to marry me. It was funny how just a few hours ago I was ready to

convince Chris to marry me.

"I don't want to find any other woman, I've made up my mind, you are going to be my wife, little one," he responded softly, coming closer until he was standing mere inches from me.

"I will not be a good wife to you. You are never going to be happy with me," I stated desperately, grasping at straws.

"That remains to be seen, for now, go pack your bags." God, did he not get tired of saying the same thing again and again?

Knowing that there was nothing more I could do to change his mind, I could only think of one thing.

"I'll marry you, but on one condition," I told him.

"And what is that, little fairy?" He enquired with a small smile.

"You stated in the ad that you'll pay one million

pounds at the end of the year when the contract is over, right?"

He nodded.

"Well, I want the money now, only then I'll marry you," I stated.

"Sorry, little dove, can't do that," He responded, shaking his head.

"Why not?"

"How would I know if you're not going to run away with the money?"

"I am not, you can trust me," I said.

"No, sorry, little one, you'll just have to wait a year for the money," He said.

"50 percent," I negotiated.

"What?"

"Give me half the amount right now and half

when the contract is over," I explained.

He breathed an audible sigh. "Fine, I'll pay you half the amount once we get married and half when the contract is over," he replied.

"Done."

I felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I now had money for Nico's surgery, which meant that I would not have to work my arse off in order to buy medicines for my brother. Now, he was going to have his surgery and would be able to live life like other ten year olds like him.

"You can go and discuss this with your brother, while we get the contract ready for you to sign," Mr.Palmer suggested.

Nodding slightly, I hurried over to Nico's room. Finding the door unlocked, I quickly entered and closed the door behind me. Nico laid in his bed, reading a book. When he saw me, he shut the

book and put it on the nightstand next to his bed.

"Nico, you know when the men said that they were going to help us get your surgery done," I started. Nico nodded, giving me his complete attention. "Well, I have to marry one of them for that to happen," I told him. I was not sure if Nico was going to understand, he was only a kid.

"If you don't marry him, I will not get my surgery?" The sadness in Nico's tone had my decision solidifying. Now, whatever happened, I was going to marry him and get the money for Nico's surgery. I could not bear to see him sad.

"Yes." However, I had to tell him the truth, right now.

"Do you love him?" Nico asked.

"Yes, I do," I lied, smiling at him. If my brother found out that this marriage was arranged, then he would tell me not to marry him, and his

dreams would be crushed.

"Then marry him," he responded with a smile. That smile was the reason I was still fighting the world. And that smile was the reason I would marry him.

"Okay, thank you," I told him.

Ruffling his hair a bit, I strode out of Nico's room and back in the living room where Mr. Palmer, Chris and Keiran were sitting on the sofa, with a black briefcase which was opened containing various sort of papers, while Chris held a file in his hands.

"This is the contract, sign it and we are getting married in three days," He told me once I sat down next to him. He gave me the file, letting me go through the content of the contract.

Taking my time, I carefully went through the contract. It stated that I had to give him an heir within a year otherwise I was not going to get

the amount promised. Other than that, I had to attend every single event he was going to be invited to, and would have to try my best to be the perfect wife. Upon the ending of the contract, I was free to date other men but before that I was going to have to be faithful to him. Also, after the baby was born and the contract would end, it was my choice whether I wanted to be a part of the baby's life or not; if so, then I would have to go to court for a case of joint custody, otherwise the baby would be his.

"You didn't say that half the amount will be given to me right now," I told Chris.

"Yeah, because we just made the condition right now, you will get the revised contract tomorrow, but for now, sign here," He replied, pointing to a dotted line.

"How do I know you're not bluffing?" I questioned.

"Because I never go back on my word, plus Keiran will be staying with you tonight until the new contract is made and then you'll sign that, but for now sign this as I want the reassurance that you're not going to back out," he replied.

Sighing deeply, I held out my hand. "Give me a pen."

He immediately handed me an expensive, silver, fountain pen, with some kind of signature on the cap. Without thinking twice, I removed the cap of the pen and signed. I signed my life away. I signed myself away

The CEO

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You sure you're alright here?" I asked Keiran as he surveyed my bedroom.

"Yeah, little mushroom, this is perfect." He splayed his hands wide, gesturing to my bedroom.

"Sorry it's not up to your standards," I apologized, fiddling with my necklace.

"You're kidding me, right?" Keiran stared at me incredulously. "This is great, I really like the room," he told me.

"Okay then, you should get some sleep," I said to Keiran softly.

"Where are you going to sleep?" Keiran asked me just as I turned to leave the room.

"I'll sleep on the couch...in the living room," I answered, waiting to see whether he would ask

me any more questions.

"Right, good night," Keiran said, dismissing me.

Taking that as my cue to leave, I walked out of my bedroom which Keiran was going to be occupying for the night.

Chris and his father had left soon after I had signed the contract, and just as He said Keiran was going to be spending the night in my apartment until the next morning when the new contract would arrive.

Since my apartment had only two bedrooms, one was my brother's while the other was mine, I had to let Keiran sleep in my room tonight; he was, after all, a guest and I was not going to make him sleep on the couch; my mother taught me better than that.

Jogging over to Nico's room, I entered and went straight for his cupboard. Hearing the sound of water running, I knew that Nico was in the

bathroom, probably brushing his teeth. Getting back to the task at hand, I opened the double doors of the cupboard, then grabbed a small chair, which Nico used for various purposes, and used it to reach higher. Once my hand reached the top of the cupboard, I pulled out a couple of fleece blankets then closed the cupboard doors.

"What are you looking for?" Nico asked me, coming out of the bathroom, wearing his pyjamas.

"I just came here to get the blankets, and it's also time for your medicine, look I brought you milk." I gestured to the glass of milk which was sitting on Nico's nightstand.

Without a word, Nico shuffled over to his bed and quickly got under the covers. I perched on the edge of His bed then handed him the glass of milk along with the pills. Taking the pills from my palm, He put them in his mouth and

swallowed them with milk.

Even though I was proud of the fact that my ten year old brother could swallow pills without throwing up, it saddened me that he had to learn the art of pill taking at such a tender age. I remember how hard it was, initially, when Nico was prescribed pills by the doctor, I had to act like Ben10 in order to make Nico take the pills.

"I don't like these pills," Nico muttered, after finishing the glass of milk and handing it to me.

My heart cracked with sympathy for my brother. I did not like giving him the pills any more than he liked taking them. But it had to be done. For his health.

"I know, but soon you won't have to take the pills," I assured him with a small smile.

"I wish you get married soon so I don't have to take these pills," Nico said, covering the top of my hand, that was clutching the fleece blankets,

with his own.

"Don't worry, I'll get married in three days, and then you will have your surgery," I replied, wanting to ease my brother's worries.

"Then I won't have to take these pills, right?" Nico asked hopefully.

"No you won't." I shook my head. "Now, go to sleep, it's getting late."

With a smile, Nico laid down and I pulled the thick blanket up to his chin. Kissing his forehead, I stood up and turned on the night light. With a quick smile in Nico's direction, who was already asleep, I padded out of his room, making sure to leave the door ajar.

Putting the blankets on the couch, I fixed the cushions against the arm of the couch then laid down on it. Quickly pulling my fleece blankets over myself, I closed my eyes and prepared to sleep.

However, the bitter chill of the night prevented me from dozing off. Instead, it gave birth to the chattering of my teeth and bone wracking shivers, making me crave the comfort and warmth of my blanket that Keiran was currently sleeping under.

After a few hours of hearing my teeth chatter, I threw the blankets off me and got up. Rubbing my eyes with the back of my hands, I stifled a yawn. Standing up, I made my way into Nico's room to grab a pair of woolen socks and gloves. If I did not wear two pairs of socks and a pair of gloves, I was sure I wouldn't be getting any sleep tonight.

Quietly going towards the closet which housed Nico's clothing, I slowly opened the door and took out a pair of gloves and socks, which did not take a whole lot of rummaging through, then closing the cupboard, I sneaked out of Nico's room.

Hastily pulling the socks and gloves on my feet and hands, I went back to my bed and once again prepared to sleep. This time, however, I did manage to fall in the land of dreams and nightmares, although it was not easy, but I was thankful nonetheless.

"Good morning, little mushroom," Keiran greeted, yawning open mouthed, causing me to grimace.

"Would you stop calling me that," I muttered, placing the plates on the kitchen counter for Nico and Keiran.

"Nope, I like calling you little mushroom, and when I like something I don't stop doing or wanting it," he answered, sitting on one of the chairs.

"Yes, but it irritates me," I complained, going back to whisking the eggs.

"You'll get used to it, everybody does," he responded, folding his arms on the counter.

"I doubt it," I muttered under my breath as I poured the whisked eggs in the pan.

"What's for breakfast?" Keiran asked while texting on his phone.

"Scrambled eggs, bread and bacon, is that okay? I can make something else if you want." Despite the crazy circumstances under which Keiran was staying here, I did not want to give him something he did not like, he was a guest after all.

"Yup, perfectly fine, where is your brother?" Keiran queried, looking around for my brother.

"He is in the bathroom, I woke him up, he'll be here in a few minutes," I answered him, completely focused on my current task.

"Hmm, how did you sleep?" he questioned.

Frowning, I eyed Keiran with curious eyes.

"Uh...fine, I slept fine," I responded, although it was not exactly the truth.

"You moved around a lot, I believe you did not sleep until 2:00 am last night," he stated, making me wonder how in the world did he know I was awake; was I not as quiet as I thought I was?

"I didn't know you had doggie ears, when did you sleep?" I smiled at him.

"I did sleep, but woke up because you were moving around, I'm a light sleeper and I do have very good hearing," he replied.

"Well, I'm sorry for disturbing you last night," I said to him, feeling slightly guilty for making my guest uneasy.

"Don't be, by the way, why were you roaming about so late night?" He enquired with a soft smile.

I took Keiran's plate back to fill it with food, then placed the plate filled with bacon, eggs and bread in front of Keiran. "I had to make sure Nico was all right, I check up on him twice or thrice every night, so...yeah," I told him, going back to working on Nico's breakfast.

"You take really good care of Nico, I mean really good," he stated, making me smile sadly.

"I love taking care of my brother, he's my only family," I explained to him.

"Who takes care of you then?" Keiran asked.

Shaking my head, I smiled. "I don't need anyone to take care of me, I can take care of myself, been doing it for quite a few years now," I answered.

"Good morning, Alice," Nico greeted with a smile, sitting on one of the two remaining chairs.

"Good morning, how are you?" I smiled at Nico, placing his breakfast plate in front of him.

"Good," Nico replied. "How are you, sir?" he asked Keiran.

"I'm good, young man," Keiran replied with a smile.

As soon as I turned to make breakfast for myself, the door bell rang. Wondering who could be visiting me so early in the morning, I ventured out of the kitchen to open the door.

"Good morning, Alice." Chris deep, silky voice made my knees wobble. Gazing at him through my lashes, I gritted my teeth to stop my jaw from dropping.

He was looking so handsome in his three piece suit, with his hair styled neatly and his shoes shining to perfection. He was holding a blue file in his hands which I assumed was the new contract.

"Good morning, please come in." I stepped aside so He could enter, ordering my heart to stop pounding.

Once he was inside, I closed the door then went back to the kitchen to prepare breakfast.

"Would you like to have breakfast?" I asked him politely.

"Yes, I will," he responded simply.

Nodding my head, I quickly prepared eggs, bacon and bread for Chris. Once I placed the plate of food in front of him, I realized that I had run out of bacon and eggs.

"This is the new contract, sign it," He ordered, pushing the file towards me.

"I'll sign, eat your breakfast," I told him.

"No, sign it now," he ordered.

"Can't it wait till after breakfast?" This man was clearly something.

"No, I won't eat breakfast until you sign the contract," He persisted, making me sigh in frustration. We had yet to be married and he was already getting on my nerves.

Opening the file, I quickly went through the revised content then held out my hand for a pen, which he immediately handed to me. Giving Nico a covert glance, I hastily scribbled my signature over the dotted lines, then closing the file, handed it to him, who took it without a word and begun eating.

Grabbing two pieces of bread, I spread mango jam on the slices then took a bite. I had gobbled up half of my sandwich when his voice thundered through my apartment, making me drop my sandwich.

"What are you doing?" he asked, irritation marring his face.

"Uh...having breakfast?" It came out as a

question, even though I intended for the opposite to happen.

"That's all you're going to have?" He questioned, aghast, making me wonder what was wrong with eating a sandwich.

"Yes?" Another question, bloody hell I needed to stop doing that.

Standing up, he strode over to me. Taking a hold of my arm, he led me all the way to his chair and forced me to sit down. Giving me the knife and fork he ordered, "eat this, no wonder you're so small and skinny."

"No, I made this for you, I can make myself something else," I said to him, who stood towering over me.

"No, you are going to eat this, you need nutrition, you are so weak," he stated.

"But what are you going to eat?" I was not going to let him go without breakfast.

"That's not your concern, just do what I say and eat this," .

"Fine." Stabbing the eggs with my fork I lifted the fork to my mouth. "And I'm not skinny or weak," I told him.

"Yes you are," Keiran chimed in. The man was never going to side with me.

Chris did not once remove his eyes from me as I was eating, making breakfast very awkward and difficult for me. Usually, I was relaxed whenever I ate but not this morning, this morning I was hyper aware of everything I was doing.

When I was half finished with my breakfast Chris took the plate from me. Eyeing him from my perch, I narrowed my eyes when I heard him chuckle.

"Don't eat all of it, leave some for me, little fairy," he said with an amused smile.

Gobbling up the remaining food, he put the plate in the sink then went to have a conversation with Nico, who had quickly finished his breakfast and was now watching TV.

After washing the dishes, I went to Nico with his medicines. After he took his medicine, Chris told me he wanted to talk to me in private. Giving him a peculiar look, I led him in my bedroom and closed the door.

"What is it, is everything okay?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes, I wanted to know that since we are getting married in less than three days would you like me to accompany you when you go to buy your dress?" He asked.

Confusion filled me after hearing his words.

"What dress?" I queried.

"Your wedding dress." Oh, so that's what he meant.

"I don't need a dress, I have a white dress, plus I can't exactly afford a new dress," I told him.

"You are getting married to me, which means you're not poor anymore and second, you are going to be getting a brand new dress, so when will you like to go shopping for your dress?"

Woah, the idea of buying a wedding dress never occurred to me. Hell, the thought of actually getting married never occurred to me.

"Right...we'll go tomorrow,".

"Good, see you tomorrow, little dove." Kissing me softly on the cheek, He turned and strode out of the room.

The three days of my bachelorette hood flew

away. With a few shopping trips, which consisted of my dress and accessories, and Nico's suit and shoes.

Chris told me that the wedding was going to be small and private with only his father and brothers and my brother. However, he also said that if I wanted a lavish wedding all I had to do was say so, but I did not want a grand wedding. This wedding was arranged and I only wanted the one million pounds he promised me, nothing more nothing less. The wedding clothes were the only things I was going to accept from him; I was not going to let him spend another extra penny on me.

I did not bother asking him where the wedding was going to be held, because frankly, I did not care. I just needed to marry him, be it in court or in church, I just needed to fulfill my end of the contract.

Now the day was here. The day I was going to

marry Chris. The day that was going to change my and my brother's life. The day that was going to be the start of happy days or days of despair, I was not sure.

So when the door bell rang, signalling the arrival of the person that was going to take me to my husband to be, I was ready.

I was ready to get married.

The CEO

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The driver parked the car just outside of a small church. I was about to open the door but the

driver beat me to it.

I was about to get out when a masculine hand appeared in front of me. Looking up, my eyes locked with Brenton's, who was leaning down, his hand outstretched.

Precariously holding on to his hand, I got out of the car. As soon as I was steady, I removed my hand from Brenton's.

"Thank you," I said softly.

Brenton nodded, then turned towards the entrance of the church. "Come, my brother is waiting for you," he stated.

"Wait, where is my brother?" I asked worriedly.

Nico had been driven away in another car.

Brenton told me that my brother would arrive at the church before me for God knows what reason.

"He is already inside, come we don't want to be late," Brenton told me.

Gathering some of the flowy material of my wedding gown so I wouldn't trip and fall. I began to slowly walk inside the church, ready to get married, with Brenton slowly walking beside me.

Brenton was Chris and Keiran's youngest brother. He was the one who had come to take me to church. Throughout the ride, Brenton hardly spoke to me; other than the usual one or two word answers, he had remained fairly silent, a trait I believed, did not suit him.

As I reached the threshold of the church, Nico came bounding to me, beaming while looking adorable and handsome in his suit. Running my eyes over him, I prayed to God to let me see my brother grow up and look handsome in tuxedos and suits as he married the woman of his dreams.

Without a word, Nico offered me his arm. Smiling at him while preventing tears from escaping my eyes, I gently took hold of his arm.

Brenton squeezed Nico's shoulder before walking ahead of us towards where Chris, Keiran and Mr. Palmer stood next to the priest.

"Come on, Alice, I'm going to give you away," Nico said to me, smiling. I had a feeling not many ten year olds got to say those words to their elder sisters.

With a quick nod, Nico and I slowly began walking to where Chris stood, looking totally sexy in a suit, with Keiran and Brenton standing next to him, while Mr. Palmer stood on the other side of where my husband to be stood.

I had no flowers in my hands; no bridesmaids to walk ahead of me; no ring bearer or flower girl; just me and my brother.

In a couple of minutes, I was standing in front of Chris, who stretched out his hand for me to take. Closing my eyes, I took his hand, and was standing in front of him, while the priest stood

in the middle of us.

"Shall we begin?" The priest asked Chris, who nodded.

I closed my eyes as the white robed priest said the usual words. Talking about love and marriage being sacred and whatnot. Twice my conscious nagged at me to run away and not to get married to a total stranger, but feeling my brother's presence next to me was what kept me in place.

The priest asked us if we would like to say the standard vows or whether we had our own. Chris opted for the standard vows. Smart man.

Soon the time came for me to say "I do." It would've been easier if I were saying the vows to the love of my life instead of to a random millionaire. However, I signed a contract, and it might sound crazy, but I believed I married him as soon as I had signed my name on the piece

of paper, this marriage in front of the priest was just a formality, Him and I had already signed an agreement.

After a bland "I do" from the both of us, then the exchanging of rings, the priest gave Chris permission to kiss me. He bent his head and softly kissed me. His kiss had butterflies fluttering in my belly, but those butterflies died the moment his lips left mine, which was after a few seconds. His kiss held no emotion, yet it awoke butterflies in my stomach that I didn't even know existed.

The only person who hooted was Keiran; the others merely congratulated Chris and I. After the congratulating part was over, Chris led me out of the church, which proved to be slightly difficult for me as my puffy gown was became a pain in the arse. The man did not even help carry the puffy, flowy material, some gentleman

he was!

There stood a sleek, silver Aston Martin, just as we stepped out of the church. The driver's door opened, and a uniformed chauffeur stepped out. Tipping his chauffeur cap in Chris direction, the chauffeur opened the back door.

"After you," Chris said to me.

Nodding, I slid inside the sleek car, him following soon after me. Just as the door closed with a soft almost inaudible thud, my heart sank.

"Where is Nico?"

"You do know we are married right?" He asked. I sensed he meant it as rhetorical question, but I was confused why he even asked that.

"What?" I was really dumb.

"We are married now, which means I'm your first priority now, not your brother or anyone

else, me, get that through your head, little fairy,"
He responded bluntly.

"Yes...but...my brother." I really needed to know where he was. If he would just tell me where he was I would relax. I knew we were married, but I just can't not worry about my brother who had known me far longer than Chris did.

He sighed irritably. "He is in the other car with my dad and brothers," he answered briskly.

"Thank you," I muttered softly.

"You need to set your priorities straight, Alice, I hope you understand what I'm trying to say,"

Nodding my head, I turned away from him to look out of the window, watching as the trees and buildings blurred away as we moved forward.

I understood exactly what he was trying to say. He wanted me to make him my first priority, something that was easier said than done.

Maybe, with time, Chris would become my first priority; but I doubted it since we were going to be married for only a year then we would go our separate ways. Maybe, after Nico's surgery, I might be able to make him my first priority. But I would not tell him that, I had to try my best to let him know that he was my first priority. This marriage might be fake or arranged, but I made a vow in front of God to love and cherish him, and stay with him through the good and bad times. And I might not be able to love him, but I would cherish him and take care of him and would stand next to him through good and bad times.

All too soon the car stopped. I blinked my eyes to come back to Earth. Turning my head to look at the front, my eyes widened when I saw a stone castle. It was gigantic and was built similar to the medieval castles in the previous centuries.

"You live here?" I asked hg him, appalled at the giant structure.

"We are going to live here," he replied, getting out of the car.

Live here?! In this gigantic castle?! Was he for real?! He was going to make me live here like a princess?! Woah, talk about Cinderella coming to life!

Still staring at the lofty castle, I shuffled out of the car. Once my feet were firmly planted on the ground, I bunched up the poofy material of my gown and begun walking with him towards the castle that was going to be my new home for a year.

The CEO

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Nico is going to live with us, right?" I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"Yes, but he will come here after two weeks," he answered, making me stop dead in my tracks.

"What? Why?" I asked, nearly shouting, jogging to catch up to him.

"Because we are going to get to know each other in two weeks; plus I need to make sure you stay quiet while we have sex, don't want to scar the poor fella at such a young age," he muttered.

"What do you mean, are the walls not sound proof?" I enquired.

"They are, but girls just can't keep their lungs in

check when I have sex with them, it's like somebody inserted a loud speaker or a blow horn in the place of their voice box, their screams shake the walls up," he replied.

"Wow, rich and cocky, a terrible combination," I told him.

"I'm just stating facts." He continued walking. The castle was pretty far away from where the car stopped; I only realized it when I had to walk all the way to it.

"So you don't like screamers?" I questioned, surprised at the ridiculous conversation we were having.

"I have no issue with screamers, but I prefer whimpers and erotic breathers," he responded as if telling his sexual preferences was an everyday conversation.

"Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

"After asking so many, now you're asking for

permission?" This man had an uncanny ability from shifting from being nice to being a total tosser.

"Why do you want your wife to be a virgin?" I asked anyway.

"Because a virgin has a higher chance of becoming pregnant than a woman who is not a virgin," he answered.

"That's not true," I argued.

"Maybe not, but I believe so," he stated.

"A woman who is not a virgin has an equal chance of becoming pregnant." I was not going to let this go.

"I do not agree with you. Yes, a woman who is not a virgin would have a chance of becoming pregnant, but a virgin has a higher chance," he responded.

"Does not," I countered.

"How about we agree to disagree?" He stopped in front of a huge wooden door, that had a metal knocker in the shape of a lion.

Taking hold of the knocker, he slammed the knocker against the door a couple of times. Before I could turn my head to appreciate the beauty surrounding me, the door opened. He strolled inside, leaving me standing, gaping like an idiot.

Sensing that I wasn't next to him, he turned, looking at me with questioning eyes. "Are you coming?"

"Are you not going to carry me over the threshold?" I queried. The man talked about me making him my first priority, while he couldn't even carry me over the bloody threshold. Unbelievable!

"You're right," he said, coming towards me, scooping me up effortlessly in his arms. "The

sooner I carry you our bedroom the sooner we can consummate our marriage."

Say what now?!

Before, my heart was thumping when Brenton came to pick me up for my wedding, but now my heart was thumping for a whole different reason.

I was going to have sex with Chris!.

He had swiftly carried me up the stairs, not pausing to let me admire my new home, and to our bedroom. He gently put me down, telling me to get out of my clothes and make myself comfortable on the bed.

Did the man forget I was a virgin? How could I make myself comfortable on the bed? How could I be expected to be perfectly okay with the fact that I was going to have sex for the first time?

I had a feeling he was not right in the head.

"You're still dressed," he stated, coming out of the bathroom, in nothing but his boxers.

A blush colored my cheeks as I stared at my husband. The man was drool worthy, with corded arms and a defined chest. No wonder women screamed while they had sex with him; I had a feeling that he nearly crushed those poor females under him, causing them to scream like banshees.

"Uh...yeah..." I finally found my voice.

Shaking his head with a small smile, he strode over to me and quickly undid the buttons holding my dress together. Once all the buttons were undone, he slipped the wedding gown off me, leaving me wearing nothing but my underwear, while I stood frozen.

Turning me around, he took hold of my shoulders, then gently guided me to bed.

Pushing me down, he positioned me so my head was on the pillow, my body under his.

"You're scared," he stated, caressing my cheeks.

I was too scared to respond, the words lodged in my throat. Never in a million years did I picture this moment—me, married, having sex for the first time with my husband, all of this made me feel as if I was in an alternate universe.

"Don't worry, just close your eyes, I won't hurt you." And he did it again, going back from being a tosser to being utterly sweet.

Too nervous to argue, I did as he said, closing my eyes I tried to find comfort in darkness, but did not succeed; his scent invaded my nostrils, making me realize just how close he was to me, his body warmth seeping into me.

He captured my lips in a slow sensual kiss. Running his hand on my bare skin, he quickly

stripped me off my bra and panties leaving me completely naked.

My body started heating up as he deepened the kiss, spearing my lips with tongue, invading my mouth. I felt something moist in between my legs.

He continued running his hands on my bare skin, leaving a trail of electric fire. I thought he would stop touching me after he stripped me off, but his hands didn't stop, they continued their journey south, until they reached my sex which was dripping with liquid heat.

I jerked when he slipped a finger inside me, but his weight kept me in place. Leaving my lips and kissing my neck, he slowly pumped his finger in and out of me, making me feel pleasure like no other.

Removing his finger from my core, he positioned himself over me. My mind was hazy

due to what he did, my eyes heavy, I felt drunk on lust. Without a word, he slid inside me, making me arch my back at the sudden fullness, my insides stretching to accommodate his length and girth.

"Aah, stop, take it out," I cried. Had he already broken my hymen? I did not know, but I did know that it hurt.

"Ssh, little fairy, relax, just relax," he cooed, running his fingers through my hair, calming me. Breathing heavily, I did my best to relax; trusting him not to hurt me. Closing my eyes, I did my best to relax my muscles.

"Good girl, now this is going to hurt."

Wait, there was more?

With a swift thrust, he pushed inside me, making me arch my back once again as pain ripped through me, making me scream.

"Son of a bitch!" The pain was horrible, burning me from the inside. I cursed all the romance novels I read that said that the first time was pleasurable.

"Ssh, relax, the pain will go away in a little while, just relax, little dove," he murmured softly, kissing me, holding me close to him.

Just as he said, the pain abated after a little while. I breathed a sigh of relief. Sensing this, he began moving, slowly, pumping in and out of me in a rhythmic pace.

Now, my body was tingling with a weird sensation. It started off like a warm ball in the pit of my stomach, which kept on growing and growing until I wanted to be bathed in the warmth.

Soon that ball grew and grew and finally exploded. I arched my back as pleasure ripped through me, showering me with golden warmth,

as my body trembled.

Was this what the females in the novels meant about sex being pleasureable? Was this what an orgasm felt like? Was this the nirvana that women talked about reaching as they kissed their significant others with passion? Was this the reason females were addicted to sex?

The sound of a grunt brought me back to reality. I blinked my eyes to see him stilling on top of me as he spilled himself inside me. After a minute, he let out a heavy breath and got up from on top of me.

"Get some sleep now, you must be exhausted," he said, lying down next to me. Pulling me to him, he wrapped a corded arm around me, securing me to him.

I was too lost in the feeling of post coital bliss to argue with him. So I closed my eyes with a small smile on my face, falling in the deep

depths of sleep, feeling sated.

The CEO

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After taking a quick shower and putting on a dress, I strode out of my room to find Chris; I needed Keiran's number in order to check on Nico.

He had not been in bed when I had woken up after my nap. Strangely I felt my heart sink when I woke up to find myself alone in the room. I knew it was totally ridiculous of me to expect someone to be nice and loving towards me when he had only married me for a baby, but I just couldn't control what I felt.

I was really dumb.

Checking the living room and then the library I frowned when I did not see him anywhere.

Where was he? Was he already gone for work?

After searching a couple of more rooms, I became breathless; the castle was huge and there was a considerable difference between one room and the next, which had me gasping for breath after searching six rooms. I

wondered how many rooms this gigantic castle had. And how long it would take for me to explore all of it? A year? Maybe more? If it was going to take more than one year then I believe I would not be able to see all of it.

Giving up after finding the sixth bedroom empty of my husband, I got out of the room planning to back to my room, when I found myself confused as to what direction my room was in.

I turned my head left and right to see if I could

recall the direction of my bedroom but it looked as if my short term memory had come into play because I did not know which direction I had come from. I was well and truly lost, after being here for only a few hours.

It was in times like these that I wished I had been blessed with some spatial intelligence, but no, God chose to bless me with one terrible trait after the other.

Relying on my instincts, which were not exactly reliable. I chose to head right, praying it would lead me to a familiar location. However, my unreliable instincts one again proved just how utterly useless they were, because as I kept going further, I found myself in an unfamiliar grand room.

It was a circular room; with a marble floor, grand windows, plush velvet curtains and tapestries on the walls, giving the room a royal look. A massive crystal chandelier hung from

the center, the tear drop crystals sparkling in the sunlight that was filtering through the windows. There was a portrait of a woman hung on the wall. The woman looked to be well in her thirties with beautiful skin, rosy cheeks, sea green eyes; she was dressed in a purple gown that looked incredibly expensive. She sat proudly atop a high backed chair. She looked regal. I wonder who she was? Chris mother? Grandmother? Great-grandmother? Whoever she was, she only added to the beauty of the already breathtaking room, which was probably off limits as well.

Feeling my heart sink at being in yet another unfamiliar room, I bolted out of the circular room and found myself back in the vast corridor. Panic started taking over me as I found myself trapped in this peculiar, grand maze. I knew being with him would not be easy, but right now finding him was proving to be more difficult that

I could possibly imagine; not to mention I had yet to call Keiran and enquire about Nico; God, it was only my first day at being married and I was already cursing! So much for living like a bloody princess.

"Malady? Are you alright?" a soft, feminine voice asked.

I twisted my neck in the direction of the voice so fast it was a wonder it didn't break.

Standing just a few feet away from me was a woman who looked to be in her mid twenties, wearing the signature maid uniform. Her blonde hair was tied in a neat bun above her head, while her pale skin was dotted with freckles. She had dark blue eyes and thin lips.

"Aah yes, do you know where Chris is?" I asked the woman, not wanting to let her know I was lost.

"Mr. Palmer is in his study," the maid answered.

"I would like to see him." I was not going to request this maid to take me to him, he was my husband and I had every right to see him.

"When Mr. Palmer is in his study, he gives strict instructions to not let anyone disturb him," she replied.

"Well I'm his wife and I want you to take me to his study," I asserted. I needed to see him and no one was going to stop me...except my sense of direction.

Before the maid could say anything, soft footsteps were heard from behind her. A woman, who looked to be in her forties appeared with a frown on her face.

"What's going on here? Malady, what are you doing here?" The woman demanded, as if me being here was wrong.

"I want to see Chris, take me to him," I ordered

the older woman.

"Suzy, why haven't you taken Mrs. Palmer to Mr. Palmer study?" The older asked the younger one, who furrowed her eyebrows.

"You know the rules, no one is allowed to disturb him, when he's working," Suzy muttered to the older woman.

"Yes, but we cannot have her roaming on this floor, this part of the castle is forbidden, Mr. Palmer has given me no instructions to allow his wife to come here," the older woman whispered harshly.

Seriously?! I was standing right there, and they were conversing with each other like I wasn't standing just a few feet from them. I get that I was short and skinny, but that in no way made me invisible!

More importantly, why was this part of the castle forbidden? Was it because of the lady in

the room? Was this castle haunted? But I did not find anything out of the ordinary while I searched for my husband here, so why in the Buckingham Palace was this part of the castle forbidden?

"Please forgive me, Malady, I will take you to Mr. Palmer right away, if you would just follow me," Suzy said to me after a few seconds.

Not wanting to waste my time lingering here more than I already had, I began to follow Suzy's lead, but the older woman's voice stopped me.

"Malady, with all due respect, please refrain from coming to this floor from now on. This part of the castle is strictly forbidden to all the staff and family alike, Mr. Palmer will not be happy if he knows you have ventured in the forbidden parts of the castle," she told me.

"Why is this part of the castle forbidden?" I

questioned.

"I'm afraid I'm not in the liberty to tell you this, Malady," she responded, her gaze not leaving mine. It was like she wanted me gone; like she was angry that I had dared to come here.

However, her words only peaked my curiosity. She might not be in the liberty to tell me exactly why this part of the castle was forbidden, but I knew Chris would tell me. He had to tell me.

"Any other parts of the castle that are forbidden?" I asked, acid dripping from my words.

"Yes, this floor and the rest of the floors above this one are strictly forbidden," she answered, not sensing the bitterness in my tone. I did not like this woman.

Nodding my head, I turned and let Suzy lead me out of the forbidden zone. We went down five flights of stairs which had me mentally

smacking myself. How on Earth had I managed to climb so many stairs? Five floors! I had searched rooms in five floors! Well they were only six rooms that had tried to find Chris in...six unlocked rooms, the rest of them were locked.

Throughout all this, I took in the beauty and opulence of the castle. There was not a single thing that looked cheap. Everything looked to be state of the art and expensive. Not to mention that the castle was a contrast between new and old. The structure of the castle looked to be made in the 18th century, but the technology was definitely from the 21st century.

After descending two more flights of stairs, Suzy took a sharp right, leading me in a secluded corridor. She stopped when she came face to face with a giant door. Raising her small fist, Suzy knocked twice on the door.

"Yes?' Came a masculine voice, unmistakably Chris.

"Sir, your wife wishes to speak to you," Suzy answered back.

"Okay, you may leave," he replied.

Nodding at the wooden door, Suzy turned and walked away, leaving me standing staring at the expensive wooden door. I had half the mind to follow her, but something told me he was going to open the door.

When the door opened, I sighed in relief, glad that I had chose to stay despite the confusion that had gather like a cloud in my mind when Suzy left me. I entered the room and the door immediately closed.

He sat in a plush high backed chair behind a large wooden desk. Papers littered the surface of the desk along with other accessories, like a glass paper weight, a mini globe, a pencil holder,

and a pad of stick notes. A giant Mac sat on his right, the screen showing an Excel sheet.

The rest of his study was not different from the rest of the castle. There were a couple of grand, high backed visiting chairs, while a royal sofa was placed against one wall with two matching chairs on either side of it. There was a small chandelier that hung from the ceiling, casting a soft glow around the room. The velvet curtains prevented sunlight from entering, bathing the room in artificial light.

"I see you're awake," he stated, looking at me.

"Why were you not in bed?" I asked, then immediately regretted it. I did not want him to think that him not being in bed made me unhappy.

"I had work to do," he answered.

"You could've woken me up," I told him.

"No, you looked like you needed to rest," he

replied, letting his eyes run over the paper he was holding.

"Well, I tried searching for you, I got lost." I began playing with my necklace.

"Well now you found me, tell me, little peach, what can I do for you?" He asked.

Commit suicide, maybe? It would save me the trouble of being married to you, my subconscious suggested.

"I need Keiran's number," I told him.

"Why?" He raised an eyebrow.

"I need to talk to him," I answered vaguely, not wanting to tell him the real reason I wanted to talk to his brother.

"About?" He was not going to let this go.

"Something important." I was not going to tell him why I needed to speak to Keiran either.

"And that is?" Man, he asked a lot of questions.

"Uh, something important," I repeated.

"Tell me, little one, are you deliberately being obtuse or were you born like this?" He enquired.

My temper flared after hearing his words. The nerve of that man! How dare he called me obtuse?!

"Just give me Keiran's number," I demanded angrily.

"No," he said.

"No?" He had to give me the number.

"Not until you tell me what you want to talk to him about," he stated.

"I told you it's something important," I gritted out.

"And I asked you exactly what it is." This man was impossible.

"It's important," I repeated stubbornly.

"Important, like wanting to know about your brother?"

I huffed. "Okay fine, yes, I want to know how Nico is, and I need to tell Keiran to give Nico his medicine at exactly nine o' clock, now can I please have his number." This is what I was reduced to begging. I could not believe that I had landed myself in such a state just because of money. No wonder greed was one of the seven deadly sins.

"See, now that wasn't so hard, was it?" He loved taunting me, riling me up.

"What's his number?" I asked him, ready to memorise Keiran's number.

He did not answer, instead picked up the cordless phone and pressed a button. "Come here, you can talk to Keiran now." He held out of the phone for me to take.

I reached him in three strides. Taking the phone

from his hand, I plopped on one of the visiting chairs and listened to the monotonous ringing.

"Hello?" Keiran's spoke.

"Hello, Keiran, it's me, Alice," I said.

"Oh, hello, little mushroom, how are you doing?" He asked.

"I'm okay, listen, is Nico there with you?"

"Yes, he's watching TV," Keiran answered.

"Has he had his dinner?" I enquired.

"Not yet, but in an other hour we will sit down for dinner," Keiran replied.

"Okay, make sure his meal is free of any fats, just give him vegetables, they are good for his health, and please give him his medicines at exactly nine o' clock, I have kept them all in his suitcase along with the prescription," I told him.

"Anything else? Does he sleep on his right side or left? Does he have a special bear that he

likes to sleep with? Does he sleep after he hears a bedtime story?" Keiran taunted.

"No," I gritted, trying to calm myself, "Just do as I said and tell Nico I said hi." With that I hung up, not wanting to listen to Keiran's annoying voice.

Putting the phone on the table, I breathed heavily. I was short tempered, I really was. But it had been so long since anyone had truly pissed me off. Now, with Keiran taunting me, I found myself getting angrier and angrier, and I did not like it.

"Is that all?" He asked.

I nodded. "Yes, thank you, I'll leave you to your work, sorry for disturbing you." I stood up and turned, intending to head out the door, but stopped myself when a thought entered my mind.

"Chris?"

"Yes?" He did not look up from his papers.

"How did the door open when you were sitting behind the desk?" I queried.

"Remote control. I pressed a button and the door opened then pressed another button that had the door closing." See what I meant by a combination of old and new.

"Oh, that's nice, and one more question." Now that we were talking about the house, I might as well ask what had been bothering me earlier.

"Yes?" He was so nice at times.

"Why are the upper floors of the castle forbidden?" I questioned.

That got a reaction from him. His head whipped up, his eyes staring at me. One second he was sitting behind the desk working away, and the next he was standing in front of me, gripping my arms with his hands, his gaze hard.

"Who told you that?" He asked me, anger marring his face.

"Uh, the maids told me," I answered, suddenly afraid of him.

"Why? Why would they tell you?" He shook me, causing my fear to rise.

"I—I went up to the seventh floor looking for you, I got lost and Suzy and this other maid found me and told me the top floors were forbidden," I answered, my heart pounding.

He released me from his grasp and clutched his head, spinning around so his back was to me, he groaned in frustration. Whirling around, he grabbed my shoulders and brought me closer to him, he bent his face until his breath mixed with mine.

"Don't ever, and I mean ever dare to go up there, Alice, I mean it, there will be serious consequences if you step foot on the seventh floor and above, do you understand me?" He ordered.

I nodded, too shocked and terrified to utter a syllable. I had no idea what on Earth was up there that had him reacting like this, but whatever it was, it was bloody serious.

After seeing me nod, he instantly relaxed. With a quick nod, he removed his hold from my shoulders. Taking a couple of deep breaths, he ran a hand through his hair.

"You are not even going to mention about these floors ever again, got it?"

I nodded once again.

"Good, now let's go eat, you must be hungry," he stated. Taking my hand in his, he led me out of the study.

I had no clue what was up there. But I was going to find out before this year ended.

The CEO

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That night I couldn't sleep. Images of that beautiful, delicate woman kept flashing before my eyes, making my mind whirl with ideas and curiosity. Who was that woman? And why were the floors seven and above prohibited? I was sure about one thing, though, that woman in the picture was related to the Palmers. But who was she?

After a few hours, my body finally succumbed to the bouts of sleep; however, my mind did not stop working, coming up with one scenario or the other regarding the mystery behind the top floors. Whatever it was I was going to figure it out, I would just have to be really sneaky about

it.

Morning came and Chris greeted me good morning by sinking his length deep inside of me. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. I never expected to be woken up in the way I did this morning. I was glad that I had opened my eyes to see who it was that was shagging me in my sleep, before punching that someone, who turned out to be Chris, to my utter relief; otherwise I would've been at the receiving end of his wrath while he would've been sporting a nice, big bruise on his face.

"Why did you have sex with me first thing in the morning?" I asked Chris over breakfast.

"I'm trying to get you pregnant, the sooner you get pregnant the better," he answered bluntly, cutting his sandwich with a knife and eating it with a fork. I was starting to wonder whether the Palmers were royalty or not, they certainly acted like it. The staff referred to Chris as 'Sir'

and me as 'Malady', which if I wasn't wrong were terms used for royalty; not to mention the way Chris was eating a bloody sandwich, with a fork and a knife!

However, his response cut deep. Not because it was the cold, hard truth, but because his answer made me feel like I was nothing more than a baby making machine. I mean, yeah, we got married only because I was required to provide him with an heir but the guy did not have to treat me like a machine, I was human, I had feelings.

"I'm sure if you have random sex with me it won't get me pregnant any faster," I said to him, trying to make conversation, the man did not talk much.

He threw me a look. "Don't argue with me," he stated.

Well then, so much for making conversation.

Maybe having sex in the morning did not bode well for his mood.

After breakfast, he quickly left for work, but not before telling me that I could contact Keiran in order to talk to my brother by using the landline, I just had to press the number 4 and I would automatically be directed to Keiran. I smiled after hearing that; even though Chris was cold and ruthless most of the times, he still had a soft spot for people or was it only me I wasn't sure and he occasionally gave me a glimpse of that softer side, by doing these little things for me.

Once Chris walked out of the castle closing the door behind him, my gaze immediately darted to the stairs. Now was the perfect time as any to go exploring in the forbidden territory , I just hoped I wouldn't get caught. But first I had to talk to my brother.

Quickly picking up a nearby cordless phone, I

pressed the number 4 and placed the phone against my ear. After four consistent rings I was starting to think that maybe Keiran wouldn't pick up, but after a couple of more rings he finally did.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Keiran, it's me, Alice," I said to him.

"Little Mushroom, how are you?" Keiran asked,

"How many times should I tell you not to call me that," I said irritably.

"You can tell me a thousand times and I'll still call you Little Mushroom," he responded. I could hear the smirk in his voice

Forcing myself not to hurl profanities at him, I took a deep breath. "Where is Nico?" I asked Keiran instead.

"Watching TV," he answered.

"You shouldn't let him watch so much TV, it's

not good for him," I admonished him.

"Well it's either TV or going outside to play, take your pick," he responded drily.

"Don't you have any board games?" These people were so boring.

"What am I, seven years old? No I don't have any bloody board games," he muttered.

"Well go buy some, what is all that money good for, throwing at strippers?!" I was really starting to hate Chris idea about Nico staying with Keiran for the next two weeks.

"God you're annoying," Keiran whined.

"Go buy some board games for Nico, he likes to play Risk and Monopoly the most, Ludo is fine too," I ordered Keiran.

"And who is he going to play with, his imaginary friends?" Now I really wanted to bang my head against the wall.

"No, you wanker, he's going to play with you," I gritted out.

"Careful, little mushroom, I might not be so nice if you continue insulting me," Keiran warned.

"Well then don't give me the chance to continuously insult you, go and buy some board games for Nico and put him on the phone, I want to talk to him," I told him.

I heard some sort of rustling noise before Nico came on the line. "Hello?" Nico said.

"Hi, Nico, it's me, Alice," I told him, relieved to hear my brother's voice.

"Hi, Alice, how are you, how is Chris?" Nico asked.

"I'm fine, buddy, Chris is fine, too, how are you?" It had only been twenty four hours since I last saw Nico and yet it felt like months.

"I'm good, Keiran has a really big house," he told

me.

"That's great, Nic, what are you doing?" I already knew what he was doing but I still asked, for the sake of conversation.

"I'm watching TV, Keiran and I made snacks earlier, he is a really good cook," he responded happily.

"Healthy snacks, right?" I would kill Keiran if he fed my brother junk food.

"Yes, vegetable sandwiches, they were delicious," he told me, my heart instantly relaxing.

"Good, that's good," I said.

"You know, Alice, Keiran told me that Chris is looking for a good doctor who will perform my surgery," Nico informed me.

My mind couldn't believe what Nico had said. Chris was looking for a cardiologist for Nico's

surgery? Even though it was not his problem, he was still looking for a good doctor for my brother.

At the moment, all the negative things I thought about Chris evaporated into wisps of nothingness, leaving behind only the positive traits. No longer did it matter to me that he was cold, blunt, distant and arrogant. The only thing that mattered was that even though it was none of his concern, he was still searching for a cardiologist, and that made me respect him a hundred times more than I already did.

"Are you sure, Nic?" I wanted to make sure that Keiran was not lying to Nico.

"Yes, Keiran told me, you can ask him yourself," Nico responded.

"Can you put him on?" I requested Nico.

"Sure." There was that rustling sound again before Kieran came back on the line.

"What's up, little mushroom?" Keiran spoke up.

"Is it true that Chris is searching for a cardiologist for Nico?" I enquired.

"Yes," he responded.

"Are you sure? You're not lying to me, are you?"
God, I would throw something if Keiran told me that he was joking.

"Little mushroom, how cruel do you think we are? Just because we sort of ganged up on you when you were rejecting my brother's proposal doesn't mean we would play some sort of a sick joke on you by lying to you about your brother's surgery. It's highly insulting that you would think so low of us," Keiran said.

A stab of guilt shot straight to my heart at hearing his words. Keiran was right, I should not judge them so quickly. Chris had already given me so much, I should smack myself for thinking

like this about my husband.

"I—I'm sorry, Keiran, I shouldn't have said all that," I apologized.

"I know you're used to being independent and not used to people helping you, but little mushroom, now you can relax and let Chris shoulder some of the burden, let him help you," Keiran told me softly.

I wish it was that easy. I wish it was that easy to accept help from others. But the truth was, I couldn't do it. I couldn't be okay with others helping me, simply because I did not want to get used to it. Chris and I were only going to be together for a year and I could not get used to sharing my burden with him, because then it would all come to end, and then going back to my waitressing job and facing the world all by myself would be difficult.

However, I did not let Keiran know about all this.

It was my problem, and I was going to handle it on my own.

"I'll try," I told him.

"Good, trust me, it won't be difficult, right now you are married to one of the richest man on the planet, all your wishes will come true, all you have to do is say the words," Keiran stated.

And what about when I wouldn't be married to one of the richest man on the planet? What then? What was the point of enjoying the life of luxury when we all knew it would soon come to an end? I could not be stupid enough to turn a blind eye to my financial status just because God had blessed me with money for my brother's surgery. And once Nico had his surgery, I would use the other fifty thousand pounds for his education. I would not let Nico stress over the monetary problems. I would give Nico the future he deserved.

"Yes, thank you, Keiran, and I'm sorry about doubting you," I told him sincerely.

"No problem, little mushroom, now I got to go and buy board games for Nico," he said.

"Okay, and make sure you give him his medicines on time, take care, bye."

"Bye." He hung up.

I put the phone back on the cradle, satisfied that my brother was alright and was enjoying himself, I set about on my other task: going up to the seventh floor.

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I waited for a few hours after I had talked to Keiran and Nico to go upstairs. The maids were bustling about everywhere, and I knew if one of them caught me sneaking upstairs I would be in trouble.

So I waited.

And waited.

The wait was excruciating. I felt that the time was moving extra slow. Everytime I glanced at the clock, the minute hand had only moved from one digit to the next, never skipping any number.

Four hours later, the maids eventually retired to their quarters for their lunch break. It was now afternoon, the hour and minute hands pointing at twelve. Suzy had informed me that the cooks will come and prepare lunch as soon as their lunch break ended which was at 1:00 pm, which meant I had only one hour to explore the seventh floor.

Taking a deep breath, I quickly jogged over to the flights of stairs, not stopping until I landed on the fourth floor. There, I paused, trying to catch my breath. I swear, if it had not been for the time being my enemy I wouldn't be standing here gasping for breath.

My eyes found the clock, the minute hand now pointing at one. The good thing about this castle was that there were clocks on every floor, and not just any clocks, huge clocks which could be seen from far away.

Great, five minutes had already passed, which left me with fifty five minutes. I would not be able to do a lot of exploring in fifty five minutes; make that fifty minutes, I needed five minutes to get back downstairs as well.

Resuming my journey up the stairs after two minutes, I climbed up the fifth floor and then the sixth floor, making sure to keep looking over my shoulder to make sure I was not being followed; I was no mood of explaining myself to anyone, least of all to that older maid whatever her name was.

Just as I reached the sixth floor, I stopped once again to catch my breath. Glancing at the great clock, my heart started pounding when I saw

the minute hand pointing at two. Shit! Forty five minutes to go.

My anticipation mounted as I prepared myself to go to the seventh floor. The floor that held so many secrets in it and above it. The floor that was prohibited to all staff and family members alike. The floor that bathed this castle in mystery.

I was glad that I had chosen this moment to explore. No one had followed me and for the next forty five minutes I could explore in peace; find out why the floors seven and above were forbidden. All I had to do was to find some sort of a clue.

However, when I turned to go up the stairs, my eyes widened in shock while rage exploded within me.

All my hardwork went to waste. All the energy I had gained during breakfast was lost. Fury

unfurled inside of me when I saw what stood before me.

It was a gate. A big, steel gate standing at the entrance of the staircase that led to the seventh floor. It had a grid structure, with each steel bar two centimeters thick. There was no padlock or a key hole that indicated where one was suppose to put the key in. But there was an electronic keypad placed in the middle of the left side.

When I saw the gate, I cursed every person living in this castle to hell and back. I screamed in utter frustration at what was now quite obvious.

The entrance to the seventh floor was locked.

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I slammed the door of my bedroom shut and let out of a scream of frustration. How on this bloody Earth did they manage to install a gate in less than twenty four hours?! It was like they suspected that I would try to sneak upstairs. I wanted to hit something so bad. But I still wondered how did they managed to install such a huge gate in less than twenty four hours when I did not hear any sounds that suggested a gate was being installed?

Here's a hint for you, they have money, my subconscious told me.

And she was right. Chris had money, lots of it; and for once I wished he had used that money on cheap tarts, who had nothing better to do than shake their arses in front of men all day and all night, than spend his money on installing a freaking gate! It was utterly crazy how men always say women go around spending money on useless things when they themselves spent outrageous amount of money on things that weren't even necessary, like a gate.

The problem I now faced was, how in the Buckingham Palace was I suppose to find out about the woman now? Where would I find information about the top floors? Who was going to tell me?

No one. You're on your own. You now have less than a year to figure out the mystery, my

subconscious stated.

But how? I needed a clue, any clue that would guide me to unravel this mystery. This castle was a little help. In the fast paced tour that I took by myself of this place, I only saw a few pictures of Chris and his family and not a single picture of that woman, except for the one in the circular room. Which left me with nothing to go on.

Curse you, Chris.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a soft knock. The door opened to reveal the one person I really did not want to see, the older maid.

"Malady, the cook is ready to prepare lunch, what would you like to eat for lunch?" The older maid asked.

Her words took me by surprise. Why was she asking what I wanted for lunch? I would eat whatever they made, shouldn't she be asking Chris what he wanted to eat? It was his house after all.

"Uh, I'm not going to have lunch, just ask Chris what he wants to eat for lunch and make that," I told her.

"You're not going to have lunch?" she questioned, her eyebrows raised.

Did she not hear me the first time? Maybe I should tell Chris to fire her, she was getting too old to work here now.

"No, I'm not hungry," I answered, wishing she would just leave now. And it was the truth, I really wasn't hungry...at least not for food. What I was hungry for and was desperately craving

was information regarding the forbidden territory.

Sighing in relief after the door shut softly leaving me alone once again in my room, I began to contemplate the numerous possibilities regarding the top floor.

It was clear that in order to know why the floors seven and above were prohibited I first had to find out about the woman in the portrait. Who was she? Was she Chris girlfriend? His wife, perhaps? No, she couldn't be his wife, they both had the same shade of sea green in their eyes. Maybe she was his mother, she certainly looked the part, being all graceful and royal, she put the queen to shame. But why would he not have more picture of his mother around the castle? If I had a mother like that, I would hang her portraits all over my house.

The knock sounded once again and it took everything in me not to growl. The door opened once again to reveal the older maid, I really should ask her name, couldn't keep calling her the older maid forever.

"Malady, Mr. Palmer is on the phone for you," she said, holding out the phone for me to take.

"Hello?" I spoke to Chris after taking the phone from her hand.

"Why aren't you eating?" He enquired bluntly.

"Uh, who told you that?" I asked him, even though I had a pretty good idea who would tell him.

"That's not the answer to my question," he said

with annoyance.

"And that's not the answer to mine, either," I retorted brazenly.

"Listen to me, and listen to me good, you are going to have lunch and you are going to eat a proper meal, understand?" He stated, causing me roll my eyes.

"I'm not hungry, so yeah, I'm not having lunch, when are you coming home?" I responded.

"Alice," He begun, making me gulp. He used my name when he was angry, as far as I had known him, which had only been a few days. "I'm going to call again after thirty minutes and if I get to know that you haven't had lunch, trust me you will not like the consequences," he threatened.

"Chris, I'm not a child, if I said I'm not hungry that means I'm not hungry," I told him.

"Well, little peach, you're certainly acting like a child so I'm going to speak to you like one, go and have lunch, I will not tell you again," he replied.

"No." I hung up.

Throwing that nasty woman a glare, I handed the phone back to her, fuming in anger. I had a feeling that this woman did not like me very much. I mean, why would she go behind my back and call Chris like a nanny complaining to the parents about a petulant child.

"Why did you call Chris?" I asked her, still glaring at her.

"It's my job, Malady, if you go against Mr. Palmer, it's my job to inform him," she replied evenly, pissing me off more than I already was.

"What's your name?" I queried.

"Helga," she responded.

"Well, Helga," I spat out her name, "I did not go against your boss, I simply refused to have lunch." I gritted.

"Not doing what he wants is going against him," she argued, making me want to slap her.

"I'm his wife not his enemy, so me refusing to have lunch is not going against him," I snapped.

"You are his wife, it is your duty to do whatever your husband wants you to do." God, did she not know when to shut the bloody hell up?

"No, I am his wife, which means I'm his equal,

so I'll do whatever the bloody hell I please, and you have no right to go behind my back and inform my husband about every little thing I do," I replied.

"I'm always going to inform Mr. Palmer about every little thing you do because he pays me, you don't," she stated, her wrinkled face made me wish I could stretch the loose skin like an elastic, eventually tearing it.

"Get out," I seethed, glaring fire daggers at her.

Helga turned to leave my room but stopped as she stepped out of the threshold of my room; turning slightly, she looked at me.

"I'll bring lunch for you, Malady," she said and left my room, closing the door behind her.

Quickly marching over to the door, I locked it shut. It was official, Helga hated me, and I had no clue why. I never did anything to the woman, and she talked to me like as if she was the owner of this castle and not Chris. The woman actually had the nerve to accuse me of going against him, my own husband. Was she crazy?! I had to talk to Chris about her. The bitch didn't know her limits nor her place in this castle.

Letting out a scream of frustration, I threw myself on the bed and quickly pulled the duvet over me. Turning to my side, I closed my eyes and willed sleep to come and take me far away from bossy husbands and nasty maids.

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"Come on, little dove, wake up," Chris voice penetrated the thick fog of peaceful darkness surrounding my mind.

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes and came face to face with my husband, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking down at me.

"What time is it?" I asked, more like croaked, my voice sounding deep.

"It's 3:00 pm, you slept for a solid two hours, now get up and eat your lunch, it's going to get cold," he ordered.

"What time did you come home?" I asked, pushing myself up to a sitting position.

"Just now, I had to cancel my meeting," he told me, lifting the tray of food from the side table and placing it gently on my thighs.

"Why?" I asked, making no attempt at eating.

"Because my stubborn wife refused to have lunch," he answered, lifting the spoon filled with rice up to my mouth.

"Don't tell me you cancelled your meeting because of me?!" I asked, aghast, feeling guilty.

"Why else would I show up here so soon, waking you up so you can have your lunch?" No, no, no, he wouldn't do that. Chris wouldn't cancel his meeting just because I refused to have lunch.

"You're bluffing," I said.

He gave me a look that clearly told me he was not bluffing; which only resulted in guilt piling in the shape of big rocks in my stomach, killing the little appetite that had appeared just now.

"Open your mouth," Chris ordered, still holding the spoon in front of my mouth.

"Ch—chris, I—I'm so sorry, why did you cancel

your meeting? You shouldn't have done that, your work is so important," I said to him.

"Yes, but my wife's health is more important than my work," he replied.

His words made my heart flutter. Was it true? Did he care about me? I mean, I'm sure he did, why else would he cancel his meeting and come home just so he could make sure I would eat something. He really cared.

"Really?" I asked, wanting to be sure that he really cared about me.

"Yes, if you are not going to be healthy then the baby would not be healthy either, and I want a healthy baby." And he knew exactly how to

burst my bubble.

My heart cracked, while my subconscious laughed at me. Stupid, stupid Alice. How many times have you told yourself not to get ahead of yourself and believe stuff that would never happen. But no, you always have to see things that are not there, believe things that would never come true.

"Oh." I stared at the food placed on my thighs, too embarrassed to look at my husband.

"Yes, now open your mouth and eat, I don't have all day." I opened my mouth, letting He slide the spoon in my mouth.

He fed me until not a grain of rice was present on the plate. Once I had eaten to his

satisfaction, he took the tray from where it was resting on my lap and placed it back on the side nightstand. Standing up, he took off his suit jacket and dropped it on the bed. Unbuttoning his shirt, he strode over to the bathroom and closed the door.

I cursed myself for letting my dreams and fantasies get the best of me. I wasn't stupid enough to think that there was going to be someone out there who would love me and care about me, but that did not mean I did not want someone to love me and care about me. I know I was on my own against this world, but it would be nice if there was someone who would, just once, fight this world for me, or at least help me fight this world. I should definitely kill all my dreams and fantasies, they would never come true if the recent events were anything to go by.

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The bedroom door opened and in walked Helga,

making me wish I had claws for nails so I could shred that loose wrinkled skin. Narrowing my eyes at her, I tracked her every move, watching with extreme concentration as she padded over to the nightstand and picked up the tray with her wrinkled, bony hands.

"You should do what Mr. Palmer wants, he had to leave work early because of you," she told me.

Her words made me see red. The bitch was speaking when it was not her place to speak. I was so talking to Chris about firing her, the bitch needed to leave, and fast.

Giving me her back, Helga shuffled out of the room. I threw the duvet off me and got out of bed. Marching over to the vanity table, I gathered my hair in my hands and tied it in a pony tail.

Chris emerged from the bathroom just as I was drinking a glass of water. His hair was wet, droplets of water falling on his shirt.

"Chris?" I called out to him, as he walked over to his side of the bed and grabbed his watch from the nightstand.

"Yes?"

"I want, no, I need you to fire Helga," I told him.

He gave me a look that clearly said he thought I was crazy for even suggesting something like that.

"And why would I do that?" He questioned.

"Because she hates me and has a serious problem with me," I answered.

"Really?" He walked over to me. "Does she have a problem with you or do you have a problem with her?" He enquired.

"Why would I have a problem with her? I don't even know her! She has a problem with me," I stated.

"Little fairy, I don't know what your issues with Helga are, but I'm not going to fire her over some insignificant womanly feud," he told me.

My eyes widened at his choice of words. Insignificant womanly feud, that's what he was calling it!

"There is no feud, I'm telling you she clearly hates me, so why can't you just fire her?!" I nearly shouted, my temper, once again getting

the best of me.

"Helga has been loyal to this family and had been working here for a really long time, I am not going to fire her just because you ask me to after less than a week of coming here," he responded.

"You're siding with her?! Why are you defending her? I'm your wife!" I shouted this time.

"Correction." He stepped closer to me, invading my personal space, making me feel small.

"Temporary wife."

It was like he slapped me. Those two words made me realize exactly what he thought of me. How little I meant to him. How insignificant I

really was. Those words weren't just true, they told me exactly what I was—nothing. I was nothing. I had no worth, nothing. Hell, I bet the staff had more respect and worth than I did.

"You're right, all this is temporary," I said, trying to keep my voice even, not letting my emotions betray me.

"Exactly, so just deal with it, bear with Helga, it's only for a year," He said.

He was right. It was only for a year. Then I was going to leave, not Helga. Chris would tell me to leave, not Helga. Chris would cut his ties with me, not Helga. And his words also told me something else. He would always choose Helga, not me. He was going to choose a wrinkled, old maid over me.

Because I was temporary.

I nodded silently after hearing his words. When he saw me nod, his shoulders relaxed and he, in turn, gave me a firm nod before sauntering out of the room.

Once the door shut firmly behind me, I let out a strangled sob. I thought if I told him about Helga he would put her in her place, but instead he had put me in my place; once again reminding me I was nothing more than a baby making machine that he was paying one million pounds to.

I was pathetic. Men actually wanted something from me in order to marry me, no one wanted me out of their own accord, no one wanted me just because maybe I had nice hair or something. I was pathetic.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes. Instantly Nico's face came to the forefront of my brain, making me realize exactly why I was doing this, and why I would continue to suffer through this sham of a marriage.

Steeling my resolve, I squared my shoulders and held my head high. I didn't need Helga or Chris. I had more important things to deal with, like finding a cardiologist for my brother, my only family.

Wiping my face with my hands in order to wipe any remnants of tears, I turned and strode purposefully out of the room, slamming the door behind me

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I'm sorry," I apologized to Chris, who sat at the head of the dining table, putting mushroom ravioli in his plate.

His eyebrows rose. "Sorry about what?" He asked, putting the spoon back in the ravioli dish.

"For telling you to fire Helga and all, I was way out of line, so I'm sorry," I replied, fiddling with my necklace.

He chuckled. "That's alright, I just found that

you've got quite a temper, I didn't know that before I married you, so it's alright," he told me.

I sighed in relief before taking a seat next to him at the dining table. "If you would've known that I had a temper before you married me, would you still have chosen me as your wife?" I asked.

"Yes," he said without hesitation.

"Why?" I enquired, I really wanted to know why he chose me as his bride.

He didn't answer my question, instead raised the fork filled with ravioli to his mouth and took a bite, chewing the food slowly before swallowing; while I stared at him, transfixed, watching as his throat moved when pushing the food down, it was strangely erotic, either that or I was being hormonal.

"Well?" I really wanted an answer to my question.

"Well what?" He asked, as if he had no idea what I was talking about.

"Don't act clueless, why did you choose to marry me?" I repeated my earlier question.

"Because I can," he replied, looking down at his plate, playing with his food a little before taking another bite of ravioli.

"That's not an answer!" I slammed my hands on the table, causing the plates and glasses to make a clanging sound.

"That's all you're going to get," he responded, not looking the least bit fazed by my outburst.

"Look, I'm your temporary wife, but still I'm your wife, I should know why you chose me when you could've chosen from hundreds of beautiful, rich women," I argued.

"And because you're my temporary wife is why I'm not going to tell you why I chose you over the others," he stated.

I glared at him, and in response he winked at me, he fucking winked! Growling in frustration, I crossed my arms in front of my chest and sat back in the chair, cursing myself for not being a mind reader.

"Eat your dinner, little peach," he said.

"No," I grumbled.

He sighed. "Are we back to that again? You want me to feed you? By the way, when I said that if you did not eat lunch by the time I came home you would have to face serious consequences, I meant that you'd have to face serious consequences," he told me.

"Oh? And what are the serious consequences that I'm going to face?" I asked in a mocking tone.

"You won't see your brother for a whole month," he answered, staring me dead in the eyes.

I swallowed hard as my eyes bugged out of my

sockets. He was not serious. He cannot be serious. He would not keep me from seeing my brother.

"You wouldn't." I wouldn't let him do that to me.

"I just did, Nico is going to come here after a month now, and if you argue with me I'm going to extend his stay at Keiran's place, your choice, little dove," he stated.

"Chris don't do this, anything but this," I pleaded. It was bad enough that Nico was under Keiran's watch for two weeks and now he was going to stay with Keiran for a month

"I might reduce it to three weeks if you eat your dinner like a good little girl," he said.

"And if I refuse?" I was just asking because I wanted to know what he planned to do if I did not eat my dinner.

"Then Nico is going to stay with Keiran for two months and you would not be allowed to have any sort of contact with him," he answered, but did not stop eating his ravioli.

Shock stole my ability to speak for a few seconds. I just gaped at my husband, while he continued eating. He did not even bat an eyelash after delivering his evil consequences. How easily he told me that if I did not eat dinner he would not let me have any contact with my brother, and Keiran said they were not cruel.

Yeah right!

Not cruel my ass!

"That's not fair!" I cried, throwing my hands in the air.

"All's fair in marriage and war," he replied.

"It's love and war," I corrected, but it made no difference.

"Same difference." He was really starting to piss me off.

"You're not nice, I thought you were nice but you're not," I said to him.

He laughed. "Little one, I can be a very nice person, but when you act like a stubborn little brat then I'm going to be very mean, and little fairy, you have no idea how mean I can really be." Now he was scaring me.

Taking my plate, he quickly filled it up with ravioli. Pushing the plate towards me, he put the fork in the plate, before gesturing for me to eat it.

"I'm not hungry, I just had lunch a few hours ago," I whined.

"Do you love your brother, little peach? It looks like you don't, because with the way you're acting, I might be forced to extend Nico's stay at Keiran's place for a whole year."

Why was he doing this? What did I do to deserve this? I only wanted money for my brother's surgery, but looks like his threats and punishments were included as a fucking bonus!

"Chris," I whined.

"Finish it up, then we'll go for five rounds of sex, hurry up, little fairy, we don't have all night," he stated.

My eyes widened. "Five rounds?" What was he, a machine?

"You want more?" He asked with furrowed eyebrows.

"No, five is too much, I can't handle that," I complained.

"Well that's why I'm telling you to eat dinner, you are going to need your energy," he responded.

"Are you crazy?! I'm not going to have sex with you five bloody times! I'm a human not a

machine which you so outrageously believe," I shot back.

"You are going to have sex five times, I paid for it," he stated.

It felt like my world stopped after hearing him utter those words. Did he just call me a whore? Was this what I was reduced to? From being his temporary wife I was now his whore.

"Did you just call me a whore?" I wanted to confirm that I was not misunderstanding anything here.

He rose from his chair and after taking a couple of steps he came and stopped right in front of me. Putting his hands on the arm rests, he bent low until his face was levelled with mine.

"Yes, you are a whore," he told me, before leaning his face forward and pressing his lips first to my cheek and then to my lips. "My whore," he finished.

Before I could process my actions, my hand rose and struck him on the cheek. Pushing him away, I stood up from my chair and took a few steps back to create some space between us.

"I'm not a whore! I only married you because I wanted money for my brother's surgery. If you think that I'm a whore because of this, then you are the most despicable man on the face of this bloody planet! If I was a whore, I would've had enough money for Nico's surgery by selling my body to random men, but no, I chose to keep my virtue and my self respect, only because I wanted to show the world that no matter happened I would not succumb to prostitution and I wanted my husband to know that his wife was and is a respectable woman. I would rather wash people's feet and feed their pigs but I would never sell my body, so don't you dare call me a whore!" I shouted at him, tears blurring my

vision.

I thought he would apologize for calling me a whore, but he didn't. He just strode towards me and kissed me so hard I feared my lips would bruise.

"You wanna know something, little fairy? I love this side of you, this angry, vicious side. And I think I would piss you off more often, because I would thoroughly enjoy seeing those green eyes blazing with fire," he stated, kissing my lips.

Even though I did not believe it, but I managed to push him away. "You're sick," I spat.

"And you're my whore," he responded with an amused glint in his eyes.

"Don't call me that, I'm warning you, Chris," I gritted out.

"Or what? You are my whore, I'm paying you a million pounds after all, you should spread those thighs whenever I command," he taunted,

fuelling my anger.

"You're calling me a whore, fine, then I'll act like one," I said before turning on my heels and making a mad dash out of the dining room.

Running out of the house, I looked around for the chauffeur before spotting him going inside his cabin. From behind me, I could hear Chris footsteps pounding on the marble floor. Before he could reach me, I sprinted towards the cabin in which I watched the chauffeur disappear into. Once I reached the cabin, I threw open the door and barged inside. Closing the door, I slid the lock into place, before turning around and facing the chauffeur.

He was laying on the sofa which was against one wall. The sofa was facing the TV which was against the opposite wall, while a coffee table was placed in front of the couch. He had shaggy brown hair and soft brown eyes. He had a nice face, but not a handsome face, with

symmetrical features, except for the nose which was crooked.

"Madam, is everything alright, would you like me to take you somewhere?" He asked.

"What's your name?" I asked, breathing heavily.

"Bernard, Madam," he answered.

"Well Bernard, I want you to take off your clothes," I told him. I was too far gone to let sanity interfere with what I was doing.

Bernard stared at me in confusion. "Pardon me, Madam."

"I said, take off your clothes," I repeated.

Suddenly loud banging erupted throughout the cabin. "Alice, open the door this instant!" He shouted from the other side.

"No, I'm a whore, let me do what I do best." I turned to Bernard who looked at me as if I was an alien from another planet. "What are you

waiting for, take off your clothes." I went to him and begun to unbutton his shirt, while Bernard stood frozen.

Just as I had freed the last button and pushed the red shirt off of Bernard's shoulders, the door tore off its hinges and flew to one side of the cabin. Chris stormed inside, looking livid, his sea green eyes burning with fury.

Before I utter a word, Chris yanked me away from Bernard and tossed me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Without a word, he stormed out of the cabin. I kept on punching and kicking him on the back but it had no effect on him.

Once he entered the castle, he glided up the stairs and into our bedroom. Throwing me on the bed, he proceeded to remove his clothing, a task he accomplished in less than ten

seconds. I sat up on the bed, my heart pounding with fear as I took note of the fury burning in his eyes. I was scared as to what he was going to do now.

"Remove your panties and spread your legs, Alice," he told me, standing before me completely naked.

"Chris, I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"Tell me something, little dove, did you touch him? Did you kiss him?" He questioned, his eyes hard.

I shook my head rapidly. "No, I swear I didn't, I'm sorry Chris, I swear I wasn't going to do anything with him, I was angry..." I trailed off.

He crawled on the bed until he was above me while I was lying under him. "Did you read the contract carefully, little peach?" He queried, cupping my cheek.

"Yes," I whispered, afraid as to where this was

going.

"Then you must have read the clause that stated that in this span of twelve months in which we would be married you are not allowed to cheat on your husband," he said.

"Yes, but Chris I did not cheat on you, I swear," I told him, begging him to believe me.

"But you attempted to cheat on me," he stated, his voice eerily soft.

"I was angry," I justified.

"So you were angry and you planned to cheat on me, and now I'm angry, little one, do you think you can handle that?" He asked.

My heartbeat accelerated at hearing his words. Oh God, please don't let him hurt me, please.

"Chris, I'm sorry," I apologized again.

Taking a hold of my dress, he ripped the material in half, baring me to him. Throwing the

torn dress aside, he yanked my bra and panties off me, leaving me naked and at his mercy.

Cupping my sex, He leaned forward. "This belongs to me," he gritted out, glaring at me. "Say it, say this belongs to me."

"It's yours," I said.

For a year.

Grabbing my breast with his other hand, he gave it a squeeze. "This belongs to me, say it," he ordered.

"It's yours." I was so terrified of him in this moment.

For a year.

He ran his over my bare body. "All of this belongs to me, it's mine, say it," He ordered once again.

"It's yours," I told him.

For a year.

Removing his hand from my sex, he wrapped his arms around my waist and laid down on top of me, putting his head just below my breast. For a long time, neither of us said anything, my heart and mind anticipating his next move.

"You are a handful," He said, after ten minutes. "You are going to make this year one hell of a year," he added. I wasn't sure whether he was complaining or complimenting me.

"I'm sorry," I murmured. And I was, I was feeling awful about what I did.

He shook his head, his hair tickling my bare skin. "You should be," he replied.

"I am," I told him.

He still had his arms around me like a vice. "You are not going to do anything like this ever again," he stated.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, feeling the softness. "Don't worry, I won't," I assured him.

"You better not, because the next time you do something like this, I would ruin your life and would have you licking my feet for the rest of your existence," he threatened, causing my heart to clench in dread.

"It's just a year, Chris, then you would be free of me," I told him.

"If you do something like this again, little dove, then you would be begging me for mercy even after our contract and this marriage is over," He said.

"I promise, I won't do anything like this again," I reassured him.

"Good, make sure you don't."

"Does that mean I'm not a whore." Please let him say that I wasn't a whore, I hated that word.

"You are a whore," He responded, tightening his arms around me, causing tears to prick my eyes.

"But you are my whore and

my wife, not anyone else's, just mine, all mine," he said. I wasn't sure if this was a good thing or bad thing.

"Chris, can you let me go, I'm getting uncomfortable," I requested.

"No," he deadpanned.

"How long are you going to hold me for?" I asked, wriggling under him to get in a slightly more comfortable position.

His answer made my heart flutter with happiness and something else which I was not sure of.

"For ever long as I want."

The CEO

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Grabbing the dress lying on my bed, I slid it over the hanger. Putting the dress on the bed, I proceeded to slide all my dresses over the hangers, which didn't take long as there were only six dresses.

The door of the bedroom opened and Chris sauntered in holding a plate with different assortments of food and a bag of some sort. Giving him a glance, I went back to my dresses. "You didn't eat breakfast," he stated.

I just ignored him, like I had been doing for the past two weeks, grabbing the dresses I went inside the walk-in closet. Hanging the dresses on the metal rails, I strode back to the bedroom. He was sitting on the bed with the plate resting

on his thigh, while the bag was on the bed. Without sparing him a glance, I made my way to the door, eager to get away from him, but he stopped me.

"Alice, stop acting like a child and come eat something," he said in a stern voice.

"I'm not hungry," I shot back. But the truth was, I was famished, but just looking at the food had me feeling queasy. I had a feeling I might be coming down with a stomach bug.

"Alice, come back here and eat something," he repeated.

Sighing deeply, I decided to tell him the truth, it didn't matter that I was mad at him, I vowed to be a good wife, and I was not going to break my promise that I made in front of God.

"Chris, I'm not feeling well, so please don't ask me to eat, I can't even look at food," I told him.

His eyebrows furrowed as concern flashed in

his eyes. Standing up, he quickly strode over to me and gripped my shoulders.

"What do you mean you're not feeling well?" He placed a hand on my forehead to check if I was having a fever. "You don't have a fever, come, sit down." He led me all the way to the bed.

"Tell me what are you feeling," he said softly, surprising me with his gentle behavior.

"I feel fine, just feel queasy when I look at food," I answered, trying not to look at the plate filled with food.

"Queasy, as in nauseous?" He enquired.

"Yes," I told him.

Nodding his head, he stood up. "Wait here, I'll be right back." He went inside the bathroom and came back after a few seconds carrying five small boxes.

"Here, go and take these, I'll be here." He

handed me the boxes. Looking at the boxes my eyes widened when I saw five pregnancy tests all of different companies.

My heart started pounding as my throat went dry at the thought of being pregnant. I knew I married him for the baby, but now, when there was a strong possibility that I could actually be pregnant with his baby, I was terrified.

However, I did as he said and went to the bathroom to see if I was pregnant or not. Closing the door behind me, I put the tests on the sink. With shaky hands I took out the tests from the boxes and one by one used them.

A knock sounded at the bathroom door. Opening the door, I stepped aside as he entered the bathroom. Taking my hand, he led me to the sink where the pregnancy tests were sitting.

"How long until we know the results?" He questioned.

"Um, two boxes said two minutes while the other three said three minutes," I answered. My hand went to my necklace as a wave of anxiety washed over me.

He rubbed my back in a soothing manner, his eyes never leaving the tests. Meanwhile, my fingers kept twisting the necklace around my neck. I wasn't sure whether I should be happy or terrified. If I was indeed pregnant, then I would get the remaining fifty thousand pounds that he promised me and I would fulfill my end of the bargain, but the thought of spending nine months carrying a baby and suffering from hormones and nausea made me wish I had never agreed to this deal.

Grabbing all of the tests at once, he ran his eyes over each one. I just stared at him with wide eyes, afraid to know the answer.

A smile made its way on his face as his eyes lit up with happiness. My heart sunk at seeing him this happy. Before he could utter a word from his mouth, I already what the results of the pregnancy tests were.

"You're pregnant." He smiled at me, a megawatt smile that I had no clue he was capable of. Putting the tests on the sink, he took me in his arms and spun me around.

Putting me down, he took my wrist and together we exited the bathroom. When we reached the bed, he put the plate of food on the nightstand and gestured for me to sit on the bed.

"We are going to visit the doctor once you eat something, okay?" He grabbed a slice of apple from the plate and handed it to me.

"I'm scared, Chris," I whispered. It was only when the words left my mouth did I realize what I had said. Shit, he wasn't suppose to know

what I was feeling.

Putting the slice of apple back in the plate, he cupped my face. "Why, little fairy? Why are you scared?" He had never been this gentle with me.

"I—I don't know." I sobbed. Tears pricked my eyes as my heart constricted in fear.

"Hey." He wrapped me in secure embrace as tears fell freely from my eyes.

Bloody hell, woman what is wrong with you. You never cry, why are you crying now. You're pregnant, not dying, stop crying! My subconscious scolded.

"Ssshhh, you have nothing to be scared of, I'm here and I'm not leaving you, got it?" He kissed my forehead while rubbing my back.

Wow, if I had known he was going this gentle and sweet with me when I got pregnant, I would've gotten pregnant sooner, at least then he wouldn't have called me a whore.

"I'm sorry." I sniffed, pulling away from him. "I didn't mean to cry."

"It's okay, don't apologize," he responded, kissing my temple.

Picking up the plate of food, he placed it on the bed. "Eat something, then we'll go to the doctor."

"Chris, I really can't eat anything, please," I whined.

"You have to eat something, little peach, it would not be good for the baby," he stated.

"But I really can't, I might end up throwing up," I argued.

He sighed. "Okay, tell you what, if you eat the fruits in the plate, then after visiting the doctor we'll go to see your brother," he told me.

"Really, you'll take me to see Nico, promise?" I really wanted to see my brother, it had been so

long. He was suppose to come live with us now, but he had followed through with his consequences and threats, and Nico was going to come live with us after another two weeks.

"Yes, but you'll have to eat the fruits in the plate first," he responded.

Without another word, I grabbed one of the two bananas from the plate and hurriedly peeled it off. Finishing the banana in three bites, I threw the peel back in the plate and immediately grabbed the other banana. Once the bananas were gone, I proceeded to eat all the eight slices of apple, which didn't take me long to finish.

"Done, let's go," I told him.

"Okay, go put on your hat, coat and gloves, I don't want you catching a cold," he ordered.

Skipping to the walk-in closet, I quickly grabbed my coat, gloves and hat. Exiting the closet, I

quickly out on my coat and slid my hands in the woolen gloves. Putting on my hat, I went to stand in front of him.

"Done, let's go, I want to see my brother," I said.

Just the thought of seeing Nico after so long had me forgetting my fear of being pregnant. As long as I would have my brother, nothing could put me down. Nico was my happiness.

"We'll go to the doctor first," he said as we exited the bedroom.

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Chris opened the door to Dr. Beck's room. There was not much in the room. A desk was placed against one corner, behind which sat a woman who looked to be in her thirties. The walls were white with a few framed certificates hanging on one wall. A bed was placed against one wall, with one of those plastic curtains hanging from a metal rod.

"Mr. Palmer, what a pleasure to see you," Dr. Beck said with a smile. She had a nice smile, soft and sweet.

How did the doctor know who Chris was? Maybe, Chris took an appointment before coming here. Or maybe he was just that famous that everybody knew him.

"Call me Chris, and this is my wife, Alice," he said, putting his arm around my shoulders.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. Palmer, how may I help you today?" Dr. Beck didn't beat around the bush, that was good.

"My wife is pregnant, I would like you to take a look at her, make sure she's alright,"he told her.

Under normal circumstances, Chris concern and gentle behavior would have me swooning over him. But I knew he was not acting this way because of me, he was acting this way because of the baby.

"Oh, I assume the pregnancy test was positive?" Dr. Beck smiled once again. I wondered what her name was. Chris didn't tell me her name, and I was too preoccupied with the thought of seeing Nico to actually bother looking at the plaque nailed on the door.

"Five of them came out positive," Chris responded proudly.

"Alright, how far along do you think you are, Mrs. Palmer?" Dr. Beck asked me.

"Um, we got married two weeks ago, so, I guess two weeks, maybe one," I answered.

"And you never engaged in any sort of sexual activity before you got married?" she enquired.

"No," I replied.

"Well, okay, so if you are pregnant then it's too early to tell because we can't do an ultrasound, or it might all be false alarm," Dr. Beck stated.

"Excuse me, what do you mean a false alarm, my wife is pregnant, she was feeling nauseous today," he told her.

"It could be a simple stomach bug, being nauseous does not always mean the person is pregnant," Dr. Beck responded.

"All five of the pregnancy tests gave a positive result," Chris persisted. I could tell that Dr. Beck's claims were starting to piss Chris off.

"Pregnancy tests are never hundred percent reliable, Mr. Palmer, but I will take a sample of your wife's blood to check for any sign of pregnancy," Dr. Beck told him, who was none too happy about Dr. Beck saying that I was not pregnant.

"Fine, but I'm telling you my wife is pregnant, I can feel it." He muttered the last part to himself.

"Right, Mrs. Palmer, if you could just hold out your arm I'll take your blood," Dr. Beck told me.

I did as she said and held out my right arm. Dr. Beck came and stood in front of me. Upon closer inspection, I was surprised to see exactly how blue the doctor's eyes were, and there was a pimple on her left cheek.

Dr. Beck removed the cap of the syringe, rubbing some antiseptic liquid on my arm with a cotton ball, she placed the needle where she had rubbed the cotton on. I winced when the needle pierced my skin. It hurt when crimson blood left my body and flowed in the syringe. The sight of my blood both disgusted and fascinated me.

All too soon it was over. Dr. Beck withdrew the needle from my arm and bandaged the pierced area. Putting the cap back on the syringe, Dr. Beck went behind her desk and sat down.

"I have taken a sample of her blood, Mr. Palmer, you can come and collect the reports in three days." Dr. Beck then turned to me. "And do take

another pregnancy test after a week, just to be sure, and as a precaution, I'm prescribing you some vitamins, do not forget to take them, you can come back if you have any problem," she said.

"Thank you, doctor," I told her.

"Well, we should get going, thank you so much for your time, Dr. Beck." Chris stood up, while I followed his lead.

"It's no problem at all," Dr. Beck replied.

"Let's go, Alice." Taking my hand, he all but dragged me out of Dr. Beck's room and out of the hospital.

Once we were in the car did he finally let loose all the anger he had reigned in while we were with the gynecologist.

"That stupid doctor, who the hell gave her the fuckin' degree?" He seethed. "Like hell you're not pregnant, I know you're pregnant, I can feel

it."

"Chris, relax, the doctor was just being cautious, she didn't come outright and said that I wasn't pregnant, she just said it's too early to tell," I said softly, trying to calm my husband.

"Well she should be sure. I mean, I'm sure that you're pregnant," he seethed.

Well, you're not a doctor, my subconscious stated.

"Well ignore her, if you believe I'm pregnant then you must be right. By the way, you never told me what the doctor's name was," I said, trying to change the subject.

"You are pregnant. And her name isn't important, hell she shouldn't even be called a doctor since she can't do her bloody job right," he snapped.

"Okay, we'll go to another doctor the next time, okay. Let's go and see my brother." I fastened my seatbelt. "You are going to take me to see

Nico, right?"

"Yes, of course, I promised to take you, plus it would make you happy, after all, a happy mother means a healthy baby," he responded.

He wasted no time in driving out of the hospital. I had a feeling that he would not come back to this hospital ever again.

However, once again my thoughts were occupied with that of my little brother. I was so excited to see Nico after two weeks. I hope he was okay and happy with Keiran, I did not trust Nico with anyone. If Keiran had not taken proper care of my brother I swear I was going to pull out his heart and would switch it with Nico's.

I couldn't wait to see my little brother.

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"Come on, we could've brought Nico back with us," I whined as Chris and I returned to the castle.

"No, your punishment isn't over yet, so Nico is going to stay with Keiran for another two weeks," he responded, taking the stairs with me following behind him.

"I can take care of my brother much better than Keiran can," I argued.

"Yes, but Keiran is taking care of Nico just fine, you've seen it with your own eyes," he said.

It was true, Keiran was taking better care of Nico than I thought he would. Keiran made sure

that my brother had everything he wanted or needed. Nico had everything there, from toys to games to medicines and food.

When Chris and I arrived at Keiran's loft, Nico had rushed over to me and threw himself at me. I was more than happy to catch my little brother. We had some food, and Chris wasted no time in breaking the news about me being pregnant to Keiran; even when I told him and Keiran that it was too early to tell, it didn't stop Keiran from shouting to the whole world how he was going to be an uncle.

After two hours Chris and I took our leave from Keiran. Nico asked me when I was going to come and visit him next, but I did not have an answer for that, so I was more than happy when Chris told Nico that he would come live with us after two weeks, which had Nico beaming.

I begged Chris to let Nico come with us now, but he was adamant and said that my

punishment was not yet over and that we needed to spend time to get to know each other. I did not see the point of getting to know each other, since he called me a whore and all, but arguing with him was pointless.

So here we were, back in our castle, without my brother, with me sulking and him being the same as he was. We made it to our bedroom and my eyes zeroed in on the bag sitting on the bed which Chris had brought earlier. I wondered what was in it.

"What's in the bag, Chris?" I asked him.

"Oh, I forgot, I bought a dress for you," he answered, handing me the bag which looked as if it belonged to some expensive clothing store.

A smile flitted across my face before it died as I gazed at the bag in my hands. The word whore kept resonating in my mind as I stared at the bag.

"I can't accept this, Chris, but thank you anyway," I told him, putting the bag back on the bed.

He frowned as he discarded his jacket. Coming over to me, he gripped my shoulders gently.

"Why? Do you not like it? I can always exchange it and buy a dress that you like," he said to me.

My anger reared its ugly head as I looked at him.

"Do you buy clothes for all your whores?" I spat out.

"What?" He asked flabbergasted. "No, why are talking like this?" Why was he acting so clueless?

"Did you forget that you called me a whore?" Did he suffer from a memory dysfunction?

"Little dove, stop saying that word. In fact, you are not allowed to swear or say any sort of a bad word for the rest of your life," he stated.

"What, why?!" I shrieked.

"Because you're pregnant with my baby, and if you swear then the baby is going to learn how to swear, so I forbid you to swear from now on," he explained.

"That's absurd, and you called me who—" he cut me off by placing his hand over my mouth, effectively silencing me. I thrashed and struggled to get out of his grip, but he was too strong as compared to me and my small frame.

"You say that awful word one more time and you'll know what'll happen," he warned. My eyes widened when the real meaning of his words sank in. He was going to extend Nico's stay with Keiran if I didn't do as he said.

Removing his hand from my mouth, he enveloped me in a hug. His actions took me by surprise, and when he begun kissing my forehead, my cheeks and then finally my lips I was frozen in shock. What was wrong with this man? One moment he was calling me a whore

and the next he was shutting me up whenever I said that word. If he kept up with this kind of behavior, I had a feeling that the next eleven and a half months were going to be no less than a roller coaster ride.

"Never say that word again, or any bad word, okay? You're not...that," he told me.

"I'm not what?" I questioned, teasing him. I knew what he meant but it was fun irritating him.

"You know what. That word you said...the thing that I called you, you're not that," he answered.

My heart bloomed with happiness at hearing him say that. He did not think I was a whore. I smiled as I inhaled his scent, my husband did not believe I was a whore.

"Thank you, that means a lot to me," I told him, feeling happy.

"You're welcome, little peach," he murmured,

kissing the top of my head.

Releasing me from his embrace, he took a step back. Grabbing the bag from the bed, he handed it to me once again. Hesitantly, I removed the box from the bag, then proceeded to open it. Inside the box was a gorgeous, royal blue dress. It was a halter neck with a brooch in the shape of a flower right below the breast. I put the dress against me and saw that it fell just half an inch below me knees. It was beautiful, and expensive.

"Chris, this dress must be so expensive, why did you buy it?" I ran my hands over the soft material, feeling priveleged that he bought such an expensive dress for me.

"It was not expensive at all...at least now that I think about it, this dress was not expensive at all." He muttered the last part to himself.

"What do you mean?" I gazed at him with a

smile on my face.

"Nothing, go try it on," he urged.

"Um, maybe later, I want to talk to you about something." The only reason I didn't want to try the dress on was because I was afraid I might ruin the dress; I never had anything this expensive.

"Of course, what is it, little fairy?" He sat down on the edge of the bed next to me.

"Have you found a cardiologist for my brother?" I questioned.

"Yes, I have found two cardiologists that are known to be the best in the United Kingdom, we can go and talk to them about your brother, and whoever you think is better we'll ask him to operate on Nico," he told me, instantly easing my worries.

"Thank you so much, Chris, you are so kind," I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Sure, anything else?" He was being so sweet, I wished that once this contract was over and Chris and I were finished, I would find a man exactly like him, except for the part where he was filthy rich. I wanted my boyfriend or husband to be well off but not filthy rich like him, I wanted someone of my standards.

"Yes, when can we go meet the doctors?" I wanted to get Nico's surgery done as soon as possible.

"Whenever you want," he answered.

"How about day after tomorrow," I suggested.

"Okay, I'll get an appointment with both of the doctors and then we'll go meet them," he told me

"Okay, thank you," I said.

"Okay, now I'm going to go to my study, I've got some work to do, while you can go see the library or go out in the garden, whatever you feel

like doing," he stated, standing up.

"There's a library, where? I want to see it." The fact that there was a library here filled me with excitement. I loved libraries and books, and it was a good thing for Nico, too.

"Yes, the library is on the sixth floor, I can have one of the maids take you there," he answered.

"No, don't bother the maids, I'll find the library myself," I told him.

"Okay, but only read the good books in the library, and make sure you are in a comfortable position, don't even think about using the ladder to reach the higher shelves, use the staircase, understand?" He instructed.

"Why read only the good books? And what was wrong with taking a ladder?" This man gave some strange instructions at times.

"Because you are pregnant now, so using a ladder is dangerous is for you, you might fall

and hurt yourself and the baby. And you must read only the good books because if you read the bad books then it will have a negative impact on the baby." He was talking as if the baby was already here, or the baby had supernatural powers where he or she would know what I was reading.

But I did not want to argue with him, especially when he was being so sweet to me. So even though his instructions seemed a little ridiculous to me, I nodded with a smile.

"Okay, sure, as you say, by the way, which books are categorized as good?" I had to know which books were good because if he caught me reading a book which was not good I would be in trouble.

"Encyclopedias, dictionaries, history books, basically any sort of educational books...other than that, fairytales with happy endings and nursery rhymes, stuff like that," he answered.

I was not going to spend my time reading nursery rhymes. "How many books do you have in the library?" It would be absolutely amazing if he had a huge library.

"The library takes up three floors of the castle, you'll know once you go there," he informed me.

"Which floors does the library occupy?" I enquired.

"Fifth, sixth and seventh," he replied, striding to the door.

"Are the books divided into aisles or something?" I queried.

"Yes, don't bother going to the fifth floor, it's the archives, you can roam around the sixth floor," he responded. He was so patient when answering my questions, never once did he show any sign of annoyance or irritation.

Opening the door, he exited the bedroom, leaving me pondering things about the library.

Placing the dress back in the box, and carefully sliding the box back in the bag, I put the box in the closet and left the room.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I reached the sixth floor in no time. Immediately, my eyes fell upon the metal gate that barred me from going to the seventh floor and figuring out who the woman in the portrait was and the mystery of the floors above. Glaring at the electronic keypad, I vowed to myself that I was going to find out the passcode and go up to the seventh floor.

After getting my breathing back to normal, I wandered around the sixth floor until I came in front of a set of giant double doors. All the doors in this castle were huge and thick, but these ones took the cake. Made of the same dark wood as the rest of doors, the double doors had an intricate carving on them. The door knobs looked to be made of some heavy

metal, maybe brass, I did not have any knowledge about metals.

Grabbing hold of a knob, I twisted it and pushed the door open. My heart leapt with excitement when my olfactory senses detected the smell of new and old books. Wasting no time standing outside, I entered the library and closed the door behind me.

It was like I had died and went to heaven as I gazed upon the library for the first time. I looked everywhere, trying to absorb every tiny detail all at once. A smile curved my lips as my eyes took in the numerous levels of the library. I tilted my head all the way back as I followed the shelves all the way to the top. There were reading nooks and alcoves, along with desks and cushioned chairs. There was not a single spot that was free of books. Shelves upon shelves were cramped with books. A chandelier hung from the ceiling. Reading lamps were placed in every

corner and on every table, casting a soft glow around the room. The stairs were supported by a banister which had an intricate pattern, similar to the one on the door, on it. The library was every bookworm's fantasy, and I got to live that fantasy.

Not heeding Chris instructions, I made my way down the stairs and entered the archives. Dust ruled the air as I took my first breath in the archives and immediately started coughing. After coughing like a total maniac, I began to walk around the archives. There were numerous shelves here as well, but as compared to the shelves above, these shelves were dusty and looked as if no one had touched them in years. I thought the archives would have boxes with useless files, but over here the archives looked like a hardly visited library.

My eyes widened when I saw an aisle with Keiran's name on it. I was about to rush over to

it but I stopped when my eyes landed on Chris name. There was an aisle dedicated to my husband. Flitting my eyes over all the aisles I came to know that all the members of the Palmer family had an aisle which was dedicated to them.

I wondered if there was an aisle dedicated to the woman in the portrait. But even if there was, how would I know, I didn't know her name. Sighing in frustration, I went over to the aisle that was dedicated to someone named Julia.

Numerous books lined the shelves from top to bottom. I wondered what was so important about this woman that she had so many books in her aisle. Placing my fingers on the first book my eyes landed on, I pulled it out. The book came out easily along with a cloud of dust that nearly sent me into another coughing fit. Sitting down on the floor with my back against the wooden shelf, I opened the book.

***Diary of Julia Marie Palmer

1821-1824***

Reading the title had me gasping. This was a diary?! Quickly flipping through the pages, I came across diary entries of three years, one for each day. This Julia woman had recorded her life in her diary. Fascinating.

Feeling like I had stumbled upon a historical treasure, I put the diary back in its place and took out another one from another shelf.

Reading the first page, I got to know that it was another diary. After going through different books in Julia's aisle I came to know that all of them were diaries; recordings of their lives.

Planning to read about Julia some other time, I left her aisle and thought about which aisle to visit next.

A frown marred my face when I saw an aisle without a name. Curious, I strode over to it, and

saw an aisle similar to that of Julia's. I thought this aisle would be empty since it had no name on it but I was wrong.

Without thinking I grabbed the first book that I got my hands on off the shelf and opened it. Instead of finding an inscription on who this diary belonged to, a picture fell out. Bending down, I picked up the photograph and the face that I saw had me gasping.

It was the woman in the portrait.

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Staring at the photograph for a few minutes, I looked at every single detail. The photograph was colored, which meant it was from this century. The lady looked to be very young, no older than 17, and was standing next to a woman, probably a friend since they looked to be about the same age. She was wearing a very pretty baby pink gown with a gorgeous matching hat. Her friend was wearing a green gown with a matching hat. I flipped the photograph to see whether there was a name written of who was in the photograph usually there was but the backside was blank.

Putting the photograph back inside the diary, I flipped through the contents of the book but found nothing. It was the blank, empty, not a single word or even a drop of ink was present in the diary. I thought there might at least be a name telling me who this diary belonged to, but

no, the whole journal was empty.

Not giving up, I put the empty journal back on the shelf and took out a couple of other journals. Quickly flipping through them I was disappointed as they were empty, just like the first one. Checking out a few other journals but finding them empty, I sighed in disappointment. Other than the photograph, there was nothing about the woman. Somebody had obviously worked hard to hide her...or maybe erase her.

Glancing at the clock, my heart jumped in my throat when I saw it was 1:30 pm. It was almost lunch time and if Chris found me over here, he was not going to be happy. Deciding to come down here some other time, I dusted my hands and went upstairs to the sixth floor; however, my mind was still stuck to the fifth floor. There was no way I was giving up on finding about that woman. I had one year to figure out who she was; 365 days to find out the truth.

Jogging over to a random shelf on the sixth floor, I plucked a random book and sat down on the fluffy cushion which was right next to the shelf. The title of the book told me that it was a book about plants, boring. I didn't like studying about plants, they bored me to death. Even when I was in high school, I prayed that the chapter on plants would be over soon so we could move on to the human body, I liked the human body much better than plants.

However, I decided to read the book anyways; not because I had developed a sudden interest in various green plants, but because if somebody came looking for me, they'll see me reading a book on plants, and not rifling through the archives like bee on a mission. Maybe I'd go down to the archives and search more about the mystery lady. I knew she was related to the Palmer's , that much was obvious from her features. But what kind of a relationship did she

exactly have? And why was there no sign of her, other than the portrait in the circular room and the photograph down in the archives? Was she dead? I hoped not, she had to be alive.

"Mrs. Palmer." I jumped at hearing the sudden voice. Raising my head from the book I saw none other than Helga standing a few feet away from me. Great, no other maid could come.

"Yes, Helga?" I tried to be polite, and tried very hard. I did not like this woman.

"Lunch is ready and Mr. Palmer s requesting your presence," she told me.

"Okay, I'll be down in a couple of minutes, thank you." I smiled at her.

"No, you come with me now," she said.

"Helga, I said I'll be in the dining room in a couple of minutes," I repeated.

"No, you must come with me now, you should

not make Mr. Palmer wait, he is your husband." And now I really did not like her. Just because she was the head housekeeper did not mean she was my boss and could tell me what to do.

Yes, but you must do what she says or Chris is going to be upset with you. There is no way Chris would listen to what you have to say when it comes to his loyal maid and her loyal words, so don't waste your words and just follow the old hag to the dining room. It was one of those rare times when my subconscious was right and chose to be supportive.

Closing the book with a sigh, I stood up and slid the book back in its place. Dusting myself a bit to make sure there was not a speck of dirt on me so no one would get suspicious, I gestured for Helga to lead the way. She turned and strode out of the library with me following behind. Helga kept looking back periodically to

make sure I was following her, but did not utter a single word which I was grateful for. I couldn't stand her ordering me to obey Chris like the women in the 70s.

When we entered the dining room, I walked towards Chris who was sitting in his usual place swiping away on his cell phone. Taking my seat next to him, I put a spoonful of stew on my plate, then put some salad next to the stew. I didn't say anything to him, I figured he was too busy as he hadn't looked up from his phone once since I entered the dining room.

Stabbing the chicken with my fork I begun eating, my mind coming up with one explanation after the other about the lady. It was confusing that these people would go to such lengths to hide the existence of one person and yet they did not get rid of all the evidence; it was like they wanted to erase this person from the world but they couldn't. But at

the end of the day, the question still remained, just who was that woman?

It would be wonderful if he decided to go on a business trip or something, I would then spend the whole day in the archives and try to find something about the mystery woman by reading someone else's journals, because her journals were blank. There should've at least been a name, like in Julia's journals, but no her journals were brand new.

Why don't you give this mystery girl a name, you can't call her Mystery Woman in the Portrait forever. My subconscious suggested.

I agreed with her but what could I call her. She was delicate and looked like one of those royal princesses who did nothing but looked at shiny jewelry all day. She was pretty, though; maybe I could name her after a flower, it would be easier.

"Little peach..."

Maybe I should call her Rose, because she was pretty and was wearing a pink gown; or maybe I should call her Daisy, since she looked so delicate; or maybe Lily was the perfect name for now for her, since she looked so pure. Yeah, maybe Lily was perfect. I would call her Lily until I found out her real name.

"Little dove..."

Satisfied that I had gotten the name for the mystery girl, my mind switched to the metal gate on the sixth floor staircase and the keypad. I needed to be sneaky about that keypad, and I needed to figure out what the passcode was, but first I had to check how many digits were needed in order to unlock the gate.

"Alice!"

"Huh, what?" I looked at Chris who was giving me a strange look. "Chris, I'm sorry did you say something?" I did not want him to be suspicious

of my activities.

"Yes, but it looks like you're precoccupied with something, is everything okay?" He asked with a hint of concern in his voice.

I nodded frantically. "Yes, yes, everything is fine, I was just...thinking about...something that I read in the library," I told him. I knew he wouldn't rest until I told him what I was thinking about, and since I couldn't tell him the actual reason I was lost, I decided to go with the half-truth.

"Oh? What did you read?" I knew he was going to ask that.

"About...plants...they are so fascinating, don't you think?" I couldn't believe I was going to have a conversation on plants.

"I guess so." He gave me a quizzical look. "But if plants are what has your mind so occupied, why don't you write about them," he said.

Now it was my turn to give him a quizzical look.

"What? What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "It's sort of a... Palmer thing...everybody in the family writes."

"Write, like a journal?" So writing was a tradition, no wonder everybody had shelves full of journals here.

He nodded. "Exactly that, every member of the family pens down his or her thoughts in a journal, I suggest you should do the same thing," he told me.

"But, I'm not exactly family, I'm only here for a year..." I trailed off, not knowing what else to say.

"You're family for now." Came a new voice. I turned my head to see Brenton, his youngest brother, entering the dining room. I hadn't seen him since our wedding, I wondered where he was.

"How much of that did you hear?" I enquired.

"Enough to know that I agree with my brother."

Brenton took a seat across from me next to Chris. "Chris, why don't you order a journal for her, I guess a small one," Brenton said.

"A small one?" Did the journals come in sizes? The ones I saw in the archives were big and thick ones.

"Yeah, one with 365 pages, since the contract is only for a year," Brenton informed me. These people were so matter-of-fact it was crazy. They talked in facts, like the contracts and facts were set in stone and nothing could change them. Like, if my contract with Chris was for a year, then nothing could change that. But a lot of things could change that. If I died in the next couple of months, then the contract would be over, if I was unable to give him an heir then the contract would be terminated before a year...so many possibilities.

"I'll call the paper company in a couple of hours and give them the order to have the journal delivered by tomorrow so she can start writing," Chris said.

"Wait, I don't want to write, my stuff is personal, what if somebody read it?" If Chris insisted on me writing, then I would make sure not to write about Lily, I couldn't trust the people in this castle, especially that old hag, Helga.

"Don't worry, the journal would have a lock on it. And if it didn't, I assure you that no one is going to read your journal, not me not anyone else, it's your journal and only you are going to have the right to see it," Chris replied.

"Oh, what if I still don't want to write?" I queried.

"You don't have a choice, you are a Palmer now, even if you're just a temporary Palmer you still are a Palmer and it's a family thing, so I'm afraid you are going to have to write, even if you don't

want to," Brenton informed me.

"Are you okay with a standard hardback journal or would you like a customized one?" Chris questioned.

I shrugged. "I'm okay with whatever, I just have to write in it, I don't care about the look of the journal," I answered.

Nothing much was said after that. Chris and Brenton discussed business while I finished my lunch. The thought of writing a journal made me feel kind of nervous, I didn't know why. I never written in a diary before, so writing down my thoughts and secrets was alien to me, since I was used to mulling things in my mind whether good or bad, I didn't know if writing was a good thing or a bad one.

Once I was finished eating, I excused myself from Chris and Brenton, eager to go to my room and think more about Lily and the passcode and

the prospect of me writing in a journal.

As soon as I exited the dining room, I heard their voice loud and clear. Curious, I decided to listen in on their conversation. I had no intention to eavesdrop, but my curiosity got the best of me.

"Why is there a gate on the sixth floor staircase?" Brenton asked Chris.

"Alice accidentally went up there, so I had a gate installed in case she decided to go up there again," Chris told him.

"Well how am I suppose to go up there and see her now?" Brenton questioned.

What the hell? Brenton was allowed to go up there and I wasn't. And who did he want to see? Lily in the picture? He wanted to go up there and look at a portrait?

"I'll give you the passcode, just use it and go see her, but do it when Alice is not there, she is a

curious one and I don't want her tangled in something that is of no concern to her," Chris said.

That was not fair, Brenton got the passcode and I didn't. Oh please, God, please let Chris yell out the passcode so I could get it, please. And who was he to decide what was my concern and what wasn't. I might be his wife for a year but that did not mean he had sort of a territorial right over me, I was my own person; I decided what I would and wouldn't concern myself with.

"You do know it's only a month away," Brenton said to Chris. I frowned in confusion. What was a month away? Brenton's birthday? Their father's birthday? Somebody's death anniversary?

"I know, we'll go to the cemetery together," Chris said. So it was somebody's death anniversary, but whose?

"Sure, let's go and work on that contract, I'll call my client and set up a meeting," Brenton said.

The scraping sound of chairs being pushed back was my cue to leave. Taking the stairs two at a time, I reached my bedroom in no time. Closing the door behind me, I took a deep breath, my mind a jumbled mess. This family had a lot of secrets.

And I intended to uncover all of them.

The CEO

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"Hey, are you okay?" I asked Chris, closing the

door to our bedroom. He was sitting on the bed, his back against the headboard, with a troubled look on his face.

"Yes, I'm fine, thank you," he replied, but I could tell from the dismal look on his face that he was anything but fine, I wondered what was wrong. He seemed perfectly fine yesterday with Brenton, but today he was acting all quiet and serious.

He's always quiet and serious, my subconscious stated.

I disagreed. He was quiet and serious, yes, but not like this. And half the time, he laughed and made jokes. Right now, he looked...sad, and that did not sit well with me. Why was he upset? Was it something to do with the person whose death anniversary was coming up? Or was it something else?

Getting on the bed, I crawled over to him and

sat facing him. Taking his hand in mind, I gave it a soft squeeze to get his attention. When he looked at me, I knew I had succeeded in getting his attention.

"There is something bothering you, I can feel it," I said.

"It's nothing," he muttered.

"You want to tell me what's bothering you?" I rubbed my thumb over his hand.

"And why would I want to tell you?" He was acting like that Chris, the one who called me a whore.

"Because...I am your temporary wife," I stated.

"Yeah, you are temporary not permanent, if you were my real and permanent wife I might consider telling you, but not now," he answered.

"So there is something bothering you," I confirmed.

"If I say yes will you leave me alone?" Wow, whatever was bothering him was serious, he never spoke to me like this in all the time we had been married, which had been about three weeks.

"No, I made a vow in front of God to stay with you during the good and bad times, I don't plan on going back on my word," I told him, scooting closer to him, until my face was a few inches away from him.

"Yeah, well it's a fake marriage, so the vows you made don't matter, get out of here," he said bluntly.

My heart clenched at hearing his words. He was being so rude, what was the matter. But I wasn't going to leave. Not only had I made a vow to stick with him through thick and thin in front of God, he was also paying me one million pounds in order to be a good wife to him, and I was going to make his money worth. I would not

make him feel as if he had wasted his money on me.

"This marriage might be fake, but the vows I made were real, I'm not leaving you when you are distressed," I told him firmly.

"Well I guess then you'll just have to waste your time sitting here because I'm not telling you anything," he stated, turning his head to look out the window.

Without saying anything I rested my head on his chest and wound an around his waist. He might be telling me to leave him alone, but I knew he didn't want that; or maybe he did, I wasn't sure because I didn't know him that well, but whatever it was I wasn't going to leave him. I knew what it was like being alone, with no one to talk to, no one to hug. I had Nico but he was a kid, and a sick kid. I couldn't talk to him about my financial problems or any problem for that matter, so I knew how it felt like being utterly

alone. And even if Chris did not tell me what was bothering him, at least he would know that he had me by his side, he wouldn't feel alone.

"Don't touch me." He tried to push me away, but I held on to him.

"You are my husband, I have the right to touch you...for a year I have the right to touch you, you can't steal my rights away from me when you are the one who gave them to me," I stated.

"You know, with you blabbering on about this marriage, I'm starting to regret marrying you," he snapped.

Calm down, it's not him talking, it's that negative emotion that's ruling his mind at the moment that's saying all sorts of nonsense. He doesn't mean it, he doesn't.

"Well, you made a mistake, now you must deal with it," I teased, trying by best not to get

affected by his words.

"Remind me again why I married you?"

"I would love to tell you why you married me, except...you haven't even told me why you married me, despite me constantly asking you," I responded, trying my best to stay strong.

"Shut up," he snapped.

I sighed deeply, trying to maintain my composure. "Chris, if you can't tell me what's bothering you as a wife, then maybe you can tell me what's wrong as a friend?" I suggested.

He scoffed. "Friend? Do you even know how to be a friend?"

"Yes," I answered.

"I don't think so, you never had any friends, how would you know how to be one," he snarled.

"I know how to be a friend, it's just I never had time to make friends when I was in high school,

but I know how to be a friend," I told him softly, my head still on his chest and my arm still around his waist.

"Friends know when the other wants to be left alone," he stated.

"Friends also never leave their friends alone, especially during the bad times," I argued.

"Friends know when the other doesn't want to talk," he said.

"Friends also talk to each other because talking helps," I countered.

"Friends know when to shut up," he snapped.

"Friends also know when to push their friends into telling them stuff," I stated.

"I don't have friends," he said.

"I can be your friend. I'll listen to you without judgment; I'll try my best to find solutions for your problems; I'll stay with you no matter what;

and when this year ends and the contract is over, and you marry the girl that's right for you, I'll be your friend and support you in your decisions; I won't just be your friend for a year, I'll be your friend for life," I told him with utmost sincerity.

"Those are difficult promises you are making, you sure you'd be able to handle it all?" He didn't know that I had dealt with far worse, but I wasn't going to tell him that, a good wife never burdened her husband.

"I promise you, Chris, I would never break these promises," I told him while looking in his eyes.

"You got a big mouth for someone so small," he commented.

"Size does not matter," I countered.

He sighed then fell silent. I put my head back to its original place, on his chest. It was okay if he didn't tell me what had him in such a mood, at

least now he knew that he had a friend...me.

"It's...my mother, it's her death anniversary next month,"he stated. His voice held so much sadness and despair, I involuntarily tightened my grip on him.

"I'm sorry, Chris, would you like to talk about it...about her?" I queried.

"She was the most amazing woman I knew." His lips curved in a sad smile. "She had the most beautiful smile and the kindest heart. She tried her best to make sure everyone was smiling, there was never a sad moment when she was around. She made all of us feel like we were her favorite child, but the truth was, she loved us all equally. And when she didn't smile, I felt as if the sun hadn't risen,"he told me.

"She sounds like an amazing woman," I told him truthfully. I imagined a beautiful woman with

gorgeous sea green eyes and shiny, golden hair that had the most beautiful curls. In my mind, his mother looked like a queen, beautiful and royal.

"Hmm she was, I thought I would never lose her, I thought she would never leave me...but she did."he murmured the last part.

I rubbed his chest in a soothing manner. "Would you like to tell me what happened to her?" I was not going to force Gideon to tell me something which was already a painful thing for him as it was.

"She...got in an...accident, some years ago." That was all he said, and I was okay with that.

"I'm sorry to hear that, it must be difficult for you to visit her in the cemetery," I said.

He nodded looking forlorn. "Yes, I go with my brothers because I don't have the strength to go there alone, to face her like this."he eyed the

ceiling with bitterness. "You must think what a pathetic, weak man I am; who runs a multinational business yet he can't even visit his own mother in her grave alone."

"No, that's not what I think. I think you are a very strong man, who despite suffering from such a great loss still manages to run such a successful business. If it were someone else instead of you, and loved their mother like you did yours, they would've succumbed to depression and their business would have gone down the drain," I told him.

"Really, you think that?" He questioned, his eyes searching my face for any sign of deceit or fabrication.

"Yes, I really do." I made sure to convey my sincerity and honesty with my eyes. I raised my head and kissed his cheek.

"The thing is...I want to visit her grave, like right

now, but I can't...I can't find the strength to go and see her right now," he told me.

"Where is her grave?" I was afraid I might've asked a sensitive question, but I was glad I was wrong.

"It's here, on the estate grounds," he answered.

"If you want...I can come with you," I offered.

He gave me a strange look; a look that said that he was unsure whether I actually meant what I said or not. I kissed him in response, assuring him that I meant what I said.

"You'd really go with me?" He asked.

"Yes, I want to meet the woman who raised such a fine man," I said with a smile.

"She is buried, you can't exactly see her," he stated.

"You know what I mean." I playfully punched his chest.

He chuckled, a sound which had me sighing in relief. Finally, he was smiling, I had made him smile. My heart fluttered in happiness when I saw him smiling.

"Okay, let's go then," he stated, detangling himself from me and jumping out of bed.

"Wait, right now?" I looked at the clock to see it was 6:00 in the evening.

"Yes, unless you don't want to go..." He looked unsure for a moment, but I wasn't going to disappoint him.

"No, I do, let me get my shoes." I hopped out of bed and jogged inside the walk-in closet. Grabbing a pair of black slippers, I slipped them on then exited the closet and joined him.

"I'm ready." He took my hand and led me out of the bedroom towards the cemetery.

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I was starting to regret my decision of coming to the cemetery in the evening. I was so excited earlier, but now, all that excitement had well and truly deserted me as thoughts of wandering spirits filled my mind. The cemetery wasn't exactly my favorite place as my parents were currently residing in a cemetery as well, but I agreed to this because of Chris and I wanted to meet his mother. If only he had decided to visit his mother in the morning.

It was awfully silent except for the rustling of the leaves; the crickets were quiet as well, which was strange as they were always making noise. The sun had nearly set, casting an orange purple glow. The trees were huge, their foundation solid. Cold breeze was caressing our skin, and I was sure my nose was turning pink.

He was silent next to me, just walking further and further in the forest, his grip on my hand

never loosening. I held on to his hand tightly, not wanting to let go and get lost in this dark forest.

Finally, after fifteen minutes of walking on muddy, slightly uneven land, we exited the forest and entered what I was sure was the Palmer cemetery. There were hundreds of tombstones, all lined horizontally and going all the way back. All the graves were neat, nothing looked out of place, just white tombstones standing on lush green grass.

Without a word, Chris took me to the left side of the cemetery. He didn't stop to introduce me to any of his dead relatives and ancestors, just kept walking straight ahead.

After another ten minutes, He finally stopped in front of a large tombstone. The tombstone was not round at the top but flat, like a rectangle. The ink on the tombstone looked fresh. The words on the tombstone were inscribed with

black ink.

Teresa Rose Palmer

1962-2006

Beloved mother and wife

"This is my mother, Teresa," he said.

"Would you like me to give you some privacy?" I asked.

"Uh, can you stand over there?" He gestured to a space which was five feet away from where we were standing.

"Sure." I smiled and gave his arm a squeeze. "I'll be here if you need me." I went to where he instructed me.

I was glad he didn't send me far away, I didn't think I would've survived roaming around a cemetery in the dark. Trying not to let my mind worry about the dead bodies surrounding me, I focused my attention on my husband.

He knelt in front of the gravestone, not caring that his pants would get dirty. I felt his lips moving but couldn't hear what he was saying. Raising his hand, He caressed the ground, a lone tear escaping his eye.

My heart cracked at seeing him like this. The man looked untouchable to the world, and yet here he was, kneeling in front of his mother's grave, lowering his guard, crying for his mother who was no longer here. Despite what I read about Chris Palmer being ruthless and savage, I knew that he was nothing like how the world portrayed him. He was kind, he was generous, and most of all...he was human.

After quite some time, He stood up and turned his head to look at me. I gave him a warm, reassuring smile. He held out his hand for me to take, which I did after two seconds of hesitation. He brought me face to face with the gravestone, and when he smiled while looking at the white

marble, I felt like I was intruding.

"Mum, this is Alice, my wife," he said. "She is pregnant, we are going to have a baby soon, I wish you were here to see and hold your grandchildren," he spoke to the gravestone.

"I'm sure she can see her grandchildren from heaven, and I'm sure our baby would have a guardian angel." I looked at the gravestone when I said the last part.

However, His next words made my heart soar; when he looked at the marble slab and uttered the words I didn't know I had been longing to hear.

"She is also my friend, my only friend."

The CEO

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"You're nervous," Chris commented, making me jump.

"No, I...I'm fine," I lied, my heart hammering against my chest the closer we got to the hospital.

"You are fiddling with your necklace, and your shoe laces are still loose." Chris observed.

"I play with my necklace all the time," I said, trying to cover my lie.

He shook his head. "No, you only touch your necklace when you're nervous. By the way, you shouldn't twist the chain so much, the necklace is old, the chain might break," he told me.

"It's a strong chain...just like my brother." I smiled sadly, but didn't stop twisting the chain around my finger.

It took me by surprise when Chris took my hand

in his. Calm spread through me when I felt how warm his hand was. I liked warm hands, they gave me comfort like no other. I wished that once this year was over and I would look for a husband, he would have warm hands too.

"Tell me what's bothering you," he prompted.

Shaking my head I smiled. "Nothing Chris, nothing is bothering me, I'm fine," I fibbed again.

"If there was nothing bothering you, then you wouldn't be sitting like this," He argued.

"Sitting like what?" I queried.

"Stiff...taut...like a bow ready to shoot the arrow; so come on, tell me what's on your mind, little peach," he stated, rubbing my hand.

"It's nothing, don't worry about it. By the way, thank you," I said to him.

"Thanks for what?" He questioned.

"For everything, getting the doctors'

appointments, cancelling your meetings and all...it means a lot to me that you would go through so much trouble for a stranger, so thank you," I told him.

"This stranger is not a stranger." He flicked my nose. "This stranger is my wife...and my friend," he stated.

My heart bloomed with happiness upon hearing him calling me his wife and friend. It was the first time he hadn't used the word

temporary before the word wife, and him calling me a friend had me doing a happy dance in my mind. However, I prevented my heart from feeling blissful. Even though his words made my heart flutter, which resulted in me falling just a little bit for my temporary husband, I tried my best not to let his words faze me. I had to be careful around him, he knew exactly what to do and say to make me happy, and I couldn't afford to fall for him; it would only end in

disaster.

"I'm fine, really," I repeated. I was not going to tell him what was worrying me, I was just not comfortable. He had already gone through so much trouble for me, I was not going to burden him with my problems. I was not used to it, and did not plan to get used to sharing my problems with anyone anytime soon.

All of a sudden, he left my hand and turned his head away to look out the window. The loss of contact had me feeling cold, which was strange because it never happened that I would miss the warmth someone's hands brought me.

"Chris, what's wrong?" I asked, worriedly.

"Nothing is wrong, why would anything be wrong," he snapped.

I tried to make him look at me, but he only shrugged me off, his face still turned away from me. Removing my seatbelt, I crawled on his lap,

which took him by surprise. Wrapping my arms around his waist, I laid my head on his chest.

"Tell me what's wrong, did I do something wrong?" I inhaled his rich scent, which brought my heart from hammering to throbbing against my ribcage.

I was right when I said you'll make a horrible friend," he stated. Frowning, I looked up at him. "What do you mean?" I was now worried; I wanted to be a good friend to him, so him saying that I was a bad friend made me feel horrible. "You said friends talk about stuff because talking helps; I talked to you about my stuff and what was bothering me and now you are not doing the same...you are a hypocrite," he complained. I sighed before laying my head on his chest. "I'm just not used to talking about my problems with anyone," I told him. "And you think I am. I had never confided in anyone in my life, except for my mum; you were the second

person who I had talked to about my problems and you are the only one who knows how I feel when visiting my mother's grave alone, and you are not showing me the same courtesy, that's not fair, Alice," he shot back. Guilt stabbed my heart. "I'm sorry...I'll try to tell you about my problems, but it won't be easy for me, and I don't want to burden you with my problems. You have given me so much, you offering your companionship is just too much, you shouldn't be so nice to me," I said. "You said you are my friend for life, well that means I am your friend too, so tell me what's going on," he prodded. "It's silly, no need to get yourself tangled in my mess." I sighed. "I will tell you one more time to tell me what's going on, if you don't then you can forget that we are friends," he stated. "Okay fine, I'm just nervous about what the doctors would say regarding Nico's surgery. All my life I had prayed to God for this day, the day my brother would have his surgery and be perfectly

fine, and now that it's here, I am terrified...what if something goes wrong. I can't live without Nico, he is my only family; I'd die if something happened to him," I said, tears pricking my eyes. But once the words were out, I felt relaxed; the tightening in my chest was no more. "Little fairy, believe me when I tell you that I will make sure that your brother gets his surgery and lives his life like a normal ten year old. Nothing is going to happen to Nico, I promise you," he stated. "You said that the doctors we are meeting are the best, right?" "Yes." "But then, they would ask for a lot of money in order to perform surgery on my brother, I only have fifty thousand pounds...would that be enough?" I asked. "We'll know when we'll meet the doctors," he answered.

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I tried to tie my shoe laces but my trembling fingers made it difficult for me to do so. Taking

a deep breath, I tried to steady my heartbeat and my fingers, but the thoughts swirling in my mind made it nearly impossible for me to calm down. Chris was going to be here any minute, and if he saw that I wasn't ready he would not like it; he had already cancelled his meetings for the day for me and if I wasted any more time I should just jump off a cliff. "You ready to go, little dove?" He entered the bedroom, slipping his hands in his pockets. "Yes, I'm ready, let's go," I replied, praying with all my might that he does not see the loose laces of my shoes. But when he lowered his gaze to my feet, I cursed my luck. "You haven't tied your shoe laces." He observed. "Yes, but it doesn't matter, we're going to be late...I'll tie them in the car." I added the last part when I saw that he did not look convinced of my explanation. "Okay, let's go." Turning around, he strode out of our bedroom, I sighed and followed after him, my heart still drumming against my chest in anxiety. I was

trying so hard to calm down and not to make it sound like a big deal, but it was a big deal, and I couldn't do anything about it. Chris and I were going to visit the two cardiologists today, in which I'd pick one to perform on my brother. And I was so nervous about it, that I barely had any breakfast. I just couldn't believe that something I had been yearning for all my life was finally in my reach, and that was something that both excited and yet scared me. I was excited that my brother was going to be all right now, and would go to school and play with kids his own age, but I was scared that I might lose him, or the surgery might not go right. As soon as Chris and I reached the car, I frowned when I saw an older looking driver, with silver hair and pale skin. Where was Bernard? He was our usual driver. The driver opened the door allowing Chris and I to settle inside. Once the door closed, I allowed myself to ask him about Bernard. "Where is Bernard?" I questioned. "I

have assigned him to other duties, he will now take me to work and bring me home," he replied, his eyes suddenly turning hard. "Why? Why did you do that?" I enquired. "I don't want Bernard around you, once was more than enough." He gritted out. "Why? What's wrong with Bernard being around me?" I queried. He just glared at me in return. "I don't trust you around him, you are...unpredictable," he muttered. Confusion reigned for almost five seconds before I realized what he was talking about. Guilt and shame overtook my mind; I blushed and looked away. He was still mad about the whole Bernard thing, even though I promised him I would never do anything like that ever again. "I'm sorry, I promise you I won't do anything like that ever again, you don't have to change Bernard's post because of me," I told him. "Doesn't matter, it's already done, and stop worrying about Bernard, it's not like he is getting paid any less than what I was already paying him," Chris responded dryly.

I bit my lip to stop myself from arguing with him. Instead, my fingers found their way to my necklace as I contemplated how the meeting with the doctors would go. I just wanted Nico's surgery to be successful and less invasive. After searching online about VSD treatments and other surgeries, I now prayed that my brother's surgery would not be invasive, as invasive surgeries made the body prone to all sorts of infections.

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The car finally stopped letting us know that we had arrived at our destination. The driver opened the door and Chris got out while I was right behind him. I had tied my shoe laces, which was a good thing because then I would be tripping and stumbling over my own feet. Taking my hand, Chris led me inside the hospital. As soon as I entered, the sterile white walls reminded of the numerous times I had

been here. These walls supported me when my father fell ill and left the world. These walls were my constant when my mother fought against her disease and lost. And these walls were what greeted me everytime I had brought my brother in the hospital. No matter where I was, which ever country I was in, the white walls of the hospitals would always be there,familiar. It was sick to think that I had started to consider hospitals as some sort of a friend...even though I had lost half of my family here, maybe hospitals were my frenemy. This hospital was luxurious. The floors were sparkly clean, and maybe it was just me and my crazy imagination, but the smell of disinfectant in the air seemed rich to me, like it was expensive. The chairs in the waiting area were clean and smooth, the nurses bustling around were neatly dressed. I bet this hospital served amazing food. Chris led us to the reception desk, and after

asking the forty something years lady about Dr. Hallaway, he led me to the second floor. Knocking on the door, which had a plaque nailed to the door with the name Dr. Paul Hallaway M.D, he entered the room.

Dr. Hallway's room was big and neat. There was a desk which looked to be made of oak against one wall, with Dr. Hallaway sitting behind it in a swivel chair. His desk had a few files and papers on it, and a few stationary items. The rest of the room consisted of a couch, a coffee table and a plasma screen against one wall.

The doctor himself looked to be in his early forties, with slightly graying hair, warm blue eyes, pale skin, and full lips which were curved in the warm, welcoming smile. He was about 6 feet, a couple of inches shorter than Chris. He was dressed in the usual doctor's attire, with a pristine white coat with black slacks and a light blue shirt.

"Mr. Palmer, it's a pleasure to meet you, please sit down," Dr. Hallaway greeted Chris. He had a deep voice, but it was warm which made me comfortable around him.

"Thank you Dr. Hallaway, this is my wife, Alice; Nico is her brother," Chris said to the doctor.

"Right, nice to meet you, Mrs. Palmer, how are you?" Dr. Hallaway asked me.

"I'm good, thank you for your time, Dr. Hallaway," I responded politely.

"Alright, let's talk about your brother, shall we?" I was glad that Dr. Hallaway did not waste time in small talk but went right down to business.

"Yes please." My hand once again flew to my necklace.

Dr. Hallaway removed a file from the pile on his desk and opened it. My heart resumed its usual pounding when I saw Nico's name on the file. This was Nico's case file; everything from the

first time he was diagnosed with VSD to the last time he visited the hospital was in that file. It had everything in it, from our family history to the numerous medications prescribed to Nico.

"So, I have went through your brother's file, Mr. Palmer had brought me his file two weeks ago, and I can assure you that the surgery is not risky. There are three ways I can close the hole in your brother's heart, which ever way you feel comfortable with, I'll use that way," Dr. Hallaway said. When he said that the surgery wouldn't be risky, half of my worries flew away.

"Could you please tell me the three ways," I requested. Grabbing Chris hand, I gave it a squeeze, nerves taking over me once again.

Dr. Hallaways nodded with a smile. "Certainly. The first procedure is known as surgical repair. This procedure usually involves open-heart surgery under general anesthesia. We are going to use a heart-lung machine; I'll make an

incision in the chest, and will use a patch to block the hole or just stitch the hole close," he informed me.

"What is the second procedure?" The first one involved an open-heart surgery, which was invasive, if the second and third option did not involve an open-heart surgery, I would opt for that.

"The second is known as the catheter procedure. For this I would not need to open the chest, but I will insert a thin tube inside the groin and guide that tube to the heart and close the hole by using a mesh," he told me.

"And what is the third one?" I liked the second option, it didn't involve an open-heart surgery.

"The third procedure is called the hybrid procedure. This procedure involves both the surgical and catheter procedures. I'll get access to the heart by making a small incision and we

would not need to stop the heart or anything. I'll insert the closing device through the catheter by placing the catheter in the incision," Dr. Hallaway answered.

"Which procedure is better?" I enquired.

"All three procedures have good odds, but the hybrid procedure has a quicker recovery. And of course, I will be doing a follow up from time to time to make sure the VSD stays closed," Dr. Hallaway responded.

I nodded and let his words sink in. The doctor had fully explained to me how the surgery would take place, and there was no worry or anything like that on his face, which eased my worries about the surgery. However, I would not make any decision until I had met the other doctor.

"Can we go meet the other doctor, then I'll make my decision," I said to Chris, who nodded and

stood up.

"Thank you so much for your time, Dr. Hallaway, we'll think it over and let you know what procedure we'll decide to go with," Chris said. After shaking the doctor's hand, Chris took my hand and led me out of Dr. Hallaway's room.

I thought we'll go to a different hospital, but Chris took me up to another floor and into another room, that looked like a lounge. There were a couple of couches and plants in every corner of the room. In the middle of the couches sat a beautiful glass table. Sitting on one of the couches was a man who was dressed similar to Dr. Hallaway, but where Dr. Hallaway had slightly graying hair, this man had silver hair like our new driver. He was wearing wire rimmed glasses which showed his brown eyes clearly. He had a small beard and his face held a few wrinkles.

"Dr. Loft, good to see you," Chris greeted.

Dr. Loft stood up and shook Chris hand. Unlike Dr. Hallaway, Dr. Loft gave us a tight smile, his posture was not relaxed or welcoming, it was professional and detached. I did not feel comfortable in Dr. Loft's presence likd I had in Dr. Hallaway's.

Without a word, Dr. Loft sat down on the couch while Chris and I sat across from him. Dr. Loft opened Nico's file and began telling us all the procedures and the survival rate of each procedure. The problem with this doctor was that he was using way too many medical jargons which I couldn't wrap my head around, and instead of easing my worries about the surgery, he first told me all the problems that could occur during the surgery and then told me the how safe the surgery was. I had a feeling not many people were comfortable with this doctor, he was not nice.

But this doctor made my decision easier. After

talking to Dr. Loft for twenty minutes, my mind was made up. I was going to have Dr. Hallaway perform on my brother. Sure this doctor was professional, but how could I pick the doctor that constantly had me worried with the information he was giving me, than the doctor who gave me facts but also eased my worries. Dr. Hallaway was my choice, and I'll let Chris know as soon we went home.

Thankfully, the meeting with Dr. Loft ended quickly. I was only too happy to get away from him. I breathed a sigh of relief when Chris and I were settled back in our car, and the driver drove out of the parking lot.

"Dr. Hallaway," I said.

"What?"

"I want Dr. Hallaway to do the surgery, I did not like Dr. Loft, too professional and cold. Dr. Hallaway had more successful surgeries than

Dr. Loft, right?" I questioned.

"Dr. Hallaway and Dr. Loft are both excellent doctors, but okay, I'll let Dr. Hallaway know that we have decided to go for the surgery and ask about other details," he replied.

I smiled knowing that a good doctor would be dealing with my brother. "Chris, why were both the doctors in the same hospital?"

"Dr. Hallaway works in the hospital and I requested Dr. Loft to come to the same hospital so we didn't have to waste time in making the trip," Chris answered.

I nodded and fell silent, thoughts of Nico and his upcoming surgery invading my mind. I felt peace after such a long time, knowing that my brother was actually going to have a future.

The CEO

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The two weeks passed by in a flurry of activity. As soon as Chris called Dr. Hallaway telling him about our consent to the surgery, the doctor requested us to bring Nico to the hospital for tests and other medical stuff. In those two weeks we made numerous trips to the hospital, getting all sorts of crazy tests done; then four days ago Dr. Hallaway told us to get Nico admitted in the hospital and to proceed with payment for the surgery, which cost me around twenty thousand pounds. And now, tomorrow was the day Nico would finally have his surgery.

"What time are we going to go see Nico?" I asked Chris.

"As soon as we have lunch, we'll go see Nico," he replied with a smile.

I nodded but my heart didn't relax. I wanted to go to my brother, who knew how he would be feeling all alone in the hospital. Keiran was with him, but I would feel better knowing I was with my brother. He had called me an hour ago asking when I was going to come, I just told him I would see him soon.

After so many years, so many dreadful hospital visits the day had finally arrived when Nico would have his surgery. I never thought I'd see the day when my brother would get his surgery and be perfectly alright. Now, if all went well and Nico's surgery was a success, he would be able to live his life without the fear of heart failure, and he would finally be a doctor. I'd make sure to send him to a medical college with the remaining fifty thousand pounds and I would get a job as well so I could pay for his

tuition. Nico and I just needed to get through tomorrow.

"Can we have lunch early today?" I queried, eager to go to the hospital.

Chris gave me a look that told me he understood the reason for my restlessness. Closing the file he was holding in his hands, he made his way over to me. Taking a hold of my shoulders, he turned me to face him. Giving my shoulders a reassuring squeeze he pecked my cheek.

"Nico is fine, little peach; Keiran is with him and trust me he is keeping an eye on your brother. So trust me and trust Keiran, and we'll go see your brother after a couple of hours. It's midday right now, at exactly 2:00 pm, we'll go to the hospital, okay?" He pecked my forehead and gave me a warm hug.

"Okay, it's just...I'm so nervous. I never thought

that Nico would get his surgery and have his heart fixed, and now that he is getting surgery and there is a strong possibility that he would be alright...I just..." My hand clutched my necklace tightly.

"I know, little dove, I know," he muttered, running his hand through my hair.

"Thank you so much, Chris, you have done so much for Nico and me, I can never repay you." I looked up at him. "You know, you can ask me for anything, anything at all and I'll give it to you. I'll give you not one but ten babies if it is what you want; honestly Chris, you just have to tell me what you want or need from me and I'll give it to you without hesitation," I stated with sincerity.

"Really, I might hold you to your promise, little fairy," he told me, caressing my cheek.

I smiled as my heart skipped a beat. "That's why

I made this promise, I want you to hold me to it."

He gave me one those cryptic looks, the one which told me nothing except that he might be thinking hard and deep about something.

Kissing my lips, he lightly pinched my cheek and exited the bedroom.

Sighing, I plopped on the bed, my anxiety reaching new heights. I knew Keiran was keeping an eye on my brother; not to mention, there were numerous doctors at the hospital who could take care of my brother much better than I could, but I just couldn't relax knowing that I wasn't with my brother.

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When my eyes flitted to the clock, I couldn't help but glare at the stupid ticking machine. The clock read 12:10 pm, the second hour moving with excruciating slowness. No matter how

much I willed the machine to move faster, it continued at its snail pace, making me growl in annoyance.

After taking a few deep breaths, I ventured out of my room and in the kitchen. My foul mood only increased when I saw Helga standing, cutting fruits on the counter. I needed time to move faster and the only way to do that was to distract myself. So, I was going to cook something, and I didn't care if anybody had a problem with it.

"You're not suppose to be here, Mrs.Palmer," Helga stated, coming to stand in front of me.

"Helga, I want to cook, so please get out of my way." If this woman did not behave then I wasn't going to either.

"Mr. Palmer has not given you permission to enter the kitchen," she said.

"I don't need his permission, get out of my way."

I gritted out.

"If you do not leave this kitchen I would have no choice but to go to Mr. Palmer," she threatened, but what she didn't know was that she could go to the Queen herself and I still wouldn't leave the kitchen. I wanted to cook and I was bloody well going to!

"Fine, go ahead," I said, pushing past her, I made my way to the counter to cook. And when the kitchen door closed behind me, I sighed in relief. Finally, the evil witch was gone.

Taking out a bunch of ingredients from the large pantry I took a few minutes to think about what I wanted to cook. Finally, I decided to go with Chinese rice with chicken almond curry. Quickly chopping up the vegetables, I set about to make lunch.

Throughout the time I was in the kitchen, I did not see Helga, other than when I first came here.

It was nice not seeing the evil hag and I finished preparing my meal in no time. I didn't care if Chris did not like me working in the kitchen, I needed a distraction and no amount of books or even Lily could distract me from my brother's impending surgery, except cooking.

After I was done, I headed out of the kitchen towards the dining room with my rice and curry in hand. Placing the dishes carefully on the table, I sat down on my designated spot and waited for Chris to join me.

I didn't have to wait long. After twenty minutes, he entered the dining table and sat down in his usual spot. I waited to see if he would say something about me going in the kitchen but he remained quiet, or so I thought.

"Helga told me you were cooking lunch, is it true?" He asked.

"Yes, I needed to distrsct myself that's why I

cooked lunch. You don't have to eat it if you don't want to," I replied.

Just then Helga entered followed by a couple of other maids holding a bunch of dishes. As soon as Helga put the dish of food in front of Chris he spoke up.

"Thank you, Helga, but today I'll be eating what Alice made, you can take this back," he told her.

Helga shot me a glare but didn't say anything, just nodded and exited the dining room. I couldn't help the smile that stretched across my face. I thought he would not eat what I made, but he rejected Helga's cooking over mine. Maybe he was being my friend or maybe he wanted to see how I cooked, whatever his reason was, I was glad that for once he favored me over Helga.

"You really want to eat what I made?" I couldn't help the happiness dripping from my words.

"Yes, I want to see how my wife cooks. If your food is really delicious I would ban you from cooking in this place," He stated.

"Why would you ban me if my food is delicious?" I questioned with a frown.

"Because I don't want to get used to your cooking, it would be awful if I get addicted to your food and then you leave," he responded, filling his plate with rice and curry.

I chuckled. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm your friend now, I'll stay with you forever...maybe not under the same roof but I'll be your friend forever and I'll cook you stuff," I said.

As soon as he took the first bite, he closed his eyes and moaned out loud. The sound had me blushing and my core tightening, it was so erotic. I smiled as I saw him chewing and

swallowing the first bite, his eyes still closed.

"That's it, you are officially banned from cooking," he stated, taking another mouthful of the rice and curry.

"The good ban or the bad ban?" I enquired, wanting to know if he liked what I cooked or not.

"The good ban, definitely the good ban. You have magic in your hands, this is truly delicious, little peach," he complimented.

"Thank you so much, I'm glad you like it," I told him.

"I should thank you for cooking me this delicious meal." He smiled and continued eating.

Grabbing the spoon I put some rice and curry in my plate. After taking a few bites I resumed the conversation.

"Chris, can we stay the night at the hospital, since tomorrow is Nico's surgery?" I enquired.

Je shook his head in response. "I'm sorry, little dove, but we can't; I have a very important meeting tomorrow and I need a good night's sleep," he said.

"You mean, you won't be there with me tomorrow." My heart in sunk knowing I would be alone while my brother is in the OR. "Don't say that, Chris, you have to be there tomorrow, please," I pleaded.

"Sorry, little fairy, but this meeting is very important, I can't cancel," he responded looking guilty.

Why are you acting all needy?! You have been alone your whole life, you have dealt with horrifying things all alone, so why are you begging him to be there for you?! You are strong. Plus, don't bother him, he has much more important things to do than to hold your hand while the doctors operate on your brother. He has already done so much for you, be

thankful to him. My subconscious reprimanded me.

"It's okay, I understand, your work is more important," I said.

"Thank you."

"If you're done eating, should we go to the hospital?" He queried.

I nodded and stood up. "Yes, I'm ready, let's go." Taking his hand, I led him out of the house. Just one more day, then Nico would be with me.

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Yesterday passed by in a blur. When we arrived at the hospital, I spent five hours with Nico while Chris was busy talking on cell phone or to his brothers. Brenton had come to visit Nico as well along with Mr. Palmer, Chris father; they had brought balloons and a couple of stuffed bears for Nico who couldn't stop smiling the whole time. Usually kids are afraid of hospitals

but not my brother; he was so excited that he would be getting his surgery, he couldn't stop talking about it. Due to his immense knowledge on the heart he asked the doctors a lot of questions, resulting in the doctors asking me if he really was only ten years old.

Today was the day when Nico and my life would change once again. Today my brother was going to get a new life and would be able to look forward to a future where he would be helping people.

I had barely slept last night. If it wasn't for Chris and his meeting I wouldn't have returned from the hospital. But he was my husband and I had to be a good wife to him, so I had left my brother and came back with my husband.

"Can you please hand me my coat, little peach?" Chris requested.

Grabbing his coat, I helped him slide it on, my

mind thinking about Nico's surgery that was due to take place in two hours. I was glad I didn't have to make breakfast for him because today as I was in no condition to cook.

"Hey." He cupped my chin. "Stop this, I'm promise you Nico is going to be fine, he has the best doctors looking after him, okay?" He kissed me tenderly.

I nodded and smiled at him, but my mind was still thinking about Nico. "All the best for your meeting, have a good day," I said to him.

"Let's go, we don't want to be late," he stated, and together we both left the castle to go to our different places.

Once Chris dropped me off to the hospital, he kissed me deeply and told me to stay strong and to think positive. He then slid inside the car and went to work, while I made my way inside the hospital.

"Hey Nic, how are you?" I said as soon as I entered Nico's room, to see Dr. Hallaway and a few nurses.

"Alice, I'm going to have my surgery in a little while," he stated with a grin.

"Yes you will." I turned to Dr. Hallaway. "Are you taking him for surgery now?" I enquired, seeing the nurses beginning to wheel the bed out the room.

"Yes, we're taking him for surgery now. The surgery is going to take a little while and if all goes well, Nico will have a normal functioning heart by the end of the this day," Dr. Hallaway told me with a warm smile.

"This surgery is going to be a success, right?" My anxiety was back full force, my fingers tangling in my necklace once again.

"We have high hopes for this surgery. There is a strong possibility that Nico will make it out of

this surgery with a fully functioning heart. You just pray and let us do our work, okay?" Dr. Hallaway squeezed my shoulder in assurance. I nodded and he exited the room with me following behind.

I made my way to the front of the gurney to talk to Nico. "Hey buddy, you ready for this?" I held his hand, comforting myself with the warmth of his hand.

"Yes, no more vegetables and T.V. for me, after today I am going to school and playing outside!" Nico exclaimed.

It was all that was said between us, the nurses took Nico inside the OR and I was left to wait outside. As soon as the doors of the OR closed, I closed my eyes and held on to my necklace, praying for my brother. I just wished that Nico came back to me and did not leave me like everyone else had.

Oh God, please save my brother.

The CEO

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Chris

I closed the file I was holding in my hand and placed it on the table. Sighing, I closed my eyes and instantly Alice's face flashed before my eyes. Those innocent green eyes, the plump lips, that radiant smile, it made me sad knowing she was going to leave once this year was over.

It was crazy how in such a short amount of time Alice had burrowed her way in my heart. She by

no means owned it, but she definitely had a special place in my heart. And I was glad that not only had I found a wife but a friend in her too.

Not once had I imagined having a woman like Alice in my life, let alone as my wife. She and I grew up in different places, came from different backgrounds. Women like Alice were the perfect candidates for charity while I was the one who gave those poor women charity, so Alice and I were definitely not the ideal couple; but we were not a disastrous one either.

When she had first walked into my office, trying to look confident but failing miserably, I decided then and there that I was not going to marry her, simply because she did not meet my standards; but the moment those green eyes met mine, my heart said one thing, something my heart never said.

This is it. She's the one.

At first I had no idea what happened and why did my heart say that, or maybe I was imagining it all, but after a while I realized that it was definitely my heart that said that, because it remained its usual silent self after she left and I interviewed the other women.

Once the interviews were over for the day, I asked my family which woman they liked. My heart on the other hand kept on chanting Alice's name, while my mind was stating all the negative things about her. It was clear that my mind and heart were conflicting, which made me unsure whether to choose Alice or not.

"I like that cute one, the strawberry blonde one, she has substance," Keiran stated. Well Alice got Keiran's vote, which increased her chances of becoming my wife.

"I agree with Keiran, she has substance and a backbone, not many had a backbone, but she is poor with an awful family history of heart

diseases so she wouldn't exactly be my first pick...maybe the second or the third," Brenton told me.

"Was there any other woman you liked, Brent?" I asked him.

"That dark haired one...what was her name, Vilma, I liked her," he answered.

"Vilma was boring, I liked Alice, she is cute, like a mushroom," Keiran responded.

"Dude, you are dating a girl who works at a toy store, what do you know about having the perfect wife?" Brenton threw at Keiran.

"Excuse me, Jenny is adorable and I'm thinking about bringing her to the next family dinner," Keiran defended.

"Let's see if she will agree to come once she becomes acquainted with your dark nature and kinky preferences," Brenton shot back.

Keiran narrowed his eyes at Brenton; I cleared my throat to get their attention. Now, I was looking at my father to know his opinion.

"Stacy would be your perfect match when it comes to social functions and all. Vilma would be your perfect match when it comes to making decisions and doing business. But if you are looking for a stay-at-home mom then Alice is perfect for that role, but then again, the heart problems is a huge downside to having her as a wife," my father stated.

I wrote down the names of Stacy, Vilma and Alice on a piece of paper before leaving my workplace, as there was one more person I needed to know the opinion of before I either made my decision or looked forward to tomorrow, the second day of interviews.

When I had arrived back at the estate, I asked Keiran to accompany me to the cemetery. Over there, I had knelt in front of my mother's grave

and asked her who she thought would be my perfect wife after I had read out the names of the three women. I didn't know exactly what I was looking for, some kind of a sign or something, maybe I wasn't really expecting anything, but a sudden breeze started and maybe it was just the wind or my mind was playing tricks on me, but I distinctly heard the name Alice being whispered. I nodded at my mother's grave to let her know that I had gotten the answer. Not wasting any time, I told Brenton to cancel the interviews for tomorrow and all four of us went straight to Alice's place.

Now it had been nearly a month since we had been married and Alice was proving to be a wonderful wife. She was so sweet and caring; despite what I'd done, how I'd treated her, she still smiled and did everything that one would expect from a good wife. It was a shame that she was going to leave me.

Well why don't you make this arrangement permanent. You obviously don't want her to leave. My subconscious suggested.

But I couldn't do that. Alice was only my wife for the baby, she wasn't the type of woman you took to social functions. She was your typical wife, the one who greeted you everytime you came home, made lunch for the family, took care of the house and children.

Isn't that what you want? A wife who greets you with a smile, who you can share your problems with, who is there with you through thick and thin. Alice is perfect and you'd be a fool to let her go, this my was heart talking.

I couldn't deny that Alice indeed was the definition of the perfect wife. Despite her small stature, she could accomplish big, difficult things. It felt so good when she would crawl on my lap, or just merely held my hand. When I was upset about visiting my mother, she held on to

me and kept on telling me how she was going to stay with me no matter what happened because she had made a promise in front of God to be a good wife. That was the moment, when I knew that it would be difficult to let her go. She was digging her way into my heart and I was afraid she was soon going to own it. She was proving by her actions and words that my heart was right, and I did not regret my decision about marrying her.

She has been a good wife to you, now you should be a good husband to her. Go to her, she needs you, she is all alone, there is no one with her.

The best thing about Alice was that she was always smiling. No matter what life threw at her, she stood strong and smiled despite all the heartache she been dealt with. Every morning, she would help me get ready for work and when I was about to leave she would give me the

most beautiful smile and told me to have a good day. And despite not wanting to believe it, I always had a good day. But not this morning; this morning she was distracted, her mind was on her brother's surgery, her smile was not as radiant today as it usually was, and as it was why I wasn't having the best day. I couldn't focus on anything, my mind flashing to the fragile girl who was in the hospital. I had been selfish and brought her back to our home even though she wanted to stay with her brother, only because I wanted to sleep and wake up next to her and have her smile at me in the morning, but it was no use.

Go to her, she needs you. And while you're at it, call your lawyer and terminate the contract, don't let her go, you wouldn't be happy without her.

Knowing my heart was right, I picked up my phone and called my client who was suppose to

be here in half an hour. It was because of this client that I refused to accompany my wife to the hospital. Since I couldn't concentrate, there was no reason calling my client here.

"Mr. Lawson?" I spoke up as soon as the line connected.

"Mr. Palmer, I'm just about to reach your office," he told me.

"Yes, about that, I would like to reschedule the meeting, something important has come up and I really need to go," I told him.

"All right, no problem, we can reschedule," he stated.

"Good, I'll have my PA call you for the new details, thank you so much." I hung up.

Standing up, I grabbed my coat and slipped it on. Slipping my phone in my pocket, I texted Bernard to go home and not to come pick me up. It would take Bernard a while to come pick

me up and I did not want to wait. My text to Bernard was short and curt; despite changing Bernard's post, I couldn't help the scowl that marred my face whenever I saw him. Seeing Alice with him that day made me want to burn Bernard's cottage down, but I couldn't do that. Even after so many days, whenever I thought about that day when I saw Alice with him, anger bubbled deep inside me and made me want to hit something.

Grabbing my car keys from the drawer, I made my way out of the my office but my PA entered my room before I could exit. She was holding some sort of envelope in her hand.

"Mr. Palmer, your wife's medical reports have arrived," she said while handing me the envelope then left the room.

My heart started pounding as I stared at the envelope. This was it; I was going to know whether Alice really was pregnant or not. My

gut told me that she was carrying my baby, but these reports would tell me the truth upfront. And unlike my gut, the answer in these reports would be right.

Slipping my finger in the slit, I tore open the envelope and took out the folded sheet of paper. It took me a few seconds to go through the contents and when I saw the word I had been so desperate to see, my decision was made.

Alice was not going anywhere.

Folding the paper, I slipped it inside my coat's pocket before exiting my office. I instructed my PA to cancel all my meetings for the next three days and to call Mr. Lawson to reschedule the meeting. Then I jogged out of the building and slipped inside my car. Turning on the ignition, I peeled out of the parking lot and drove to the hospital.

As soon as I arrived at the hospital, I quickly got the required information from the reception and headed in the direction of the OR. Once I arrived, my eyes immediately landed on my wife and what I saw made my heart clench.

Alice was standing a few feet away from the OR doors. Her head was bowed and her hands were cupped. It looked as if she was trying her best to stay strong but wasn't succeeding. Seeing her like this, so fragile and helpless, the caveman inside me woke up. I wanted to protect this delicate woman from this world.

My feet led me all the way to her. Once she was within my reach, I turned her to face me. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears; her cheeks had pink splotches on them; she was trembling, trying her best to stay strong.

"Little dove," I said to her.

When she looked up at me, it was like she let go.

A strangled sob tore through her before she launched herself at me, holding on to me tightly, afraid to let me go. I clutched her tightly to me, fully intending to hold her forever. I felt like utter asshole for abandoning her in her time of need. But not now, not anymore.

Carrying her to the waiting chairs, I sat down with her firmly on my lap. I placed her head on my chest, while I let my hand run over her arm, soothing her. Alice clutched my shirt, sobbing.

How could I leave this woman? How could I leave the woman who was the mother of my unborn baby? How could I let her walk all alone in the midst of this cruel world with her little fairy feet? How could I sit back and watch her face this dark and dangerous world all on her own? How could I be okay with watching her suffer?

No, I was not going to do it. I would protect her from this evil world. I would shield her from all the bad things that were happening around her. I would hold her when she fell and I'll be her strength when she was weak. I would not let anyone hurt her; I would make her smile.

You are only with her because of the baby. You don't really have feelings for her. My subconscious stated.

But my subconscious was wrong. It was not about the baby, not anymore. Sure, I had married her for the baby, but in just one month she had made me need her. Now, I didn't just want a baby from her, I wanted her.

"He's going to die, Chris, Nico is going to die," Alice cried.

"No, little peach, don't say that, Nico is going to be just fine," I replied, holding her tightly against me. If God forbid something happened to Nico, I

was not going to leave her; I would stay by her side and help her move on.

"He's going to die. He's going to leave me like everyone else had." She continued to sob.

I am not going to leave you.

"No, little dove, he is strong, trust me he will make it," I assured her.

"Don't l—lie to me, I know he w-won't come back. Look, my nec—necklace broke, Nico ga—gave me this neck—necklace and I had this necklace on for years, and now it's bro—broken; this is a sign, Chris," she stated, showing me the broken necklace. The chain was broken; I didn't expect the necklace to last long, the chain was getting rusty.

"Little fairy, it's just a necklace, and the chain was old so it broke, don't take it as a sign," I murmured, kissing her cheek.

"You know, when Nico gave me this necklace,

he sa—said that he would always be with me as long as I wore the necklace, and now it's broken...it means he is going leave me," she told me, closing her eyes as fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

"No, little one, no, he is going to be just fine, I promise you," I muttered.

"Don't make promises you can't keep, don't give me false hope." She continued crying. "I'm going to die without my brother, Chris, it would kill me if Nico left me," she said.

No little peach, you won't die. I won't let anything happen to you. You are going to stay with me forever.

"He is going to be just fine," I reassured her.

"He has to be fine, Chris; he has to make it out of this surgery. He has to be a doctor and save people's lives, I—I am going to send him to medical school, and we planned a trip to Disney

Land, he has to be okay, he has to be..."

In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to take Alice's pain away and give her my happiness. It was in that moment, when I realized just how alone she really was. I had my brothers and my father to love and support me, and she had no one. Alice did not have a father who would protect her; she did not have a mother who would share her pain; she only had a little brother, who at this moment could leave her.

"Nico is going to be a doctor, and you are going to Disney Land, just pray to God and Nico will be all right," I stated.

"What if he isn't?"

The doors of the OR opened just as the question left Alice's lips. Dr. Hallaway exited the OR and walked over to us. Alice pushed herself off of me and stood in front of Dr. Hallaway.

"Doctor, how did the surgery go, is my brother okay?" She asked, fear dripping from her words.

"Congratulations, the surgery went great, Nico is just fine. We have fixed the VSD by using the hybrid procedure as you wanted, and Nico is expected to make a full recovery in just a few days," Dr. Hallaway answered with a smile.

Relief radiated on Alice's face. Her legs gave out and she would've fallen if I hadn't caught her. I held her tightly against me, not intending to let her fall.

"My brother is okay? He's really okay?" Alice kept saying, it was like she couldn't believe it. Relief spread through me at hearing Nico was going to be all right.

"Yes, Mrs. Palmer, your brother will be just fine. He has a bright future ahead of him. Make sure to send him to medical school where he so desperately wants to go," Dr. Hallaway replied.

"Thank you, doctor, thank you so much." Alice wrapped her arms around Dr. Hallaway in a surprised hug, catching him off guard.

"You're welcome." Alice pulled away from the doctor. "You can see your brother in a little while, we'll be moving him to his room and he'll wake up once the anesthesia wears off," Dr. Hallaway stated.

Alice nodded. "Thank you so much."

Dr. Hallaway shook my hand before walking away. I took out my phone and texted my family about the good news of Nico's surgery being a success. Alice wrapped her arms around me.

"Thank you for being there for me," she murmured.

I'll always be there for you, little peach.

"You don't need to thank me," I replied, holding her close to me.

"How come you're here? Didn't you have an important meeting?"

"Yeah, it got cancelled, so I came, plus you needed me here." I wasn't going to tell her I cancelled the meeting, she would only feel guilty about it.

She nodded and smiled. The smile I had been yearning for since morning. "Yes, I needed you, come, let's go and wait for the doctors to bring Nico to his room," Alice stated.

"Sure, wait, I dropped something." I bent down and picked up the broken necklace and slipped it inside my pocket. Now was not the right time to tell her she was pregnant, she had too much on her mind. Taking her hand, I led her away from the doors of the OR.

Glancing at her had me making up my mind. I may have married Alice for only a year, but this marriage was not going to last for 365 days.

It was going to last forever.

The CEO

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Chris and I entered Nico's room and immediately my eyes landed on my brother, who was lying flat on the bed, hooked to a couple of machines that were probably monitoring his heart and other vitals. Relief washed over me like a tidal wave when I saw that my brother was all right and would no longer have any problems with his heart.

Quickly walking the remaining distance, I reached Nico's bed and immediately took his

small hand in mine. Pressing a kiss on the back of his hand I waited for Nico to wake up. Chris, meanwhile, had made himself comfortable on the couch which was situated against one wall. Taking out his cell phone, he began working.

After ten minutes, Nico's eyelids fluttered before he opened them and his eyes met mine. It was like I had been given a new life when I looked into my brother's sparkly green eyes. I felt that now things were starting to look up for me, and I would never be alone in the future because I would have my brother with me.

"Hey Nic, how do you feel?" I asked, happiness dripping from my words.

"Can you please give me some water, I feel thirsty," Nico requested.

Nodding my head, I let go of his hand to grab

the cup of water which was placed on a table next to Nico's bed. Chris had joined me by the time I had turned back to give Nico the cup of water. He had helped Nico sit up in a comfortable position; I handed Nico the cup but kept one hand on the cup so it wouldn't accidentally fall.

"Don't drink too much at once, okay? Small sips," I instructed.

Chris wrapped his arm around my shoulders as I watched Nico drinking water. Once he finished, Nico gave me the cup and I placed it back to its original place. My eyes wouldn't leave Nico, it was like I would burst with happiness as I watched my brother taking deep breaths.

"I'm all better now, right Alice?" Nico queried with hopeful eyes.

"Yes, your surgery was a success and in a few days we'll go home," I told him.

Nico fist pumped the air with the hand that was not pierced with an IV needle. "Yes! Now you'll take me to the amusement park, right?" And when will I go to school?" Nico fired off his questions.

I laughed. "Soon, you'll go to school very soon and we'll go to the amusement park as well," I promised him.

"Chris sir? Will you come with Alice and I to the amusement park?" Nico questioned my husband.

"Of course, if you guys want me to come then I will," he replied. I glanced at Chris to see if he was saying this to appease my brother, but I saw nothing but sincerity in his eyes, he was

not lying.

"Could you tell me the names of the best schools around here?" Nico enquired. I blinked my eyes in bewilderment. Nico was the first kid who was so excited to go to school, it was crazy.

"The list is kind of long. Do you want to go to a private school or the regular one?" Chris sat down on the edge of Nico's bed.

"The regular one. Which school is nearest to your house, Alice?" Nico queried.

I found myself at a loss for words. I had no idea which was closest to the castle, if there was a school close to it at all. I bit my lip as I contemplated what to tell Nico, but thankfully Chris came to my rescue.

"Where Alice and I live is kind of a remote...secluded area, there is no school for

quite a few miles from there," chris said.

"Alice will you please buy me a bike then? I'll use it to go to school," Nico said to me.

"You don't need a bike, the driver will drop you off everyday; if you don't want the chauffeur to drop you off then the school bus will come to pick you up everyday, it's your choice," chris responded with a smile.

"The school bus, I want to go on the school bus like all the other boys and girls," Nico stated with a grin on his face.

"Okay then, you best get back on your feet as soon as possible, young man, then we'll send you to school," Chris said, ruffling Nico's hair in a brotherly manner.

"Yes!" Nico exclaimed.

I glanced to my right to see Dr. Hallaway entering followed by a couple of nurses. He had the same warm smile on his face that was becoming one of my favorites. I smiled when I saw him, grateful that men like Dr. Hallaway existed to help people like my brother.

"Hello, Nico, how are you?" Dr. Hallaway asked my brother while placing the stethoscope against his chest.

"I am all good, Dr. Hallaway, thank you for fixing me up," Nico replied.

"You're welcome, now you must come every month for your follow up, okay? And you have to become a doctor now and help me out with the other patients." The doctor told Nico.

Nico was just about to answer Dr. Hallaway when Keiran, along with Brenton and Mr. Palmer

entered the room. Keiran was grinning while Brenton and Mr. Palmer were stoic, their faces blank. I thanked God once again for sending these people to help me and my brother out.

"Nic, how are you, buddy? I heard the surgery went well," Keiran said to Nico.

"Yeah, I am going to go to school now, on a bus!" There was no stopping Nico's excitement.

Dr. Hallaway finished checking Nico's vitals, then ushered Chris and I out of the room to speak to us privately. Since Nico was busy talking to the Palmer men, I wasn't worried about leaving him alone for a few seconds, and the fact that we were in the hospital helped ease my worries further.

"I checked Nico's heartbeat and it is strong and steady. It means that the surgery was a hundred percent success." Relief shot through me at hearing Dr. Hallaway confirm this. "We'll do a follow up every month for at least a year, then maybe we'll reduce the follow ups to maybe every two months or every three months," he said.

"Yes, of course, thank you so much, doctor," I stated.

"You're welcome, now we'll discharge Nico next week as his body needs the proper care and time to heal," Dr. Hallaway informed me.

"Of course, doctor, we understand that Nico is going to get the best treatment over here," Chris responded.

After giving a firm nod, the doctor said, "Yes, I

shall go now, I'll come again in the morning to check up on Nico." Shaking his hand, Dr. Hallaway walked away, while Chris and I went back inside Nico's room.

Nico was busy chatting with Keiran while Brenton and Mr. Palmer were busy talking on their phones. At seeing Keiran and Nico laughing together, I couldn't help but notice how close the two have gotten in a month. They were talking and laughing like two brothers, like friends. It was like Nico was always a part of Keiran's life. It was heart warming to see.

"Little fairy?" Chris said.

"Hmm?" I smiled up at him.

"I am going to go and get you something to eat and drink, okay?" Chris told me.

"No, no, you don't have to do that, I'm fine." I didn't want Chris to bother, if I got hungry I'd get

something for myself.

"Don't argue, little one, you haven't eaten anything since morning and that is not good for your health. I am going to bring you something to eat and drink and you are not going to argue with me on that; and once everybody leaves, you are going to sleep, I know you didn't sleep last night," he stated.

Knowing that arguing with him was futile, I merely nodded. He smiled before cupping my cheek and kissing me tenderly. The kiss sent shivers down my spine and made me feel hot all over. A simple kiss from him was enough to melt me in a puddle of lust and hormones.

However, I pulled away and by the frown that creased his forehead, I knew he did not like what I just did.

"Not here, Chris, Nico is here," I whispered, a blush spreading over my cheeks as I glanced at

my brother who was busy talking to Keiran.

"So? you are my wife, I can kiss you whenever I want, wherever I want, however I want," he replied.

"Yes, but Nico is a kid," I argued.

"I don't care, you are my wife," he countered. Then to prove his point, he captured my lips in bone-melting kiss, and I would've fallen if it hadn't been for him holding me to him.

"My. Wife." He enunciated each word, before kissing my cheek and exiting the room, leaving me a breathless, blushing mess.

"Keiran, aren't you going to leave, it's almost nine," I said.

Keiran had stayed while Brenton and Mr. Palmer left at six. He and Nico had been conversing non-stop. So much so, that I was starting to feel jealous that Nico was talking to Keiran more than he was talking to me.

"No, little mushroom, I am going to stay here for the night while you and Chris go home and get some rest," he replied.

"No, no, you don't have to do that; you have done so much already, thank you for that, by the way, but really, you don't have to stay, I am staying," I responded.

When Mr. Palmer and Brenton took their leave, I told Chris that we should go home because he had to go to work in the morning, but he simply told me that he had taken three days off from work and that we would stay with Nico at the hospital. I was glad that Chris had decided for

us to stay. I did not want to leave my brother alone after he just had his surgery, but I did not tell Chris that I wanted to stay, because if he had decided to go home then I wouldn't have disagreed. I was going to do my best to be a good wife, and that meant putting my husband's wishes before mine.

"Relax, little mushroom, I told Chris that I would stay with Nic, you need your rest," he responded.

Chris entered the room and immediately went to sit on the couch. Removing his coat, he draped it at the back of a metal chair, then removed his shoes and socks before laying down on the couch.

"Chris, tell Keiran to go home, we're staying here." I tried my best not to sound too demanding.

"Chris, you and little mushroom can't stay here.

You never slept on the couch before, how are you going to sleep at night?" Keiran looked at his brother with concern.

"Keiran, Alice and I will stay with Nic tonight, but tomorrow you'll stay, okay?" Chris looked exhausted, he was just about to fall in a deep sleep.

"Alright, we'll alternate. But Chris, if you decided to go home, call me and I'll come, okay? And if there is any problem let me know immediately," Keiran stated.

I nodded my head as Keiran enveloped me in a brotherly hug. All these men were so tall, I barely reached their elbows. Next time, I was going to wear high heels when hugging them.

The bathroom door opened and Nico emerged. Keiran immediately went to him and helped him

all the way back to his bed. Once Nico was comfortable, lying flat on the bed ready to sleep, Keiran got ready to leave.

"Okay buddy, I'm off, I'll see you in the morning and will make sure to bring some board games and DVDs with me. We'll spend the time watching movies and playing games, okay?" Keiran said to my brother.

"Okay, you better not be late, bye, good night," Nico mumbled, looking sleepy.

"Good night, buddy." Giving me a final nod, Keiran strode out of the room.

Deciding not to disturb Chris, I walked to the chair and sat down. Pulling my knees up, I rested my head on my arms. I knew there was no way I would be able to fall asleep in such an uncomfortable position, but resting my eyes would suffice.

"Little dove?" He mumbled.

"Yes, Chris?" I turned to face him.

"Why are you over there, come here, you need to sleep," he said.

"I'm all right here, you go to sleep," I responded.

"No, come here, I will not sleep until you come here," he stated.

Sighing, I got up and went to the couch and sat down. He immediately pulled me down until I was pressed to his front. Draping a thick arm around me while placing the other under my head, he kissed my forehead.

"Sleep now, you need it," he mumbled.

"Chris, I can't sleep here, there is no space and I don't want you to be uncomfortable," I whispered.

"I am comfortable, little peach, now close your eyes and sleep; and don't worry about occupying any space, you are too short and thin to occupy any space, just perfect," he replied, pulling me close.

If that was supposed to be make me angry, it didn't. I was glad that he was not uncomfortable because of me. Right then, I was glad I was short and thin, because it was giving me an advantage in this small space. And him saying it was perfect made my heart soar. His words put a fissure in the walls around my heart, making it difficult for me to keep my heart in check. However, I knew dwelling on the future would do me no good at the moment. I would just have to deal with all this one step at a time.

So putting a lid on all my worries, I closed my

eyes and gave in to sleep. That was the first time, I dreamt of Chris and I with four kids, laughing and enjoying our lives. But I knew all of it would be what it already was.

A dream.

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"Keep her..."

"...Forever..." I felt lips brushing against my temple before I opened my eyes. Chris and I were in the same position that we slept in last night.

"Good morning, little fairy," he said before pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"Good morning," I mumbled, rubbing my eyes. I sat up and slipped on my shoes, my eyes landing on Nico who was wide awake.

"Nico, how do you feel?" I asked him, my voice sounding like a croak.

"I feel great, Keiran got me board games and DVDs, he's going to watch them with me," he chirped.

"Did you eat breakfast?" I asked him.

"Not yet, but I'll get us something to eat, you wait here," he replied, standing up and stretching.

"It's okay, I'll get you something to eat, let me just use the bathroom first." I jogged inside the bathroom and hastily got rid of the last remnants of sleep from my eyes. After washing my face with a cold water and rubbing some toothpaste on my teeth with my finger, I exited the bathroom.

"You stay here." I gestured to him to stay in the room while I went to get breakfast. "Keiran, would you like anything from the cafeteria?" I asked Keiran, who was placing a house on the Monopoly board.

"Little mushroom, you see that basket on the chair?" Keiran asked me.

My eyes immediately landed on the chair where there was indeed a basket, but I had no idea what was in it.

"Yes, what about it?" I queried.

"There is plenty of food for all of us in there, and Helga will be coming by around 1:00 pm to bring us lunch," he told me, rolling a pair of dice in his hand.

Quickly walking to the basket, I opened it up to see what exactly had Helga sent for us. The basket was full to the brim with various assortments of breakfast food. I was surprised

and a little confused when I saw waffles and pancakes in the mix as well, wondering how had Helga managed to do that.

Taking a paper plate, I filled it up with one of everything from the basket, then took the plate to Chris and placed it on the couch in front of him. Then I took another plate and begun filling it up for Keiran.

"You haven't eaten yet, right?" I questioned Keiran, who was watching Nico roll the dice.

"No, I came straight here as soon as I woke up," he answered, watching Nico moving his piece a few steps forward.

"Here you go." I handed him the plate.

"Helga also made porridge for Nico...along with other things, he can eat a little bit of that," Keiran stated, taking the fake money from Nico and putting it in the box.

"Nico, would you like to have some porridge?"

Nico was engrossed in the game, resulting in him answering me after a few seconds.

"Sure Alice," Nico responded offhandedly.

Shaking my head at my brother's intense concentration I put a little bit of porridge in a bowl and placed it next to the Monopoly board.

"I want you to finish all of it, okay?" I turned to Chris, who had finished half of his breakfast.

"Will your father visit today?" He nodded. "Yeah, he might come." He frowned when he loled at me. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Oh I'll just eat an apple, I'm not very hungry," I answered with a shrug.

The frown on his face deepened after my answer. Shaking his head, he stood up and went straight for the basket. Taking a paper plate, he quickly filled it up with waffles, pancakes, Nutella, and maple syrup. Without a word, Chris

took my hand and led me to the couch where he made me sit before sitting down beside me.

"What am I going to do with you, little one. You are going to keep me on my toes for the next few months," he muttered before cutting up the pancakes with a knife and fork, then dipping the pancakes in maple syrup before raising the fork to my mouth.

"What do you mean I would keep you on your toes for the next few months?" I questioned before opening my mouth, allowing him to slip the fork in my mouth. The delicious pancake slowly melted in my mouth, making me forget what I was talking to Chris about; my stomach growled letting me how an apple wouldn't have been enough.

Chris quickly finished feeding me the pancakes. I tried to take the fork and plate from him but he said he liked feeding me, which made me uncomfortable as Nico and Keiran were in the

room with us. After the pancakes, he proceeded to dip the waffles in Nutella and begun feeding it to me.

"I must thank Helga for the food, it's delicious," I muttered, chewing on a waffle.

"I know how awful hospital food can be, so I had her prepare the basket," Keiran replied.

"Her food is delicious, but not as delicious as yours," Chris stated, sincerity shining in his eyes as he fed me another bite. His compliment only made me blush, which he found amusing as he chuckled.

Bloody sweet husband!

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"I am starving," Keiran stated as he opened the basket and took out a few plates with spoons, knives and forks, passing one of each to all of us.

Helga had left five minutes ago, leaving a basket containing lunch. Mr. Palmy and Brenton had showed up half an hour ago and now all of us were having lunch together.

Dr. Hallaway had checked up on Nico and told us he was healing nicely which had me sighing in relief. God was finally having mercy on me, I just hoped nothing bad happened to him now.

The unexpected sound of knocking on the door had all of us turning to see who had arrived. I frowned as I saw a woman standing next to the door holding a small bouquet of various flowers and a box which was wrapped in a cute wrapping paper.

She was about 5'4 with glossy brown hair that were curled to perfection. I wasn't sure if they were natural or styled, but they were perfect. She had big blue eyes, that were sparkling with innocence. Her cheeks had splotches of pink that one got when spending too much time out

in the cold. Her lips were small but they were not thin, just perfect. She was so cute and an uncanny innocence surrounded her, like the one you saw in children not grown people. She was wearing a maroon trench coat with paired with the cutest black ankle boots I had ever seen.

"Jenny! What a pleasant surprise," Keiran exclaimed before placing his plate on the table and walking over to her. He enveloped her small frame in a hug, crushing her to him like a lover did.

"I—I hope I'm not interrupting anything," she said. Her voice was soft and sweet, dripping with innocence.

I glanced to my right to Mr. Palmer frowning as he gazed at Keiran and Jenny, disapproval evident in his eyes. Why was Mr. Palmer acting like that? Did he not like Jenny? I thought she was perfect.

"Nonsense, you can never interrupt, come have lunch with us," Keiran stated, taking her hand and leading her to the only empty chair in the room, pretty much the same way Chris did to me.

"Hello Nico, how do you feel?" Jenny asked with a smile on her face.

"I fell great, Jenny, would you like to play Snakes and Ladders with us?" Nico had a huge smile on his face. He clearly knew who Jenny was and by the smile on his face, he really liked her.

"No thank you, I got you a present and flowers," she said, handing Nico the wrapped box and placed three flowers next to the Snakes and Ladders board.

"Thank you, Jenny, I love it!" Nico stated, looking at the package with excitement.

"You haven't even seen what I got you." Jenny chuckled.

"I know whatever you got me would be perfect, you always know what to get me," Nico responded.

Now I was getting suspicious of the girl. Just who was she and how did she know what to buy Nico? Curiosity nearly killing me, I decided to find out who she was.

"Who is Jenny?" I asked Chris.

"She is Keiran's girlfriend," he replied.

Oh, no wonder Keiran was so overjoyed to see her; and Nico knew who she was. She must be a regular visitor at Keiran's loft. An involuntary smile tugged at the corner of my lips as I looked at Keiran and Jenny; they looked perfect together.

"This is for you," Jenny said, handing Keiran a big red rose.

"Thanks, strawberry." He kissed her cheeks, causing the blush to deepen.

Jenny turned to face Brenton and Mr. Palmer who were sitting silently observing the new girl. After a few seconds of hesitation she shuffled forward and held out three white lily flowers.

"These are for you, Mr. Palmer," Jenny said. I could tell she felt intimidated by Brenton and Mr. Palmer, but she showed no fear.

Mr. Palmer took the flower without a word; inspecting the white petals like one would a strange specimen. Irritation and disapproval flashed in Mr. Palmer's eyes but he didn't say a word. Jenny, however, noticed that he did not like the small gift she had given him. She pressed her lips together before handing Brenton a couple of bluebells.

"These are for you, I hope you like them," she said to Brenton who eyed the flowers pretty

much like his father did.

What was wrong with these men? Why were they being so ungrateful? They should smile and thank her for being considerate enough to bring gifts, no matter how big or small, for everyone.

I could tell Jenny was trying her best not to let the reaction of Keiran's brother and father affect her. I suddenly felt sorry for the poor girl who was trying her best to be nice but was receiving cold shoulders in return.

Taking a deep breath, Jenny came and stopped in front of Chris. She held out three yellow daffodils which Chris immediately took with a smile on his face.

"I hope you like them, Keiran told me you like daffodils," Jenny said. I was surprised at her words. She knew the kind of flowers that Chris liked, I didn't even know that! I mentally slapped

myself.

Stupid, stupid Alice. So selfish and inconsiderate!

"Thank you, Jenny, I love them, they are beautiful; but you really shouldn't have," he said, giving her side hug.

"It was no trouble at all. This is a tough time for you all, with Nico's surgery and all...you people must be so worried, so I bought flowers to cheer everyone up," she responded.

It was official, this girl was perfect. Was there anything wrong with this girl?! Did she have an evil bone in her body?! I had no clue people could be so kind. Chris and his family were kind, but this girl was in a completely different league.

Jenny faced me and a smile crept on her beautiful face. "Hello, you must be Alice. Keiran and Nico have told me so much about you, it's

like I already know you; hi, I'm Jenny." She held out her hand for me to shake.

"Nice to meet you, Jenny, and I'm sorry to say no one told me about you," I replied shaking her hand.

"Oh it doesn't matter, you had so many important things going on in your life. I'm glad that Nico is all right now, when Keiran told me the news I knew I had come and visit him, he is one of my favorite kids." She told me.

"Oh, these are for you." She held out a few daisies in different colors. "I had no idea what kind of flowers you liked so I got you daisies, they are my third favorite flowers. Oh, and I got you these earrings. When I saw them I just knew I had to buy them for you." I took the flowers and earrings from her with a smile on my face. This girl was so sweet it was impossible not to like her.

"Thank you so much, Jenny, I love them, the earrings are very cute," I told her. The earrings were more like studs with a big turquoise rose in the center with a pearl attached to it with a few small crystals finishing the look.

"Okay, enough giving present, strawberry, come and sit down, have lunch with us," Keiran said to Jenny.

"Oh wow, Alice look, Jenny got me a X31000!" Nico nearly shouted, holding up a big, colorful water gun, looking at it like one would their dream car.

"I presume you wanted this?!" I smiled at him, liking Jenny even more.

"Yes! It's the coolest water gun in the world." I could tell Nico wanted to try out his new toy right this very moment.

"I'm glad you like it, Nico," Jenny said.

"I love it, thank you again. Come, eat with us,"

Nico stated.

"Actually, I can't, I have to be at the store in two hours, maybe some other time," Jenny replied.

Keiran's face hardened and he strode over to Jenny. I glanced at Chris only to see him looking at the couple with amusement. Keiran led Jenny back to the empty chair and sat her down.

"I'll drop you off, but you are going to have lunch with us and no arguments," Keiran stated, quickly putting food in the plate for his girlfriend.

"Keiran, you are not going to drop me off, I'll take the bus," Jenny argued.

"Like hell you will! I won't have you suffering in buses and trains while I'm here to take you anywhere you want to go, I won't allow it!"

Seeing Keiran acting like this made me wonder if he had an identical twin. For as long as I had known Keiran I had never seen him like this, so

bossy and dominating. To me, he was laid back and a little goofy, but not this.

Jenny's eyes narrowed and she opened her mouth to argue but one look from Keiran had her shutting up. She took the plate filled with food from Keiran and begun eating.

"Is he always like this with her?" I whispered to Chris.

He chuckled. "You haven't seen anything yet. He is three love sessions away from impregnating her, not kidding." He added after seeing my shocked expression.

"I thought Keiran was laid back and jolly." I continued to whisper.

"He is laid back but not when it comes to the people he loves. He is going to laugh and joke around, but if any one of us does something which he thinks is stupid, then he would be treating us exactly like he was talking to Jenny,"

He informed me.

"Even me?" I queried.

"Especially you and Jenny and Brenton's possible girlfriend. He loves Jenny and he loves you like a sister, so he would do anything to protect you. Just like he will not allow Jenny to ride a bus, he wouldn't allow you either...neither of us will," he answered.

"Oh."

I wanted to take a few minutes to digest this new piece of information but Mr. Palmer cleared his throat, gaining our attention.

"I just want to let you all know that I am hosting a family dinner next Saturday and all of you are invited, including you Jenny." Mr. Palmer eyed Jenny who tried not to squirm under his gaze.

"We'll be there dad." Keiran and Chris said in unison.

After lunch Mr. Palmer and Brenton took their leave, leaving us with Nico. Since Mr. Palmer had told us about the upcoming dinner, my mind begun swimming with various scenarios as to how this dinner was going to be.

I just hoped it was not a disaster.

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"You sure Keiran will have no problem staying with Nico for the night?" I asked Chris while unbuttoning my coat.

"Of course not, trust me Keiran has no problem staying with Nico, plus he has Jenny with him," he responded heading to the bathroom.

As decided, Keiran was going to stay the night

with Nico while Chris and I would go back home, which we did. Chris looked exhausted so I was glad Keiran was willing to stay with Nico. I knew he did not sleep well on the hospital couch last night, rich men like him were used to sleeping in comfortable beds. But I was glad that he made an effort for me.

He emerged from the bathroom and strode towards me. Once he was standing a couple of feet away from me, he pulled in for a comforting hug, taking me by surprise. I had no idea why he was hugging me, but I liked having his arms around me.

"Sit." He gently pushed me down on the bed, but he didn't stop until I was lying flat on the bed looking at him with confusion.

Giving me a smile, he got on top of me and nuzzled my neck, sparking pleasure in my core. I would've moaned if his sudden physical affection hadn't left me bewildered.

"Chris, what are you doing?" I asked softly.

"Kissing you." And to prove his point, he kissed the column of my neck.

"Yes, but why?" I enquired.

"Because I am your husband," he answered, kissing the spot below my ear.

"Yes, but why all of a sudden?" I queried, running my fingers through his hair.

"Can't a husband kiss his wife?" he murmured, before grabbing the hem of my shirt and tugging it. "Take this off." He demanded, pulling the shirt over my head and discarding it to the side.

Once I was naked from the waist up with only my bra, he claimed my mouth in a passionate kiss, running his hands over my bare stomach, igniting pleasure in every cell of my body. I had no idea why he was being so touchy feely and I wanted to know why.

"You make me so happy." He whispered, gliding his lips down my neck.

"Chris, you're confusing me, please tell me why I make you so happy?" I asked breathlessly.

Without a word, he grabbed his coat which was lying at the foot of the bed. He slipped his hands inside the pocket and pulled out an envelope which was already opened. Removing a folded piece of paper, he handed it to me, smiling from ear to ear.

I read the content of the paper and my eyes widened, suddenly I knew the reason for his happiness. He placed a kiss on my still flat belly, right below my navel, while I stared at the word that told me what he knew all along.

I was pregnant.

"Is that why you're so happy?" I questioned, a smile breaking across my face.

"Yes, because of you." He nuzzled my tummy,

making me laugh at the ticklish feeling.

"Well, I'm glad I made you happy by being pregnant," I said, feeling relieved. I felt that now things were finally working out for me; my brother had gotten his heart fixed, and now I was pregnant with Chris baby. I also had money for Nico's education and now I just had to apply for a decent paying job and look for a house because this castle was my home for the next eleven months only.

"Not just happy, ecstatic, I am going love you because now I have got you all to myself." He hastily removed my jeans and my underwear in less than minute, before discarding his clothes and getting on top of me.

He made sweet love to me, letting me savor every inch of him. I ran my hands leisurely over his hard, muscular body, enjoying the feel of

him slowly pumping in and out of me. Him making love to me forged another crack in my heart, making me fall just a little more for the man I was not supposed to.

Once we were done and basking in after glow of our love making,he ran his hand all over my skin, goosebumps erupting all over my skin.

"I am going to be with you every step of the way. I will accompany you to every scan, and I will take care of you and our baby. You will not be alone, little dove, you will never be alone." He kissed my lips sweetly, before eyeing my tummy with barely concealed glee.

His words brought tears in my eyes, and for once I wished that we would be together forever and not just for a year. I really wished there was a man like him out there for me, I didn't think I would be able to handle an abusive husband.

"We'll be great parents, don't you think?" You are

caring and loving and you know all about taking care of kids. And I would learn to handle our baby from you. One day you'll be on diaper duty and one day I will be. What do you think?" He gently wound an arm around my tummy. The little gesture had my thoughts confirming about him being an amazing father. My belly was still flat and yet he was already protecting the life growing inside it.

"I think it will be perfect." I kissed him tenderly, pouring my happiness in that one kiss.

"Do you know that I did not want a baby just because I needed an heir to run my empire; but because I wanted to start a family, have someone to call mine; someone who I will look forward to seeing at the end of the day; someone who will greet me with a smile everytime I come home from work." He told me.

"Well I wish that you find that someone for yourself," I said with utmost sincerity.

"I have already found that someone," he replied, running his hand over my tummy.

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Time passed quickly, a week passed by in a blur and now we were bringing Nico home. Chris had already prepared a room for Nico in the castle, and Keiran was coming to stay with us because he offered to babysit Nico and make sure he was taking his medicines on times. I told him it was unnecessary because I could take care of my brother, not to mention the number of maids Chris had in the castle. But Keiran didn't budge, telling me that I was pregnant with his nephew or niece and would need to focus more on myself and the maids would not play games with Nico. Chris had agreed with Keiran and strictly told me to take care of myself.

Once Chris told me that I was pregnant, it didn't take long for him to tell the whole family. So his

father changed the

monthly family lunch to a celebratory lunch and had invited the whole Palmer family, which included all of Chris's uncles, aunts and cousins.

Now here we were dressing up to go to lunch over at Mr. Palmer's place. Chris had given five maids strict orders regarding Nico. All five of them would stay with Nico until we came back, and if Nico wanted to play games they would oblige him and play with him.

I was a little reluctant to leave Nico alone with the maids when he had just come back from the hospital, but I also knew that Mr. Palmer was hosting this lunch because of me, and I couldn't cancel because Chris's whole family would be there and I would never embarrass him.

"You ready to go?" Chris asked, emerging from the walk-in closet looking as if he was ready to

go for a photoshoot.

"Yes, let's go." Grabbing my clutch from the table I followed him out of our room and towards the car.

Throughout the ride, I was a nervous wreck. Everytime my hand would reach my neck only to find no necklace there, I would be disappointed. Right then, I was feeling the loss of the necklace so much, I was cursing the fact that it broke.

We arrived at Mr. Palmer's estate after thirty minutes. The estate was huge but the architecture was not of this century; it was old, very old. However, it was beautiful, and I could easily picture a man like Mr. Palmer living here.

Chris and I entered the house and my eyes widened at seeing the number of people in the house...more like the number of men in the house. It's like females didn't exist in the place.

Every where I looked there were males of various age and size, all dressed in shirts and slacks.

Keiran came and slapped chris at the back in acknowledgement. Giving me a brotherly hug, he shouted to everyone that guest of honor was here, which didn't help ease my anxiety one bit.

"Jenny is over there." Keiran pointed to where Jenny sat looking as uncomfortable as I was feeling.

Giving him a grateful smile, I quickly went over to Jenny. Relief spread through her face once she saw me. Giving me a sweet smile, Jenny stood up and hugged me.

"Thank God you're here, I was feeling so strange being in the middle of all these men, have you ever seen this many men in one family?" She queried, gazing the room swarming with men.

"I had no idea chris only had males in the

family," I remarked.

"His aunts are in the kitchen preparing lunch, and I don't think they have any female cousins," Jenny responded.

Just then two females came trotting down the stairs. As soon as they saw Jenny and I their face broke out into huge grins. They jogged towards us and enveloped us in hugs.

Both the females were very pretty. The one who hugged Jenny had a cylindrical figure with wavy blonde hair and green eyes. While the one who was grinning at me had curly dark hair and blue eyes.

"Oh my God, finally, girls in the family." The one who was hugging me shrieked excitedly.

"And best of all, they're not older than us!" The other one said.

"Hi, I'm Chloe and this is Maddie," Chloe said to me.

"Nice to meet you, Chloe and Maddie, I'm Alice, Chris's wife." I introduced myself.

"And I'm Jenny, I came with Keiran," Jenny said.

"Aah, you're the girlfriend Keiran can't stop talking about," Maddie stated, causing Jenny to blush.

"And you are the guest of honor, I'm glad to finally meet you. Come let's go to my room, there is still plenty of time until lunch." Chloe spotted Chris sitting with a few guys. "Hey Chris, I'm taking your wife and Keiran's girlfriend to my room, don't assemble a search party," she said before taking my hand and leading me up the stairs.

"You live here?" I asked Chloe.

"No," she answered.

"Then how come you are taking us to your room?" I queried.

"Oh, this is my room when I visit uncle Brian," she answered.

"Who?" Jenny asked.

"Uncle Brian, Keiran's father," Chloe responded, opening the door to her room letting us all in before shutting the door.

"Sit anywhere you like." Jenny and I sat on the bed, right across from Chloe and Maddie.

"So, how did you like the family full of men?" Maddie asked.

"Uncomfortable," Jenny answered.

"You have no idea how happy we are that you two are here. It gets so boring here with all the men and no other female, it's just Maddie and I," Chloe commented.

"But it must be nice having so many men to protect you," I stated.

"Uh, no it isn't. Chloe and I can never have

boyfriends. One time I was dating this guy and my brothers found out, they literally beat the guy to a pulp and grounded me for three months. Now, I am not allowed to go to any club, and if I want to go to a club, I must go to that boring one near my house and have to take my brothers along," Maddie said, resentment dripping from her words.

"I agree, having a male dominant family is anything but fun. The guys all treat you like you're made of expensive china. I liked Lizzie, at least she had the guts to stand up to all of them and be true to the love of her life," Chloe stated.

"Yeah, but look what happened, she got kicked out of the family, now people are forbidden to even say her name," Maddie responded.

"Yes, but at least she got out. If I have a guy that truly loves me, I will run away with him," Chloe said.

"Hey, you can't leave me all alone here, you're all I have," Maddie replied.

Jenny and I gave each other puzzled glances, asking the same question: who was Lizzie? And where was she? What was her history with the Palmer family? Chris never told me about a Lizzie before; well he never told me about anyone before, and I had a feeling that if I would ask about Lizzie from Chris he would not be very forthcoming.

"Oh we're so horrible." Maddie slapped her forehead. "Congratulations about the baby, you'll be giving birth to another Palmer boy," she said.

"It could be a girl," I responded.

"I wish, but this family is cursed; the women of this family always, and I mean ninety nine percent of the times, give birth to boys, girls are a rarity. In this generation, we only have Chloe,

Lizzie and I as girls, the rest are boys, and since Lizzie is gone it's just us two," Maddie stated.

"Wow, and you guys believe in this?" Jenny asked.

"It's hard not to, since ninety five percent of our ancestors are males, the females are only the wives and the rare daughters," Chloe replied.

Well I did not believe this family was cursed. And since I was a temporary woman in this family, I believe I would give birth to a girl. Chloe and Maddie talking about the family being male dominant made me wish that my baby was a girl.

"Who is Lizzie?" Jenny questioned.

"Oohh, we can't tell you who she was related to, because since the day Lizzie got kicked out of the family, everybody said that Lizzie was never part of the family and no one should associate her with the family, especially to the ones she

was actually related to; but we can tell you that she was our cousin and was a total badass," Chloe answered.

This family was so weird, had so many secrets. There was a mysterious woman on the seventh floor of the castle, there was an empty archive aisle regarding that same woman, and now there was this Lizzie woman, just how many secrets did this family had? And would I be able to figure them all out in less than a year?

I hope so.

The CEO

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A strange feeling of anxiety begun brewing inside me as I watched Nico dressing up. I couldn't believe it, he was going to school today. All his life, Nico wanted to be like other kids, go to school and get a proper education so he could become a doctor, and now he was finally getting his wish. The only thing was, I was afraid to send him to school.

Nico and I had never been separated for long, and now he was going to stay in the school for seven hours. What if something happened to him in my absence? Would the school inform me? Even though, after the first follow up two weeks ago, the doctor had told us that Nico was perfectly fine and was ready to go to school, I was still worried.

It had been a month and a half since Nico had his surgery, and in the past few weeks, we had got Nico admission in a local grammar school, and today was his first day. It was strange, I was feeling so worried about sending my brother to school, what would I do when I had to send my own baby to school? I needed to stop worrying, the school had a very good and secure environment, Nico would be safe there.

"Alice, where is my school bag?" Nico asked, looking around for his bag.

"It's in the dining room, you will have breakfast then I'll accompany you to school," I answered.

"But I thought I would go in the school bus," Nico said.

"You will from tomorrow, today I'll accompany you with the chauffeur, come on you don't want to be late." I ushered Nico out of his room and

in the dining room.

"Where is Chris?" Nico asked, sitting down on one of the chairs.

"He is at work, he had to go early, had this video conference thing with a foreign investor," I replied.

The door of the dining room opened and Keiran sauntered in, smiling widely. I was surprised to see him as Chris didn't tell me he would be coming.

"Hey Nic, ready for your first day, little man?" Keiran asked, sitting next to Nico.

"Yeah, I am going to be in the fifth grade!" Nico told him, grinning.

"Wow, you are one smart fella," Keiran commented. "Good morning, little mushroom." Keiran said to me.

"Good morning, what are you doing here? Chris didn't tell me you'd be coming over," I stated.

"Isn't it obvious? I came to drop Nico off to school, the chauffeur is already waiting," Keiran answered.

"Thank you, Keiran, but there is no need for that. I'm going to drop Nico off, so you didn't have to bother," I said.

"Don't be silly, I'll accompany you both." While munching on a slice of bread, Keiran stood up followed by Nico.

"Let's go, Alice, I don't want to be late on my first day," Nico stated.

I was about grab Nico's bag but he beat me to it. "It's okay, Alice, now my heart is fixed, you don't have to carry stuff for me anymore." Nico slipped his arms in the bag straps before striding out of the dining room with me and Keiran following behind.

Slipping inside the car, all three of us drove to Nico's school. The excitement that Nico was feeling was palpable as he gazed out of the window, a beautiful sparkle in his eyes that I had never seen before but never wanted it to extinguish. He kept on asking Keiran questions about what school was like for him, and Keiran answered every single one of his questions, not seeming the least bit bothered.

In twenty minutes we arrived outside of a giant brick building. Nico wasted no time in getting out and running towards the entrance of the school. I had to call out to him to stop him from dashing ahead.

"Okay, now, be careful and be good, no picking fights, and if anyone hurts you or anything you tell the teacher immediately, and try not to exert yourself too much, okay?" I instructed Nico, my tone stern.

"Don't worry, Alice, I'll be good," Nico assured me.

"Okay, good, now where is your teacher." I looked around to see any teacher standing outside. Thankfully, I saw the teacher who had met with us when we had first come here for Nico's admission. I immediately went over to her, when she saw us she gave a wide smile.

"Hello, good morning, Nico, welcome to the school," Miss Hardings said.

Miss Harding was a sweet woman in her mid-twenties with auburn hair and gray eyes. She had been very good to us and had answered all my questions regarding Nico's education with utmost patience. She had eased all my doubts and worries and I was comfortable talking to her.

"Thank you, Miss Hardings," Nico said, bouncing on his toes. I could tell that Nico couldn't wait to go to class.

Nico turned to me and gave me a tight hug, before pecking my cheek. "Bye Alice, I have to go to class now. Will you come to pick me up?"

"Of course buddy, I'll come to pick you up for school," I said but Keiran intervened.

"Actually, I'll come to pick you up, your sister will be a little busy," Keiran stated, making me frown. Nico nodded and hurried inside.

Once Nico vanished from my sight, I turned my attention to Miss Hardings. "Would you keep an eye on him, and please call me immediately if anything happens." I told her.

She nodded with a smile. "Don't worry, Mrs.

Palmer, Nico is safe here and we will contact you if something happens, you have nothing to worry about," she replied.

Nodding my head, I bid her goodbye and walked out of the school building with Keiran beside me. Once we settled in the car, I asked Keiran the question that had entered my mind as soon as he spoke up in front of Nico.

"What made you think I will be too busy to pick Nico up from school?" I asked.

"Did you forget, you have your first scan today?" Keiran reminded me.

"Oh my God, I totally forgot it was today." I couldn't believe I had forgotten all about it. I didn't even remind chris last night.

"It's okay, chris remembered and told me to pick Nico up from school because you would be at the doctor's," Keiran informed me.

"Right, wow, thank God he remembered," I said.

"Of course he would remember, he had the date marked on every single calender he owns, put alarms on his phone and had his PA remind him," Keiran informed me.

"Wow, I didn't think Chris would take such measures regarding a scan," I commented.

"You have no idea, little mushroom," Keiran muttered.

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Chris arrived at 11 o' clock precisely. He gave me a tender kiss before telling me to get ready. I had donned on my trench coat before grabbing my wallet and exiting the room with him.

Throughout the ride, my heart kept thundering

against my chest. I was nervous about this, extremely nervous. A heavy feeling settled in the pit of my stomach as we got closer and closer to the hospital. My mind kept coming up with one ridiculous scenario after the other, making me want to throw up.

I glanced to my left to see Chris sitting calmly, not looking the least bit troubled about all of this. It always impressed me how calm and cool he really was. I had never seen him lose control. It was impressive.

As if sensing my gaze on him, he turned to me and gave me a soft smile. That smile affected me more than it should've. That small smile was enough to ease some of my worries.

"Nervous?" He asked, the soft smile not leaving his face.

"How did you know?" Was I that transparent?

"It's written all over your face. Not to mention that you keep touching your neck." He told me.

"Oh, I didn't realize I was doing that," I responded sheepishly. I was really missing my necklace. Everytime I got nervous, the necklace was the first thing my hand went to, and now even though the necklace was gone, my mind was still programmed to have my hand touch my neck everytime I was nervous.

He took my hand in his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, everything will be all right, trust me," he said.

I nodded and watched as the chauffeur parked the car in the hospital parking lot. Chris and I exited the car and walked inside the hospital. As soon as the smell of disinfectants slithered up my nose, a wave of anxiety hit me full force.

Right then, I wanted nothing more than to make a mad dash out of the hospital. I didn't want to do this, what if there was something wrong with the baby?

It was like Chris could sense my inner turmoil, because no sooner had I thought about running, he had gotten a firm hold on my wrist and led me to the reception. After telling the lady that we had an appointment with Dr. Hubble, and getting the information about her office, Chris led me down the corridor and in the elevator.

"Why are we seeing a different doctor? Why not the old one, the one whom we went to last time?" I asked him as the elevator slowly moved up.

"I did not like that doctor, I like this one so that's why," he answered.

The elevator doors opened and he led me into another corridor. There were a few doors on this floor. He stopped in front of the third door and knocked. A sweet feminine voice told us to enter before he pushed the door open and strode inside.

Dr. Hubble's room was like a standard room with a hospital bed against one wall, an ultrasound machine next to the bed. Dr. Hubble's desk was against the opposite wall of the one with the hospital bed. All in all the room was really small and plain.

When she saw us, Dr. Hubble stood up to greet Chris and I. She was a fairly tall woman with blonde hair, brown eyes and a radiant smile; she was a little on the curvy side, but that only added to her beauty.

"So first scan, nervous?" She asked me, handing me a gown to change into. I took the gown from her with a nod of affirmation and quickly changed into it in the bathroom before exiting and laying down on the bed.

Nerves attacked me once again as I stared at the ultrasound machine as the doctor fiddled with it. Chris came and stood next to me, holding my hand. It was in times like this when I was glad I wasn't alone, his presence gave me a strange sense of comfort, something I couldn't get used to even if I wanted to.

"Alright, you guys ready?" Dr. Hubble gave us another radiant smile, before shifting her attention to the machine.

"Yes," he responded. His grip on my hand tightened as he stared at the blank screen.

Dr. Hubble moved my gown away, exposing my

stomach before grabbing a plastic bottle. She squirted a glob of cold gel onto my stomach before spreading the gel with a wand.

"It's not too cold, is it?" She asked me.

"No doctor," I replied, my heart drumming in my chest.

Soon enough the screen started showing a black and gray picture. I couldn't make much out of it as it looked splotchy and kind of blurry. Dr. Hubble moved the wand around before stopping at one spot.

"There, see that." Dr. Hubble pointed at a little blob with what looked to be a head. "That is your baby, you are exactly eight weeks and three days along," she informed us.

It was like nothing else existed except for the

baby. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the screen as I looked at my baby for the first time. My heart clenched in joy and pain. Joy at knowing that this precious little baby was inside me and pain at knowing that it would be impossible for me to part with it when the time came.

Suddenly, the thought of being just a carrier of this baby did not sit well with me. I couldn't give up this baby, not now, not ever; what was I thinking when I signed the contract. I couldn't give this baby up. In just a few seconds, this baby has owned my heart and I knew that I couldn't live without him or her.

"It's too early to determine the sex of the baby, but would you like to hear the heartbeat?" Dr. Hubble enquired.

"Yes please," Chris replied, his voice thick with

emotion.

In another few seconds, the room was filled with a strong beating sound. My breath hitched as I heard the sound, trying to memorise it. I felt Chris brushing his thumb over my cheek. I glanced at his thumb to see it was wet. I didn't realize I was crying.

"This is your baby's heartbeat, it's strong and steady," Dr. Hubble informed us.

"You hear that, little fairy, this is our baby's heartbeat." Chris bent down and kissed me deeply.

"Would you like a print out of the scan?" She asked.

"Yes please." Once again Chris responded, it was like I had lost the ability to speak. I just couldn't believe it, seeing my baby had made me so happy.

Dr. Hubble quickly printed out the scan and

handed it to Chris . After telling me all about pregnancies and prescribing me some prenatal vitamins we bid Dr. Hubble goodbye until the next scan.

Once in the car, Chris took out the prints from the envelope and gazed at it with so much love I wanted to cry. His eyes were shimmering with love and happiness and his lips were curved in a huge smile.

"He's beautiful, isn't he?" He showed me the picture.

"Yes, but it could be a girl," I said, eyeing the picture with barely contained happiness.

"It's going to be a boy, I'm sure of it. You must take good care of yourself from now on, okay, little peach?" He kissed my forehead.

"Yes, I will," I said with conviction. And I was, I was not going to let anything happen to my baby.

"We're having a baby, little dove." It was like he was the happiest man alive.

I nodded and bit my lip to stop myself from crying. Seeing the baby had sealed my decision for me, but it had also put me in a predicament. I knew that I couldn't live without my baby.

How in the world was I going to part with my baby?

The CEO.

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Two more weeks passed and my life had begun to fall into a routine. Except for the growing bump in my tummy, there was not much that was happening. Some people might be bored of the monotony in their lives, but I loved it. It was so peaceful, I had nothing to worry about, except for when Nico was going to get home from school and when would Chris come home from work.

Chris, for his part had been the best husband anyone could ever wish for. Not only had he been paying me more attention than usual, he was also starting to open up to me regarding his life and the things he did. He no longer treated me like a temporary woman in his life, but instead treated me like someone whom you wanted to stay with forever. I knew that it was not going to happen, soon the time would come

for me to leave and he would find a more suitable woman for him. I just wished that he would be happy with her.

All in all, the past few weeks had been wonderful for me. This was the first time in forever that I had felt peace and did not have to worry about Nico and his deteriorating health, nor did I have to worry about my next meal or wish that people would give me a nice tip. Now all I needed to worry about was to find a suitable job, which would be extremely difficult due to my less than impressive resume and a two bedroom apartment, which I would be going back to East End for, since they had cheap apartments.

The Palmers, to my surprise, were being incredibly nice to me, except for Chris father

who was always being his brooding self and not saying more than two words to me at one time. Brenton was warming up to me and talked to me like one would normally talk to a friend and had not been his usual dominating self. Keiran, on the other hand had managed to get a special place in my heart; not only was he extremely sweet and caring towards Nico, I was starting to see him as an older brother.

However, there was one thing that had me puzzled: Lizzie. Just who was she and what exactly had she done to deserve the wrath of the palmers. I mean, Chloe and Maddie had told me that she chose the love of her life over her family and that was why she had been banished from the family, but I wanted to know exactly who she was and who she was related to. And so far, I had no clue. When Jenny and I had went down to the dining room with Chloe and Maddie, that was the last time we discussed

Lizzi, in Chloe's room. After the dinner, which was spectacular and would be one of my most cherished memories, Chloe and Maddie started telling us about the rest of the family members and the topic of Lizzie was closed for good.

Now I just sat in my room, thinking about what to do next. Nico was at school and Chris was at work, so I didn't have anything to do. But since thoughts of Lizzie had barely left my mind since the night of the dinner, maybe I could go in the library and search the archives or something.

Slipping my shoes on, I left my room and made my way to the library. All I had to do was go down to the archives and search for Lizzie's aisle, or any name that resembled the name Lizzie. And I might as well look into the aisle which was dedicated to Chris's mother, maybe she might tell me something about Lizzie.

As soon as I reached the library, I quickly slipped inside and closed the giant double doors making sure to lock them so no one would disturb me. If the maids needed me, they could simply use the intercom. And if Chris needed to talk to me, then he would call me on my cell phone which I was carrying with me.

Quickly making my way to the fifth floor, I paused for a moment and inhaled the scent of old journals and memories before raising my head to look at the names of the aisles. I slowly walked around the archives, trying to spot the name Lizzie anywhere, but just as I had expected, there was no aisle by the name of Lizzie.

Sighing in disappointment, I searched for the aisle with Chris mother's name. That was

something that didn't take me long to find. Right next to the aisle named Brian Carl Palmer was the aisle Teresa Rose Palmer. Slipping inside the aisle, I gazed at the shelf which was filled with thick journals. However, this aisle was not as full as the rest, which had me wondering whether she had written any more journals or not.

Shaking my head to get rid of irrelevant thoughts, I grabbed a journal off the shelf and sat down on the orange bean bag to read. I opened the journal and looked at the years in which this journal was written in.

****Diary of Teresa Rose Palmer

1986-1989***

There was a beautiful picture of Chris mother below the the name. Her golden hair were styled in an intricate bun and she looked to be wearing some sort of a luxurious gown, if the high neck and the heavy necklace was anything to go by. Chris mother was truly beautiful, I really wished I met her. Turning the page I came across the first entry which was dated March 27th. Taking a deep breath I begun reading the smooth, feminine scrawl of Teresa Palmer.

***March 27, 1986

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Life can change in just a moment. I know, because it had happened to me. Just a few hours ago, I was a single woman, getting ready to marry the man I love. And now, in just a moment, I had gone from a single woman to a married one. From being a woman with her virtue intact, I had now become a woman who willingly gave her virtue to her husband.***

Teresa then begun talking about her husband and their first night together after marriage, which I skipped because Teresa palmer was not a shy writer. No way, she had written every single detail of their night together in the first entry. So I quickly skipped the first entry because I did not want to be scarred for life while I was pregnant with Chris baby, and moved on the second one, which was written the bext day.

****March 28, 1986

We had made a baby last night, I am sure of it. There was just something so magical about the few hours in which Brian and I came together, I knew without a doubt that now I was carrying Brian's baby in my womb.

I hope our first baby is a girl. Brian told me that the females of this family only give birth to boys.

I think it's a curse, and I want to break it. I want to break this curse of having my first born a boy. I wish it is a girl.****

On and on her second entry went. I skimmed through the next few entries, trying to find anything about Lizzie, but was met with disappointment once again. There was no mention of Lizzie at all. And I didn't really need to know that Teresa Palmer, just like all the other palmer women, was unable to break the curse, because Chris was the first born. However, the next entry which my eyes stopped at gave me one of the greatest shocks of my life.

***May 3rd, 1986

Since I had married Brian, my life had been nothing but wonderful. The day I had gotten married, I had a hunch that I was pregnant, but

today the doctor confirmed it.

I woke up to feeling sick, like I had been for the past few weeks. The only difference was that Brian was with me and had noticed that I was sick. He had skipped work and taken me to the hospital where the doctor confirmed that I was pregnant.

Upon hearing the news, I was elated. Now, nothing could put a damper on my mood. Brian had been ecstatic once he got to know that he would soon be a father. Now I just wish that my baby is a girl. I want to be the first woman to break the family curse. I want to give Brian a baby girl first.***

As soon as I had finished reading the rest of the entry, my mind was filled with questions. If Teresa got pregnant in 1986 that would mean that Chris had be around 30 years old, but he

was only 27. Had he lied to me about his age? Or did Teresa lose the baby? Curiosity nearly killing me, I decided to skim the next few entries. Before I could start reading the next entry, my phone started ringing, giving my heart a sudden jolt.

Grabbing my cell phone from where I had placed it on my lap, my eyes widened when I saw Chris name flashing on the screen. Shit, what was I going to tell him? What if he asked me what I was doing? Bloody hell, why did he have to call at this time? Taking a couple of deep breaths to steady my pounding heart, I answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hello, little dove, how are you?" He asked.

"I'm great, how are you?" I tried hard to keep my voice steady.

"I'm fine, have you eaten anything after breakfast?" He questioned.

"Yes, I had fruit," I answered.

"Good, and is my son behaving himself?" He enquired. Just by his tone, I could tell that he was smiling on the other end.

"Yes, he is, not bothering me at all," I replied, wishing he would quickly hang up and let me go back to Teresa and her unborn baby.

"That's good, I just want to tell you that I'll be home in a few hours, then I might take you out for dinner, how's that?" He queried.

"Uh, sure, dinner sounds great, but are you sure you don't want to eat at home?" I asked. I did not want him to waste money on restaurant food when we could afford a nice meal at home.

"No, I want to eat out, with you." If he was here

right now, I bet he would've kissed my cheek after saying this.

"Okay, sure, I'd love to," I responded with a genuine smile. He was the best husband ever. I was actually wishing that this whole thing between us was real and not just a sham.

"Okay, see you in a while, take care of yourself, bye little peach." He said.

"Bye." I hung up, the happy smile still on my face. Putting my phone back on my lap, I begun reading the next entry.

****November 20, 1986

Wow, I can't believe it. Only one more month until I will finally see and hold my baby in my

arms. I can't believe it. The happiness I feel as I write this down is unexplainable.

I know that my baby is a girl. Not only do I see a beautiful girl who has Brian's hair and my eyes in my dreams, the women in my family also tell me that I am going to give birth to a girl. It is something about the way I walk that indicates that my baby is a girl, according to my grandmother, but I just hope she is right.

I asked Brian what he thought about having a girl as our first born, and he told me that if our baby was a girl, then he will do everything in his power to protect his little girl and keep her happy.

His words had given me so much relief. I did not have to worry about giving Brian a boy because he would be happy with either one.****

Reading this gave me an unexpected surprise.

So there really was a baby before Chris, or maybe Chris was the first baby. But that didn't make any sense, as he was twenty seven and not thirty. And even there was a possibility that his parents had changed his birth records, I didn't believe it. For some reason, I didn't think that Chris was the baby that Teresa was talking about. And there was no way that Teresa could lose the baby in the eighth month, unless she met with a fatal accident that killed the baby.

Turning my attention back to the journal, I turned the next page and to my horror, met the end of the journal. Gritting my teeth, I flipped the whole journal before huffing in frustration. But when I saw the raw edges in the middle, I knew there was something seriously wrong. Somebody had ripped out nearly of the journal. The journal was dated from the year 1986 to 1989 and the journal ended after November

20th. And seeing the uneven bits of pages glued to the spine of the journal, my thoughts were confirmed. Somebody had deliberately removed more than half of the journal. And the worst part was, I had no idea if the baby was a girl or a boy.

Not one to give up, I placed the journal back on the shelf and took out a few other ones. I quickly skimmed through the journals to find information about Teresa's first born, but just like the first journal, some of the pages were torn from the other journals as well. I had no idea what was so important in those journals that somebody went through the effort to keep it a secret. But whatever it was, it was something big.

The sound of the intercom halted my progress.

Taking a deep breath, I marched towards the intercom and picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Palmer, I just wanted to inform you that Mr. Nico is about to come back from school and that lunch will be ready in fifteen minutes." One of the maid whom I did not the name of told me.

"All right, I'll be in the dining room in ten minutes, thank you for telling me, and if Nico arrives, take him to his room and have him change out of his uniform." I told her before hanging up.

Dragging myself back to Teresa's aisle, I proceeded to put all the journals back in their rightful place, making sure not to let anyone know that I had been here. It didn't take me long before I put the majority of the journals back in their place. With only three journals left, I climbed the portable wooden steps, that were

placed around the archives for people who were short and needed help in reaching the higher shelves, to put them back in place when my wrist accidentally hit the journal next to the one I was putting back, causing it drop on the floor. I swore in my mind before reaching down and picking up the fallen journal. Thinking there was no harm if I looked through one last journal I flipped the journal open.

To my surprise, the journal was not a journal. I mean it was a journal, but the inside of the journal was not what one would expect when looking at a journal. The pages of the journal were glued together and the middle was cut to form a cavity, like in movies where people hid stuff in books to hide from prying eyes. And in the cavity, laid a blue velvet bound journal.

Removing the blue journal, I ran my fingers over it, loving the feel of soft velvet beneath my

fingertips. I turned the journal to inspect the back of it when my eyes landed on three words in beautiful golden ink. For a second I felt like Harry Potter when he picked up Tom Marvolo Riddle's diary, because the three words were written in exactly the same way as the Tom's name in his diary. However, these words were different. These words were...

Elizabeth Julia Palmer

The CEO

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The beautiful restaurant was a place I thought I would never visit in my entire life, but thanks to chr, I was now here, having dinner in one of the most prestigious restaurants . It was like Chris was my own personal genie, fulfilling my wishes and desires with just a snap of his fingers.

Chris came precisely at seven o' clock. I had worn the blue dress he got for me and was brushing my hair when he entered our room and gave me a swift kiss on the lips. He then turned and headed to the bathroom, telling me he would be out in fifteen minutes then we would go out for dinner.

Even though I did not want to go, because I wanted to read the diary of Elizabeth Julia Palmer, I couldn't refuse him. So I did not touch the diary after I had put it back in its place. I would read it tomorrow, and find out who the woman was. However, my overly curious nature

wanted me to skip dinner and read the diary.

When the maître d' opened the door for us, my eyes widened and my jaw dropped as I took in the opulence of the restaurant. The tables were set to perfection; the waiters were efficiently working around; the lights reflecting against the chandeliers gave the restaurant a luxurious feel. It was perfect. It was so not me.

The restaurant was for the rich and successful, not a poor woman like me who was only going to be rich for the next nine months. I did not deserve to sit in one of the comfortable, cushioned chairs; I belonged with the staff, waiting on people, making sure the orders were taken to the right tables. Maybe I was lower than the waiting staff; I belonged with the maids, who cleaned up after the chefs.

I wondered how much salary these people got. I needed a job after all, maybe I could work here. Would they even hire a high school graduate? I wasn't sure, but I had the feeling the pay was good. I might apply for a waitress job here, however, the chances of me getting hired were slim to none.

"What are you looking around for?" Chris asked me. We had given our orders to the waiter a few minutes ago. I tried to order to the cheapest thing on the menu, which was water, but he shook his head and ordered for me.

"This place is so nice, thank you for bringing me here," I said, looking around again, trying to soak in everything all at once.

"You don't have to thank me, and you better get

used to living like the rich and famous, I'll be taking you to a lot of high end places," he stated with a soft smile. I loved his smile, it was so beautiful and so genuine.

"I still want to thank you, you've done a lot for me." I eyed the waiters dressed in crisp white shirts and black slacks. "How much do these waiters get, as a salary, I mean?" I asked him.

He frowned before asking, "Why are you asking this?"

"Oh, because I need to find a job. Now that Nico is all well, I need money for his education and stuff, I have to send him to medical school after all, fifty thousand pounds won't last forever." I told him.

The frown on his forehead deepened. "Fifty thousand? You mean five hundred thousand, right, little dove?"

Now it was my turn to frown at him. "Five hundred thousand?"

"Yeah, I'm giving you a million pounds, I have already given you five hundred thousand and you'll get the remaining five hundred thousand at the end of the year," he replied with an amused smile.

"Wait, you mean, I currently have five hundred thousand pounds! Shoot, I thought I had fifty, well thirty after Nico's surgery; damn it, why I can't be good at math?!" I couldn't believe it. I thought I only had fifty thousand pounds, I couldn't believe I had four hundred and eighty thousand pounds right now, and I would get more later.

He laughed light heartedly before giving my hand a soft squeeze. "Trust me, you don't need

to get a job, you have more than enough money, little fairy," he said.

"No, not at all. I have to buy new clothes for Nico, he's growing up fast, not to mention food and money for the bills. And once the baby comes, I will have to buy clothes and food for the baby, trust me I need to get a job," I replied with conviction.

"The baby is mine, too, and I will pay for food and clothes and other necessities, I'm telling you, you don't need a job," he responded, his lips set in a hard line.

"You might pay for the baby, but I will pay for my brother's wants and needs," I responded.

"No, you're not, I'll pay for Nico's education and

clothes and anything else he might want or need, the money is for you. Go shopping with Jenny, by clothes and shoes for yourself," he stated.

"No, I can not throw away the money on myself. I have to think of the baby and my brother. Plus, it might be your baby too but I will still buy clothes and food for him or her, you will not be the sole provider for the baby. I just need to find a lucrative job," I replied.

"We'll see," he muttered before giving my hand another squeeze and falling silent.

After fifteen minutes, the server arrived carrying our food. After carefully placing the plates in front of us, he gave a short bow and left. Chris and I wasted little time before digging in. When the first morsel of my meal touched my lips, I had to physically stop myself from moaning out

loud. The food was delicious. Never in my life had I tasted something so delicious, so amazing. Now I knew why everything on the menu was so expensive; it took quite a lot of hardwork to create something so unique and perfect.

Once I cleaned my plate of everything, he ordered dessert, despite my refusal. When I asked him why he ordered dessert when I clearly told him not to, he simple said that he wanted me to have the full experience and the full experience could not be complete without dessert. I thought I fell a little more for my temporary husband after that.

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"Did you finish all your homework last night?" I asked Nico who was busy eating his sandwich. Giving me a nod, Nico swallowed before saying, "Yes, I finished my homework before going to

bed. I have an English test today." He told me.

"Did you study for it?" I enquired, knowing that he had studied.

"Yes, I'm fully prepared," he answered with a grin.

I chuckled before grabbing a slice of bread and spreading jelly on it for Chris. He was going to come down any minute now and I needed to make sure his breakfast was ready.

Just as I placed the sandwich on the plate, Chris entered the dining room, looking handsome as always. Sometimes I wondered if there was any time that Chris did not look so sexy and mouth watering. My subconscious replied with a firm 'never' before falling silent.

"Mrs. Palmer, Mr. Nico's bus is here," Sally

informed us.

Nico quickly grabbed his bag, bidding me a hasty goodbye, he jogged out of the dining room, leaving just me and Chris.

Chris took me by surprise when he dipped his head and captured my lips in a searing kiss. The kiss had me melting in his arms, but he did not relent, but after a few minutes. Once he released my lips, I found a bit difficult to gain my bearings, the kiss had taken me to another place altogether.

"Wh—what was that for?" I asked breathless, trying to recover from the kiss.

"A good morning kiss," he replied, before leaning down and giving me another tender kiss.

"Wow, okay." I had no idea what I was saying, he knew how to mess with me.

"Be good, and be safe; and if you need anything, don't hesitate to call me, okay?" He said.

I nodded. "Have some breakfast." I stepped aside to let him sit in his chair.

"Not today, I have to be at work in twenty minutes, so I'm gonna have to skip breakfast," he informed me.

"You can take it on the go, I'll tell Helga to pack it up for you." I turned to leave but he stopped me.

"Little peach, it's okay, skipping breakfast one day won't kill me. Now I have to go, you be good, okay?" He kissed my forehead.

"Okay, have a good day." I smiled at my husband, who gave me another kiss before exiting the dining room.

Once he left for work, I made sure none of the

maids required anything from me before jogging upstairs to the library. It was time to read and find out who was Elizabeth Julia Palmer.

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The familiar dusty aisles of the archives greeted me as soon as I entered. This time I did not spend hours looking for one thing or the other, I knew what I was here for and I knew where it was.

Taking the portable steps, I placed them on the floor and climbed on top reach the top shelf of Teresa Palmer. Grabbing the thick journal with the glued pages, I carefully pulled it out. Stepping down, I flopped down on the orange beanbag and opened the journal. Carefully removing the blue, velvet bound journal, I

flipped the faux journal closed and opened Elizabeth's journal.

Diary of Elizabeth Julia Palmer

2002-2004

Turning the page, I got the answer to the mystery that had plagued my mind since that day I had ventured up to the seventh floor.

There, sitting like a princess, was the younger version of the woman in the portrait, and now I knew her name; Elizabeth Julia palmer. She was no longer Lily, but Elizabeth now.

She was dressed in a maroon gown. Since the photo was taken when she was sitting, I could only see the top half of her dress, and it looked awfully expensive. Dark crystals were embedded in the dark colored corset. The sleeves were long and were slightly puffy at the shoulders. To finish of her look, she was

wearing a beautiful maroon hat with feathers and flowers.

Elizabeth looked to be about seventeen in the photograph. Her skin looked soft, she looked innocent. There were no harsh wrinkles on her face, and she did not look like a queen like she did in that portrait on the seventh floor; she looked like a princess.

Flipping to the next page, I saw the first entry. Taking a deep breath, I started reading the feminine scrawl of Elizabeth.

***January 1st, 2002

Dear Diary,

Another year has come and gone, but my love for Henry has not wavered. In fact, I think I am more in love with my him now than I have ever been. Not only is he the most handsome and charming man in all of London, he truly loves me, and I know he wants to marry me.

I'm afraid to tell my father about Henry. Mainly because he has already started to look for a suitable groom for me. But I will not marry anyone except for Henry, and my father should understand that.****

I continued reading. Elizabeth mainly talked about Henry and the love she had for her boyfriend. She also wrote how they were planning to meet in secret at 10:00 pm on New Year's Eve. Her diary was like a romance novel, and I could tell she was hopelessly in love just by reading and eyeing the hearts on top of the i's.

The CEO

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I continued reading. Elizabeth mainly talked about Henry and the love she had for her boyfriend.

She also wrote how they were planning to meet in secret at 10:00 pm on New Year's Eve. Her diary was like a romance novel, and I could tell she was hopelessly in love just by reading and eyeing the hearts on top of the i's.

However, I got a real shock when I turned to read the second entry.

I couldn't believe that I had been lied to; that not only Chris but his whole family had hid such a big secret.

***January 2nd, 2002

Diary Diary,

I want to do it. I want to tell my family about Henry, but I'm afraid. What if they do not approve of our relationship?

What if father does not agree to the match?

What if they lock me up in this gargantuan palace and forbid me to see Henry ever again?

What if they kill Henry?

No, I cannot tell them. I will never tell them. I cannot risk Henry's life. But I have to do something.

Because if I don't do anything, Henry and I can never be together. And I refuse to live a life without Henry.

Last night, after I sneaked back in my room during the dark hours of the night, I quickly changed my clothes and got ready for bed. But, Lynn, my maid had come in my room and told me that father wanted to see me. I was afraid because I thought he had found out that I had

snuck out to meet Henry. However, I could not refuse my father's call, so I had went downstairs, my mind filled with anticipation.

Once I entered the living room, I was confused when I saw that not only my whole family was present but also the neighbor's family.

Alejandro, the neighbor's son was sitting, smiling at me.

When my father saw me he beckoned me over with a smile on his face. Confused, I went to him and sat down next to him. My mind was full of questions, but they all were answered when my father told me that Alejandro and I were going to be married in July.

I couldn't believe it. My father had arranged for me to marry my neighbor and childhood friend, Alejandro. He didn't even ask me if I was okay with this, he just agreed without my consent.

How could he do this?! Was I not human?! Did I

not have any rights in regards to my future?!
How could my father just take it upon himself to
make decisions about my marriage?

After that, I all but ran out of the living room.

I came back in my room and cried myself to
sleep. I know I could never be happy with
Alejandro.

He was a nice man, and I knew he would do his
best to keep me happy, but I love Henry, and I
can never be happy with anyone else but him.

Maybe I'll talk to Chris, he might know what to
do.

He was my brother and my best friend. Though
he was younger than me, he and I were
extremely close. Maybe he can talk to father
regarding mine and Henry's marriage. If he did
not help me, then I will have no choice but to do
something drastic; because come hell or high
waters, I will only marry Henry.

Elizabeth.***

The journal shut on its own as I processed the new piece of information. Chris had a sister?! He had another sibling and he never told me. Well I understood that I was his temporary wife, and not exactly part of the family, but still he could've told me that he had another sibling, a sister in fact. So Teresa's first child was actually a girl.

She had succeeded in breaking the family curse.

I placed the journal back in the journal and put it back on the shelf.

I had done enough reading for one day. Now I had to go up there; up to the seventh floor. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I had to go up there.

As soon as I reached the sixth floor, I marched up to the seventh floor which was the third floor

of the library.

I had a hunch that I might be able to enter the seventh floor through the library, I prayed that the library doors were not locked from the outside.

Once I reached the third floor of the library, I did not bother looking around, I headed straight for the giant double doors.

Turning the key, which was already present in the lock, I turned the knob and prayed that the door would open.

My heart stopped for a second as the door opened smoothly.

I couldn't believe it, I could now survey the mysteries of the seventh floor without anyone knowing. With a ridiculous grin plastered on my face, I opened the door and stepped outside.

I was now on the seventh floor.

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A once off thing,dont get used to it

The CEO

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Silence greeted me as I took in my surroundings. The seventh floor looked and felt deserted. I wondered how long had it been since anyone been up here. Trying to control my excitement, I begun walking around the seventh floor, not worried about getting caught.

The silence made me enjoy my surroundings more. The marble floors were gleaming like they had been recently polished. I got a closer look at the paintings and saw that some of them were portraits of Elizabeth. So the entire floor was dedicated to her. Was this where she stayed when she was young? Did the seventh floor belong to her?

Moving forward, I came across a thick wooden door. Without thinking twice, I turned the knob and found it locked. Shaking my head, I ventured farther, trying to open the doors but found them locked. It was like the secrets wanted to stay buried, did not want to see the light of the day.

Well good thing you found the diary, otherwise you would never have found out who or what was on the seventh floor.

While walking around, I finally came across the grand room where I had seen Elizabeth's

portrait for the first time. For some reason, the doors of this room weren't locked, giving me access. I turned the knob and quietly slid inside, trying my best not to make a sound, even though the chances of me being heard were pretty slim.

The room was exactly the way I had seen it when I last stumbled upon here. A gigantic portrait of Elizabeth hung on the wall, making her look like a queen of this castle. However, there was one thing that didn't make sense to me as I gazed at the portrait. Elizabeth looked older, in her thirties; how and why did her portrait look so recent if she had been banished years ago? The only way that I could think of was that maybe, somehow, Chris and the others were still in contact with Elizabeth—if she was alive, that is. But if Chris was in contact with his sister, why act like she didn't exist?

While I contemplated the complicated mystery,

making it even more complicated by coming up with one far fetched scenario after another, I decided to halt my processings regarding Elizabeth, and instead decided to find out more about her. So with one final look at the portrait, I turned on my heels and strode out of the grand room.

As soon as I exited the room, my eyes landed on a grand marble staircase. Chris told me that the floors seven and above were forbidden. Indulging my curiosity a bit more, I hastily climbed up the staircase, feeling like a kid who was about to do something wrong.

However, as soon as I reached the eighth floor, my jaw dropped. Everywhere I looked, Elizabeth's face greeted me. There were about twenty portraits of her, and a few of an older woman with blonde hair, hanging on the walls in a straight, horizontal line. The woman in the portraits was Elizabeth, there was no doubt;

however, in some portraits she was young, no more than a pre teen, while in others she looked older. The portrait in which she looked the youngest looked very old and a little worn out, with a four year old Elizabeth standing next to a beautiful couple holding a baby in a blue blanket. I shuffled forward until I was standing in front of the portrait. I gently brushed my fingers over the portrait, feeling the smoothness of the glass case. The baby that the couple was holding must be Chris, he was the second born. The family looked happy.

Smiling to myself, I stepped away from the portrait and gazed around. Aside from the portraits lining the walls, the eighth floor had a lot of tables pushed against the walls with lots of velvet boxes placed on them. The tables blocked the entrance to all the doors on the floor, leaving me once again confused and curious.

You really need to learn to mind your own business. Why do you always have to go poking your nose in things you're not suppose to? Get a life or at least a hobby and stop prying into people's business. My subconscious sneered as I eyed the big, red, velvet box with a gold latch on it.

It's my husband's business, which means it is my business.

Temporary husband. Stop poking your nose everywhere. What will your husband think of you when he's going to find out you went behind his back and entered the forbidden territory? He's going to kick you out of this castle before you can say Elizabeth Palmer.

I'll cross that bridge when I'll come to it.

Moving forward, I surveyed the velvet box before running my fingers over it. If this box

belonged to Elizabeth, then that meant she loved velvet. Her diary was velvet bound, and now these boxes. In a couple of portraits she was wearing heavy velvet dresses. Seeing the golden latch, I moved my fingers to it.

Don't do it.

Pulling the latch, I opened the box and was greeted with lots of expensive jewelry. I picked up a few pieces of jewelry, eyeing the sparkling gems with awe and fascination. Why on Earth were these things lying in the open? True, this place was forbidden, but anyone could come up here and steal them. Either, this part of the castle was forbidden for everyone, family and staff alike, or the Palmer's trusted their staff way too much.

Quickly putting the jewelry back in the box, I shut the box and moved on to the blue, velvet one which was lying next to the red one. The blue box was slightly smaller than the red one.

Without thinking twice, I opened the blue box.

You are going to hell for this. Chris will never forgive you. Turn back and go back to your room. Your husband trusts you, do not break his trust.

However, what I saw in the blue box was enough for me to throw caution to the wind and ignore my subconscious. There, staring at me, were four children, all of them below the age of ten. The girl was the oldest with shiny, blonde hair tied in pig tails, while the boys stood next to her, smiling, their eyes narrowed in slits as the sun beat down on them.

Picking up the photograph, I turned it around to inspect the back when I saw the names of the children. The first one was Elizabeth Palmer , followed by Chris, Keiran and then Brenton. There were more photographs in the box. I quickly pulled all of them out of the box and slowly looked at each picture, smiling as I saw

Chris and his siblings growing up; going from children to teens and then reaching adulthood. There were only two photographs of all four of them at the age of eighteen.

I was smiling while looking at Chris at the age of ten when a shrill sound tore the silence of the eighth floor. My heart jolted as I jumped, dropping the pictures and watching them all scatter on the marble floor. Cursing myself, I quickly fished out my phone from my pocket only to see Chris name flashing across the screen.

Shit, Chris why do you call everytime I'm doing something wrong?

Taking a deep breath, I accepted the call and hesitantly put the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hello, little fairy, how are you?" He spoke. I could sense he was smiling while talking to me.

"I'm fine, thank you. How are you? Are you

having a good day?" I enquired, bending down to pick up the scattered photographs with one hand.

"I'm great, and my day is going fine, however, it could be better," he said.

"How could it be better?" I questioned, picking up a handful of photographs and placing them back in the box.

"Well, my wife is a wonderful cook and I was wondering if she would cook and bring me lunch," he responded.

"Yo—you want me to make lunch for you?" I queried, making sure I heard him right.

"Yes, and bring it to me, if it's not too much of a problem for you," he replied.

"No, no, not at all, I'd love to make lunch for you, what would you like to eat?" I asked, grinning

from ear to ear as I listened to him. I couldn't believe it, my husband had requested me to make lunch for him. I had no idea why I was feeling so happy, I just knew that I wanted to make him happy, and if he wanted me to make lunch for him, then I was going to make the best meal he had ever tasted.

"Anything, as long as you make it," he answered.

"But still, there must be something you want to eat," I stated, picking the remaining photographs and putting them back in the box, making sure to place them neatly.

"Surprise me." Was all he said.

I chuckled. "Okay, when should I come by your work place?" I enquired, walking towards the staircase.

"As soon as possible," he answered.

"Okay, I'll see you soon." With a smile, I hung up.

Forgetting about Elizabeth, I hurried to the library and glided down the library stairs to the sixth floor. From there, I exited the library and headed to the kitchen, my thoughts on Chris and what to make for him.

Helga's frosty eyes greeted me as I entered the kitchen. I narrowed my eyes at her and walked to the pantry with my head held high. Quickly getting the ingredients that I wanted, I began cooking lunch for my husband.

After one and a half hour, I was putting the beef wellington and fish and chips in a basket for Chris. I told the maids to only prepare lunch for Nico once he arrived and to make sure he changed out of his uniform. Once all was set, I left the castle and told the chauffeur to drive me to Chris work place.

The chauffeur dropped me outside Palmer Enterprises after twenty minutes. I walked inside and took the elevator to Chris floor,

nobody stopped to ask me who I was and why I was there. But, as the elevator doors opened and I arrived at his floor, his PA greeted me.

She was around twenty five, with brown hair and green eyes. She was dressed professionally, and her features were enhanced with make up, making her look beautiful.

"Good afternoon, how may I help you?" She asked me.

"Uh, I'm here to see Mr. Palmer," I said.

"Do you have an appointment?" She enquired.

"Um, no," I replied. Chris didn't tell me I needed an appointment before coming here.

"I'm sorry Ma'am, but I can't let you see Mr. Palmer without an appointment." Just then, my phone rang. I pulled it out of my purse and accepted the call when I saw his name.

"Little dove where are you?" He asked.

"I'm outside your office, you didn't tell me I needed an appointment," I said.

Without replying, he hung up. After a few seconds, the door to his office opened and he emerged looking as handsome as I had last seen him—this morning. He smiled as he strode towards me.

"Why don't you go inside, I need to speak to Melissa about something." He told me. Nodding my head, I gave a small smile to Melissa and went inside his room.

His office was just as I remembered the last time I was here. The couch and the glass table were against one wall. The desk with a computer and other office supplies were to my right. It was clean and everything was in place.

"So what did you cook for me?" He asked as he came back.

"I made beef wellington and some fish and

chips, I hope that's okay?" I carefully set the basket on the table.

"It's perfect." He kissed my lips before sitting down on the couch.

"Thank God you came, I was worried that your lunch will get cold." I opened the basket and took out a clean plate and the rest of the items. I cut a generous slice of beef wellington and added some fish and chips on the plate before presenting it to him.

"Don't worry, you won't be having that problem now," he said, picking up a fry and popping it in his mouth.

"Does it taste okay?" I asked nervously. I worked hard to prepare this meal and I wanted him to like it. It would make me sad if he didn't like it.

"It tastes perfect, little peach. Why are you sitting like that, eat something, I want my baby

to be healthy," he ordered.

"It's okay, I'll eat when I'll go home. I made this for you," I replied.

Shaking his head, he placed his plate on the table before standing up. From the basket, he took out a second plate and filled it beef wellington and fish and chips before sitting back down. Cutting up some beef wellington, he begun feeding me. I tried to stop him, but he told me to stop talking and eat.

After fifteen minutes, he fed me the last bite before putting the now empty plate on the table and picking up his, which he did not touch the moment he had started feeding me.

"There is a charity function on Saturday, I want you to accompany me," he said out of the blue.

My eyes widened as I heard him. "Me?"

He nodded. "Yes, we'll go shopping for a dress for you," he stated.

"But, but, I can't go with you," I said.

"And why not?" He enquired.

"Don't you remember? You were the one who said he wants a woman with class and status to accompany him to social functions. And I'm not that woman. Yo—you should ask someone else to go with you." My heart hurt when I said this and I had no idea why.

He all but slammed his plate on the table, causing me to jump in surprise. I looked at him to see him glaring at me, his sea green eyes hard. Before I knew it, he had pulled me on his lap and had cupped the back of my head with his hand.

"Listen to me and listen good because I'm only going to say this once. You are going to accompany me to this charity function and all the functions and social gatherings from this day forward, is that clear?" It was evident from

his words that he only wanted to hear a 'yes' from me.

"Bu—But you said—" he cut me off.

"Forget what I said. It was in the past, and it's gone now. You should focus on the present and what I'm saying now, got it?" He looked in my eyes, willing me to agree to him.

"Yes," I said softly.

"Good girl." He kissed me like he had no intention of letting me go. Like this marriage was based on love and not on a contract. It was confusing, yet it succeeded in penetrating my heart, making me fall for my husband. I was falling in love, and I had no idea how I could stop.

The sound of a throat clearing broke him and I apart. I looked to see a beautiful woman standing with a file in her hands. Chris stood up and greeted her.

"Trish, how are you? What brings you here?" He asked the woman.

Trish looked about 5'8 with a glossy mane of auburn hair and hazel eyes. Her skin was smooth and her eyebrows were plucked to perfection. She was a beauty, a woman perfect to play the role of Chris wife.

She waved the file in response to his question. Chris took the file from her and opened and both of them started conversing in hushed voices, while I sat there and stared at the two of them. A strange feeling started brewing in my core as I eyed my husband conversing with the woman. An unfamiliar ache shot at my heart as I saw Trish smiling secretly at my husband. It didn't take a genius to know that Trish liked him, more than an employee liked an employer. No, she wanted him. She wanted my husband.

After ten minutes, Trish gave another secret smile to Chris before sashaying out of his office.

Chris came back and sat down next to me.

"Are you going to marry her?" I blurted out before thinking.

"Who?" He asked with a frown.

"Trish," I answered.

"What? No, why would you think that?" He looked at me like I had lost my mind.

"Because she likes you and she has class and status," I stated. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he did marry her, she was perfect, and exactly the kind of woman he wanted.

"She doesn't like me, I'm her boss and she's my employee, that's it," he said firmly.

"No, she likes you, more than an employee should like an employer," I responded.

He chuckled. "Are you jealous, little one?" His statement took me by surprise. Was that what this was? The strange feeling in my core, the

unfamiliar pain? I couldn't be jealous, could I?

"What?! No, why would I be jealous?" I feigned ignorance. Deep down, I wasn't so sure.

"I don't know, little fairy, you tell me." He gave me an amused look.

"I'm not jealous. I'm just saying that even if you do marry her, she will be perfect for you." I said this with a heavy heart. Despite not wanting to believe it, I had a feeling that he was right. I was jealous. Despite not wanting to, I had fallen for him, and it was the biggest mistake I could make.

"Well then, let me tell you that I'm never going to marry Trish, she's not my type," he said, contradicting his earlier statement about wanting a woman with class and status.

I did not believe him. I knew once this year was over and I was out of his life, he would marry Trish, or someone like her. And he belonged

with women like Trish. I just hoped that leaving Chris would not break me.

The CEO

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Saturday arrived sooner than I had expected. Throughout the week, I had been a nervous wreck. I had never been to any high end social gatherings and now he wanted me to accompany him to a charity function. Did he not know, by taking me along, he would most probably be subjecting himself to total public humiliation?!

"Do I look all right?" I asked Chris who looked delectable in his suit.

He turned and put his hands on my shoulders.

"You look beautiful," he complimented. I

blushed at his words but gave him a small smile nonetheless. Chris calling me beautiful tugged at my heartstrings. I really didn't want to fall in love with him.

I was wearing a gorgeous sea green dress, exactly like the color of Chris's eyes. The dress was strapless, made of chiffon and had a sweetheart neckline. It was so pretty. I had a feeling that my baby bump was showing, but he told me that it wasn't that noticeable, I just hoped he was right.

Just like he had promised, he took me shopping for a dress. We were doing fine until the time came to pay for the dress. I didn't want him to spend anymore money on me than he already had. I wanted to pay for my dress by myself.

However, he was not having it. He wanted to pay for the dress, and both of us started arguing over the fact that who was going to pay. In the end, Chris won, simply because the store's cashier threatened to kick us out if we didn't stop arguing. Chris quickly slipped her his credit card and she wasted little time in checking us out.

Now, the day had finally arrived when I would accompany Chris to a charity function, I just hoped I did not look like a charity case. Would people notice that I wasn't like them, rich. Would they notice that I was from the lower class? Was it possible for someone who had been poor their whole lives suddenly manage to blend in with the rich and powerful? Were there any rules on how to act like a rich person?

"Are you sure you won't rather take someone else with you?" Even though my heart ached when I asked this, I had to make sure.

"I'm a hundred and ten percent sure that the only woman I want to take with me to this function is you," he replied. Then without a word, he took my hand and led me out of the room.

"Wait, I have to go see Nico. Why don't you wait for me in the living room and I'll be down in a couple of minutes." I told him.

"All right, but make it quick." With a kiss to my forehead, he sauntered away. Not wanting to waste my time, I headed to Nico's room.

I knocked before entering Nico's bedroom. He was sitting on the bed, a bunch of textbooks opened in front of him. Nico studied way too much; he was determined to follow his dream of becoming a doctor.

He looked up when I entered. "Hey Alice, you're leaving now?" Nico asked.

"Yes, I just came to tell you that you should be in bed by eleven," I said. Even though it was a

weekend, I didn't want my brother staying up late.

"Yeah, don't worry. I'm almost done with my homework and revision, and I'll sleep after doing a bit of reading," Nico responded with a smile.

"Good, and if there is anything you need, let me know immediately. I have my cell phone with me so don't hesitate to call me," I said.

"Don't worry, I'll be fine." Giving him a small smile, I left his room and went to meet Chris in the living room.

He was swiping away on his cell phone when I arrived. "Ready to go?" I asked.

He smiled before putting his phone away. "Yes. Let's go," he said, and together we left the castle and headed to the function, my nerves a jangled mess.

When we arrived at the grand hotel, I was in awe. It was a lofty building with a red carpet flowing down the stairs. A few cameramen were standing around, snapping pictures of influential people filtering out of the cars and entering the hotel.

The chauffeur opened our door and Chris and I slipped out. To say I was nervous would be an understatement. It was one of those moments where I wished I had my necklace; although, if I did have it, I would've twisted it to breaking point.

We entered the grand hall and I had never seen so much glitz and glamor in my whole life. There was not a single spot which wasn't glimmering in the light. It was breathtaking. There were a considerable number of tables which were decorated to perfection. Across the tables was a cleared space, which I assumed was a dance floor.

"Chris, you finally arrived!" A man who looked to be about Chris's age walked toward us and gave him a brotherly hug. The man had shaggy brown hair and bottle green eyes and a strong muscular body.

"Jared, you sure know how to throw a charity function," commented Chris as he returned the hug, while I just stood there by Chris's side, observing the two of them.

"Thanks mate," Jared said before his eyes landed on me. "And you must be the beautiful lady who managed to snag Chris heart." Jared took my hand and placed a small kiss on the back of it. "Hello, I'm Jared," he said.

Snag his heart?! Yeah right!

"Hello, I'm Alice, nice to meet you," I said softly.

"I'm glad to finally meet you. This asshole over here has been hiding you from the world. Now that I've finally met you, I can see why," Jared

stated.

Yes, because I'm poor and he is embarrassed of me.

I didn't reply, because I had no idea whether he was praising me or insulting me. However, I did start to get uncomfortable. Chris sensing this, wrapped his arm around me, securing me to him.

"Don't scare my girl, Jared, go and see if Laura is here." Chris told him.

"That woman seriously messes me up," Jared commented before turning on his heels and walking away from us.

"Is he your friend?" I asked Chris, who was led me to a group of people, all dressed impeccably, their attire screaming wealth. I just hoped that I looked the part of rich and powerful.

"Yes, but a very irritating one," replied Chris just before he greeted other people.

For the next thirty minutes, he greeted and introduced me to almost everyone who was present at the function. I tried my best to smile and talk to people, but it was like the people had their hearts encased in a block of ice. No one truly smiled; I tried to talk one lady and she gave me a look that said 'Why are you talking to me, woman?'.

The next hour consisted of a wonderful dinner with a four course meal and Jared announcing the outrageous amount of money that had been collected, which would all be given to the children's hospital. I was touched knowing that rich people weren't that bad. Sure they were snobby and mean at times, but at least they donated money to charity, even if it was only to show the world.

As soon as we finished our meal, Jared announced that it was time to dance, and the orchestra started playing their instruments, and

soon everyone was dancing. I wanted to dance with Chris but he was dancing with Trish and he had promised another lady that he was going to dance with her after the song finished. It was then that I decided to go to the lady's room and to call home and make sure that Nico was in bed.

So with a final glance at Chris, I made my way to the bathroom. Once inside the pristine walls of the bathroom, I entered one of the four empty stalls and quickly relieved myself. This pregnancy was loosening up my bladder.

Once relieved, I stood up and fixed my dress. Just as I was about to exit, I heard voice. It sounded as if two ladies were conversing. And by their tone, I could tell that they were not happy.

"Did you see that woman he brought along with him, she resembles a dwarf. They look ridiculous together," said a high pitched voice

which belonged to lady number one.

"I know and she is already pregnant, did you see that bump. She doesn't even know how to dress up to hide that bump," said a slightly deep voice which belonged to lady number two.

"Well I'm glad the pip squeak would not stay with Chris forever. Just wait till this year ends and we won't have to see that midget again," lady number one stated.

My heart cracked at hearing them. They were talking about me. I placed a hand on my tummy; Chris said that the bump wasn't noticeable, but clearly he was lying, these two had definitely noticed.

"What do you mean? He's going to divorce her?" Lady number two questioned.

"Obviously, did you not see the ad? Chris only married the ugly dwarf because of a baby. Once the baby comes, he is going to get rid of her.

Good for him, he deserves someone much better," stated lady number one.

"Who do you think he'll marry then?" Lady number two enquired.

"I don't know, hopefully it'll be someone with class and a personality, and hopefully she won't resemble an ugly dwarf," replied lady number one. "By the way, just between the two of us, he did say that he would like to take me out sometime," she said.

"Wow, lucky you. I can only dream about being with a man like Chris," lady number two said with a dejected sigh.

Lady number one chuckled. "Come on, we should get going. Hopefully I can get Chris to dance with me before this night is over," lady number one said and then I heard the clacking of retreating high heels.

Once I heard the bathroom closing, I exited my

stall and went straight to the sink. A sob broke through me as I replayed the conversation in my head. Time was passing away rapidly, and at end of December, Chris was going to kick me out. I would watch him marry someone else, someone who would be rich and knew how to dress up. She would be tall and would not look ridiculous standing next to him. Chris would have a herd of women, begging him to marry them, while I would have no one.

You're a strong woman. Since when did you need a man? My subconscious sneered.

Since the moment I started to fall for my husband.

Quickly opening my clutch, I touched up my make up and forced myself to stop crying. If Chris saw that I had been crying, he would get upset and his night would be ruined, and I was not going to let that happen.

As soon as I had pulled myself together, I took out my cell phone and dialled home. After talking to Suzy and making sure that Nico was in bed, I gave myself one final glance in the mirror, to make sure I did not look like I had been crying, before exiting the bathroom.

I looked around for Chris only to see him dancing with a strange woman. I bit my lip as my heart ached at the sight of my husband laughing and dancing with another woman. It was clear that he did not miss my presence.

Looking around for a place to sit, I started making my way towards the chairs when a deep voice stopped me.

"Why is a beautiful woman like you not dancing?" I turned around and saw a man around twenty eight standing with a smile on his face. I didn't remember the man's name, I just knew that he was one of Chris business partners, because Chris had introduced me to

him.

"Uh—I'm a little tired," I said, not wanting him to know the real reason I was not dancing.

"Too tired to honor this man one dance?" He asked.

"I'm sorry?" I blinked at him in confusion. His dark blue eyes searched mine.

"I'm asking you if you'd like to dance with me, if you're not too tired," he replied.

His request took me by surprise. I didn't think anyone would want to dance with me, even Chris didn't. But with surprise came hesitation; Chris wouldn't be mad, would he?

Right now, he has no idea that you even exist, and even if he did, he doesn't care. You should dance with him, at least he wants to dance with you. My subconscious stated.

"Sure, I'd love to." I gave the man my hand and

he led me to the dance floor.

"So, did you like the charity event?" He asked me as we swayed to the music.

"Yes, it was amazing. If you don't mind me asking, what is your name again?" I questioned.

"My name is Justin," he replied.

"Oh, thank you for telling me. It's just that Chris introduced me to so many people I lost track of names," I explained.

"That's all right, no worries. It's a shame that you're married," Justin stated.

"What do you mean?" Was he saying that Chris made a mistake by marrying me?

"I mean, if you weren't married, I would've asked you out, maybe even ask you to be my girlfriend. Chris is one lucky man," Justin said bluntly.

"Oh." His words took me by surprise. I had no idea anyone would want me to be their girlfriend.

Justin's words made me feel happy for some reason. But I couldn't tell him about mine and Chris contract and that our marriage was only for a year. I wished I could though, I wouldn't mind having Justin as a boyfriend either.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to have my wife back," Chris said, his tone firm, his eyes hard.

Justin released me and stepped back. "Of course, Chris, it was nice to see you," Justin said before giving me a small smile and leaving.

I eyed him with confusion. What was he playing at? Not only he didn't want to dance with me, he didn't want anybody else dancing with me either. And now he was looking at me like he wanted to do something rash.

Before I could utter a word, he took my wrist in a tight hold and dragged me away from the dance floor. I had no choice but to follow, bewildered. He dragged me up the stairs and

pushed me inside the first room he came upon as soon as he reached the second floor.

"Chris what's wrong, why are you acting like this?" I asked, as I saw Chris discarding his suit jacket and rolling up his sleeves.

"That was the last straw, Alice. That's the last time you are going to be with a strange man," he said, his eyes glowing with fury.

"What are you talking about? I was only dancing with Justin," I stated.

"Exactly. How dare you dance with a strange man when you're married to me?!" He all but shouted, he pushed me on the bed and climbing on top of me.

"You were dancing with strange women all night long, I didn't say anything to you," I responded angrily.

"That's different, I know those women," he stated.

"And I know Justin," I replied.

"No you don't. You're my wife! The only man you should be dancing with, is me," he said.

"Yeah well, you didn't want to dance with me. I know I'm an embarrassment to you, I told you before you're better off taking someone else with you, but you didn't listen," I said, tears welling up in my eyes.

He frowned. "What are you talking about? You're not an embarrassment. You're perfect," he said with conviction.

"Then why didn't you want to dance with me?" I asked, tears flowing from my eyes. I knew I was pathetic and weak, but I couldn't help loving him.

He kissed my tear stained cheeks before placing his forehead on mine. "Oh my little fairy, you're not an embarrassment, far from it actually. I was going to dance with you. I saved the last dance for you. I was going to dance

with you in the center of the dance floor and after the dance I was going to kiss you in front of everyone and tell everyone you are my wife." He told me.

"Why the last and not the first?" I enquired, my heart swelling with happiness at his words.

"Because you pregnant with my baby. And if I had danced with you first then I would've never stopped dancing; you would've been tired, and I can't have my pregnant wife exhausted." He kissed me tenderly, pouring all his sincerity and emotions in that kiss.

"Justin said he wanted me to be his girlfriend." I told Chris, secretly wanting him to be jealous. He kissed me deeply. "Poor man. You belong to me, forever," he stated.

"Not once this year ends," I reminded him.

"We'll see, little dove, we'll see. I'm never letting you go, not now, not ever," he responded,

kissing me in a wildly possessive manner.

I wanted to tell him that I would leave him once this year was over, but I never got the chance.

He kissed me until I forgot everything but his presence and that feeling of his lips as they molded with mine and made me feel loved.

Oh Chris, what were you doing to me?

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Monday it is!....

The CEO

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***March 3rd, 2002

Dear Diary,

It's happening. My worst nightmare is coming true. My father has arranged for me to marry Alejandro in September, 16th September to be precise. I haven't told him about Henry, but now I think I should. But first, I have to talk to Chris, he'll know the best way to approach father.

My father has to agree with mine and Henry's bond, he has no option but to agree. There is no one I will marry except Henry. I wish my father had asked for my consent, but no, my father was a dominant chauvinist. According to him, women weren't fit to make life changing decisions, it was a miracle how he let mum make some decisions.

I haven't even told my mother that I love Henry and want to marry him. Truth be told, I don't know how she'll react. Would she understand or

will she reject the idea? If my mother would not support me, I don't know who will. I have to tell my mum, but first I need to tell Chris, my brother, my best friend.

If my family won't agree, then I'll run away with Henry. He already has a decent job and his grandparents left him a small fortune. And if worst comes to pass, I'll find a job and earn money. Henry and I have already talked about all the possibilities. He will have no problem in eloping, because he just wants to be with me, forever.

I just wish my family understands.

Elizabeth.****

I closed the journal softly before placing it back inside the bigger journal and putting it back on the shelf. After reading another of Elizabeth's entries, I had a feeling that she would run away, and it wasn't because she wasn't here right

now—it was the determination in those words that told me.

Walking up to the sixth floor, I glanced at the staircase that would lead to the seventh floor. Maybe I could sneak another trip to the forbidden territory. However, the thought was there only for a second before I dispelled it. I would not go there anymore, I would only go up there when Chris would allow me. I felt slightly guilty about going up there against Chris wishes, so this time, I would not to give in to curiosity.

With one final glance at the book shelves, I exited the library and went back to my bedroom. As soon as I entered, I was surprised to see Chris standing there with a smile on his face. He was still dressed in his work attire, but I had no idea what he was doing back home so soon.

"Hello little one, where were you?" Chris asked, coming to stop in front of me and giving me a tender kiss.

"I was in the library, what are you doing here so soon? I thought you won't be home until five," I enquired.

"All my meetings were over and there was nothing else that required my attention, so I thought, why not spend the rest of the day with my wife." he caressed my cheek with the back of his hand.

Since the night of the charity event two days ago, he had been very sweet to me. More so than in the past. After our little argument in the hotel room, Chris and I danced the last dance of the evening, and he stayed true to his words about kissing me at the end of the dance and announcing to everyone that I was his wife. I would be lying if I said that the sour look on the women's faces when Chris announced that I was his wife didn't give me a satisfied feeling. I bet the women who were talking shit about me were quite furious at hearing all that, and that

made me feel all the better.

"Oh? Well then, how will you like to spend the day?" I asked with a smile.

"Well first, I have to give you something. It took a long time to arrive," Chris said, moving towards his nightstand and picking up a book that resembled the family journals in the archives.

"Your journal is here." Chris handed me the thick journal.

"Wow, it's kind of heavy. How many pages does this have?" I enquired. According to Brenton, I was supposed to get the small journal since I would only be here for a year, but this journal was big, like I was going to be Chris wife forever.

"It has exactly one thousand pages," he replied.

"Why one thousand? The year only has three hundred and sixty five days." I ran my hand over the paper, feeling the smoothness. I could tell

the paper used in the journal was expensive.

"Just because," he responded.

"The rest of the journal will go to waste, are you sure you want me to follow this family tradition of yours?" I really liked the journal, and wouldn't mind keeping it as my secret diary.

"Yes." he came close to me. "Because you're my family now, and this baby." He put a hand on my tummy. "Is also a part of it. Both of you are now Palmer, so you must follow the Palmer tradition."

His words left me stunned. Did he just imply that I would be his wife forever? But he couldn't have meant it, I mean, we signed a contract, so he must know that this marriage would end in less than a year. But then, why did his words felt like as if he was talking about a forever and not just a few months?

"Okay, I'll write, but you won't be allowed to read

it." I told him.

"Don't worry, little peach, your journal is your own property. No one will read it except for you, it's all yours. By the way, tomorrow we have another doctor's appointment, you'll get an ultrasound, so be ready at ten," he informed me.

I placed the journal on the bed and flopped down on the mattress. The third month was coming to pass, leaving only nine months until my marriage was over. To some people, nine months might seem like a lot of time, but not me. For me, nine months were equal to nine weeks, and I still needed a proper job and an apartment. Maybe in a few days I would start looking for an apartment.

"So what do you want to do?" he questioned, coming to sit beside me. He had changed out of his work attire and was now wearing an orange shirt with blue jeans.

"Whatever you want," I replied, hopefully he would not want to have sex, last night left me sore. But what I really wanted was for him to tell me about Elizabeth and what happened to her. Was she even alive?

"Have you ever ridden on a horse?" He enquired.

"No, but I always wanted to," I answered.

"Great, then that's what we'll do." Without waiting for me to respond, he took my hand led me out of the castle.

"Where are we going?" I queried, walking beside him.

"Horseback riding," he replied.

"Okay, but where are we going to get a horse from?" I enquired, enjoying the carefree way Chris was behaving. I had seen his carefree side but not like this, it was like he had no worries.

"Oh little dove, don't you know by now, there is

nothing I do not own." Taking my hand once again, he started to run in the direction of God knew what.

"Chris slow down." I giggled, enjoying the feeling of the wind caressing my face. This place was strange; these grounds were strange. Whenever I had come here, it was like all my worries took a back seat and I was left with nothing but peace and happiness.

"I'll slow down when we'll reach," he responded.

"Reach where?"

No sooner had the question left my mouth that I saw a huge wooden building. It was humorous, with plenty of room for horses, which were poking their heads out of their stables and munching on hay. Never in my life had I seen so many horses in one place, with so many different colors and sizes.

"You have your own stables?" I asked while staring at the grand structure in awe.

"Yes, come on, I'll introduce you to all the horses." he led me all the way to the corner and stopped in front of a brown horse. The horse was big and had its head buried in a pile of hay.

"This is Nutcracker, he belongs to my uncle Fred, say hello." he introduced me to Nutcracker.

"Hello Nutcracker," I said hesitantly.

"He's the last horse from my father's generation. Uncle Fred is the youngest, so his horse is the last one of his generation," he informed me.

"Where is your horse?" I asked.

"Oh he's over here." We skipped the horse which was next to Nutcracker and moved on to the next one.

"This is my horse. I have other horses, but this was my first horse, I got him at the age of seven,

his name is Thunder." The horse was black and huge.

"Wow, he's magnificent," I commented, my hand itching to run over the smooth black coat.

"Thank you. He came straight from Arab, and is the best of his kind. Go on, touch him," he urged.

Slowly, I raised my hand and glided it over the horse's smooth, shiny coat. I was glad when the horse didn't attack me. He really was magnificent, just like his owner.

"Why did you name him Thunder?" I enquired.

"You haven't seen the speed and power with which he runs with. He's incredibly fast and strong, Keiran suggested the name Thunder for him, and I agreed," he answered, patting the horse with affection.

I was about to touch Thunder once again when my eyes landed on another horse, the one we had skipped. It was the most beautiful horse I

had ever seen. Chris horse was magnificent, but that horse was simply beautiful.

It was considerably smaller than Chris horse. While his horse had a beautiful shiny, black coat, that horse had a white coat. It looked innocent and beautiful.

"Whose horse is that?" I questioned, pointed at the horse. his expression went from happy to guarded as he eyed the horse I was pointing at. Where he was smiling, now he was frowning. his expression gave me an idea about who that horse belonged to.

"That is Pearl. She belongs to a family member," he replied.

"Who?" I asked, wondering if I was pushing my luck.

Chris walked over to Pearl and ran an affectionate hand over her. "She belongs to my best friend," he stated, sadness flashing in his

eyes.

"Will you tell me about her?" I enquired, looking at the beautiful horse.

"Maybe, but not right now. Tell me which horse do you want to ride on?" he asked me, the smile back on his face.

"I like Thunder, can we ride on him?" I enquired, marching over to stand in front of Thunder. For now I wouldn't pester him into telling me about Elizabeth, he'd tell me in his own time.

"Sure, let me just get him ready. Why don't you go and grab the helmets from there?" he pointed at small cabin next to the stables.

I quickly went to the cabin and looked inside with wonder as I gazed at the various riding gears. I wanted to stay and look around but I knew he wanted me back as soon as possible, otherwise he would think I couldn't handle the simple task of finding a couple of helmets.

Grabbing two helmets from the shelf, I exited the cabin and jogged back to Chris who was standing next to Thunder. The horse was now wearing a saddle and looked ready to go.

"Are these okay?" I held up the helmets to him.

"Perfect." Taking one of the helmets, he put it over my head and tied the buckle under my chin. Then he took his own helmet and tied it.

"Ready?" he asked holding out his hand for me to take.

With anticipation and excitement coursing through my veins, I took his hand. He carefully lifted me up; I quickly shifted one leg over the horse and in a few seconds was sitting on the saddle. I wanted to hook my feet in that little space reserved for feet but my legs were too small.

he climbed in behind me and gave me the reins.

"You all right, little peach?" He asked, wrapping

his arms around me.

"Yes, this feels nice. I think this horse is a little too big for me," I stated.

"Yes he is, soon I'll buy a horse for you along with the riding gear in your size; you need a proper gear for horseback riding. Are you ready to go?" he gave the reins in my hands a gentle tug and the horse started moving; my heart jumped slightly at the sudden movement.

"You don't have to buy me a horse, it's not like I'll ride it much," I said, the horse continued forward.

"Don't be silly, I'll buy you a horse," he stated. He clearly had a lot of money to throw away at useless things.

The horse continued moving at a slow pace, while the wind rustled the trees and blew my hair. It was perfect. I never thought I would ever get a chance to ride on a horse, but Chris had

once again fulfilled my wish. He truly was amazing.

You can't love him. My subconscious stated.

Too late. I'm already in love with him.

We made small talk as the horse walked around the garden. Nothing could compare to the peace and bliss that I was feeling at that very moment.

Suddenly, our peaceful time was shattered by the sound of Chris cell phone. He quickly fished it out of his pocket and with a frown accepted the call.

"Hello?"

It was silence as he listened to the person on the other line. "Uh huh—Is she all right?—Yes—All right—I'll be there as soon as possible." he hung up and slipped his cell phone back in his pocket.

"Is everything okay?" I asked Chris.

"I have to go, something important came up. I'm really sorry, little dove, we'll go riding another time, okay?" He quickly led the horse back to the stables, before getting off the horse and carefully pulling me down.

"It's okay, but will you tell me what happened?" I enquired.

"A—Friend of mine fell ill, so I have to go see her." he replied, guiding the horse back inside the stables.

"Oh, can I come with you?" I wanted to make sure his friend was all right.

"No that's all right, little fairy, I'll go alone. She freaks out when she sees new people, so that's why it'll be better if you don't come with me," he responded, leading me back to the castle.

"Okay, I hope she's okay. When will you come back?" I asked as I watched him grabbing his

car keys and his wallet.

"I'll be back in a few hours. If you need anything, call me immediately, okay?" He jogged down the stairs with me following behind. It looked as if his friend was in some serious danger the way he was running about.

"Yes, no problem, take care," I said.

Giving me quick peck on the lips, he exited through the front door. "See you later."

"Bye."

Wow, I wondered who his friend was. I wished he would start opening up to me and telling me everything that bothered him. With a final glance at his car driving away, I went inside, a hundred question swimming in my mind.

The CEO

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Chris sudden departure left me with nothing to do but think. As far as I knew he did not have any friends, then why did he say that the white horse belonged to his best friend and that his friend had fallen ill. If he already had a best friend, why did he tell his mum that I was his only friend? My train of thoughts was halted when I saw a familiar face.

Jenny slowly entered the living room looking unsure. I smiled at her before hugging her. "Hey, I didn't know you were coming here," I said. "I didn't know I was coming here until Keiran dropped me off in front of the entrance doors. He said something about a friend falling ill and needed to go and check on her," she responded,

a puzzled expression crossing her face.

I raised my eyebrows when I heard Jenny telling me that Keiran had used the exact same words that Chris had. "Wow, it's strange isn't it. Both of them needing to go to see their friend." I knew there was something Chris was not telling me about this friend of his. "I think Brenton is gone, as well," Jenny stated, sitting down on the sofa. "Do you think that Mr. Palmer is gone, too?" I enquired, sitting down next to her. Jenny scoffed. "Mr. Palmer, caring for anybody other than his family? I don't think so," she said bitterly. "What do you mean?" Had something happened between Chris's father and Jenny? "Tell me something, Alice, how is Mr. Palmer with you? I mean, how does he behave?" She queried. "To be honest, the man has barely said ten words to me since Chris and I got married, and that was only to put me in my place and to threaten me into marrying Chris," I answered.

Jenny's eyes widened. "What? You were forced into this marriage?" Uh oh, I couldn't believe I let that slip, shoot! "Uh, I wasn't exactly forced, but this marriage was arranged." I told her.

I couldn't tell her about the contract, it would break the clause of keeping the arrangement between me and Chris a secret. "Really, I didn't know your marriage was arranged, it doesn't look like it," she uttered. "Why?" I questioned. "Because Chris loves you, and you love him, so I just figured you both married out of love," she explained. "What? What are you talking about? Chris and I don't love each other." By now I could feel my cheeks heating up.

Jenny was right about one thing, I did love him, a lot, but he didn't feel the same way. "I've seen the way he looks at you, like you're the reason he gets up every morning and goes to sleep every night, and like you're the reason he smiles. And I know you love him, I saw the way you

looked at him when I visited you guys at the hospital after Nico's surgery," she argued.

I shook my head, not believing her. "Chris does not love me, he never will," I muttered the last part to myself. "But you love him, right?" Jenny searched my eyes for the truth.

Nodding my head, I told her the truth. "Yeah, I love him. He's perfect, Jenny," I confessed. "Chris loves you, trust me on that." She gave my hand a warm, comforting squeeze. Shaking my head, I gave her a warm smile. "All right, enough about me and Chris, tell me about Keiran and how he's with you," I demanded.

Jenny blushed and a strange sparkle lit her eyes at the mention of Keiran. "He's...intense," she answered.

"Oh, tell me all about it." I never knew talking to another girl about men would be so entertaining, no wonder women talked about men with their

friends.

"Well, like I said, he's intense; if I don't do as he says then I have to deal with the consequences. And those consequences scare me." Jenny begun wringing her hands together, looking nervous.

I scooted closer to Jenny. "Why do they scare you?" I asked softly, trying not to scare her.

Jenny took a deep breath. "Okay, what I'm about to tell you, can you like...keep it between us, it's about Keiran and I don't want people to know."

"Of course, your secret is safe with me," I assured her.

"Well Keiran has these preferences when it comes to sex." Jenny blushed a bright red. "He likes to be in charge," she said cryptically.

"Be in charge how?" I enquired.

"Well, he likes his women subdued, under his

mercy," she responded, the blush not leaving her face.

Realization dawned on me. "You mean, he likes to tie women up?"

Jenny nodded. "Yes, he likes taking control of a woman, he likes to own his women in bed," she answered.

Keiran just kept surprising me. Where I thought he was laid back and mischievous, he was now intense and kinky.

Were there more surprises which were yet to come?

"So, is that a good thing or a bad thing?" I queried.

"Bad. Very bad. But I can't tell Keiran about it," Jenny replied softly.

"So you allow Keiran to tie you up even when you're not comfortable with it?" She needed to

stand up for herself. I was sure once Keiran knew that Jenny was uncomfortable, he wouldn't tie her up.

Jenny shook her head. "No, we haven't had sex." She told me.

"How long have you two been dating?" I questioned.

"Nearly six months," she answered.

"And you haven't had sex up til now?" I felt my eyes were going to pop out of their sockets.

"Believe me Keiran has tried a hundred times to get me in bed, but I always make up an excuse and get out of having to have sex. I don't think Keiran is going to wait for me much longer, I'm surprised he has waited this long." She told me.

"Just tell him you're not comfortable with it," I stated.

"I can't do that, Alice. Keiran has done so much

for me, and how would he feel if I told him I couldn't handle being tied up." Jenny looked utterly distraught.

"If he likes you and cares about you he'll understand. And maybe, in the future you can try his way of having sex."

Jenny shook her head, her eyes glittering with unshed tears. "No, I can never let Keiran tie me up. There are things that happened to me in the past; things that shackle me, my happiness. These things prevent me from moving forward, from embracing Keiran and his needs..."

"Maybe you can talk to Keiran about it, explain why you can't handle his needs," I suggested. Wow, Jenny looked so innocent, I didn't know that she had gone through so much. I wished I could do something to help her.

"If I tell him, I'll lose him forever, and I don't want to lose him, Alice. I like Keiran, a lot; he makes

me happy, he makes me feel important; and him and his happiness is important to me." A lone tear fell from her eyes.

"Like I said, if he cares about you he'll understand. And if he likes you as much as I think he does, I'm sure that your comfort and happiness is more important to Keiran than his own needs," I stated.

"I wish I wasn't so weak. I wish I was strong enough to forget my past and move on," Jenny muttered.

"You are strong." I told her with conviction.

Jenny shook her head. "No I'm not. And because of this, I'm going to lose Keiran. I know sooner or later he is going to tell me that he can't be with me, and I understand that; Keiran is not going to wait for me forever. Maybe then he'll find a woman who is not a skittish freak

like me." She quickly wiped the tears with her hand.

"You're wrong. Keiran is not like that, and I'm pretty sure he'll understand if you just tell him," I stated.

"I don't believe you." Jenny took a deep breath. "But anyways, what are we going to do until Chris and Keiran arrive?" She asked, changing the subject.

"We can watch a film while eating snacks?" I suggested.

"Perfect, do you want to pick the film?" She queried.

"No, that's all right, you pick, I'll go tell the maids to bring us some snacks." Leaving Jenny to search for films, I headed to the kitchen for some snacks

The CEO

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One week had passed since Chris friend had fallen ill, and he had made no move to tell me who that friend was. I wasn't going to ask him, I hoped he would tell me himself.

The day after his hasty departure, was the day for my doctor's appointment. He and I went to the gynecologist who told us that the baby was fine—after giving me an ultrasound and that we'd know the sex of the baby next month.

Chris hearing this told me that he already knew it was the boy, because of the family curse but I did not believe him. There was only a fifty

percent chance the baby would be a boy, and like Chris's mum, I too wanted to break the family curse by having a girl as my firstborn.

After my ultrasound, Chris returned to being the caring, doting husband, only in a stronger, more intense way. Not to mention, that he would have to get up during the late hours of the night and get me tacos and salsa. Every night, I would have this craving of eating something spicy, mainly salsa, so Chris would get me a huge bowl of salsa and nachos, and I would spend an hour or two eating that. I knew these late night visits to the kitchen were taking a toll on him, but he never once complained. He just made sure that I was comfortable.

Since that day, Jenny and I had become close friends, and even talked on the phone. He said that it was good that Jenny and I were getting along, and even told me that I should take the time out and go shopping with her. I still needed

to buy clothes and toys for the baby, so going shopping with Jenny sounded like a good idea.

Today was the start of a new week and after being thoroughly rested, Chris went to work. He had spend the weekend sleeping in, my crazy midnight snack schedule preventing him from sleeping peacefully. And he still hadn't told me about the friend of his; in fact, he hadn't talked about that day at all. He just asked me how I was doing and how the baby was. I knew being so curious about my temporary husband's life and family was not right, but I couldn't help it. My mum did say that one day this curiosity of mine would get me in trouble.

Once Chris and Nico left, I made my way to the library, wanting to read more about Elizabeth. Maybe I would skip to the entry where she would tell Chris about Henry or maybe to the part where she would run away with the love of her life.

As soon as I entered the library, the familiar smell of books greeted me. I loved the smell of books, both new and old; I wished I could sleep with a book so the smell of it would stay with me even in my sleep.

Padding downstairs, I entered the archives and immediately headed in the direction of Teresa's aisle. I decided that once I was finished reading Elizabeth's journal, I would read Teresa's journals and then slowly work my way through the ancestors of the Palmer family. These people were just too interesting.

Climbing on the portable steps, I removed Elizabeth's journal and sat down on the bean bag to read. The entry I started to read was dated June 4th, 2002.

*** June 4th, 2002

Dear Diary,

I told Chris about Henry last night, and he was

not happy. He said that going against father's wishes would be similar to committing suicide. I begged him to help me. I told him that I would never be happy with Alejandro.

Chris being my best friend and brother would never want me to be unhappy, so even though he was not happy about this, he promised to help me to the best of his ability. He told me he would talk to our father and would try to convince him about calling off the wedding. Bless my brother, he always helped me.

However, father agreeing to Chris is going to be next to impossible. My father is stubborn and when he says something, it's like set in stone, no one has the power to question or change it. I just hope that Chris gets through to him, otherwise I would have no choice but to run away with Henry.

Henry called me a couple of hours ago. He told me he loves me and can't wait to marry me. His

words gave me the happiness and comfort they always did, and made me forget about my father and his unfair decisions. I told Henry I love him, too, and I would do everything in my power to make sure we were together.

Slowly, I have started packing my clothes in a duffle bag. If I ran away, I would only be able to take my necessities with me, I would have to leave my jewelry and all my couture dresses here, and only take my practical clothes. No matter what happened, I have no choice but to prepare for the worst.

I hope everything worked out for the best.

Elizabeth.***

After finishing the first entry, I flipped the journal until I stopped at the entry dated July 1st, 2002. I took a deep breath and begun reading. This entry mainly consisted of Elizabeth being a nervous wreck because Chris

was going to talk to their father about Henry. She prayed that her father agreed to marry her with Henry rather than with Alejandro, although she wasn't very hopeful. She now had two duffle bags which contained all of her important things.

I was almost at the end of the entry when a sudden voice startled me. "Wow, I didn't know that my wife was the female version of Sherlock Holmes," Chris said, his voice hard.

Jumping from the bean bag, I hid Elizabeth's journal behind me but I knew he had already seen me with it. My heart started pounding as I gazed at my husband, who stood leaning against the wooden shelf with his arms crossed across his chest. His sea green eyes were hard, betraying his calm exterior. Knowing that I was busted, I couldn't do anything, my mouth suddenly felt dry as fear settled in my tummy, and all I did was say one word.

"Chris."

The CEO

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When my mother told me that my curiosity was going to get me in trouble one day, I did not believe her. But now, as I stared at Chris, unable to decipher the look in his sea green eyes, I knew that my mum was right.

Chris did not say anything, just kept staring at me, making me feel even more guilty than I normally would have. I, on the other hand, did not know what to do to get myself out of this situation. I did not know how to explain my

behavior. Should I lie? Should I tell the truth? Would he throw me out of his home if I opted for the truth?

Well considering what you've just been caught doing, kicking you out of the house will be slightly better than all the other things your husband is capable of doing.

Trying to muster up as much as courage as I could, I decided to face this new predicament head on. "Chris, what are you doing here?" I asked, even though I had no right to ask my husband what he was doing in his own home.

"Well, I got done with my work early so I thought I'll surprise my wife, but it was I who got surprised when I came to see that my wife had been sneaking around behind my back," he answered, bitterness and fury dripping from his words.

Taking a deep breath, I continued on. "Chris, I

can explain," I said, digging my fingers in Elizabeth's journal, squishing the velvet.

He raised his eyebrow. "Oh please, do explain, I would love to know why you did not respect my privacy and wishes and went down to the archives when I strictly told you not to." He looked calm, but I knew he was anything but. He wanted to lash out, to be angry, I had no idea why he was acting so calm when both of us knew that he wasn't.

Suddenly my throat felt dry and I found it difficult to speak. I didn't know how to explain it to him without sounding like a nosy idiot. I knew I was nosy, and despite trying my best to control my curiosity, I always ended up giving into it; I was weak.

"I—I wa—wanted t—to kn—know ab—about th—the woman on the sev—seventh floor," I stammered, looking at the floor.

"Why?" He asked, his voice frosty.

"Because...because..." I had no idea what to tell him. I wanted to know about the woman in the portrait because I was a nosy human being? Because I didn't know when to mind my own bloody business?

My heart started pounding when he strode over to me until he stood mere centimeteres from me. Before I could say anything, he snatched Elizabeth's journal from behind my back, wrenching it free from my grasp. I bit my lip as he flipped through the journal before tossing it on the bean bag.

Taking a deep breath he asked, "Why?"

That one word held so many questions, I didn't know how to answer. I just wanted to curl up into a ball and hide. The shame and guilt about what I had done made me wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole. Anything

to get away from him and not to see the look he was giving me—full of accusation and bitterness.

"I'm sorry," I muttered, wishing I had my necklace.

"No, that's not what I asked. I don't need an apology Alice, I need a bloody explanation!" He shouted, causing me to jump.

"I—told you, I wa—wanted to kn—know about the woman in the portrait on the seventh floor," I responded.

"Why?" He questioned.

"Because you weren't telling me who she was, and told me not to go up there, so..." I trailed off, hoping that he would understand.

"Exactly, I told you not to go up there, and what do you do, you sneak into the archives and start snooping around. Do my wishes and requests mean nothing to you? I thought I could trust

you!" He did not bother lowering his voice.

"I'm sorry, I just...I wanted to know who she was. And you were being so secretive, I thought I'll find out about her by myself," I stated.

He nodded but there was no understanding in his eyes. "Right, instead of respecting people's privacy, you go around poking your nose where it doesn't belong. You know, I was never ashamed of you. Despite you belonging to the lower class, I never felt ashamed of you, but now, today, I am ashamed of you. I am ashamed to call you my wife," he seethed.

Tears welled up in my eyes upon hearing his words. No, no, this couldn't happen. I tried my best to be a good wife to him, and he couldn't be ashamed of me. No, no, no. Oh God, what had I done. I never wanted this to happen.

"Chris, please, don't say that. I told you I'm sorry,

please don't say you're ashamed of me." I clutched his arm but he shook out of my grip.

"Why shouldn't I say it when it's true. I thought I could trust you. But no, you didn't care that you were betraying my trust and snooping around my home when I told you not to." He turned to leave but I stopped him but grabbing his hand and holding it tightly.

"Chris please, I'm sorry. I promise I won't do it again, I won't ever come to the archives again, just please forgive me. Please give me another chance," I pleaded, but it looked as if it fell on deaf ears.

"Let go of me, Alice. I can't even look at you right now." Twisting his hand free from my grasp, he strode out of the archives. I followed after him, wanting him to forgive me. I would apologize a thousand times if that was what he wanted.

"Chris please, talk to me. Give me another chance. Give me a chance to explain," I begged, but he kept walking.

"You've done enough. I don't even want to look at you, nor do I want any kind of an explanation. Leave me alone." He snarled.

"please, don't do this. I can explain. Just listen to me. I won't leave you alone until you listen to me," I said.

He turned to face, a myraid of emotions flashing in those mesmerizing eyes. "You didn't respect my wishes before, at least respect them now. Leave me alone. I don't want to be anywhere near you." His voice held a note of finality to it, before he stormed out of the library, slamming the giant door shut.

Tears slipped freely from my eyes as I crumbled to the floor, sobbing. He said that he was ashamed to call me his wife, well right now I

was ashamed of myself. What was I thinking, snooping around my husband's castle? I should've respected his wishes about keeping his sister a secret. Oh God, what had I done. I was a horrible person, and now he hate me.

Well he has every right to hate you, what you did was awful. I won't be surprised if he tells you leave the castle and never to show your horrible, traitorous face to him ever again.

I was an idiot. Why couldn't I learn to mind my own business like normal people. Why did I have to be so awfully nosy? And now because of my horrible, curious nature, Chris hated me, and would probably terminate the contract and kick me out.

Why don't you leave. That way he won't kick you out and you will be out of this castle with your dignity intact. My subconscious suggested.

Knowing that I had to look for an apartment

anyways, I decided to heed her advice. I would start looking for an apartment as soon as possible. Chris would probably never forgive me, it would be better if I left—he did say he didn't want to see me, and wanted me to leave him alone.

Pulling myself together, I wiped my tears away before making my way to my bedroom. Maybe I would sleep in Nico's bedroom, since the room was Chris's and I doubted he wanted to sleep next to me.

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Chris was not in the bedroom when I entered; which was something I expected. Sitting on the bed, I allowed myself to fall back, until my back met the mattress. My feet hung down, as I contemplated what to do next. Apologizing to Chris again and again was something I knew I would have to do; what I did was unforgivable. I knew he would terminate the contract and kick

me out, maybe I should start looking for an apartment. Or should I find a decent job first? I knew I couldn't work in an unhealthy environment; I was pregnant now, and I would never risk my baby's health. Speaking of the baby, maybe I should look for a lawyer who would represent me when I would file for joint custody of the baby.

The door of my bedroom opened and Helga entered, her face stiff. Great, it wasn't like I had enough to deal with and now she had to come. I sat up, wondering what on Earth she wanted from me now.

"Sire Palmer has sent a few instructions for you which you must abide by, because if you don't there will be serious consequences." She began. Was it just me, or did Helga look pleased. Whatever Chris had to say to me, I knew it was not good, because Helga was happy.

"What are the instructions?" I asked, not

wanting her to stay any longer than she had to.

"Mister Palmer has forbidden you to enter any room in this castle. The only rooms you are allowed in are this bedroom and your brother's room. You are not allowed to enter any other room in this castle. Sire Palmer's study is completely off limits to you, and so is every other room in the castle. Your food will be brought to you, and you are permitted to visit the grounds. Should you venture into any room other than the designated rooms, Mr. Palmer is going to terminate the contract and you will be send to prison." She told me.

The tears which I had worked so hard to control, came to the surface once again, but I did not allow them to fall in front of Helga. Instead, I nodded my head, letting her know that I understood.

"I understand, Helga. Can you please let Mr. Palmer know that I will be sleeping in my

brother's room tonight," I requested.

Helga shook her head. "You are not allowed to sleep anywhere except in this room, this is also one of the instructions," she replied.

So this was what he was going to do? Hold me prisoner? Take away my freedom? Cage me here until the baby arrived? And then what, he was going to kick me out or would he send me to prison.

Well you kind of deserve it.

"Are there any more instructions?" I enquired, trying not to let my voice break.

"No, just that you are to stay in this room or in your brother's room. And you are not allowed to visit Mr. Palmer nor make any sort of demands," she responded coolly.

Nodding my head, I gave her a small smile.

"Okay, I understand. Thank you, Helga." She looked surprised for a moment before

composing her features and exiting my room, closing the door behind her.

As soon as Helga left, the tears which I had been holding back for so long, came spilling out. Sobs shook my body as I let myself drop on the mattress and cried my heart out. Cried at my shameful deeds. Cried because of the immense guilt weighing on my mind. Cried because I had broken Chris's trust and hurt him in the worst way possible. I cursed myself and my curious nature.

Maybe I should kill myself. He is better off without me anyways. He'll find a nice woman who would mind her bloody business and not go snooping around. He deserved better.

I didn't know how long I cried for. Nor did I know how long I cursed myself for, but eventually, I ran out of tears. Pushing myself to a sitting position, I wondered if Chris would let me borrow his laptop. I needed to look for an

apartment. But, it would have to wait till tomorrow as the sun was beginning its decent, and soon it would be dark.

Glancing at my left, I spotted my journal sitting on the nightstand. Thinking that I could use something to lessen the burden of shame and guilt, I grabbed the journal and a pen which was in the drawer and begun writing.

***Dear Diary,

I have done a terrible thing. I have hurt my husband, the love of my life, in the worst way possible. And I wish I hadn't. I wish I had not let my curiosity win. I just wanted to know who the lady on the seventh floor was, hurting him was never my intention. I would rather die than hurt the man I love. But now it's too late. He hates me.

I am going to start looking for an apartment tomorrow and will try to find a job. I need

money to pay for Nico's education and for the baby. I know he is going to terminate the contract soon, so I need to find a place for me and Nico.

I know what I did was unforgivable, but I wish he forgives me. But if he doesn't, I would understand. I know I deserve nothing from him. He has done so much for me and Nico, and how do I repay him, by going behind his back and snooping around his home—his territory. I should be slaughtered for my crimes.

He said he is ashamed of me. He is ashamed to call me his wife. I agree with him. I'm the worst person alive. He shouldn't have married me in the first place. He shouldn't have made me fall for him. Maybe then, what I have done would not seem so heinous.

Right now, I feel like the worst person on the planet. And maybe I am. I just wish I could take it all back. Because I know now that nothing

means more to me than his happiness and his trust. And I had taken both of those things from him. I should kill myself.***

Not having the strength to write anymore, I let the pen drop from my hand. Clutching the journal to my chest, I let loose a fresh torrent of tears, as guilt and shame, once again washed over me.

Oh God, what was I going to do? How would I ever get back his trust again? How would I earn his forgiveness?

What have I done!

The CEO

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Morning came quickly and I did not see Chris. He did not come to bed last night. I was right, he did not want to sleep next to me. But I didn't sleep on the bed, I slept on the couch, well more like tossed and turned, the shame and guilt prevented me from getting any sleep.

Dragging myself to the bathroom, I washed my face with cold water to make myself presentable. After staring at my reflection in the mirror for a couple of minutes, I dragged myself out of the bathroom only to stop short when I saw Chris standing in our room. He looked freshly showered, his hair were still glistening with the leftover water. I, on the other hand, looked like a total mess.

"You didn't sleep." he said it as more of a statement rather than a question.

"I did, just not much," I lied. I didn't sleep a wink. Without a word, he turned and sat down on the bed. My eyes widened when he picked up my journal which was lying on the bed and opened it. My heart started pounding, he could not read my journal.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing, I'm reading your journal," he replied shortly.

"You can't do that. You said my journal was my own personal property and that no one will be allowed to read it," I told him.

he raised his eyebrows. "Oh, so you remember this, but you don't remember me telling you to stay away from the archives, interesting," he commented, but thankfully did not flip to my first entry.

Angry tears pricked my eyes. "You didn't specifically told me to stay away. You said the

archives wouldn't be of any interest to me," I clarified.

"Learn to read between the lines, Alice. Me telling you the archives will bore you meant that you were to stay away from them," he shot back.

"Chris, please, my journal is personal." I tried again.

"No. Since you love to snoop in other people's business and invade their privacy, let's see how you like it when somebody invades your privacy," he retorted. his words caused my heart to crack. I knew I deserved every harsh word he said to me, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

"Fine, go ahead. Read my journal, unlike you I've got nothing to hide," I snapped then went for the door. I should start packing my clothes, he was going to kick me out soon.

"Where do you think you're going?" He asked.

"To my brother's room. I am allowed to go there,

aren't I, or will that be another invasion of your precious privacy!" I slammed the door shut on my way out. I knew I had no right to be angry at him when it was my fault that he was upset, but I just couldn't help my crazy emotions. And the truth was, I couldn't stand and see him read my journal. I know he was going to laugh after reading it, and I couldn't see that—Chris mocking me after reading that I loved him.

As soon as I entered Nico's room, I quickly got his bag out of the closet and begun packing his clothes. I had to find a job and look for an apartment as well. Even though Helga said that I had no right to make demands, I wondered if she would let me have a newspaper.

I tried to pack Nico's belongings but my vision blurred. Tears started to fall freely from my eyes as the shame and guilt over what I had done once again threatened to cripple me. How could I tell Chris that I had not meant to hurt

him when he wasn't even listening to me. He was so angry, how could I apologize for my actions.

Trying to force my tears to stop falling but failing miserably, I went to the bathroom to pack Nico's toiletries. I picked up Nico's toothbrush when my eyes landed on something glinting in the bathroom light. Dropping the toothbrush, I picked a pair of sharp scissors.

Maybe I should kill myself, I deserve it after all. Chris would be happy without me.

Without thinking I placed the blade end of the scissors on my bare wrist. I closed my eyes and counted to ten, then begun applying pressure.

No, stop. What are you doing? Stop it, don't kill yourself. What about Nico, who is going to take care of him once you're gone? And your baby is still in your womb, don't kill your baby, your baby deserves to live! Stop it!

Instantly, the pair of scissors fell from my hand as the magnitude of what I was about to do sunk in. Oh God, no, I couldn't do this. I couldn't kill myself, I had Nico and my baby to think about. I couldn't be selfish right now, not when my baby hadn't even opened his/her eyes.

Feeling out of control, I left Nico's room and returned to mine. Chris was not present, which I wasn't sure was a good thing or not. Taking a deep breath I sat on the bed and thought about what to do. I knew I was hoping for the impossible, but I wished Chris would forgive me.

Before I could drown in guilt, the door opened and Helga entered carrying a tray of breakfast. She placed the tray in front of me then stepped back.

"Sire Palmer has ordered for you to finish everything on the tray," she said then turned to leave.

"Wait Helga." She stopped and turned to face me, looking irritated. "I know you said I'm not allowed to make demands, but I was wondering if you can bring me a newspaper." I bit my lip nervously.

"I'll ask Sire Palmer, if he says yes I'll bring you the paper." With that she exited my room.

I eyed my breakfast and my stomach churned. I couldn't eat anything, the guilt was sitting in my stomach like a pile of heavy rocks. I tore a piece of bread and chewed on it, but it was like chewing a piece of rubber. I had no idea how I managed to finish everything that was on the tray, but I did, and I felt sick after that.

Helga entered after I had finished and placed today's newspaper on the bed before picking up the now empty tray. I thanked her for the paper and she left without a word.

Ignoring the churning in my stomach, I opened

the paper and scanned the whole thing, looking for an apartment. I found a couple of nice apartments and circled the ad with a pen which I got from the drawer. Next, I tried to looking for a nice job, which proved to be difficult. I needed a desk job but there were hardly any available, and those which were, required more than a high school degree.

Feeling hopeless, I dropped the newspaper and laid down on the bed. I needed a job soon, I had to earn money for my brother and my child.

Where was I going to work? Who would hire a high school graduate?

Oh God, please help me.

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The evening was cold, but I stayed in the garden, sitting on a bench. Sitting in my room was starting to suffocate me, so I decided to go and sit in the garden for a while. So, after forcing

lunch down my throat, I came out here and had been sitting here since then. I had no idea where Chris was, probably in his study, avoiding me.

I was waiting for the sun to set, then I would go back in my room. It was one of those rare days when the sun was out, so I decided to take some advantage of it. Although, the sun wasn't really doing a great job of warming me up, but still, it felt nice to be sitting out, breathing some fresh air.

"Penny for your thoughts." I turned and saw Justin standing, a smile on his handsome face.

"Oh hello. I didn't know you were coming here," I said.

"I was just with your husband for some work. I was leaving when I saw you sitting out here," he replied.

"Yeah, I just thought I'd get some fresh air.

Would you like to sit down?" I moved a little to the right to make room for Justin.

"If you don't mind." He sat down next to me.

"So how are you?" I asked.

"I'm good, thank you. How are you? How's the baby?" Justin enquired eyeing my baby bump.

"The baby is fine, thank you. So how was your meeting with Chris?" I queried, trying to make conversation.

"It was all right. We were talking about hiring new people for the company, since Chris is expanding his business and all," Justin answered.

"That's interesting. Justin, if you don't mind, can I ask you something?" I really wished Justin would help me find a job.

"Sure, what is it?"

"Uh...do you know some place where I can find

a decent job?" I questioned.

"Why do you need a job, Chris earns enough to feed the whole world," he said.

"I know, but I don't have anything to do, it gets boring here, you know," I explained.

"I see. Is Chris okay with it?"

"Yeah, he is. He agrees that I should get a job until the baby arrives," I lied. Truth was, I did not care what Chris thought. I needed to find a job, and I had to do it before Chris kicked me out.

"All right." Justin fished a card out of his wallet and handed it to me. "This is my card. You can call me tomorrow and in the meantime I'll look for a job for you. Would you like a desk job?"

"Yes, a desk job is what I need, and something that pays well." I told him.

"All right, I'll see what I can do."

"Oh, and Justin. I—I am only a high school

graduate, I didn't go to college," I informed him.

"That's no problem. I have a couple of people who will hire you. Let me talk to them and I'll let you know tomorrow," he said.

"All right, thank you so much, Justin." I smiled at him. He was such a nice man. Maybe after the contract was over, I would agree to go on a date with Justin.

"Sure thing. I should go now, I have a meeting in a couple of hours." Justin stood up to leave.

"Okay. I'll call you tomorrow, you take care, bye." I watch Justin saunter away, feeling happy that he was going to help me.

Thinking it was time that I went back to my room, I stood up and turned around to leave only to stop abruptly as my eyes met Chris's. He looked furious. I opened my mouth to speak but before I could utter a syllable, he grabbed my wrist and dragged me inside.

"Chris, what's wrong?" I tried to wrench my hand free but he only tightened his grip, causing me to wince in pain.

But he did not respond. He just dragged me upstairs to our room, and when we entered our room did he let me go. I held my wrist in my other hand, trying to ease the throbbing.

"You really know how to piss me off, don't you?" he snarled, eyes blazing.

"What are you talking about?" Why was he acting so strange.

"Mark my words, Alice. You are not, and I mean not going to work. You can forget about finding a job," he stated.

"And why not, huh?"

he ignored me, instead, he picked up the newspaper lying on the bed and showed me the page where I had circled the ads for the apartment.

"And what the hell is this?! You are not leaving, not now, not ever!" He flung the paper to the side.

"I'll leave whenever I bloody want to!" I stated.

"Not according to the contract you can't," he pointed out.

"Yeah well, according to the contract this marriage is going to be over in a few months anyway, why not finish it early. You obviously hate me," I said, hurt evident in my voice.

Chris frowned. "Who said I hate you?"

"Doesn't matter. I can't live with a man who is so secretive." I didn't know why I said that, probably because my hormones were in full swing.

"Oh really, and what makes you think you can leave?" he crossed his arms over his chest, giving me a challenging look.

"I have the contract. I have the law on my side. And I am going to leave once this year is over. And you are going to file for joint custody; there is no way I'm parting with my baby." I told him.

"And if I don't file for joint custody?" There was an odd glint in his sea green eyes, something that told me he was forming a plan in his mind.

"Then I'll take the baby with me. And the court will be in my favor because a baby needs its mum more than its dad, at least when he/she is born," I stated, feeling confident.

"I distinctly remember the contract saying that the baby will stay with me once this marriage is over, and since you signed the contract as well, the court will have no choice but to give me the custody of the baby," Chris said, an arrogant smile on his face.

My heart sank at hearing this. No that was not true. I read the contract a dozen times and

there was nothing in there that said that Chris would have the custody of our child. He was lying.

"You're lying. I read the contract, there was nothing in there that said the baby will be yours after the contract was over." It couldn't be true, it just couldn't be. I would not be able to live without my baby.

"Oh? Well why don't you bring the contract and we'll see exactly what it says," he suggested calmly.

Wanting to prove Chris wrong, I marched over to the closet and fetched the blue file which contained my copy of the contract. I handed the file to him who smirked and opened it.

I thought Chris was going to go over the terms of the contract. I thought he was going to read and show me whether I was wrong or not. I even thought he would apologize to me after

reading the contract. But he did something that I would've never expected in a million years. He closed the file, then with both of his hands, ripped the file in two. And he didn't just stop there. he

did not stop tearing until the contract resembled white confetti. Then he let the remaining bits of the document fall from his hands.

"Wh—What have you done?!" I shrieked in horror, my eyes bulging out of their sockets.

"What I should've done a long time ago, little dove." he stepped forward until he was standing mere inches from me.

"Yo—You had no right to do this! It was my copy of the contract, you had no right to rip it apart like that, now I would have nothing to use in court." I was breathing heavily now. Oh God, now he would get custody of the baby.

"No one is going to court, little peach. Not you, and not me. The contract has been terminated. I had it terminated a long time ago. Every single copy of the document is thankfully now destroyed," he informed me, a satisfied smile on his face.

"How could you do this?!" I cried out, not aware of the tears streaming down my face. "I will not let you take my baby away from me!"

"I can do whatever I want, little one, haven't you realized that by now. And as for the baby, little bird, the baby is not going anywhere because you are not going anywhere," he stated.

"If you think I'm going to stay with you after what you just did then you are very much mistaken. I want a divorce, and I want it now." I had clearly lost my sanity, but I was just so angry.

he laughed, a laugh that shook me to my core.

"Divorce?" He laughed once again, then abruptly gripped my upper arms. "Listen to me, and listen good. The contract is over, you are not getting out of this marriage, little peach, not now, not ever." he stated.

"You can't do this." It felt as if he was closing every window of freedom for me, caging me to him.

he caressed my tear stained cheek. "Little fairy, did you forget who has the power here? I can do whatever I want. And I am not letting you go. You can forget about divorce because you are never getting it. You are going to be my wife forever."

If at any other time Chris had said those words to me, I would've been ecstatic, but not today. It was true I loved him and wanted to stay with him forever, but right now, I was angry. He had effortlessly shattered all my shields and defences and left me vulnerable. He showed

exactly how powerful he was. And right now, I was scared of his power.

"I am never going to be happy with you." I was grasping at straws, anything to get some sort of leverage over him.

"That's debatable, little dove. Right now, just understand that the contract is no more. It's over. You are going to be wife, not just for a year, but for eternity. And our baby is going to grow up with both of his parents in this castle, got it?"

Suddenly, I felt exhausted, weak. I knew it was over, he had won. He had all the power, and I had nothing. I found myself too tired to argue with him anymore, so I didn't say anything. Taking my silence as a 'yes' he kissed my forehead.

"Now, why don't you rest. I have some work I need to do. When I come back, I want to see

you sleeping soundly, okay?" He commanded. I kinda felt he wasn't angry anymore.

Without saying a word, I got on the bed and laid down, facing away from Chris. He pulled the duvet over me and with another kiss on my forehead, left the room. I did not want to sleep, but I felt exhausted, which resulted in sleep coming easily.

Just darkness pulled me and, I kept thinking, How was I going to deal with these new circumstances now

Thendo Mpho Vhuthu. Sizo gagashe. Linathi Nakhane Msuthukaziomhle Makoba. Onesimo dokolwana,"Samolene 'Uniqueness' Steyn, Khomotso Boreng, Zamaswazi Sne Dlamini,Portia Skosana, and others who did not mention their good deeds to me .Thank You all.

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Thank you so much

The CEO

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I woke up to a continuous light tapping. Forcing my eyes open, I saw Chris in bed with me, working on his laptop, his back against the headboard. I tried to go back to sleep but it looked as if sleep had deserted me.

As if sensing me awake, he stopped working and looked at me. He gave me a warm smile

which instantly had me wondering what was the reason behind his smile. I mean, he was mad at me, and I was mad at him, too, so why the smile?

"Oh you're awake, did you have a nice nap?" He asked, as if we hadn't fought just a few hours ago.

"What time is it?" I grumbled. I was still angry, but I needed to know the time.

"It's 2:00 in the morning. Why don't you go back to sleep," he suggested. What, I had slept for seven hours!

Ignoring him, I sat up and ran a hand through my hair. I needed to get out of here, I had to leave him. I still couldn't believe that he had destroyed the contract right in front of me. Did he really want me to stay with him as his wife forever or was it because of anger? Why did he terminate the contract if he was ashamed of me?

"Where are you going? Are you hungry? Do you need to use the bathroom?" He questioned, his eyes not leaving me.

"I'm going to pack, I'm leaving as soon as the sun rises." I told him.

"Where are you going, on a vacation?" He queried.

I sighed, trying not to explode. "I am leaving you. I want a divorce. Remember, we had a fight," I said like I was talking to a four year old.

"If you remember us fighting then I'm sure you remember me telling you that you're not leaving me, ever, and you can forget about a divorce because you're not getting one," he replied calmly.

"I can't do this, Chris. I don't want to be with you," I said. I was lying, but I was angry.

He didn't look as if my words affected him.

"Why don't you want to be with me?" He asked

softly.

"Lots of reasons," I replied vaguely.

"I want to know all of them," he responded.

I sighed again. "Well, you don't trust me and you expect me to trust you. You make decisions about me and my life and you get angry if I make a decision for you. You have more secrets than the MI6. And you are ashamed of me. Why do you want to be with someone who you hate and are ashamed of?" Unshed tears burned my eyes as I said the last part.

He closed his laptop and placed it on the side, before pulling me closer to him until I was sitting on his thighs, straddling him. He cupped my cheeks before capturing my lips in sweet, tender kiss. The kiss made me feel as if I was the most important person in his life. The kiss didn't feel as if he was ashamed of me.

He pulled away after a few minute leaving me

bereft. He ran his nose over mine, his breath softly fanning my face. God, this man was confusing.

"You have a lot of reasons to leave me for someone who claims to love me." My eyes widened when he said this, and suddenly I felt more naked than I had all the times we had sex. Oh God, he knew. He knew how I felt.

"How did you—" I couldn't bring myself to finish the sentence.

But he understood what I was trying to say. "I told you I was going to read your journal."

I gritted my teeth as a new wave of fury washed over me. "Yo—You had no right," I seethed, glaring at him.

He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, a calm expression on his face. "On the contrary, little bird, I have all the right. And I'm glad that I read your journal, by the way, you ever think

about leaving me or killing yourself, you'll be bringing my wrath upon yourself, understood?" His eyes hardened until they resembled green shards.

"I can't bring your wrath upon myself if I'm dead, now can I?"

Instantly, his arms around me tightened to the point of pain. He brought me closer to him, until the fury blazing in his eyes seared my soul.

"You think about killing yourself and I'm going to lock you in this room forever, do you understand?"

"You can't keep me prisoner," I stated, fearing for my freedom.

"I should devise a new contract, in which you can never cause yourself physical or emotional harm," He said.

"Why? So you can rip up that contract as well when you get tired of me?" I raised my eyebrows as I said that.

"Getting tired of you is impossible, little peach," He replied.

"And being ashamed of me is incredibly easy," I snapped.

He chuckled before giving me another tender kiss. "I'm not ashamed of you, little fairy. I can never be, you are much too amazing for that," he replied.

"Liar. That's not what you said earlier!" I raised my voice.

"I was angry," he justified.

"Not good enough! If everytime we have a fight and you get angry, will you always say such harsh words to me, because if that's the case then tell me now and I'll get the bloody hell out of here." I was breathing heavily now.

He kissed me again. "I did not mean it, little fairy. Just because I said, it doesn't mean I meant it," He said, sincerity shimmering in his irises.

"Well it still hurt, a lot." I could not believe I just said that. He already knew I loved him and now he knew how hurt I was. I really needed to learn to keep my emotions to myself. He tugged me closer until my chest was pressed against his. He kissed my forehead and begun running his hand over my back, soothing me.

"I'm sorry, little dove. So sorry. I did not mean to hurt you, and I'm sorry I did. I promise you, I won't hurt you ever again," He murmured.

I pulled away and looked at him, eyes wide in surprise. He apologized. Chris Palmer apologized to me. I never thought a man like him would ever apologize to me. I thought he would tell me to suck it up and live my life like a docile wife, but no, he apologized for hurting me and promised to never hurt me again.

Well forgive the poor lad now, don't keep him waiting, he might change his mind.

"It's all right, you're forgiven, but if you hurt me again I'm leaving with Justin," I warned.

"Shut up," he stated before kissing me again.

"I'm sorry, for invading your privacy and reading your family's journals, I'm extremely curious, I'm sorry for that," I said as soon as he released my lips.

"Are you apologizing for reading my family's journals or for being curious?" He enquired.

"Does it matter?" I questioned, feeling a blush creeping up my face.

"Yes, it does. If you are apologizing for reading the journals then you're forgiven, but if you are apologizing for being curious, then don't apologize." He caressed my cheek. "Curiosity is a part of you, you shouldn't apologize for being yourself. I like you just the way you are, so don't

apologize for being curious."

He said like, not love. Oh man!

"Right, so do you forgive me for snooping around?" I enquired, not wanting to dwell on the fact that he told me he likes me and not loves me.

"I forgive you, little one."

"Oh good, and since you're in such a forgiving mood, you won't get angry if I tell you I went up to the seventh floor, right?" I asked, nervously.

His eyes widened. "What? You went up to the seventh floor, how?"

"Through the library. The door was open, so I went," I explained, gauging his reaction.

"And how many times did you go?" He asked.

"Just one time, promise," I answered.

He closed his eyes, preventing me from finding out what he was thinking. I stayed where I was,

straddling him, twisting my fingers in anxiety. I did not regret telling him that I went up to the seventh floor, I wanted to be honest with him.

"Right." He said upon opening his eyes again.

"Well I forgive you."

"Really?" Wow, that was easy.

"Yeah, I mean, you are my permanent wife now, so you have to know about all the skeletons hidden in the closet. I was going to tell you about Elizabeth anyways, so it's good that you found out about her yourself; saves me the trouble and the awkwardness," He explained.

Wow he called me his permanent wife! It feels so much better than temporary wife.

"I also went up to the eighth floor," I blurted out, and by the look of frustration on his handsome face, I knew it was too soon. "I'm sorry."

"Did you go to the ninth floor as well?" He queried.

"No, I swear," I answered truthfully.

"May I ask why?" Amusement shimmered in his eyes and I knew he wasn't mad.

"My guilty conscience kinda kicked in." I told him.

He chuckled. "I see. Well I forgive you." He was so sweet.

"I promise I won't go up there ever again," I stated.

"That's all right. I'll give you a tour of those floors myself. You can ask me anything you want while we are touring," he said, and I swear I fell in love a little more with him.

"Really? Wow, can we go now?"

"No. First of all, it's 3:00 am and you need to eat and then sleep. Second, you need to know about Elizabeth before we go up there," he said.

"But I'm not tired," I argued, but one look from

him had me shutting up. I knew he was not going to budge.

"Okay, but can you tell me about her right now, while I eat? That way, we'll go up there in the morning." Now that he said he would tell me about his sister, I wanted to know everything, right now.

"No and no. I'll tell you about her in a few days," he stated.

"But she was your sister." I wanted to know now.

"Was? She is my sister," he corrected.

"Oh, she's still alive? Why didn't you ever tell me about her?" I enquired.

I thought he would tell me to mind my own business. But he picked up the tray filled with tacos and tamales and placed it between us. He picked up a taco and handed it to me.

"You are only allowed to ask me a question if you finish all this," He stated, gesturing to the contents of the tray.

I took a hearty bite of the taco. "Is your sister still alive? Why didn't you ever tell me you have a sister?" I asked once I had swallowed, then took another bite.

"Yes, my sister is alive. Her name is Elizabeth and she is older than me, she is the first born. And the reason I didn't tell you, is because Lizzy is a sensitive subject in the family, and only the family knows about her and our most trusted staff, those who have served the family for generations. No outsider knows about Lizzy," he answered, watching me eat.

"Why did she leave, or get kicked out, whatever it was?" I picked up one of the seven spicy tamales from the tray. Both the tacos and the tamales were extremely spicy, which was exactly what I was craving.

"I'll tell you that later. But for your information, she ran away and the family decided to sever ties with her," he responded.

"Because she loved Henry?" I finished half of my tamale in less than a minute.

He nodded. "Yes, and father refused to marry her to him."

"So where is she now?" I picked up another tamale.

"She lives in the countryside now, with Henry. A couple of hours from here," he said.

"Is she happy?" I enquired.

"Very. She had a baby girl a few days back," he informed me.

"Oh? Wow. Is that where you went when you said your friend fell ill?" I really wanted to meet Elizabeth.

He nodded. "Yes. She we went into labor, and

my niece came into this world." He smiled affectionately as he recalled seeing his niece for the first time.

"Is your niece the first child?" I picked up a taco.

"No. She is the third." My eyes bugged out at hearing this.

"Your sister has three kids, wow, you'll only get one," I said.

"No. I want more than one child. We'll have more than one baby, all right?"

"But you married me for one baby." These tacos were delicious.

"Yes, and then I terminated the contract so now we are free to have as many babies as we want, and I want more than two," he stated.

"Let's have one baby first, then we'll see about the others," I said. "So, when did you decided to make me your permanent wife?"

"Uh, a while ago," he replied.

"How long?" I queried.

"Since Nico's surgery."

"That long?! Why didn't you tell me?" Damn, he never told me anything.

"I wanted to tell you at the right time," he defended.

"And the right time was now?"

"No, but I realized the right time won't come and I'll have to make this time, the right time," he explained.

"Right, so does that mean we are husband and wife forever?" I wanted to make sure I understood him clearly.

"Yes, little one, that's exactly what it means." He squeezed my hand.

"And Nico will live with us as well, right?" I never I thought the man I love would ever accept me as his permanent wife.

"Yes, he will live with us, and I'm going to pay for his education. You can stop worrying about your financial problems because now you won't ever have to deal with any kind of problem...if I can help it." He gave me one of his special smiles. The smile that made him look as if he was child of the angels themselves.

"I thought you were going to leave me after this year was over," I said, feeling like the luckiest woman on Earth. I never thought anyone would want me. And now, this man, who was no less than royalty, wanted me as his permanent wife. Dreams really do come true.

"I'm never leaving you, little dove, never. You are mine forever." He kissed my hand.

"Thank you."

"For what?" He frowned.

"For accepting me. For making me your permanent wife."

"Hey, don't talk like that. You are perfect. And I am one lucky son of a—" He broke off as his gaze landed on my swollen baby. "I mean, I'm a very lucky man to have an amazing wife like you; only an idiot will reject you." He kissed me deeply after that.

"So, do you love me?" He asked as soon as he broke apart.

I nodded, feeling my cheeks heat up. "Yes. I love you, Chris." Never in my life had I felt so vulnerable than I did when I confessed my feelings to him.

When he kissed me is time, it felt like he was kissing my soul. The emotion flowing through the kiss replaced the marrow in my bones. My soul lit up. Fireworks flashed before my eyes, as

he consumed me. With just one kiss, he told me what words couldn't.

I was his.

"Thank you. Thank you for loving me, little fairy," he murmured, as he kissed my jawline.

"You don't need to thank me for that." I was breathless after that intense kiss.

"I do. Your love and your heart is a treasure that you have given me, and I thank you for that. And I promise to protect your heart from all the darkness in the world." He was not good for my heart.

I wished he would tell me he loved me too, but I believed it was next to impossible. It was a miracle that he had accepted me as his permanent wife, I didn't think he would ever love me like I loved him. But I would be happy with what I had. I would be happy with being Chris's permanent wife.

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"Helga, please call the entire staff here, right now," Chris ordered her.

Chris and I were sitting in the dining room having breakfast. He had just finished his breakfast and now had ordered Helga to call the entire staff here, I had no idea why. Maybe he had an announcement to make.

After he thanked me for loving him, it didn't take us long to fall asleep after that. He kept me especially close to him as he drifted off to sleep; and I had one of the most peaceful sleeps of my life in my husband's arms.

"Why do you want the entire staff to be present here?" I asked as soon as Helga left.

"Because I have something I need to tell them," he replied.

"What?"

"You'll know soon." Now I was curious.

After five minutes of patiently waiting, Helga returned followed by fifteen men and seventeen women. The males were wearing a uniform, and the females were dressed in the standard maid's outfit. They all stopped a few feet from us.

Chris stood up, my eyes following him.

"Welcome everyone, today I have called you here because I have something very important to tell you." He took my hand and pulled me to a standing position.

"As you all know, I married Mrs. Palmer." He gestured to me. "Conditionally. She was to give me an heir within the first year of our marriage and after that the contract would end and she would leave.

"But, not anymore. Mrs. Palmer is now a permanent residence of this castle, and a

permanent member of the Palmer family. You all are to treat to her with utmost respect and shall not question her. She is now the queen of this castle, and anyone who dares to defy her or disrespect her will be removed immediately, am I clear?"

I blushed when a chorus of "Yes Sire Palmer" was heard. "Good, that is all, you may leave now."

Before leaving, each staff member came in front of me and bowed shortly before leaving. I just stood there awestruck, not knowing how to react as one by one the staff members bowed to me.

Finally, all of the staff members left, leaving only Helga standing. I swallowed hard as Helga came and bowed shortly. She gave me a smile that was way too sweet to be real, and I instantly knew I was in trouble. Helga had not accepted me.

"Welcome to the family, Mrs. Palmer"

Oh Lord. Help me.

The CEO

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Two weeks elapsed and Helga fortunately hadn't done anything that warranted fear or insecurity; however, I did not let my guard down. Maybe it was my imagination, thinking that Helga had not accepted me, but my gut told me otherwise. So despite wanting to relax, I couldn't.

Nico's birthday was in a few days and I was wondering what to give him. Now that I had enough money, I wanted to buy something big and special for my brother, but I didn't know what. I thought about getting an encyclopedia set, but Chris told me that the library contained all the encyclopedias Nico could possibly want. That had me rejecting the first idea. My second idea was to take Nico somewhere special, but I couldn't think of a single place. Discarding the second idea took less time than the first one.

I couldn't believe that my brother would get to celebrate lots of birthdays. A few months back, the thought of Nico's birthday was terrifying. I used to wonder whether he'd be able to survive for another year. But now, Nico had many years ahead of him if Nature decided not to intervene. And hopefully, he would live to see grandchildren.

"Why don't you just ask him what he wants for

his birthday," Chris suggested. We were currently sitting in the living room, discussing about Nico's eleventh birthday.

"I want to give him a surprise," I replied.

"Just ask him what he wants and then you can give him an extra present to go along with it, that could be a surprise," he stated.

"You know, I want to buy everything for Nico. New clothes, new shoes. It's been so long since he had new clothes." I told him.

"Why don't you take him shopping?"

"I tried. But everytime Nico would tell me he is busy with something. I asked him if he wanted to go shopping last week, and he said he had a science test to study for," I responded.

"Well why don't you buy clothes for him yourself." He interlaced his fingers with mine.

"Have you seen the speed in which he's growing?"

What if I get his size wrong?"

He kissed my hand. "I think you should ask him what he wants for his birthday, and when you get the time, take Nico out for shopping. Buy him all the new clothes and shoes he wants, all right?" He kissed my forehead.

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Good. And one more thing. I've invited my father and brothers to dinner next week." Chris told me.

"Any special reason?" I enquired.

"I am going to tell them that the contract has been terminated and now you are my wife forever," he answered.

I blushed at hearing this. Even though it had been two weeks since Chris announced to the whole staff that I was his permanent wife, the fact still managed to color my cheeks. And now he was going to tell his family. How were they

going to react? I had a feeling that Keiran would accept me, it was his father and Brenton I was worried about. I didn't think his father liked me very much. And what would he do if his father and Brenton did not accept me? Was he going to leave me? Would he take my baby and throw me to the curb?

"Hey, what's wrong?" He turned my face to him.

"Nothing," I lied easily, too easily.

He arched his eyebrow at me. "Tell me what's wrong," he demanded.

"I told you nothing's wrong," I fibbed.

"Little bird, tell me what's wrong." He used the tone that told me I better start talking or else.

"What if your family doesn't accept me? What will you do then?" I searched his eyes, trying to get my answers through the sea green irises. He

kissed me softly. "Little peach, trust me, they will accept you. Keiran will be thrilled to know that you are my permanent wife now, he already accepted you as his sister the day we got married," he said.

"But what about your dad and Brenton. Your dad never really liked me," I said.

"What made you think my father doesn't like you?" He questioned.

"Well he was awfully rude to me when you came to my apartment, no offence, and since we've gotten married, he never once invited us to dinner," I replied.

"There was a dinner, the family dinner," He pointed out.

"Your whole family was there. I mean, just us. Me and you. He never invited us over for dinner. He never calls to ask how I'm doing or anything. Even though I have no idea how father-in-laws

normally behave, I still think they at least ask how their daughter-in-law is," I ranted.

"Is my little wife feeling neglected?" He cooed.

"Oh stop making fun of me. I'm just saying, he doesn't like me, so what will you do when he refuses to accept me?" I questioned.

"I don't care," He said.

"What?" What did he mean by that?

"I don't care if he does not accept you, I'll choose you," He elaborated.

"You're joking." He couldn't possibly do that.

"No I'm not. I'll choose you," he repeated.

"Over your family?"

"Yes."

"But why?" I did not believe he would do that.

"Because you make me happy. And you are the mother of my unborn child," he answered.

"It's easier said than done." I told him.

"What is?"

"Choosing someone over your family. It's kind of impossible," I clarified.

"I'm not choosing anyone over my family. My father and brothers are my family. You are my family. So if I choose you over my father and brothers, I won't be choosing just anyone over my family, I'll be choosing my family...well...over my family." I chuckled as he said this.

"I won't come between you and your family, Chris" I said with conviction.

"Nobody is coming between anybody, I'm telling you, my father and Brenton will accept you, you have nothing to worry about."

Despite his constant assurances, I wasn't convinced. I knew Mr. Palmer only married Chris to me because he believed it would be temporary. Even when he was at my apartment,

I could tell he did not approve of me. And even though he didn't say anything to me directly, I could still feel his dislike of me in our brief encounter. I had no idea what Chris was thinking, but I was worried. Very worried.

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I knocked softly before opening the door of Nico's bedroom. He was sitting on his bed, his knees drawn up to his chin. The only light that was slightly illuminating his room was coming from his lamp which was sitting on the nightstand. I gave him a small smile before entering and closing the door softly behind me.

"Hey Nico, I hope I'm not disturbing you," I said lightly.

In response, I got a hiccup. Worry clenched my heart and I raced over to my brother and sat down on the bed in front of me.

"Nic, are you okay?" I asked, looking at my

brother's tear stained face.

He didn't say anything, just hiccuped as more tears streamed down his face. Worry and fear clouded my mind and I hugged Nico tightly to me, rubbing his back in a soothing manner.

"Nico tell me what's wrong, please," I pleaded.

"No—Nothing," he sobbed.

"Don't lie to me, Nico. I'm your sister, tell me what's wrong, why are you crying?"

Nico pulled away from me and tried to wipe the tears with the back of his hand, but the tears did not stop leaking from his eyes. I felt helpless seeing my brother like this. Why was he upset?

"Tell me what's wrong," I coaxed.

"Al—Alice, did mum and dad hate us?" He asked.

My heart cracked. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?" Where was this coming from? Nico was perfectly fine and had accepted

our parents' death years ago.

"Then why—why did they leave us?" More tears escaped.

I held his hands tightly. "It wasn't their choice, Nic. Mum and dad were sick." I told him.

"Did—Didn't they know that we needed them?" It felt like I was transported back years ago, when mum and dad had just passed away. Nico asked me the same questions then, and even though I tried my best to answer his questions, right now, I felt helpless just like I had felt all those years ago.

"They knew, bud, but like I said, they didn't have a choice. Mum and dad did not want to leave you, they wanted to stay with you forever," I explained.

"Why is God so cruel? Why did He take mum and dad away from us? Did God not know that I needed mum and dad?" He asked.

I had no answer for that. Well I did, but I didn't think I could explain in a rational manner. So I opted to choose the subject and go to the heart of the problem.

"Nico, what's wrong? Why ask me all these questions again?" I understood why he was asking me this, but what I did not understand that Nico was perfectly fine all these years, and now all of a sudden he was asking about mum and dad.

"If mum and dad were here, I wouldn't be an orphan," he sobbed.

My heart ached at hearing Nico call himself an orphan. "Yo—You are not orphan, Nic." I was his older sister. I was practically his parent.

"Yes I am," he cried. "An orphan is som—someone who has no pa—parents, and I have no parents."

"But—But—" I had no idea what to say to make

him feel better.

"It's true, don't lie to me, Alice. Everybody in school calls me an orphan. Nobody wants to be my friend be—because I'm an or—orphan. Stan says that my pa—parents hated me that's wh—why they le—left me." A torrent of fresh tears fell, as sobs shook Nico's body.

Anger and sadness flared in me as I watched my brother crying for something in which he had no control over. Without thinking, I wrapped Nico in my arms, and rubbed his back, all the while fuming over this Stan kid.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked, trying my best to contain my fury.

"One week after I joined school," he replied.

"And why didn't you tell me? You know you are suppose to tell me if somebody hurt you or bully's you."

"You have your own problems. I thought it

would stop—stop but it didn't." I hugged him tighter. I wished he had told me sooner that kids were bullying him. I would've dealt with the problem quicker.

"Did you tell your teachers?" I enquired.

"No." Nico seemed to be getting himself under control.

"Why not?" I queried.

"Because I didn't want them to think differently of me," he replied.

"Nico, your teachers will help you. They will never bully you or anything," I explained.

"What if they do?" Nico queried.

"They won't," I stated. "So I want you to go to school tomorrow tell your teacher how the other kids are treating you. And I am going to talk to your teacher as well, all right." I wiped

Nico's face with my fingers.

"You sure it won't be a problem?"

"It won't be a problem at all," I assured him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"What for?"

"For crying and worrying you," he answered.

"Hey, I'm your sister. You can cry all you want in front me, and you are my little brother, you are suppose to worry me." I ruffled his hair, my heart jumping in relief when I saw Nico smiling.

"Now tell me, what do you want for your brithday?" I asked, wanting to talk about happy things.

"Is it okay if I want to celebrate my brithday this year?" He asked, green eyes hopeful.

"You mean like a party?"

Nico nodded. "Sort of. Yes, if it's not a problem."

"Of course you can. Who would you like to invite?" I questioned.

"I want to celebrate my birthday with other kids like me." Nico told me.

"Kids like you?" I frowned in confusion.

"Orphans. I want to celebrate my birthday with orphans," he explained.

"Oh. Really? Is that what you want?" I had to be absolutely sure that's what Nico wanted.

He nodded. "Yes. And I want a huge party with lots of kids who are orphans. I know it will cost a lot of money, if you don't have it, then I don't want a party."

"Money is not an issue. And we'll have a huge party, just like you want." Finally, my brother was not forlorn anymore. As soon as I would leave his room, I would start preparing for his party.

"Oh and can you please let the orphan kids know that I don't want any presents, I just want them to come to my birthday party." Nico was looking excited about his birthday.

"Of course, I'll let them know." I stood up from the bed. "Now, why don't you go back to your homework, while I go and make preparations for your huge birthday party. And tomorrow, I'm taking you shopping, okay? I am going to buy you new clothes and shoes, all right?"

Nico nodded. "Okay Alice. Thank you so much. You are the best sister in the whole world."

"And you are the best brother ever." With a final wink, I left Nico's room, eager to start planning his birthday.

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"Where were you?" Chris asked as soon as I entered our bedroom.

"I took your advice and asked Nico what he wanted," I replied.

"And what did he say?"

"He wants to celebrate his birthday with orphans. So can you please contact different orphanages and invite the kids to Nico's birthday party?" I requested.

"All right, anything else?"

"You agree? Just like that?" He was crazy.

"Of course. Doing this will make Nico happy, which in turn will make you happy." I really loved this man.

"So you have no problem with throwing a huge birthday party for Nico?"

"No, I don't. What do you think, will five hundred orphans be enough?"

"Five hundred?! How will we accommodate so many?" I asked, bewildered.

"Leave it to me, little dove. I've got it under control. You just worry about finding a nice dress to wear," He stated.

"You are crazy," I said.

He winked at me. "Crazy for my woman." Those words made my heart flutter.

The CEO

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Chris please," I moaned, lost in the sensation he was creating within me. His manhood was

doing delicious things to me, torturing me to a blissful end.

"Not until I'm satisfied," he said, thrusting deep inside me.

"Satisfied about—about what?" I asked breathlessly, barely repressing another moan.

"That my agenda has been met," he replied, pumping in me.

"What agenda? Wh—What are you tal—talking about?" Why couldn't he just let me come?

"My agenda is that, I want you to know who you belong to once I'm done with you, and I want you to never forget it," he ground out, screwing his sex, causing a whirlwind of sensation to overtake me.

"I already know," I moaned out.

"Do you, little peach? Do you know who you belong to?" He tweaked my nipple.

"Yes." Another moan escaped.

"Who? Tell me who you belong to?" He gritted out, I could tell he was close.

"Yo—You." I closed my eyes as pleasure washed over me with the force of a tidal wave.

"Say it again. Louder," he commanded, thrusting more forcefully.

"You!" I screamed.

"Say my name. Scream my name, little bird," he ordered.

"Chris!" And finally, he allowed me to fall in the pit of utmost bliss. Pleasure exploded inside me as my toes curled and my back arched as the orgasm raced through me. I shuddered in sexual delight as wave after wave of pleasure drowned me in carnal bliss.

"My little fairy." He stilled on top of me as he came, riding his own orgasm.

He rolled on his side taking me with him as both of us laid there, basking in post-coital bliss. I snuggled next to him, who tightened his hold on me. One of his hands made its way in my hair while the other kept me securely in place next to him.

"Tell me you love me," he commanded softly, kissing me.

I blushed. "I—I lo—love you," I stuttered.

"Say it again, and this time, don't stutter," he ordered.

"Why? You already know how I feel, why do you want me to say it again?" It wasn't like he told me loved me, and that thought always managed to create a fissure in my heart.

"Say it," he commanded more forcefully.

"No." I hid my face in the crook of his neck. I felt so vulnerable when telling Chris I loved him. He had my heart and I was afraid he would break it.

His hand which was resting on my waist slowly glided south until it reached the apex of my thighs. And then, slowly, two of his fingers entered me, causing me to gasp in surprise. I was already sore and tender down there due to three orgasms, and now his penetrating fingers were back to torturing me.

"Tell me you love me," he stated, pumping his fingers in and out.

"I already did," I moaned, trying not to give in to him.

"No, tell me without stuttering," he ordered.

"Why?" Stars exploded in front of my eyes as I neared another orgasm.

"Because I said so," he replied.

"Chris stop," I pleaded, my sex highly sensitized.

"Not until you tell me you love me," he said.

"I—I—" I stopped myself just in time.

"Stubborn are we? Well, I'll just have to use other means." He inserted another finger and latched on to my left breast. Instantly, my senses evaded me and I was left with nothing but the feel of his lips and fingers.

"Tell me you love me, and I'll give you the reprieve you so desperately seek." He knew that I close, and he was holding me on the edge. Damn him!

Not having the support of my common sense, I voiced out the words that my husband was torturing me for. "I love you." I said softly, not stuttering.

"Say it again." His fingers hit my sweet spot and I was lost.

"I love you."

"One more time, little dove."

"I love you." And that was when I was once again allowed to bathe myself in the pleasure of

a mind numbing orgasm.

"You will always love me," he whispered, before capturing my lips in searing kiss as my body shuddered with the sizzling bolts of my climax.

And you will never love me. The thought was painful, but it was the truth. If he loved me he would've told me by now. I mean, I bared my soul to him, shouldn't he do the same?

We laid there, lost in the feel and warmth of one another. He began lazily trailing fingers over skin, while I kept my face hidden in the crook of his neck, inhaling his masculine scent.

"We have a lot to do today, don't we?" He said.

"Yes. The caterers and the decorators will be arriving soon, and I need to take out Nico's outfit for tonight," I stated.

"What kind of cake is Nico going for?" He asked, getting up from the bed.

"Ice cream cake, it's his favorite." I told him, eyeing his naked form with obvious approval.

"All right, why don't you change as well," he suggested.

"How many orphans have you invited?" I questioned, watching him disappearing inside the walk-in closet.

"Five hundred and fifty, is that okay or should we invite more?"

"No, five fifty are fine." Jeez, he had a lot of contacts.

Taking a deep breath I removed myself from the bed and dragged my naked body in the bathroom. I turned on the shower to medium heat and instantly got under the warm spray, letting the water soothe me.

I stiffened as arms encircled my waist, but instantly relaxed knowing that it was Chris behind me. I leaned into him as the water

cascaded over us.

"You decided to join me," I said.

"Can't let you have all the fun, now can I?" He kissed my neck sweetly.

"What fun?" I grinned at him.

"This, taking a shower," he replied.

"You're kidding, right? How is taking a shower fun?" I arched my eyebrows in question.

"What I meant was, taking a shower with you is fun," he corrected before dipping a finger in my hair, and I was lost once again.

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"Do you think they'll come?" Nico asked nervously, eyeing the empty grounds which were decorated with balloons and streamers. There were a few tables with various assortment of snacks, and one table which was reserved for goodie bags that Nico himself

filled with exciting things.

"Of course they'll come," I assured my brother, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

"What if they don't?" He queried, looking at me.

"They will, don't worry." It was Chris who replied, coming up and standing next to me. "You okay, little peach? My baby isn't giving you any trouble, is he?" He whispered. He was dressed to kill. His suit fit to perfection, and not a hair was out of place.

"No, the baby is behaving, and stop saying he, it could be a she," I pointed out.

"It's a he. My mum might've escaped the family curse but that doesn't mean you can," he stated.

"I can, and speaking of your mum, you still have to tell me about Elizabeth," I reminded him.

"Yes I do, how about tomorrow?" He didn't look

nervous at all much to my surprise.

"All right. Yeah, tomorrow. You'll tell me everything, right?" Finally, he would tell me about his sister.

"Yes, I'll tell you whatever you want to know," he replied.

"They're here, they are here!" Nico said excitedly. I followed Nico's gaze and saw three buses arrive. They parked before the door was opened and numerous children filtered out, wearing colorful clothes. More buses followed in their wake and more children piled out.

"Wow, that's a lot of children," I commented as I eyed the hundreds of children running around.

Nico hurried over to them and soon enough he was mingling with kids his own age. Chris and I walked about, watching as some of the kids were being entertained by the clown while the others helped themselves to snacks and juice.

"This is nice, isn't it?" I said to Chris.

"Yes, having these children here is nice." He was eyeing someone at a distance. I followed his gaze to see he was looking at a baby boy, no older than a few months, sitting in the lap of the one of the care takers.

Without saying anything, Chris walked towards the baby, me beside him, and in a few seconds we reached the baby. The little boy gave Chris a toothless smile and he smiled back. The baby looked to have blonde hair with dark blue eyes, and the most beautiful smile I had ever seen on a baby. His chubby cheeks had pink splotches, and he was dressed in a red shirt and blue pants, with a blue cap to match.

"May I hold him?" Chris asked the care taker, a sweet lady with mocha skin and dark, curly hair. She nodded and Chris wasted little time in picking up the boy from her lap.

I watched as Chris interacted with the little boy, he looked like the epitome of fatherhood. He was treating the little boy as if he was his own son. Seeing him like this, had my worries evaporating. I knew he would make an excellent father.

"What's his name?" I asked the care taker.

"For now, his name is Shawn, it hasn't been finalized yet." She told me.

"Abioye," Chris said, causing both of us to look up at him in surprise.

"What?" I queried.

"His name should be Abioye," Chris clarified.

"Why?" I enquired, watching the baby playing with Chris's hair.

"It suits him, don't you think?" He kissed the baby's chubby cheek.

"I guess." To be honest, I thought the name was

strange.

"How long has he been with you?" He asked the care taker.

"Since the day he was born. His parents died in an accident while he was still at the hospital, he was a preemie, you see. They were coming to see him when they got in an accident and died," she informed us.

"And you haven't decided on a name yet? All this time?" Chris enquired, holding the baby's tiny hand.

"All the kids call him with different names, it's kind of difficult for us to pick one." She smiled.

"You should name him Abioye," Chris stated.

"People have the right to change a baby's name if they choose to adopt him." The care taker told us.

"Do they now?" Chris frowned.

"Yes, since this one doesn't have a birth certificate yet. We'll have his certificate made in a few days," she replied.

"And why haven't you had his birth certificate made uptil now?" Chris queried.

"We were hoping somebody will adopt him, we sometimes wait it out in case the babies get adopted, but now we'll have his birth certificate made," she answered.

"Can you wait for a few days, if it's not too much to ask?" Chris questioned, smiling at the baby. I looked at him in confusion, wondering why he was making such a request.

"May I know the reason why, Mr. Palmer?" The lady asked.

"Well you've waited this long, I'm sure you can wait a few more days, can't you?"

"Yes but, you have to give us a reason, sir," she persisted.

"Can you or can you not wait a few more days?"
Chris dodged her question once again.

"We can, but—"

"Perfect. That's all good." Chris tried to hand the baby over to the care taker when he started to cry. Without thinking, Chris hugged the baby to him, and instantly he stopped crying.

"Well would you look at that, he likes you, Mr. Palmer," the care taker said with a smile on her face.

"Does he, I like him, too." Chris kissed the baby's head affectionately. He whispered something the little boy's ear before reluctantly, handing him over to the care taker. Taking my hand, Chris led me away from the baby.

"What did you say to the baby?" I asked once we were a safe distance away.

"I made a promise to him," Chris answered.

"And that is?"

"That I'll never let a tear escape his eyes," he responded.

"I don't understand," I said honestly.

"Wait for this party to be over, I'll tell you then," he replied and that was the end of our conversation regarding the little baby.

The rest of the evening passed with smiles and laughters. Nico did not stop smiling for even a minute as he talked to each every kid that was present there. Nico personally thanked all of them for coming to his birthday party, and when he cut the cake, Nico had the biggest smile on his face. The maids were responsible for making sure that every kid got cake and a healthy serving of snacks.

When it was time for all the kids to head back, Nico made sure that no one left without a goodie bag. He even gave goodie bags to the

care takers and thanked them for coming. Only when the last of the buses drove away that Nico went inside. Chris instructed the maids to clean up and bring Nico's presents inside. Then he took my hand and led me inside.

"So now will you tell me about the baby?" I asked as soon as he closed our bedroom door.

"How will you like it if we adopted that baby?" He asked me, taking me by surprise.

"Seriously?" Why did he want to adopt a baby when he was going to have his own child in just a few months?

"Yes," he replied and sat down next to me.

"Chris, are you sure you want to adopt a baby, when you'll have your own child in just a few months?" I shifted closer to him.

"It's not about having my own baby, little fairy. Did you see the smile on his face? Did you see the innocence sparkling in those blue eyes? I

don't know about you but I won't be able to live with myself knowing that innocence and smile will be no more once he grows up and faces the harsh realities of this world, not when I can do something about it," he stated.

"But are you sure you want to, I mean, taking responsibility of a child isn't easy. And will you be able to treat him just like your own son, even when your own baby is born?" I asked.

"Yes. I may not be a father yet, little peach, but I do know that I want that little boy to be my son. I want to protect him from the evils of this world. I want to keep my promise to him and make sure that no tears escape his eyes. And just like I'll protect my real child, I'll protect my adopted one, too, so what do you say?"

I didn't have to think much, the answer was staring at me right in the face. He was right, taking care of a child who had no one in this world was the right thing to do. I mean, Nico

was an orphan, and no one was there except me. Nico did not get the love he needed and deserved because our parents died. But now, when there was a way that a little boy could get the love of parents, then why shouldn't we take it. What was the point of all this wealth when we couldn't use it to help the people in need.

"All right. I'm with you. If you want to adopt that baby, then you have my full support, and I'll love and treat him like my own son." I told Chris who beamed at me in response.

"Thank you, little bird, thank you so much. We'll go in a few days and adopt him," he stated.

"Why not tomorrow?" I asked.

"Are you kidding? We have to buy clothes and toys for him. And I have to inform dad and my brothers about this, so we have to wait for a few days."

I chuckled before he leaned down and kiss me

tenderly. His kiss told me all I needed to know.

That everything would be all right.

The CEO

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I closed Nico's bedroom door after making sure he was busy with his homework. I checked to see that the maids did not need me before I went to see my husband. Today Chris was going to tell me about Elizabeth. The thought of that barely let me sleep at night, but I wasn't tired. I wanted to know about his sister, and he

was finally going to tell me.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Chris asked as soon as I entered. He was typing away on his laptop, but I was not going to let this go. He was going to tell me, and he was going to tell me now.

"Tell me about Elizabeth," I said bluntly.

His eyebrows furrowed. "Now? Can't it wait? I've got to send a few emails," he said.

"No. Now." I scooted closer to him.

"But it's just a few email, little dove." I knew he was stalling, but I was determined.

"No. Now." I parroted.

He sighed and shut his laptop. "All right. Come here." He pulled me closer until my lips were a whisper away from his neck.

"What do you want to know?" He gazed at me through those mesmerizing eyes.

"Everything," I answered.

"Okay, where should I start?" He held my hand in his big ones.

"From the beginning," I stated.

"All right, my little curious bird." He closed his eyes and took a deep, as if he was preparing himself to reveal a horrible truth.

"As you already know, my mum managed to break the family curse and bore a baby girl first, before me, Keiran and Brenton. Everything was perfect in their lives; my father adored Elizabeth, and was a complete slave to her happiness. My grandparents didn't exactly approve of having a girl as the first child, as you can imagine their primitive thinking about having a boy first who will carry on the family name." He paused.

"Nonetheless, they kept their mouths shut about their disapproval; because if my dad heard anyone talking about Lizzy in a negative way, he or she would be in great trouble. So for my dad, the elders kept their thoughts and

opinions to themselves, and pretended to be happy for my father's sake.

"Years passed, and as Lizzy grew up, my father started becoming more and more protective of her; so much so, that she started to feel suffocated. My father made sure she was accompanied by no less than six servants wherever she went. She had a personal maid who stayed with her twenty four seven. Elizabeth hated the special treatment, but she couldn't do anything about it."

"She could've talked to your father," I suggested. He scoffed. "You think she didn't try that? She begged father for reprieve; she didn't stop asking for just a bit of freedom. All Lizzy wanted was some time to breathe alone. She wanted to be by herself and she hardly ever got it. The only time she was alone was when she was in the bathroom."

"Well, in that case, she must be taking incredibly long showers." It was meant to be a joke, but when he nodded, my eyes widened.

"She did exactly that. She spent hours in the bathroom. So much so, the one day, the maid freaked out thinking Lizzy has committed suicide. But then my father and Lizzy had a long talk over Lizzy's extensive stays in the bathroom. Lizzy demanded some freedom but my father rejected her pleas. My mother tried to reason with him as well but father stated that Lizzy was not going to spend time without anyone watching over her."

"Your father could've allowed a little freedom," I stated; trying to imagine myself in Lizzy's place. If my father kept me under supervision twenty four seven, I would've gone berserk

"According to him, he was only keeping his baby girl safe. He did not want any harm to come her way. Father kept Elizabeth sheltered all her

life—that is, until she ran away. But he was just keeping her safe," he said.

"So what happened then?" I asked. I wanted to argue that his father could've loosen up a bit, but I decided not to bother with arguments. In a way, I could understand why Mr. Palmer did what he did.

"Elizabeth was angry, but she couldn't do much; so she decided on another tactic. She befriended her personal maid whom she resented previously. Lizzy started using her maid as a confidante; telling her sob stories about feeling trapped, until the maid started helping her sneak out of the castle. And then, Lizzy was happy, because she finally got the freedom she craved, even if it was only for a few hours everyday. And it was during one those escapades that she met Henry." He paused once again.

"How?" I couldn't help asking, even though I

knew he was about to tell me.

"Lizzy met him during winters. It was one of those nights where snow became your worst enemy. Lizzy has been sheltered her whole life and didn't have a single clue on how to survive in extreme weather. She snuck out with only a fur coat, hat and gloves, but they couldn't stop the snow from penetrating her skin. She was very cold, but incredibly stubborn. She did not dare return, because she wanted to spend her three hours in private. So she sat under a tree, shivering from the brutal cold. And that was how she met Henry.

"Lizzy did not want to waste her time sitting under a tree for three hours, so she decided to check out the shops nearby, and that was where she first saw the man she fell in love with. Henry was buying a pack of matchsticks when he saw Lizzy enter the shop. And according to my sister, all his concerns flew away the

moment their eyes met. Henry dropped the matchsticks and immediately rushed over to her because she was shivering from the cold. Henry immediately removed his jacket, and draped it over her."

"Sounds like a gentleman," I commented with a smile.

"He is an extremely honorable man, and I am glad Lizzy found him. Anyways, from then on, Henry and Lizzy started meeting in secret, obviously, and everybody thought that Lizzy has accepted father's decision about absolute supervision. Little did they know that Lizzy was happy because she was in love with another man and was using her personal maid to sneak out of the castle." He took a deep breath.

"After a few months, father announced Elizabeth's and Alejandro's marriage. And Elizabeth was not happy. She wanted to marry Henry, the man she loved, not her childhood

friend."

"Your father should've asked Elizabeth whether she wanted to marry Alejandro or not," I interrupted.

"He wanted to, believe me, he did, but there were other factors as well which led him to ignore his only daughter's wishes," he responded.

"Factors like what? What could be more important than your daughter's decision?"

"You should know something about the Palmer family. Our values haven't really changed in all this time. This is the twenty first century, yet we have the same androcentric thinking that our ancestors had. We as in the males are patriarchal. And that's how it has been from generation to generation."

"You mean to say, you guys still believe that women have no rights and that their only

purpose is to serve the male specie?" I scowled. He laughed. "Not really. But yeah, we make sure that the females in this family know who has the power. We love to dominate and make our women submit." His voice turned husky as he said the last part; and despite wanting to grab him and kiss him silly, I eyed him with evident disapproval.

I sat up to face him. "I don't like this," I stated. He chuckled darkly. "It is what it is, you don't have to like it. You my, little fairy, just need to learn to live with it." He kissed me softly.

"Start telling me about Elizabeth before I scratch your eyes out because of your androcentric thinking," I warned.

He chuckled again. "Just try, little peach, just try."

"Start talking," I seethed.

"Or what?" He gave me challenging look.

"Just start talking."

"No." He crossed his arms over his chest.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Don't push me," I threatened.

"Don't you get it by now, pushing you is what I love doing most." I had no idea if it was me or my hormones, but as soon as the words left his lips, I was on him like a predator to prey. I started scratching his chest, but in just under five seconds, he had me pinned under him.

"Let go, you patriarchal man. I am going to change your sexist mind-set if it's the last thing I do," I growled.

He sealed my lips with his and only released me after I was gasping for oxygen. He peppered kisses all over my jaw and neck and had me moaning in just under two minutes.

"God, I love this side of you. You should be careful, you don't want to harm the baby." I froze at his word. Shit! He was right, what was I thinking. I could've harmed my baby by acting so recklessly.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize..." He released my wrists and I immediately placed my hand on my swollen tummy.

"Hey, relax." He kissed my cheek. "It's okay. I won't let anything happen to you or our baby."

"But I wasn't thinking and I jumped on you."

"And I caught you, just like I'll always catch you. I won't ever let you fall." He pulled me to him.

"Do you want to hear the rest of the story?" He asked softly.

"Yes," I muttered softly.

"Let's see, where was I?"

"You were telling me why your father didn't ask

for Lizzy's permission," I reminded him.

"Right. Mainly my father didn't do this was because it was my grandfather's decision. He wanted Elizabeth to marry Alejandro, and he strictly told my father not to intervene. My father was to only focus on the wedding."

"Oh, I see."

"When Elizabeth got to know, she was furious. She wanted to run away, but was afraid. She wanted the blessings of mum and dad, but unfortunately she got none. She reached out to me for help because I am her best friend. Even though I knew that dad would never agree, I still tried to talk to him, to reason with him, but to no avail, dad refused to budge.

"I hated disappointing my sister, but I had to tell her that father did not agree. I tried to stop her from marrying Henry, not because I didn't think he was a good man, but because I did not want

a feud in the family,our relatives weren't exactly thrilled with the fact that Elizabeth was first born, this would've given them ammunition against my father. But Lizzy inherited a lot from our dad, and one of the trait was being strong-willed. She refused, and told me straight up that she was only going to marry Henry, with or without my support."

"Your sister ran away from home," I said.

"Yes, she did and I helped her escape," he confessed.

My eyebrows shot to my hairline at hearing this. No way. Not possible. He would never do anything like that. Well at least I thought he wouldn't. But he did. He helped his sister escape.

"You helped her escape? How? Why?" I questioned, intrigued. He always managed to surprise me, in one way or the other.

"Yes. The day when she was going to run away, I held the ladder which Elizabeth used to climb down from her room, while Henry stood beside me ready to take Elizabeth away. When Lizzy was safely on the ground, she told me where she and Henry will be going and that I was welcome to come and see them. I did not want her to leave, but I will never go against her happiness. Lizzy is not only my sister, she is my best friend and my confidante.

"Anyway, Lizzy and Henry ran away, and I pretended to be shocked and angry like everybody else in the family. Nobody knew I helped my sister escape. But I made sure to check up on her at least twice a month. She had her first baby a year after she and Henry got married."

"What happened with your family after Lizzy ran away?" I enquired.

"What do you think? My parents were distraught.

Dad was angry and heart broken. The relatives swooped down like vultures, telling my father how they had been right all along and that Elizabeth was nothing but a disgrace to the family. They said that she should never have been first born, because she was too selfish to keep her family's reputation intact.

"It all went downhill from there. Mum and dad fought. Dad changed, he went from being a slave of love to a cold, ruthless man who never trusted anyone again. Lizzy's disappearance turned my dad to stone. He stopped loving. He stopped caring."

"I'm so sorry." I didn't why I said that. Maybe because I could picture the pain and unrest of his family. And selfish or not, I was actually glad that this wasn't the family I was born in. Sure, my family was poor, and I lost my parents because we didn't have enough money to pay for their treatment, but there was love and

happiness. We didn't have relatives that objected to our existence. My family had peace.

"Don't be," he murmured, stroking my hair.

"Do you regret it?" I looked at him. "Do you regret helping Elizabeth escape? Do you feel responsible for what happened with your family?" I asked.

He nodded. "I did. I did feel like it was all my fault. But when I told Elizabeth, she said that it wasn't my fault; that she would've run away whether I helped her or not. She said if anyone should feel responsible, it should be her."

"She's right," I stated. And she was. It was not his fault. He only wanted to keep his sister happy. He wanted to make sure she was safe.

"Do you think so?" He asked, softly.

"Yes. You love your sister and was only helping her, it wasn't your fault that your father changed, none of it is your fault. So don't blame yourself,"

I said, firmly.

"I don't blame myself anymore, but I did for a long time." He smiled at me.

"Good. If you still blame yourself, then I'll be giving you another talk," I warned.

He chuckled. "Yes Ma'am." And captured my lips in a sweet, tender kiss.

I could tell there was more to the story; he hadn't told me everything, but he told me enough. And for now, that was enough.

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Chris eyed me with amusement, while I only shot him a glare in return. He was enjoying this a lot, and all I could do was stare at the clock as the seconds ticked by and dinner time came closer with every tick and tock.

"Don't worry, little peach, everything will be fine," he said for the fiftieth time.

I shook my head for the fiftieth time. "No, no. Your dad hates me, and he's going to hate all this." I gestured to the pots and pans on the stove. "Are you going to kick me out?"

Today Chris was going to tell his family about the termination of the contract, and I was nervous as well. No matter how hard I tried I couldn't get the look of disapproval from Mr. Palmer out of my mind. And no matter what, my heart just wouldn't stop pounding, like something reall bad was going to happen and I better be prepared for it.

"Nobody hates you, little one." He kissed my forehead. "Relax, it's not good for the baby."

"You know what's not good for the baby, your father's hatred. Oh my God, what am I going to do, I didn't even look for an apartment, where will I go?" I was speaking to myself.

His grip on my arms tightened, and I looked up at him to see the green irises resembling shards of anger. "Get one thing straight, little bird, you are not going anywhere, got it. I am never letting you go, so stop thinking about finding another bloody apartment. Whether my father likes you or not, you are my wife and you will stay with me forever," he nearly shouted.

"But—But your father—"

"Say that one more time and I'll fuck your mouth so hard, you'll lose the ability to speak," he threatened with no hint of jest.

I gulped but nodded reluctantly. He keeps telling

me that no matter what happened he would never leave me, but I just couldn't believe it. Why would he leave his family for me, when he couldn't even fire Helga for me? I understood that my demand was irrational, but when he didn't fire her for me, why would he leave his father?

"You have nothing to worry about. You are mine, and I protect what's mine." He kissed me long and hard, forcing me to trust him.

"What time will they come?" I asked after he released my lips and I was allowed to breathe.

"In an hour. Brenton had a meeting, therefore they'll be an hour late," he informed me.

"Good." I clamped a hand over my hand. "Sorry, I did not mean that."

He chuckled. "It's a shame you're pregnant, I wish I could drug you to help you relax."

"I'm not that worried," I defended, my cheeks

heating up.

"Oh no, of course not, you just keep touching your neck and missing the presence of your broken necklace for no reason at all." I could sense the sarcasm in his words.

"Well I miss my necklace. I had it for years, you know, that doesn't mean I'm worried," I lied. I did miss my necklace, but I was more worried about his family.

He came closer to me and bent his head until his lips brushed the shell of my ear. "I promise you, little fairy, you'll forget that necklace very soon," he whispered, before placing a soft kiss below my ear.

"Easier said than done," I stated.

"Trust me, it'll happen sooner than you think," he said confidently.

I rolled my eyes. "Why are you here anyways, shouldn't you be in the living room."

"I'm here to keep an eye on you; make sure you don't hurt yourself," he replied

"I'm not a child, Chris. I can handle a fire and a few sharp tools," I said, annoyance dripping from my words.

"Yes, I'm sure you can. But right now, you are acting like a child who's about to take her first exam, so forgive me if I'm not entirely confident in your abilities right now." When I shot him a deadly glare, he only winked at me, and that bloody wink did something funny to my insides. God help me, he was not making it easy for me; everything he did only made me fall deeper in love with him. He had my heart in his hands and he knew how to manipulate it to his advantage.

"Get out of the kitchen," I ordered.

He chuckled causing me to scowl at him. "It's cute how you think you can order me around."

"Out!" I said more firmly.

"Instead of telling me what to do, why don't you check on the rice, I don't think they should be burning like that." I turned just in time to turn off the stove, saving myself from a total disaster.

"See, this is why you should not be here. Look what happened because of you." I took the pot of rice off the stove.

"You're blaming me for this, seriously?!" he exclaimed, causing me to giggle out loud.

"Yes." I giggled.

"Finally, you laughed, I thought I'd never be able to put a smile on your face," he said, relief and affection shining in his eyes.

I blushed at his words. "I'm sorry," I murmured, feeling guilty about worrying my husband.

"Why are you apologizing?" He questioned.

"Because I worry you a lot. You do so much for

me and I can't even face your family," I replied.

"Hey, your anxiety over meeting my family is justified, dad can be pretty intimidating. And if I do a lot of things for you, you do a lot of things for me, too. You have nothing to apologize for, little peach." He took my hands in his and for a while neither of us said anything, too absorbed in the warmth of one another.

Our private moment was interrupted by Helga. "Mr. Palmer , your father and brothers are here, they are in the living room," she informed us.

Immediately, my heart resumed its thumping. The Palmers were here, I was going to be judged. Somebody kill me. Maybe I could pretend to be sick, that way I wouldn't have to face them.

"We'll be there," Chris said, dismissing her. Helga nodded then turned and walked out of the kitchen, leaving me and Chris alone.

"You should go, I'll finish up over here and then join you." I told him.

"Oh no, you're not getting out of this. You are going to come with me, and we'll let the maids finish up." Without waiting for my response, he took my hand and led me out of the kitchen.

"But, but, the chicken—"

"The chicken can be handled by the maids, they are not that bad at cooking, little peach," Chris said.

"I have a special way of cutting the chicken." I knew my excuse was ridiculous, but I wanted to avoid Mr. Palmer as much as possible.

"I'm sure my dad and brothers wouldn't care if the chicken is cut in an ordinary style." Before I could say anything, Chris and I entered the living room, where Mr. Palmer along with Keiran and Brenton were sitting. All three of them were dressed formally, one would think they came to

a banquet and not a family dinner.

"Hello dad, nice to see you," Chris said as he went to hug his dad.

"It's good to see you, too, son, how are you?" Mr. Palmer smiled affectionately at him

Not wanting to act like an idiot, I forced myself to go greet Mr. Palmer. "Good evening, Mr. Palmer" I said, forcing myself to sound normal.

"Alice, how's the baby?" Mr. Palmer asked me.

Nice to meet you too, Mr. Palmer, I'm fine, thanks for asking!

"The baby is doing great, we'll meet him in a less than five months," Chris stated.

"Little mushroom, it's nice to see you again. I didn't think I'd miss you so much." Keiran wrapped me in a brotherly hug, making me feel better. He had no idea, how much his hug meant to me. Apart from Chris, Keiran was the

only Palmer who didn't make me feel like an outcast.

"Where have you been?" I asked Keiran.

"I've been busy with work...and other...things," he responded.

I nodded then turned to see Brenton. "Hello Brenton, it's nice to see you." I held out my hand for him to shake.

Brenton gave me a nod of acknowledgement.

"Alice, you look good." But didn't shake my hand.

We had just finished with the pleasentries when Helga came. "Mr. Palmer, dinner is ready," she said.

"All right, Helga, we'll be there," Chris responded.

"Let's go eat before the food gets cold, I don't know about you guys, but I am starving."

Everyone murmured in agreement before making their way to the dining table. I, for one,

wanted to hide in my bedroom for the rest of the evening but I couldn't do that to Chris.

"What has Helga cooked tonight?" Mr. Palmer asked, taking a seat at the head of the table, the seat which Chris usually occupied.

"Actually dad, Alice did all the cooking today. She is really great at cooking," Chris praised me, causing me to blush.

"All right! Good job, little mushroom, I always knew you were a special one." I blushed deeper at Keiran's words.

Mr. Maslow frowned. "Alice cooked? But what about Helga, her talent in cooking rivals that of professional chefs," he said.

"I assure you, father, Alice is a much better cook." Just as he finished speaking, the door opened and the maids brought in the dishes, which they placed on the dining table before departing.

"Here." Chris passed the shrimps to his father.
"You should be the one to try this first."

Mr. Palmer took a few shrimps, dipped one in the sauce, and took a bite out of it. I swear, my heart did not dare beat as I saw his mouth working as he chewed the shrimp. And when he swallowed, my eyes followed the descent of the chewed shrimp as it made its way down his throat, his Adam's apple bobbing slightly.

"It's good, isn't it. My wife has a special talent," Chris stated, pride dripping from his words.

"If you're done bragging about your wife, can you please pass me the shrimps," Keiran whined. Chris chuckled but passed him the tray.

Mr. Palmer, however, did not comment. He simply went about eating the shrimps, not saying whether he liked it or hated it. And because of him, my heart was afraid to resume its beating, and I missed my necklace more

than ever.

"So, why the sudden dinner?" Mr. Palmer asked Chris.

Chris clasped my hand under the table as a smile lit up his handsome face. "Actually, Alice and I have a couple of things we want to tell you all."

"Oh? What is it?" Mr. Palmer looked intrigued.

Don't do it, Chris. Please don't.

"Well, as you all know, Alice and I were married under a contract. But, now, I have terminated the contract," he announced.

The shrimp dropped from Mr. Palmer's hand as his eyes hardened in obvious anger. "What?! You terminated the contract!" His voice rose, my heart froze.

"Yes. I realized I want Alice to be my wife forever, and so I had the contract terminated. I

don't need anyone else as long as I have Alice."
Chris gave my hand a soft squeeze.

Mr. Palmer stood up. "This is not acceptable. She." He pointed at me. "Is not going to be a part of this family, I forbid it!"

"Alice is my wife, dad, and I'm never going to leave her," Chris stated.

"The hell you're not! You are my son and you are not going to defy me. She is not going to be a part of this family, understood?!" By now, Mr Palmer was shouting.

Chris stood up, pulling me along with him. "I am your son, but I'm not going to leave Alice." Chris locked his eyes with his father, while Keiran and Brenton sat silently, watching the show.

"You have to leave her. She is nothing but a carrier of your baby. The contract is only for a year. You deserve better, Chris!" Mr. Palmer did not stop shouting. His words had tears burning

my eyes, and I wished I could run away.

"Stop it! You do not get to disrespect my wife in front of me. She is not just the mother of my baby, she is my wife, too!" Chris raised his voice, his hand squeezing mine, but I did not dare protest. I'd be here for my husband, I would never turn my back on him.

"She is not your wife, and she'll never be! She is nothing but trash, born and raised in the bloody slums. Women like her are only good for entertainment, you deserve a woman with status and class, not someone who is fit to be your maid, even Helga is better than her!" A tear fell but I quickly wiped it away before anyone could see.

"That's enough!" Keiran and Chris said in unison. I saw Keiran standing up, staring daggers at his father.

"You do not get to insult her in that way," Keirsn

stated.

Mr. Palmer ignored him. "I don't understand why you're talking like this, Chris, but let me tell you that you are making a huge mistake," he said.

"It's not a mistake, dad. I love her," Chris responded, his words dripping with honesty.

I gasped at hearing this. Chris loved me? He said loved me. How? When? Why? Did he mean it, or was he just saying all this? No, no, he meant it, I could feel the truth in those words. But why didn't he tell me that before?

It looked as if his words had shocked everyone, including me. A heavy silence descended upon the dining room; but it was quickly shattered by Mr. Palmer laughing.

"Love her?! Son, you don't know the first thing about love. And let me tell you, you don't fall in love with a trashy girl. You fall in love with someone of your standards, your caliber, not

someone who is not even worth the dirt under your feet." Mr. Palmer looked at Chris as if he was a ten year old boy and not a grown man who was fully capable of making his own decisions.

"Shut up!" Chris and Keiran shouted, surprising me once again.

"Dad, I swear if you say one more word against Alice—"

"You'll what, huh Keiran?" Mr. Palmer then looked at me, really looked at me. "I can't believe what a conniving bitch you really are. Not only did you trap my eldest son in marriage, you have also used your charms on my second son. Tell me, do you fuck Keiran by day and Chris by night?"

His words sliced my heart, and lashed at my self respect. I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand, not caring if everybody saw my

tears. I couldn't believe he would accuse me like this. How could he think, that I would do something like this.

If Chris believed him...

The sudden sound of bones cracking penetrated the thick fog of disbelief in my mind and brought me back to reality. I saw Keiran towering over the now fallen body of Mr. Palmer, who was sprawled on the floor, holding his bleeding nose. I saw Keiran glaring at his father, his eyes blazing. Brenton stood behind Chris, his face pale.

"How dare you disrespect her. How fucking dare you?!"

Mr. Palmer eyed Chris, who stood in front of me as still as a statue, blocking me from view.

"Leave her Chris, this is the last time I'm telling you," he said, his voice sounded strange.

"No," Chris said firmly.

"Fine. Then leave this castle. If you don't divorce her, you do not get to be a part of this family. I will not have you taint the royal blood. So what will it be, Chris, do you choose your family, your blood, or will you choose this trashy wife of yours?"

This was it, the moment of truth. Either Chris would stay true to his words and choose me, or he'd do the right thing and choose his family. If he chose his family over me, I would understand and I wouldn't hold it against him.

"I choose Alice. I'll always choose Alice," he stated, and it felt as if his words were the final nail in the coffin. I was too shocked to even gasp.

"Fine, I want you to leave the castle before midnight, otherwise I will have you thrown out. I don't care where you go, how you live, I don't ever want you to contact me ever again. You are no longer a part of this family, get out of here,"

Mr. Palmer stated.

"In that case, I want to tell you something as well. I am in love with Jenny, the girl who works at a toy store, and I plan to marry her very soon. So that means, I'm no longer a part of this family either. I'll go and pack my bags as well," Keiran stated, causing Mr. Palmer to let out an animalistic growl.

"I'll be leaving now, father. But before I go, I want to say something to you. All this time, I have spoken to you with respect, but not anymore, since you're not my father anymore." Chris paused to take a deep breath. "I just want to say, this is the reason why you lost Lizzy, this is the reason why you lost mum, and this is the reason why you're losing me and Keiran as well.

"Love does not see money. It does not see a person's physical beauty. True love only sees the purity of the soul and the sincerity of the heart, and that's why, father, you'll never know

what true love is, because you see money and you see status, you don't see what you should. You are blind, father, and I'm not going to waste my time making you see what you obviously don't want to.

"And you say that Alice is going to taint the royal blood?! You're wrong! I'm taking her away because I don't want this family's blood to taint her or my son. Good bye Brian Palmer."

Turning around, He kissed my forehead before taking my hand in a firm grip and leading me out of the dining room. Away from the palmers, his family. Away from his home.

The CEO

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"Chris stop. Please, sit down and think for a moment. You can't just leave your father like this," I said anxiously.

"There is nothing to think about, little dove, we're leaving. Go get Nico and we're leaving," he stated, throwing his clothes in the suitcase.

"Chris, he is your family." I tried once again.

Chris let out a bitter laugh. "First of all, family doesn't do what he did. Second, after what he said, I am not going to stay with him even if he fucking begged me."

"But—"

"No! I am not going to stay with him, and that's final, Alice! You know, I wanted to do this for a long time. He was the reason my sister had to run away, and he thinks that it is perfectly okay

to treat people like shit, well he is wrong. My sister was one thing, but he has no right to stand in front of me and insult the woman I love, and expect me to be okay with it!" He shouted, breathing heavily.

In response, I took his hands in mine, before forcing him to sit down. He sat down with a huff, before pulling me on his lap. I wanted to place my head on his shoulder, but he captured my lips in a heated kiss before I got the chance.

The kiss was tender, yet full of un conveyed emotions. He poured his love, his guilt, and his strength into that kiss, giving me no choice but to accept whatever he gave me. After a few seconds, I felt the familiar lack of air. I tried to push him away, but he had no intention of releasing my lips, and continued the dance with my tongue. It was only when I was starting to get lightheaded did he broke up, only to place his forehead against mine, breathing deeply.

"I love you." He kissed me. "I love you so much."
Another kiss. "I won't ever leave you."

"I love you too. Calm down, Chris." I ran my fingers through his hair, trying to comfort him the best way I could.

"Little peach, I am going to ask you a question and I want you to answer honestly, okay?"

I gave him a puzzled look before nodding. "Of course. Ask me anything."

"Did you marry me for my money?" He asked, looking me dead in the eyes.

I swallowed hard. How was I going to answer that. It was true that I married Chris for money, but now I love him, how could I tell him that when he wanted an honest answer from me.

"Wh—Why are you asking me that?" I queried.

"Answer my question, Alice," he commanded.

I blinked, trying to tell him through my eyes not

to ask me that. "Chris..."

He cupped my cheek. "Answer me," he ordered softly.

"You'll hate me." I bit my lip, as guilt weighed on my heart.

"Answer my question," he repeated.

Taking a deep breath, I gave him the honest truth. "Alright, yes. I did marry you for money, because I needed money for my brother's surgery. You know that," I answered.

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, causing my heart to sink. Great, the moment he told me he loves me, I just gave him the reason to hate me. But I couldn't lie to him, he asked for the truth and I told him that.

"Do you love me?" He asked.

I nodded my head rapidly. "Yes. I do love you...so much," I stated, trying my best to

convey my feelings in those words.

"So if I take you to a small house, which only has two bedrooms and bathroom, will you still love me?" He asked.

"Did you not hear me? I said I love you. You. Not your money. I might've married you for money but I fell in love with you. Even if you make me live on the streets, it won't change my feelings for you. My love for you will never waver," I said with conviction.

He kissed me sweetly. "That is all I want to hear. Now be a good girl and go pack Nico's things, I'll finish packing and then we'll leave."

"Chris, are you sure about this?" I asked again. I didn't want him to resent me later; blaming me for separating him from his family.

"I am a hundred and fifty percent sure, and nothing you can do or say is going to change my mind. So go and pack Nico's things,

otherwise, Nico will have no choice but to survive the next few days with no clothes, the choice is yours."

Sighing audibly, I removed myself from his lap. "Okay, but if...anytime...you want to leave me and go back to your family, to your father...just tell me okay? I won't stop you, alright?" I wanted him to know that I wouldn't force him to stay with me if he didn't want to.

"Go and pack Nico's things." With that, he went back to his suitcase and quickly threw his clothes in.

Clearly being dismissed, I left my room and headed straight for Nico's room. I entered without knocking and found Nico sitting on the bed with a thick book in his hands. I tried to give him a reassuring smile but failed. I was too worried to give my brother any assurance.

"Nico. Come on, pack up all your things. We are

leaving." I told him.

Nico frowned before closing the book. "Leaving? Where? Why? What happened? Did you and Chris have a fight?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. Chris and I did not have a fight. We just have to leave, now. So please pack your things," I replied.

"Is Chris coming?" Nico enquired, getting up from his bed and heading for his closet.

"Yes, he's coming with us as well. Please hurry, Nico. Would you like me to help you?" I asked, eyeing Nico, as he took out a duffle bag and the rest of his clothes from the closet.

"No, no, it's fine. I can manage. Have you packed your clothes?" Nico asked.

"I am just going to, are you sure you don't need my help?"

"Positive. Go pack your things." Nico told me.

Nodding my head, I left Nico's room and went back to my own. As soon as I entered, my eyes widened when I saw my clothes in his Chris's hands.

"What are you doing?!" I tried my best not to shriek in bewilderment.

"I'm packing your clothes, what does it look like I'm doing?" He neatly folded the dress and placed it inside the suitcase.

"Yes, but why? I can pack my clothes by myself. You didn't have to do it," I said.

"So? You're my wife, not some stranger. I can pack your clothes if I want to," he argued, picking up another dress.

"Yes, but you didn't have to." I just couldn't wrap my head around the fact that he was packing my clothes.

"I didn't have to, I wanted to, little fairy. I like taking care of you." And then he winked; that

wink that did something funny to my insides.

"Can you please get the toiletries out, I've packed everything else. Has Nico finished packing?"

"I saw him packing. I'll check on him in a while."

I headed for the bathroom, and grabbed Chris things, putting them in a small black bag, while I put my things in an even smaller green bag.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I saw Keiran standing in the room.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He asked his brother.

"Are you?" Keiran shot back.

"Yeah," answered Chris.

"So am I," replied Keiran.

Chris noticing me standing there, nodded for me to come to him. I gave Keiran a small smile, which he returned, before striding over to my husband, who took the bags containing our

toiletries and placed them inside the suitcase. Then, Chris shut the suitcase and zipped it shut, making sure to lock it.

"Are you ready?" Chris asked Keiran, who nodded.

"Yes. Why don't you go and start the car, I'll bring the bags down," Keiran said.

Chris nodded before turning to me. "Go and see if Nico finished packing, then come down to the garage," he instructed before exiting the bedroom. Keiran, picked up the suitcase on the bed and followed after Chris, leaving me alone.

Not wanting to waste time, I went over to Nico's room. I sighed in relief when I saw him zipping his bags. When he saw me, Nico held up his thumb.

"I'm done, Alice. Ready to go?"

Nodding my head, I went over to pick one of Nico's bags but he stopped me. "No. You can't

carry my bags for me. Not when you're pregnant." I blushed at hearing Nico say that I was pregnant. "And besides, you've carried my bags for me all my life, let me carry my own bags now. I can do it."

Giving my brother a small smile, I ushered him out of his bedroom and both of us made our way to the garage, my heart picking up speed as I wondered where Chris planned to take us. Were we going to spend the night in a hotel? Or in his car? How long would it take for him to find a job now that his father had cut him off?

Before my mind could further come up with impossible, anxiety-triggering questions, we entered the garage. Chris was sitting in the driver's seat while Keiran was sitting in the back. Nico jogged over to the car and threw his bags in the trunk before slamming it shut and getting in the back with Keiran. I quickly followed and sat in the front passenger seat.

He grabbed my hand as soon as I closed the door. I looked at him to see his eyes shining with affection. "Do you trust me, little dove?" He asked.

I nodded without thinking. "Always." I smiled at him.

"Good." Placing my hand on his thigh, he turned the ignition and drove out of the garage and away from the Palmer castle.

For a while, none of us said anything, too lost in our own thoughts. I was not worried about me, I was worried about him. Would he be able to live without his family? He was so used to the rich life, would he be able to live in a two bedroom apartment? How long until he cracked and left me? What would I do when he would finally leave me? Would I be able to survive? Was I strong enough without my husband's love?

"Where are we going?" I jolted back to reality

upon hearing Nico's question.

"We are going somewhere far away, buddy," Keiran replied.

"Why?" He enquired.

"Because it's better this way," Keiran said cryptically.

"Seriously Keiran, you've got to give me a proper answer," Nico demanded.

Chris chuckled. "You'll get your answers soon, Nico."

"Are we going to a hotel?" Nico changed his approach.

"No, we are not," Keiran answered him.

"Then where are we going to sleep?" He queried.

"Nico. Keep quiet, don't bother them. We'll sleep in the car if we have to," I chided.

"Little mushroom, what kind of monsters do you

think we are? You really think Chris is going to let you sleep in the car?" Keiran stated, sounding affronted.

"So where are we going to sleep, then?"

"Nico." I turned to give him a stern glare, warning him to stop asking question.

"Sorry," Nico said sheepishly.

"Little one, calm down. Nico, you can ask as many questions as you want," Chris said.

"She needs sleep," Keiran stated. I rolled my eyes.

"I know, it's been a long day for her. She'll sleep the moment we get there," Chris responded.

"I think she should sleep now," Keiran commented.

"I want her to be comfortable," Chris stated.

"Hello! I'm right here." Seriously, why were they talking like I was invisible.

Chris and Keiran chuckled before Chris raised my hand, which was sitting on his thigh, and placed a soft, lingering kiss on it.

"I'm so sorry, Alice, but I have to ask. Where are we going?" Nico questioned.

"Chris has a place where we will live from now on. But that place is far away, so we are going to spend the night somewhere else, and tomorrow we'll go to Chris's place," Keiran answered.

Wait what? Chris had a place and he never told me about it. Was it a secret place or was it a secret just for me? And why didn't he tell me about this place of his? I had given him plenty of chances to tell me.

"And where are we going to spend the night?" Nico asked.

"You'll know soon, we're almost there. Just ten more minutes," Keiran said.

Now, even I was curious. Exactly where were we going? Did he have a friend I didn't know of? Was it a motel where he was taking us? Why were these men so cryptic?

"Is this car yours?" I asked.

"Yes, it is," he replied.

"I mean, did your..."

"No little bird, my father didn't give me this car. I bought it with my own money," he said.

"You have your own money?!" I slapped a hand over my mouth as soon as the words left my lips. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "It's all right, little fairy. And yes, I have my own money, plenty of it. I don't know what you think, but Keiran and I have our own separate businesses. We might be running the family business, but we also have our own business. I'm not a mooch, little one."

"I'm sorry." My cheeks heated in embarrassment over judging my husband like that.

"Don't be. You didn't know."

"Take the left turn," Keiran instructed.

"I know where it is," Chris snapped, before taking a sharp left and coming to a stop a few seconds later.

"Wow, whose place is this?" I asked, as I gazed at the gorgeous villa standing proudly before me. It had a victorian architecture, with flowers surrounding it. It was a truly beautiful structure.

"Let's go." Keiran opened the door and got out, followed by Chris, Nico and me. I wanted to stretch like a cat but refrained myself. But I was unable to suppress the yawn that had Chris coming over to me and wrapping an arm around my shoulders.

"It's all right, we're here. You'll sleep once we get

inside," Chris said softly, kissing my forehead.

I nodded and allowed him to lead me to the front door. Keiran rang the bell a few times before stepping back. I felt slightly guilty, because someone's sleep was ruined because of us.

"She must be sleeping," Chris stated.

"I know," Keiran agreed.

"Whose place is this?" I asked.

"Someone who you should've met a long time ago, little peach." Chris told me.

Before I could ask who, the door opened and a woman stepped out. Just one look at the woman told me all I wanted to know. And I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought I would never get a chance to meet her. But here she was, standing before me in a silk robe and bedroom slippers.

Elizabeth Palmer.

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She looked exactly like she did in the portrait up on the seventh floor. The same eyes, the same hair color, I couldn't believe that I was looking at Chris's sister. But I was glad this day had come, I always wanted to meet her, ever since Chris told me about her.

"Chris, how are you?" Elizabeth came over and threw her arms around Chris, who couldn't properly hug her back because he had an arm around my shoulders.

"I'm good, Liz, how are you?" He responded, holding her close. It was apparent that he had

missed her a lot.

"You know, Chris is not your only brother here," Keiran grumbled.

Elizabeth removed herself from Chris and hugged Keiran. "I missed you so much, Keiran," Elizabeth said.

"Ditto sis," Keiran stated.

As soon as Elizabeth and Keiran stopped hugging, Elizabeth eyed my little brother. She gave him a once over before her eyes landed on me. When she gave me a once over, I felt like I was being judged, because Elizabeth was important to Chris, and if she didn't approve of me... The thought was so horrific that I immediately discarded it, and instead tried my best to remain unaffected by her gaze.

Thank God that Keiran broke the silence. "Are you just going to keep us standing in the cold or are you going to let us in?" He whined. I eyed his

pink cheeks and smiled, Keiran was cold.

"Sorry, my bad. Please come inside." Elizabeth ushered all of us inside, before closing the door.

Chris let go of me and went over to Elizabeth. He whispered something in her ear, causing her to look at me before she nodded and pointed towards the staircase. he gave her a smile before striding over to me.

"Come on, little dove, let's get you to bed," he said to me.

"No, that would be rude. We just got here, what will your sister think?"

"My sister thinks nothing, and you're not being rude. You're tired and I'm not going to stand there and watch you fighting with sleep. Let's go." Firmly taking a hold of my hand, he led me up the stairs and all the way to the end of the hallway. He opened the last door on the left and tugged me inside.

I eyed the beautiful room with interest. The two colors dominating the room were white and sea green. A king sized bed was placed against one wall with white sheets and sea green pillows, while a plasma screen faced the bed. A shelf containing various knick knacks was sitting below the plasma screen. A love seat was placed in one corner with a lamp next to it. The sea green curtains were pushed aside, and various flower pots were sitting on the window ledge. The room looked cosy.

"Come on, in you go." Chris gestured towards the bed, causing me to sigh but do as he said.

"Are you sure about this, Chris. I mean, we're not intruding are we?" I had no idea what Elizabeth thought of me, and the worry was eating at my insides.

He perched on the bed next to me. He stroked my hair before speaking. "Little peach, don't worry yourself over trivial matters. Trust me,

we're not intruding. Don't stress yourself, it's not good for the baby. Close your eyes and go to sleep."

"Are you going back down?" I asked.

"Yeah. I have to tell Lizzy what happened. But don't worry, I'll come back to you as soon as possible." He smiled at me.

"Promise?"

"I promise, little fairy. I'll always come back to you." Kissing my cheek then my forehead, He stood up. "Good night, little one. Sweet dreams." Giving me another loving smile, he strode out of the room, leaving me to fall in a deep, peaceful sleep.

I woke up with Chris's warmth cocooning me. I blinked a few times to get rid of the residual sleep. I tried slipping out of his grasp but he held me in a vice-like grip, like he was afraid to let me go. I tried to gently pry his arm off me,

but he only tightened his grip on my waist.

"Looks like my little bird is awake," he murmured sleepily before kissing my exposed neck.

"Yes, I am. Would you let me go, I need to use the bathroom." I told him.

"No. I like having you close," he replied.

"What time did you come back, last night?" I asked.

"Around 2:00 am," he answered.

"I see. Can I use the bathroom now?" My bladder was killing me.

"Do you have to?" He questioned.

"I'm carrying your baby, yes I have to," I replied.

"Our baby," he muttered before kissing my cheek and finally removing his arm.

"Thank you!" I exclaimed before jumping out of

bed. "Where is the bathroom?"

"Over there." He pointed to a door in the corner that I did not notice last night.

"Thanks," I responded and dashed inside the bathroom.

Once I finished relieving myself, I washed my hands, rinsed my mouth and washed my face before emerging from the bathroom. Chris was sitting up, his back against the headboard. And even though he had just woken up, he looked incredibly sexy.

"Are you going to change?" He asked, eyeing my rumpled dressed.

"Yes. Where is the bag?" I looked around, finally spotting the suitcase next to the nightstand.

"Nevermind, I found it." I hurried over to it, and after a couple of minutes, took out a new dress. Then I dashed back inside the bathroom and after another two minutes, emerged.

"I'm going to make breakfast." I told him.

"You don't have to do that. Lizzy will make it," he said.

"Are you kidding? Lizzy shouldn't bother with this, I'll make breakfast." Without waiting for his response, I left the room and skipped down the stairs.

When I reached the foyer, I looked around trying to spot the kitchen. I sighed in relief when I saw a door on the left. Hoping it would be the kitchen, I went over and pushed the door open. And when I saw the silver utensils, I sighed in relief. Finally I had found the kitchen.

Now I just need to look for the ingredients.

I knew I had no right to venture into someone's kitchen and act like I owned the place, but Elizabeth had helped us so much; she gave us a place to sleep, the least I could do was relieve her of breakfast duty. I didn't want to look

ungrateful.

Opening the fridge, I took out a few eggs and a jug of milk. As soon as I placed the items on the counter, a voice had me jumping.

"What are you doing in my kitchen?" She asked. She was wearing jeans a pretty floral top with her hair tied up in a ponytail.

"Uhh, I was making breakfast," I answered.

She frowned. "Why? You're my guest, I should be the one making breakfast for you," she stated.

"You have already done so much for us. You gave us a place to stay, I just wanted to help you, repay you for your kindness," I said.

Elizabeth cocked her head to the side, a gesture which reminded me strongly of her brothers. "Are you always this formal?" She enquired, a small smile on her lips.

"Uh, I just don't want you to think that I'm an ungrateful person," I muttered. Elizabeth was so confident and I just felt awkward standing in front of her.

"Trust me, I don't think you're ungrateful, quite the opposite actually. I mean, that is why Chris chose you as his wife," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, feeling confused.

"I mean, I can see why he picked you," she clarified, taking the eggs and removing a glass bowl.

"Can you tell me why, because he never told me," I requested.

"I can, but I'm not going to," she replied.

Elizabeth was confusing me; I couldn't figure out if she liked me or not.

"Oh okay. Can I help you make breakfast, if it's okay with you?" I queried.

Elizabeth went over to the pantry and came back with green chillies and a can of mushrooms. She placed the items in front of me along with a cutting board and a knife.

"You can cut the chillies and the mushrooms," she said.

"Thank you." I didn't waste time, I immediately began cutting the chillies. Once I was done, I moved on to the vegetables.

"So, you have a little brother." Elizabeth said in the form of a statement.

I nodded. "Yes. Nico is my brother," I stated the obvious.

"And he lives with you?" She asked.

"Yes. He is too young to live on his own," I replied.

"I can see that." She paused. "How do you feel about Chris leaving his family?" She questioned.

"I didn't want him to leave his father," I answered.

"So if Chris wants to go back to his family and leave you fending for yourself, you'll be okay with it?" She queried.

"Yes. If he wants to leave me in order to be with his family, I'll be okay with it," I responded, biting my lip.

"Why?"

"Because I love him and want him to be happy. If his happiness lies with his family, then who am I to come in between." I told her.

"But you'll go back to being poor, is that okay with you. I mean from living like a royal to going back to living in the slums..." She let her sentence trail off, but I understood what she was trying to say.

"I was born in the slums. So what if I lived like a royal for a little while. I know what I'm worth,

and poverty is not new to me. I lived like a poor before, I can do it again. If he decides to leave me, I won't ask for a single cent," I replied.

"You sure about that? People can get used to the rich life," she said.

"If people can get used to the rich life, they can get used to poverty as well, it just takes a little longer. I might've married hkm for money because I wanted my brother to get his surgery, but I love him now and his money doesn't matter to me anymore," I stated, while continued to cut the mushrooms.

Elizabeth didn't say anything for a while. When I was done cutting the mushrooms, she took the chopped mushrooms along with the green chillies and threw them in the beaten eggs. She then proceeded to make an omelet, while I looked around the kitchen, trying to distract myself from Elizabeth's overbearing presence. I had a feeling that Elizabeth did not like me

much.

"Good morning, love." I looked at the unfamiliar male who had entered the kitchen and hugged Elizabeth from behind. He placed a kiss on her neck, causing me to blush. Now I really was intruding.

"Morning babe, did you sleep well?" Elizabeth asked, smiling at the man. This must be Henry, her husband. Henry was about 6 feet tall, with curly blonde hair and jade green eyes.

"I slept with you, what do you think?" He grinned at her. It was only when he glanced at me did he realize I was also present.

"Oh hello there, you must be Alice, Chris's wife." Henry let go of Elizabeth and strode over to me, holding his hand out for me to shake.

"Yes, nice to meet you, and thank you for letting us stay the night." I shook his hand.

"You are so small. How can you handle a man

like Chris?" Henry asked. I gave him a puzzled look, what was he implying.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean." Now I just felt stupid.

"Just that you're so delicate, and so small, Chris is the exact opposite of you," he stated.

"Opposites attract, babe," Elizabeth said, making Henry chuckle.

"I guess they do." He gave me a warm smile.

"Alice, will you please set the table, the plates and other things are over there," Elizabeth requested.

I was only too happy to comply. "Of course." I immediately grabbed the plate, spoons, knives and forks before heading out of the kitchen.

"Where is the table?" I asked.

"The dining room is the next door," she replied. Nodding my head, I left the kitchen and entered

the dining room.

I quickly placed the cutlery in the best possible way that I could. I wanted to take as much as time as possible. I didn't want to deal with Elizabeth or Henry. I wished Chris would come down soon, or even Kieran. I should've listened to him when he told me to stay in bed. Damn it, I was such an idiot. Next time, I was not going to help anyone, no matter how much I wanted to. I didn't even know what Elizabeth would be thinking about me. Maybe she would tell Chris to leave me.

"Little peach, I see you've set the table." Chris's voice had me relaxing in an instant.

"Yeah, why don't you sit down." I pulled out a chair for him, causing him to frown.

"Don't do that," he admonished.

"Don't do what?" I asked.

"Pull out a chair for me. I'm suppose to do that

for you, not the other way around," he explained.

"So what? I'm your wife, I can pull out a chair for you," I argued.

"No, you're my little fairy, and you're never going to do anything of this sort ever again," he said firmly.

Just then, Keiran and Nico entered. "Good morning, little mushroom, you look well," Kieran commented, pulling out a chair and sitting down, while Nico did the same.

"Good morning, Kieran, Nic," I greeted.

"Good morning, Alice," Nico said.

Elizabeth entered the dining room followed by Henry, both of them carrying breakfast dishes in their hands which they placed on the table. My stomach growled just by looking at the mouth watering food. How long had it been since I last ate? I didn't think I had dinner last night, with the whole fiasco, maybe that was why I was so

hungry.

"Dig in everyone," Henry said, sitting down next to his wife.

Oh boy, another family meal. I hope this one goes well.

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Staring at the clock told me exactly how slow the time was moving. I wish Chris would hurry up and come back so we could leave, but it looked as if he had no intention of coming back. And I did not want to stay here any longer.

Breakfast went all right, surprisingly. Elizabeth didn't make me feel like an outcast. She was actually very nice to me. She tried to make

small talk, but I was too nervous to really get the conversation going; which was stupid of me, as she might be thinking of me as cold-hearted or awkward. But she made me so nervous.

Elizabeth was Chris's best friend, I needed her to like me, but the way things were going, I doubt that was going to happen any time soon.

After breakfast, Chris told me he had to go take care of some things and get a cleaning crew over to the new house which we would be living in. He said he would be back in three hours, and now it had been five hours and no sign of him. I tried helping Elizabeth with chores, as I did not want to seem like those guests who only sat in your living room or trashed your house and did not help. But just like earlier, She told me to sit back and relax, because she wanted her nephew to be comfortable. She eyed my bulging stomach as she said that. Great, even Elizabeth believed that my baby was a boy.

So now I had no choice but to sit in my room and stare at the bloody clock. I had nothing to do and it was driving me crazy. I wish Chris would hurry up and come back so we can go to our new house. There, at least I would have something to do. I eyed the clock only to see the minute hand had now moved to four from two. Great, only ten minutes passed. Sighing, I sat back and closed my eyes.

My eyes opened when the door of the bedroom opened and a boy of about eight entered. He had blonde hair and jade green eyes. He looked like a mini version of Henry. Was this Elizabeth's oldest child?

The boy strode over to my side of the bed, and stopped as soon as his waist touched the mattress. The kid blinked a few times, eyeing me curiously but didn't say anything. Not knowing what to do, all I did was smile. Maybe if he saw me smiling, he wouldn't be scared of

me.

"Who are you? Where is uncle Chris?" The kid asked, turning his head to the left, as if willing Chris to emerge from the bathroom.

"Uncle Chris is gone to do some work," I answered the kid.

"When will he be back?" He questioned.

"I don't know, but soon," I replied.

"Who are you?" He asked his earlier question.

"Umm...I'm..." What was I suppose to tell the kid? That I was his aunt, was I even allowed to be his aunt?

"Are you mum's friend?" He enquired, the green gaze not leaving my face.

"Uhh...I..." This was getting awkward.

The boy shook his head before I could say a word. "No. You can't be mum's friend. I know who you are, but mummy says you only exist in

stories," he uttered.

I frowned in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You are a fairy right? Uncle Chris told me he has a fairy in his house." The kid told me.

"A fairy?" What was this kid talking about? What has Chris told him? And why did Elizabeth tell him that I exist in stories?

The kid nodded. "Yes, you are the fairy. Uncle Chris told me he has a fairy. Can you grant me three wishes?" He climbed on the bed and sat on his knees in front of me.

"Three wishes?" Wasn't the genie suppose to grant wishes?

"Yes. Please. I promise I'll be a good boy this year," he said. Great, now he was thinking I was Santa Clause.

Before I could be any more uncomfortable, Elizabeth entered the room, her motherly face in

place.

"Sam Harold Whitmore! What are you doing here, and why are you still not dressed?!"

Elizabeth said, sternly, causing the kid's eyes to widen.

"Mum. Look." He pointed at me. "Uncle Chris brought his fairy here. You said fairies only exist in stories, but this fairy is real. I'm asking if she will grant me three wishes," Sam explained.

Elizabeth's jaw dropped a little before she recovered. "Sam, I want you to go and put on fresh clothes. Now." She pointed in the direction of the door.

"But my wishes," Sam whined.

"You can make your wishes once you're dressed. Quick. Otherwise the fairy will go away,"

Elizabeth ordered her son, who scrambled off the bed.

"Okay. I'll go get dressed. Please fairy Miss,

don't go. I'll be right back." Without looking back, Sam dashed out of the bedroom, leaving me bewildered.

Once Sam was gone, Elizabeth turned to me. "I'm so sorry, Alice. I had no idea he would get out of bed and come straight here," she said, looking apologetic.

"It's all right. He came looking for Chris. I told him he was not here," I responded.

"Yeah. He is in love with Chris. If he doesn't come to visit him, he thinks he doesn't love him and has abandoned him." She chuckled.

"I see."

"And now I think Sam might be in love with you," she remarked.

I frowned. "Why would you say that?" I enquired.

"Because according to Sam, you are a fairy who is going to grant him his three wishes," she

answered, an amused smile on her face.

"But, I'm not a fairy. And I can't grant any wishes." I had Chris who fulfilled my every wish and desire, without him, I could barely pay for a one time meal.

"Oh Sam begs to differ. He is going to come back to you in a little while and will tell you his three wishes," she replied.

"But—But, I can't grant him his wishes. He will be so disappointed..." Guilt stabbed me at the thought of seeing Sam sad.

Elizabeth chuckled before sitting on the bed. "Don't worry about Sam's wishes, Alice. The most he's going to wish for will be an action figure or a Play Station game," she stated.

"Yeah but..."

"Hey. Don't worry about it. I'll let Chris know what his nephew wants, and he'll grant his wish." She told me.

"But Sam wants me to grant his wish," I pointed out.

"Oh, don't worry. Chris will get the stuff, we'll just tell him it's from you." And she winked at me. The gesture reminded me so much of Chris, I missed him right then. Oh Chris, where were you?

"Thank you. But you don't have to do that. What is taking Chris so long?" I said out loud.

"Why are you so worried about him getting back?" Elizabeth queried.

"I miss him. And we have to go. He said the new house will be clean by 2:00 pm," I informed her.

Elizabeth gave me another amused smile. "He didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?" I asked.

"That you guys are not leaving." She told me.

"What do you mean?" I questioned further.

"I don't want you guys to go so soon. So I told Chris that he better not leave my house for the next two weeks, and I haven't given him the right to say no to me. Being an older sister has its perks." She laughed.

"Why would you do that?" I asked, flabbergasted.

"Do what?"

"You know, want us to stay...I mean Chris is your brother, I get that, but..." How could I say she wanted me and Nico gone without sounding like a presumptuous bitch?

"Are you kidding me? Why would I want you guys to leave, you just got here. And do you have any idea how long I had to wait to finally meet you? Chris told me all about you over the phone, but now I finally get to meet you and I want to get to know you more. So you're staying here for two weeks," she stated, making my eyes go wide.

She likes me! She actually likes me!

"Are you sure about this?" I gave her skeptical look.

"Of course. Maybe tomorrow I'll take you shopping. Have you started shopping for the baby?"

"Not yet. Chris and I bought a little stuff, but not much. Never really got the time." I told her.

"Perfect. We'll go tomorrow then. Have you thought of any names for my nephew?" She queried.

"You know, the baby can be a girl as well," I stated.

"It's not, trust me."

"It can be. Chris doesn't believe me either," I said.

"Well it's a boy. The Palmer family has a curse," she replied.

"But your mother broke the curse."

"Yeah, and she was the first out of sixty five women to have a girl as the first baby. Generations have passed without a girl being the firstborn," she responded.

"Maybe I can break the curse as well."

"Yeah. Keep believing that. Who knows it might come true." Elizabeth patted my shoulder lightly.

I wanted to change the topic and talk about something else, but a nagging thought didn't let me. And so finally, I asked what I really wanted to ask her.

"Elizabeth?"

"You can call me Lizzy."

"Thank you. Umm, can I ask you something, if you don't mind?"

"Shoot."

"Di—Did you not like me when you met me?" I

had no idea if she understood my question or not.

"You mean, if I liked you at first or not?"

"Yeah...I think." God I was an idiot.

"Alice. I liked you since the moment Chris called me and told me he was going to marry you."

"But...earlier...you seemed a little—"

"Cold? Aloof? Closed off?"

"Yes." I blushed in embarrassment.

"Yeah, I was just testing you...sizing you up. Don't tell anyone this, but I want to intimidate people a little when I first meet them, it's a tactic I use. And I'll be doing the same with Jenny once she gets here."

"Jenny's coming here?" I asked, my eyes wide.

"Yeah. Keiran will bring her here in a few hours. Don't tell her I'm testing her, pretend you're oblivious." She winked again, her playful attitude

helping me relax.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Elizabeth queried.

"Everything. For accepting me. For giving us a place to live. You have no idea how much you've helped us." I wish I could repay Elizabeth somehow.

"You don't need to thank me. I'm glad you guys are here." She gave me a smile.

"I do. I wish there was some way I could repay you."

"You want to repay me. Keep Chris happy...forever. That's all I want," she said.

"You don't have to worry about that. I love him, and I'll do everything in my power to keep him happy," I promised.

"I love you too, little bird." Chris strode forward and sat on the bed beside me, pulling me to him.

"Where have you been? I was waiting for you." I eyed him with disapproval.

"I got held up. In two days, you are going to get a surprise," he whispered, kissing me below the ear.

"What surprise?" I questioned.

"Patience, little fairy." He kissed my forehead.

"No. Tell me now!" I demanded.

"No. Be patient." He turned to face his sister.

"Where is Henry?" He asked Elizabeth.

"Work."

"Where is Keiran?" Chris enquired, his hand tangling in my hair.

"Gone to get Jenny," she answered.

"Did you talk some sense into him?"

"I tried. But he is not listening. I keep telling him he has plenty of time to marry Jenny, but he

wants to marry her right now." She told Chris.

"I'm afraid he's going to scare her," Chris said.

"Wait. Keiran wants to marry Jenny? Right now?" Wow, these men didn't know the meaning of patience.

Elizabeth nodded. "Yes. That's why he went to get her."

"But, isn't that too soon?"

"No!"

"Yes!"

Elizabeth and Chris said at the same time. I eyed him then Elizabeth. "Why is it not soon?" I asked Chris.

"Come on, Alice. Chris is a guy, it doesn't matter to him. But a sudden marriage for a woman, that's difficult, not to mention scary." Elizabeth shuddered.

"So you were scared when you got married?" I

questioned her.

She let out an awkward laugh. "That's a story for another time. Anyways, we are not talking about me, we are talking about Keiran."

"I'll try and talk to him again. I hope he doesn't try and kill me when I tell him I could not get a priest for him and Jenny," Chris muttered.

"You mean he wants to get married right now?"
Now, I was shocked.

"Yes. But we are trying to prevent that from happening." Elizabeth chuckled.

"And we are not succeeding," Chris grumbled.

"Should I talk to him?" I offered.

Just then, the sound of the front door slamming shut reverberated throughout the villa. And then, we heard the distinct voices of Keiran and Jenny.

"Keiran. What is this place? Where are you

taking me? Keiran stop!"

"Shit! I need to deal with this." Chris got up from the bed.

"Let me come with you." I tried getting up, but he stopped me.

'No. I want you to rest. I'll go handle Keiran. God knows what temperament he'll be in," he muttered, before jogging out of the room.

"Aren't you going to do anything?" I asked Elizabeth.

"Nope. There is nothing I can do. Keiran wants to marry Jenny and he's not going to stop until he slips the wedding band on her finger. The most Chris can do is postpone the marriage for two days max," she answered.

"Why are all these men like that?" I enquired.

"It's a Palmer thing. The men are insanely possessive about their women. Sometimes I

think these men were born in the wrong time, because they act more like cavemen rather than civil human beings," she stated.

"Will Jenny be okay?" I was worried about her, she looked so fragile.

"She has no choice. She has to be." Elizabeth stood up. "I have to go check on the kids, I'll see you later. Try and relax." With another smile, she strode out of the room, leaving me with my own thoughts.

Oh God. These Palmer's and their unique blood.

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I stared at the scene in front of me, and the shock that resonated through my body was

enough to have me clutching the banister. Keiran was standing in the foyer with Jenny who was desperately trying to free her wrist from his hold. Chris was standing in front of Keiran, a harsh look on his face. While Lizzy was standing a few feet away holding her baby. All of them were wearing different expressions. Keiran looked determined, like he would destroy the world any second. Jenny's face showed a mixture of fear and confusion. Chris glared at his brother, looking frustrated. And Elizabeth looked like she wanted to smack her brother.

Even though Chris had told me to rest, I couldn't. Keiran was going to force Jenny into marrying him and I just couldn't stay in bed and let it happen. And I would try to help if needed. But I just couldn't stay in bed and worry myself to death. And so, despite my husband telling me to take it easy, I was out of bed and was now looking at the two brothers having a standoff.

No one saw me standing on the stairs, both of them too busy staring at each other.

"Get out of my way, Chris," Keiran said.

"Let go of her, you're hurting her," Chris ordered.

"Keiran please, let go of me," Jenny pleaded.

Sighing, Keiran let go of Jenny's wrist, who immediately began rubbing it with her other hand. She looked so scared, my heart ached for her. I really hoped Keiran wouldn't force her to marry him, God knows how Jenny would react.

"Liz, can you please take her to one of the guests rooms," Keiran requested.

Elizabeth came forward, grabbed Jenny's hand lightly and begun leading her away. Jenny, not knowing what else to do, hesitantly followed Elizabeth to the guest room. Seeing her scared and confused, I vowed to myself to talk some sense into Keiran.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Chris exploded as soon as Jenny was well out of sight.

"What do you mean? I'm marrying the woman I love, there is nothing wrong with that!" Keiran shouted.

"No there isn't. But when you're forcing someone to marry you, then it is wrong," Chris argued.

"Oh please. You did the same thing. You forced Alice to marry you," Keiran said.

"That was different, Keiran, and you know it," Chris defended.

"How? How was that different? You wanted a baby, you forced Alice to marry you, and you're telling me that forcing Jenny to marry me is wrong!" Keiran did not lower his voice.

"Have you seen how scared she is?! She is confused and terrified, and you're going to force

her to marry you, are you out of your mind?!" It looked as if Chris did not have control over his emotions either.

"So what?! Alice was scared as well, but she learned to live with it. Jenny is strong, she will be fine," Keiran argued.

Chris sighed audibly. "Tell me. Do you really love her?" He asked softly.

"What kind of a question is that? Of course I love Jenny, I refuse to live without her!" Keiran threw his hands in the air.

"If you love her, then stop being a selfish wanker and take her feelings into consideration. You love her, you marry her when she wants to marry you. Don't force her, she won't be happy," Chris explained.

"I can't give her that choice," Keiran stated.

"Why not?" Chris enquired.

"What if she says no. What if she says she doesn't want to marry me? I can't live without her. Hell I won't let anyone else have her. She is mine." Keiran raked his hair with his fingers.

"If she says no, then love her until she says yes. Don't force her into marrying you, treat her in such a way that she has no choice but to love you and marry you," Chris reasoned.

"I don't want her to be free. Other men would have her if she doesn't marry me," Keiran stated.

"Look. Marrying her like this is not the answer. She won't be happy, you need to think rationally," Chris asserted.

Keiran sighed. "Two weeks. That is all I'm willing to give her to make up her mind. After that, I'm going to do what I want, and you are not going to stand in my way," Keiran conceded.

"I will if my sister-in-law is upset," Chris stated.

With a sudden growl that had my heart jolting,

Keiran stormed out of the house, slamming the door on his way out. Chris breathed out a sigh before running a hand through his hair. Thinking that it was safe for me to show myself now, I walked down the stairs. Chris saw me and tried to give me a reassuring smile but failed; I could see the worry in his sea green eyes, he was worried about Jenny.

"Hey, I thought I told you to rest," he said softly, as soon as I reached him. He enveloped me in a warm hug.

"I got tired of resting." I breathed in his masculine scent. "How are you? And how is Keiran?"

"Why do I get the feeling that you saw everything that transpired down here?" He uttered.

"Maybe because I did," I replied.

"You are a naughty little dove, aren't you?" He

tightened his grip around me before letting me go.

"Am I suppose to apologize?" I asked.

He laughed. "No. Come on, I want to tell you something." He led me to the couch in the living room and sat down next to me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Remember I said that I have a surprise for you."

"Yes." Was he going to tell me what the surprise was?

"You remember the boy that I said I want to adopt?" He asked me, a soft smile on his face.

Instantly, the face of that adorable baby came into my mind. "Yes. I remember him," I answered.

"Well, in two days you and I will go and adopt that baby," he stated.

"Really?" I couldn't believe it. We were going to

adopt him, we were going to adopt that little boy. My heart swelled with happiness at the prospect of having that little boy as my son. I would love him like my own, and would never make him feel like he didn't belong.

He nodded. "Yes, little peach. We'll go and adopt him." The smile on his face told me exactly how excited he was to adopt that boy.

"That's wonderful. I'm so glad you decided to adopt him. Which room will he stay in?" I asked, looking forward to spending time with the little boy.

"He'll stay in our room while we are here, when we'll move in our new home, he'll have his own room," he replied.

"We'll have to buy toys for him and clothes, and diapers and..." I trailed off.

"Yes. We'll buy everything for him," he agreed.

"Uh, hate to break you two love birds apart, but

where is Keiran?" Elizabeth asked, snapping us out of our plans.

"He went out...to cool off, hopefully," Chris muttered.

"And why didn't you go with him?" Lizzy questioned.

"Where is your baby?" Chris queried.

"I asked you first, answer me," Elizabeth demanded, causing Chris to roll his eyes.

"I think he needs time to himself," he responded drily.

"Umm, how is Jenny?" I asked

"She is in her room. I was trying to help her relax but I think she got more scared." Elizabeth told me.

"Do you mind if I go..."

"Oh sure, her room is that one." She pointed to the last door on the left.

"Thank you." I turned my attention to my husband. "I'm going to see if she's all right."

"All right, little bird." He kissed my cheek, before he allowed me to leave.

It didn't take me long to reach Jenny's room. I knocked twice before entering, only to find Jenny sitting up in bed, with her arms around her as if protecting herself. When Jenny saw me, her eyes sparkled with relief. I gave her a small smile before venturing further in her room and closing the door softly behind me. Jenny tried to smile but didn't quite succeed, confusion still evident on her face.

"Hi. How are you?" I asked, coming to sit on the bed beside her.

"Hi. I'm fine," Jenny replied.

"Liar," I teased.

Jenny sighed. "What is this place, Alice? Who is that woman? Why did Keiran bring me here?"

"That woman is Keiran's and Chris's older sister and this is her house," I answered.

"I never knew Keiran had a sister," she remarked.

"Neither did I, until recently," I said.

"And Keiran brought me here because he wanted to introduce me to his sister?" Jenny questioned.

"You know, I would love to tell you why Keiran brought you here, but I think it's best if you ask Keiran that." I told her.

"Why is Keiran acting like this?" She queried.

"Acting like what?" I asked.

"All controlling. I don't like controlling men."
Jenny shuddered slightly as she said that, and I wondered what has happened to this girl that had her terrified of controlling men.

"Why don't you ask him?" I wanted to tell her what was going on, but it was not my story to

tell.

"Where is he?" She eyed the closed door, like she was expecting Keiran to enter any moment.

"He's out, but he'll be back soon." I told her.

"I hope he hurries, I need him right now," Jenny stated.

"Jenny?" I wanted to ask her something in order to appease my mind.

"Yes?"

"Do you love Keiran?" I questioned.

"Yes. I do." She didn't even hesitate.

"So will you marry him if he propose?" I enquired, getting excited at the thought of Keiran and Jenny getting married.

"He's never going to propose," Jenny said.

"Why not?" I asked confused.

"Because...I'm not...I'm not the kind of girl

Keiran would want as his wife," she replied, looking forlorn.

"What? How can you say that? Keiran lo—" I caught myself before I could spill Keiran's secret. I had no idea if Keiran had told Jenny he loved her or not, so I had to be careful.

"Oh come on, Alice. Have you seen Keiran? He is like...perfect, and look at me, I don't even hold a candle to all those women who Keiran might choose as his bride. I'm just a girl who works at the toy store," she muttered.

"That is not true, Jenny. Keiran is anything but shallow, and he will never make a girl fall in love with him only to never catch her. And you are better than all those rich girls or whoever you think is fit to be Keiran's bride," I said firmly, willing Jenny to believe me.

"You don't know that. And Keiran never talks about marriage or anything like that." Jenny told

me.

"He's a man. Men don't talk about marriage or any of that stuff...well not to their girlfriends at least," I responded.

"Then how will I know if he loves me enough to want to marry me?" Jenny queried.

"He will propose. Or he will force you to marry him." I cursed myself for saying the last part, but prayed with all my might that Jenny did not understand what I was trying to say.

Jenny's eyes widened. "What? Men actually do that, force a woman to marry them?"

"Uhh...maybe." I had no idea what else to say.

"No. Keiran is not like that. He will never force anyone to marry him, he is a really nice guy. But as for your question, if Keiran would ever propose, I'll say yes. I love Keiran and being his wife would be the greatest honor," Jenny replied, her eyes shining with love for Keiran.

Damn, Keiran is one lucky man. I wonder if Chris thinks he's lucky to have me. I thought.

"When will Keiran come? I want to go home," Jenny said. I could tell she was uncomfortable in this equally unfamiliar territory. Had Elizabeth told Keiran to stay for two weeks as well? If so, what did that mean for Jenny? Would she stay or would she go?

"He'll be here soon," I assured her. I had no clue how long it took for Keiran to cool off, I just hoped not too long.

"When is your baby coming?" Jenny enquired, changing the subject.

"In a few months," I answered, eyeing my swollen tummy. I wonder if our adopted baby would have a brother or a sister.

"Have you decided on any names yet?" Jenny asked.

"Not really, no," I replied.

"I love babies." Jenny told me.

"Is that why you work at a toy store?" I queried.

Jenny smiled. "Partly. I love seeing kids smiling and laughing, that is why I love working at the toy store, it makes children smile."

"How many kids do you want?" I could imagine Keiran's and Jenny's children, running around, shrieking and giggling, while Jenny made sure no one got hurt.

"I want four kids, at least," she answered.

I opened my mouth to reply when the door opened and Chris, Keiran, Elizabeth and Brenton entered; all of them wearing expressions of horror and dismay. I frowned as Chris reached me while Keiran went to Jenny. When did Brenton come?

"Chris, is everything all right? What's going on?" I asked, anxiety blooming in my heart at seeing my husband looking so distraught.

"Little one, listen to me. We have to go, now," he stated.

"Why what happened?" I enquired. Behind me I could hear Jenny and Keiran talking in hushed voices. Brenton and Elizabeth were standing in one corner whispering to each other.

"Chris we have to go," Elizabeth urged.

"Brenton, go start the car, we'll be right there," Chris instructed his youngest brother who nodded and jogged out of the room. Was it me or did Brenton look really pale?

"Chris, tell me what's going on?" I asked.

"We have to go to the hospital immediately," he answered.

"Why? Is everyone all right?" The questions wouldn't stop coming out of mouth.

He shook his head and my heartbeat accelerated. "No. Little fairy, my father had a

heart attack. We have to go to the hospital.
Now"!.
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Waiting in the hospital is the worst thing ever. Not only are depression and joy at a constant war with each other in the confines of these sterile walls, your patience is being tested with every tick and tock of the clock. With every minute that passes, it becomes difficult for you to remain in your place and not dash towards the OR, but we get no choice but to stay and deperately pray that joy wins the war; because the victory of depression brings nothing but a reign of sorrow and despair and has an unpredictable ruling time.

When Chris told me his father had a heart attack, panic filled me instantly. I knew his father hated me, but I wasn't desperate for his approval either. However, my heart started pounding with anxiety because he was important to Chris. And I had lost my parents, so I knew what he was going through right now, and despite wanting to stay at home, I accompanied him to the hospital. Now, all the Palmers with their loved ones were here, waiting for the OR doors to open.

"It's all that bitch's fault," Brenton seethed, throwing a menacing glare at Helga.

The moment we had arrived to the hospital, Brenton looked at Helga and charged towards her. He grabbed her by the neck and tried to strangle her, and would've succeeded if Chris and Keiran hadn't pulled him away.

"It her fault! This bitch is the reason my dad is in the fucking hospital! We trusted this fucking

whore and she stabbed us in the back! Let me go, I want to kill her!" Brenton growled loud enough for the whole hospital to hear.

It took a while for Chris and Keiran to calm Brenton down, but even then, he didn't stop glaring at Helga who was now sitting in the corner, her face ashen. She had her eyes downcast, afraid to look at the Palmers.

"Why are you blaming her for your father's condition?" It was Jenny who voiced out the question.

"Because she is the reason he is here," Brenton muttered.

"What do you mean? Tell me what happened," Elizabeth demanded.

Brenton sighed and suddenly all of us were eager to here just how Helga was responsible for Mr. Palmer heart attack. After a few seconds, he started speaking.

"I just came home from work when I decided to visit dad in his study. Since the day he kicked Chris out, he has been holed up in his study. I'm sure he was regretting what he did, but he didn't voice his thoughts out to me. Whenever I asked him what was bothering him, he just told me that 'it's just business.' But I didn't believe him, his eyes told a different story, but I didn't say anything.

"But this morning, I went to father's study and found the door slightly ajar. I heard father speaking to someone, and I had no idea what in God's name came over me but I decided to eavesdrop on him. And I found him talking to that witch." He shot a glare at Helga.

"He told her how he regretted kicking Chris out, and this disgusting whore told him that he did the right thing." Elizabeth, Jenny and I gasped when we heard this. I couldn't believe it, I thought Helga was loyal to the Palmers,

apparently all of us had been deceived.

"When I heard this, I decided to peek through the small opening, and there I saw this bitch, unbuttoning my father's shirt, telling him how he deserved better children who obeyed him. And then she told him that she—this fucking maid—will give him children who will never choose their brides over him!" Brenton raised his voice at the end.

"That conniving bitch!" Elizabeth shot Helga a menacing look, before eyeing her brother once again. "What happened then?"

"Dad pushed her away, told her she will never be the mother of his children, and this tart couldn't handle the rejection. She begun spewing all kinds of nonsense about how dad wasn't a good man and how his children were right in leaving him, and this fucked up bitch told him he was the reason why mum died

"As soon as she said that, dad couldn't handle the allegation, and it was in the moment when his heart gave up and he had a heart attack; all because this piece of filth couldn't handle rejection. This gold digging tramp wanted to be a Palmer! She wanted to be the fucking queen of the family! Just because father showed her respect, she thought she was fit to take my mum's place; that she could replace my mum!" Brenton growled before throwing his head back in fury.

Elizabeth whirled to face Helga with a murderous look. "You bitch!" She charged over to where the maid stood, enraged. "How fucking dare you stay here. Get your filthy being out of here!" Elizabeth yelled.

Helga trembled under Elizabeth's glare but shook her head. "Please, Ms. Palmer, I can't leave him...I...I love him," Helga whimpered.

Elizabeth raised her hand slapped Helga across

the cheek so hard, I was afraid her neck would break. "How dare you?" Elizabeth shook with rage. "How dare you think that you can ever be a Palmer, one of us?! You are the reason my father is in the goddamn hospital, and you have the audacity to tell me that you love him."

"I love him," Helga said firmly. "I've loved him since the moment he first smiled at me. And your mother was nothing but a wall that separated me and Brian. And your father hasn't told you this, but after your mum died, he came to me, he came to me for comfort, and we even had sex. So you don't get to tell me that I am not suppose to be here, because for your information, I was there for your father when you were too busy whoring around with that stupid husband of yours," Helga spat, her eyes shining with madness.

Chris, who had been silent throughout all this, finally released my hand and stormed over to

Helga, and before anyone of us could process what was happening, Chris grabbed Helga by the neck and begun squeezing.

"You don't get to talk shit about my family from your filthy mouth." He squeezed harder. "You want to know why my father rejected you, because he knows exactly how filthy you are, how worthless your blood really is. And no matter what you do, you'll never be a Palmer, because women like you, only belong on their knees, sucking a man off; you belong on the floor so forget dreaming about a throne." By now, Chris was squeezing so hard that Helga's eyes begun to roll back in her head. He only released her when Elizabeth gently pulled his hand away, which resulted in Helga dropping to the floor, coughing for air.

"Come on, Chris. She's not worth it. Her blood is too filthy, don't taint your hands with her blood," Elizabeth said soothingly, rubbing her brother's

back in an attempt to calm him down.

Seeing Chris like this shook me to the core. I realized exactly how much he loved his family, and he would rather die than let anyone talk shit about his family. The respect I had for my husband grew ten folds at the realization.

However, seeing how he was capable of murder kinda scared me, but it also brought a sense of security; because now I was sure that no matter what happened, he would do everything in his power to protect his child.

"Get this bitch out of here. I don't want to see her face," Chris spat eyeing Helga with hatred.

"I'll gladly get rid of her for you. Security!" Keiran bellowed. In a few seconds, a couple of men in uniforms walked over to where Helga was sprawled. "Take her away." Keiran pointed at Helga. The guards grabbed her by the biceps and tugged her to a standing position before dragging her away, ignoring her threats and

shrieks of protest.

"How come the security guard did not question Keiran?" I asked Jenny.

"The Palmers own the hospital, that's why," she answered, looking as anxious and bewildered as I felt.

"They do? Chris never told me," I said.

"Keiran told me when I visited Nico after his surgery. He said, they were planning to buy the hospital where Nico got his surgery and they owned this one." Jenny told me.

"Wow, these people are filthy rich," I commented.

"Seriously. They are so filthy rich, Helga's blood seems cleaner than them," Jenny remarked.

I nearly burst out laughing at her comment but controlled myself just in time because I did not want to be rude in front of a bunch of people.

Instead, I snickered, biting my lip to stop myself from bursting into giggles. When Jenny saw me stifling my laughter, she snickered, which made it even more difficult for me to control my laughter, but I managed to succeed.

"You are terrible," I joked.

"I'm sorry," Jenny apologized before bursting into giggles. She clamped a hand over her mouth to control herself. I swear, I was a terrible wife; my husband was angry and worried about his sick father, and here I was laughing at Jenny's comment.

When I saw Chris striding over to me, I did my best to control myself. He grabbed my hand and without a word led me away from Jenny. He dragged me off to a corner before sitting down on a chair and pulling me on his lap. He placed my head on his shoulder before kissing my forehead.

"I love you so much," he said softly.

"I love you, too," I replied truthfully.

"Do you want me to tell you what really happened to my mum?" He queried, stroking my cheek.

"All of a sudden? Where is this coming from?" Normally, I was the one begging him to tell me about his family, but right now, he was the one offering, that seemed strange to me.

He sighed. "I love you, little bird. And I don't want there to be any secrets between us, so I want to tell you everything that you want to know—that you should know," he replied.

"But why all of a sudden?" I questioned.

"Because I want to talk about something and not think about Helga's betrayal or worry about my father for some time," he responded.

"Oh. Okay, yes. I want to know what really

happened to your mum," I stated.

"Well. After Elizabeth ran away, you know it was a difficult time for my family. My father was angry and hurt, my mother was scared and begged my father to bring Lizzy back but he didn't listen to her. He kept on saying, whoever leaves the Palmers, the palmers leave him/her. You have no idea how much my mother cried and begged, but father paid no heed to her pleas.

"It was one of those days when my father was ignoring my mum's tears. Mother was standing on the stairs and pleading with my father to bring their only daughter back; to accept her marriage and forgive her. My father snapped and tried to pry her hands off his arm. He—He used a bit more force than necessary, which caused my mum to lose her balance and fall down the flight of stairs. She died of a severe head wound that day."

I gasped. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry, Chris. You told me your mum died in an accident." This tale was so sad, his mum died in a tragic way.

"In a way, this was an accident, my father didn't mean to do it, and he regrets his actions till this day. He has never forgiven himself over what happened, and me being the terrible son that I am kept blaming him for my mother's death." He tightened his grip on me.

"We all tend to blame someone, it's all right." I tried to make him realize that what he did was not wrong.

"No it's not. My father is in the OR fighting for his life, and if God forbid something happens to him, my father's last memory will be of his son leaving him and blaming him for his wife's death," he said bitterly.

"Chris, please don't think like that. Your father loves you, and he is not upset with you. Brenton

just told you how your father was regretting kicking you out, this proves he loves you, and parents always forgive their children, no matter what," I said with conviction.

"My father is never going to forgive me," he muttered, his eyes shimmering with regret.

"Your father loves you, and he has already forgiven you. But Chris, I stand by what I said before, if you ever want to leave me and be with your family, you can do that, I won't force you to stay with me, I know your family is more important." I told him.

"Don't say that! You are mine and I am never going to leave you. No matter what happens, you are mine and will always be. Don't you dare say anything like this ever again." His tone told me he meant every word that he said.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I love you so much, Chris." I kissed his cheek.

"I'm sorry, Alice. I'm so sorry," he said.

I frowned in confusion. What was he apologizing about? "Why are you apologizing?"

"I defended Helga when you first told me to fire her. I'm sorry I did that. Please forgive me, little peach," he said.

"Chris no. Don't apologize. You were right to defend her, I had no right to tell you to kick her out. I was out of line. If there is anyone who should apologize, it should be me; because of me, you had a fight with your father; you had to change your lifestyle for me; you had to endure my curious nature, you got such a nosy wife. I'm sorry." I placed my head back on my shoulder.

"You are perfect, I'm so glad that my mum told me to marry you," he uttered.

"What? Your mum told you to marry me? How? And is that why you married me?" I fired off my questions.

He nodded. "My mum sort of sent me a sign telling me to marry you when I went to her grave and asked her. And she is partly the reason why I married you. The other half of the reason is, I found you intriguing and so adorable, plus Keiran liked you a lot." He told me.

"So you married me for me?" I questioned.

"Yes. And I'm fucking glad that the people who are the most important in my life supported my decision." With those words, He captured my lips in a tender, loving kiss.

"Uh, I hate to break you guys apart, but dad's out of surgery and we can visit him in a little while." I turned my head to see Keiran standing a few feet away, looking relieved.

"How long has it been since he's been out of surgery?" He asked, relief evident in his eyes.

"A little while. Let's go." Keiran turned and strode away, leaving Chris and I to follow.

And now, I had to deal with another confrontation. God help me.

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"Is dad all right?" Chris asked Elizabeth who was standing outside the ICU.

As soon as Keiran had informed us that Mr. Palmer was out of surgery, Chris grabbed my arm and rushed all the way here. I could see different emotions flashing in those sea green eyes: worry, relief, happiness and a tad bit of fear.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Brenton is inside. The doctor said he can't have too many visitors."

"Why didn't you go?" Chris enquired.

Elizabeth let out a bitter laugh. "Are you kidding? Father hates me, he doesn't want to see me," she said. I could see the sadness swimming in her eyes. No matter how rebellious she acted in the past, Elizabeth still yearned for her father's love and acceptance, and I truly wished for her sake that Mr. Palmer forgave her.

Henry kissed Elizabeth's forehead before wrapping his arms around her. He had barely said anything throughout the time we had been here, but I could see he was worried about his wife. And I could understand that, because I was worried about my husband as well.

"Chris, why don't you sit down," I suggested.

"I'm fine, Alice," he responded, his eyes glued to the doors of the ICU.

"You need to relax. You haven't eaten anything, maybe I should get you something to eat," I said.

"I said I'm fine." his voice rose, which was enough for me to shut up. Nodding my head, I perched on a chair which he was standing next to. I didn't want to admit it, but his word awoke a dormant fear inside of me. The fear of him leaving me for his family. I mean, I would understand if he would leave me, but raising a child on your own was difficult; if he left me, it would be extremely difficult for me and my brother.

After ten minutes, Brenton emerged from the ICU. Chris rushed over to him while Elizabeth eyed him with worry; Keiran held Jenny's hand tightly, his gaze not leaving Brenton.

"Is he all right?" Chris asked immediately.

Brenton nodded, which resulted in all the Palmers breathing a sigh of relief. "Yes, he is fine, but he can't deal with stress, so we have to take it easy with him. And he should not work anymore, which means I will be stepping in to

take his place." Brenton eyed Elizabeth. "He wants to see you. Both of you. I told him you were here and he wishes to see you. But please don't do or say anything that would upset him," he instructed.

Elizabeth looked as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. The disbelief shining in her eyes was enough proof, and when she stayed rooted to her spot, it just told me exactly how surprised she really was.

Henry nudged Elizabeth a little to get her to move, and both of them shuffled inside, leaving the rest of us wondering how Mr Palmer was doing.

"Chris, Keiran. You guys are next. Once Lizzy and Henry come back, then dad wants to see you." Brenton said . Chris and Keiran nodded simultaneously.

My mind went into overdrive as I contemplated

the possibilities of Him leaving me. Even though he had just told me that he would never leave me, I couldn't believe that; especially after Brenton told us that we must not do anything to upset Mr. Palmer. Right now, Mr. Palmer had all the power; if he wanted, he would tell him to leave me, and he would do just that because he would not want to upset his dad.

Why don't you leave him? It'll be easier for you. No pain. My subconscious suggested.

If it was that easy, I would've done it ages ago. But I love him.

Be independent like you were before. If you can't leave him, at least don't depend on him too much.

"You okay?" Jenny asked, sitting beside me.

I nodded and glanced up at Chris who was still staring at the doors of the ICU. "Yeah. I'm all right, what about you?"

"I am freaking out." Jenny turned to see Keiran, who was messing with his cell phone. "I have a feeling Mr. Palmer is going to tell Keiran to leave me."

My eyes widened. I couldn't believe Jenny was having the same thoughts as me. Just like me, she was afraid of losing the love of her life. And just like me, I doubted she could do anything to prevent that from happening.

"To be honest, I am having the same thoughts," I confessed, making sure my voice was low enough so Chris could not hear me.

"Do you want to go to the bathroom, we can talk there," Jenny suggested.

Nodding my head I stood up. "Chris, I am going to use the restroom." I told him.

"Alright, but make sure you hurry back," he replied.

Jenny and I went to the restroom to talk in

private. And when we entered the bathroom, I actually relaxed. Now I could talk freely.

"Keiran is going to leave me, isn't he?" Jenny said as soon as the bathroom door shut behind us.

"No, he isn't. Keiran loves you and will never leave you." Oh how I wanted to tell her about Keiran forcing her to marry him; but I couldn't.

"No Alice, you don't understand. You see, Chris is married to you, so he will never leave you, but Keiran and I are not married. What if Mr. Palmer tells Keiran to marry a better woman than me?" Jenny looked genuinely worried.

"If he can tell Keiran to marry someone else, he can tell Chris to divorce me as well," I stated.

"Chris loves you too much to leave you," she responded.

"He might say he loves me, but his family is more important. I wouldn't stop him if he left

me for his family." I told her.

"You are pregnant with his baby, trust me, he will never leave you," she argued.

I sighed. "You are worrying about nothing. Keiran loves you," I replied.

"Do you think he loves me enough to fight this world for me?" She asked me.

I nodded. "I don't think, I know."

"How are you so sure?" She questioned, hope lighting up her eyes.

"I just do," I replied.

Jenny nodded. "I don't know what to believe. But I don't think I have a lot of time, we should get going before Keiran and Chris come here."

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure, I'm pushing the soon limit," I agreed, and together we left the bathroom and went back to Keiran and Chris.

Both of them were in deep conversation when we returned. However, what caught my attention was Elizabeth, who was sitting with Henry, steady tears falling from her eyes. I frowned in confusion; why was she crying?

"What happened?" Jenny asked, addressing no one yet everyone.

Keiran shook his head which was an indication that he would explain later. With a final nod, Chris headed towards me.

"Come. Father wants to see us," he said.

"Us?" Surely he didn't mean me and him.

"Yeah. You and I. Come, we must not make him wait," he stated.

"Wait. Are you sure that he wants to see me?" I asked.

"Of course. Brenton just said that after Elizabeth, I would go and see dad," he said.

"Yes, but you should go alone. I'm sure your father does not want to see me." I told him.

He frowned. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course he wants to see you. Come, when you'll meet him then you'll know." he begun tugging me along, but I resisted.

"No. Chris, please. I know for a fact that your father does not want to see me. He hates me. Please go without me. I'll wait for you here," I stated.

"No. I am not going inside without you," He stated.

"Don't be silly, Chris. Brenton just said we should not do anything that would upset your father, and me being there will upset him. So please, go. I'll wait here," I said firmly.

He sighed. "I am going to go in there, and I will tell dad that I'm bringing you inside to meet him, then you'll come, is that clear?"

I shook my head. "I won't come if my presence will upset him. I am not going to be the cause of his heart attack," I replied.

He gave me a look filled with frustration, but I did not budge. Mr. Palmer already hated me, I did not need another Palmer hating me; and upsetting the head of the Palmer family was not going to help.

"Stay here," Chris ordered before turning around and marching off to the ICU.

Glancing at Elizabeth as she wiped away her tears had me wondering just what happened to her. Was she crying tears of happiness? Or were those tears of sorrow? Did Mr. Palmer forgive her, or was he still angry because she ruined his reputation in the family? I wished I had the liberty to ask, but I knew I had no right to interfere.

"No. I'm not going in there with you, Keiran. You

go, Chris is there as well." I heard Jenny saying. I turned around to see the two of them arguing in much the same way as Chris and I were doing just a couple of minutes ago.

"If you think I'm going to see my father without you, then you are very much mistaken," Keiran stated, giving Jenny a hard look. Was it crazy of me to think that the look Keiran was giving Jenny felt as if he wanted Jenny to submit?

"Keiran—" Jenny began but Keiran cut her off.

"No arguments. You are going to with me in the ICU, even if I have to drag you there." Keiran's words left no room for arguments. I suddenly wished I could run away, because I felt like I was intruding.

No sooner had that thought entered my mind that I felt a hand clamp on my bicep. I looked up to see Chris standing, his grip on my arm.

"What's wrong? Why are you back so soon?" I

questioned.

"Father wants to see you." Without waiting for me to reply, he dragged me inside the ICU.

"Don't lie to me. I know your father doesn't want to see me."

"Actually little fairy, I'm not lying. Dad told me specifically that he wants to see you," He replied, as we passed a number of beds all hidden behind white curtains.

Maybe Mr. Palmer is trying to give himself another heart attack by asking to meet him. Maybe Helga has made him suicidal.

Chris stopped when we reached the fourth bed on the right. My eyes landed on Mr. Palmer who was sitting up in bed, hooked to a bunch of weird wires. He looked pale and frail, not like the powerful man I had seen the last time when he was threatening Chris.

"Hello Alice," Mr. Palmer greeted, his voice

gravelly.

"Hello Mr. Palmer" I replied softly.

"Chris. Will you please give us some privacy. I want to discuss something with Alice," he said.

No, no, I did not want to be alone with him. I gave Chris a pleading look, telling him through my eyes how I did not want him to leave me. But my husband chose that moment to be oblivious to my pleas. Bloody husband!

Nodding his head, he stepped back. "I'll be just a few feet away," he murmured before leaving.

"Come here and sit, Alice," Mr. Palmer instructed after Chris was gone.

Everything in me was telling me to run in the opposite direction, but I did as he said and perched on the bed beside him. Mr. Palmer grabbed my hand in both of his gently, a warm smile on his face. His skin felt paper thin but his eyes had a happy sparkle.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Palmer?" I asked.

"I'm much better now, honey. Thank you." He gave my hand a soft squeeze. "Do you know what I called you here for?"

"Uh—You want me to leave your son?" I guessed.

He smiled sadly before shaking his head. "No dear, quite the opposite actually. Chris loves you, and you are his happiness. I was wrong to take his happiness away, and I made the worst mistake of my life when I chose pride over family. I want you to promise me that you will never leave my son. You make him happy, and I want you to be with him forever," he said.

"But you wanted a better woman for him," I responded. Was he serious? Did he really want me to stay with Chris?

He laughed bitterly. "Like I said, I chose pride over family. I chose my reputation over my children's happiness; and I regret it, Alice. So

please promise me you won't ever leave my son, no matter how difficult it becomes."

I had no idea what to say. I was ecstatic that Mr. Palmer was admitting the fact that he was wrong, but I was still hesitant. However, despite all this, I knew that I loved Chris and would stay with him no matter what.

"I love your son. I love him, and I promise you that I am never going to leave him, no matter how difficult it becomes," I promised.

Mr. Palmer kissed the top of my hand, a joyous smile on his face. "Thank you. Thank you so much, dear. And one last thing before I call Chris back here." I tensed at his words. What else did he want to say to me?

"I am sorry." Now that surprised me. "For everything that I did, for everything I said to you. I'm very sorry. No one deserved such harsh words. Please forgive me, dear." The sincerity

shimmering in his gaze was astounding. Was he really the same man who abused me in front of the whole family?

Yes. Hell yes!

"Mr. Palmer..." I had no idea what to say. He had abused me. How could I put that all behind me so soon.

"It's all right, dear. You don't have to say anything. I know forgiving me will not come easy, and frankly, I don't even deserve it. But I do want you to know that I truly am sorry for everything, and when the time comes, you can forgive me, that is totally up to you.

"And I want you to know, that regardless of the fact that you forgive me or not, I accept you not only as my daughter-in-law but as my daughter. I do not only accept you as Chris's wife, I accept you as a Palmer."

Those words had me wondering whether I was

dreaming or not. He accepted me. Mr. Palmer finally accepted me as family. I could not believe it. I thought it would be impossible to gain his acceptance, but I had done it. Or maybe Chris did it, since he fought his father for me. But bottom line; Mr. Palmer accepted me as Chris's wife.

"Th—Thank you, Mr. Palmer" I uttered.

"I should thank you for coming to see me," he said.

"Are you guys finished?" Chris asked, his voice sounding far away.

"Yes son, you can come back now," Mr. Palmer replied.

In an instant, Chris appeared beside me. When he saw my hand encased in Mr. Palmer's a happy smile graced his handsome face. Chris bent down and kissed my forehead.

"Did you guys have a good chat?" Chris enquired.

Mr. Palmer nodded. "Yes we did, son. But don't ask your wife what we talked about, it's between me and her."

Chris chuckled. "All right, I'll try to keep my curiosity at bay." He winked at me.

Mr. Palmer laughed out loud. "You do that. Now where are Keiran and Jenny? I would like to see them now," he said.

Chris nodded before pulling me up and wrapping his arm around me. "I'll let them know you wish to see them. I'll see you soon." With that, Chris and I walked out of the ICU.

"Chris?" I tried to gain his attention.

"Yes little bird?"

"Have you—have you forgiven your father?" I queried.

He nodded. "Yes, I have. Because he accepted you, and that is all I wanted," he answered.

"Was that your only problem with him?" I questioned.

He nodded again. "Yes. I refuse to accept anyone who does not accept my wife. I love you, and I am going to make sure the whole world knows it."

I chuckled. "Are you sure?"

"It doesn't really matter if the whole world knows it, I just need to make sure that you know it, but if the whole world knows it then that's just a plus."

I smiled at him. "I love you."

"And I love you," he replied

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I eyed the dining table which was filled with snacks, with happiness. I couldn't wait for the others to arrive. My daughter was going to turn one today, and the elation that I felt was beyond human comprehension.

"Little bird, why are you standing here?" Chris asked softly, coming up behind me, giving me a peck on the cheek.

"I am just making sure that everything is fine," I replied, smiling up at my husband.

"Everything is perfect." He wrapped his arms around me from behind.

"Is the cake here?" I enquired.

"Yes. I just gave it to the maid so she can put it in the refrigerator. Where is my daughter?" He enquired.

"With her aunt Jenny. She is getting her ready.

When is your father coming?" I questioned.

"He'll be here in about twenty minutes, at least that's what Brenton told me," he answered.

"Your father should take it easy now. Let Brenton handle things," I stated.

"Dad likes working, keeps him busy and distracted. By the way, where is Jack?" He looked around for our son.

"Your son is playing with your other son." I told him with a smile.

"Abioye is happy here, isn't he?" A happy sparkle lit up Chris's eyes at the mention of our adopted son.

I nodded. "He calls you dad and me mum, I'll say he's pretty happy here. I just hope Jack doesn't mess up his clothes." When Abioye and Jack were playing together, their clothes were bound to get dirty.

"Don't worry. Jack is a big boy," he stated.

"He is only two and half years old, just a few months younger than Abioye, and you're telling me he's a big boy," I argued.

"Don't worry, little fairy. The kids will be fine." He kissed my forehead.

"I hope so." A sudden thought struck me, something I should've asked him a long time ago. "Chris?"

"Yes little peach?"

"Why did you name our son Abioye?" I asked.

"Because Abioye means son of royalty...and since we were going to adopt him, I thought the name fit." He told me.

"Abioye means son of royalty?" I did not know that.

He nodded. "Yes, it does. I was looking for names on Google when I found it," he said.

"Oh." Was all I could say.

"Alright. Here you go Alice, your daughter is ready for her birthday party," Jenny said, holding Lily in her arms.

Chris took a giggling Lily from Jenny before hugging her close. Jenny had dressed Lily in a baby blue poofy dress and added a matching headband on her head. Since Lily had just turned one, she only had a small amount of strawberry blonde hair on head.

"Here is my birthday girl." Chris kissed her chubby cheek. Lily, in response, wrapped her tiny arms around his neck, burying her face in it. The love shining in Chris's eyes for our daughter had my heart swelling with joy. Palmer or no Palmer, he would give his life for his daughter.

"Thank you Jenny for dressing her up." I told her.

"No problem, I love doing it. Have you seen my daughter anywhere?" Jenny asked, looking

around for her one year old daughter.

I smiled when I saw Rose, Jenny's daughter walking over to Jenny. "There she is." I pointed at the little girl.

Relief shone through Jenny's eyes as she bent down and picked up Rose. "Where have you been, Rosemarie? And where is daddy?" She asked the little girl.

"Mama, dada home," Rose said.

"Is he?" Jenny turned to Chris. "Is Keiran home?" She questioned.

"Yes he is." It was Keiran who answered, as he joined us in the dining room, giving Jenny a hug from behind. "How are you, strawberry?" Keiran kissed Jenny's temple.

"I'm all right. What took you so long?" She asked.

"I was trying to find the perfect present for my niece, it takes time," Keiran answered.

"Where is Elizabeth?" I questioned.

"She is on her way. Why don't you relax. Everything looks perfect," Chris said.

"I'll relax when everybody will be here and my daughter's birthday will pass without any incidents," I stated, glaring at the clock, which seemed to be running at the speed of light.

"Everybody isn't here yet?" Nico asked, stepping inside the dining room.

"No! They are late," I answered my little brother.

"It's alright, little sister, everything will go smoothly," Brenton said, sauntering inside the dining room followed by Mr. Palmer himself. Even though Mr. Palmer had a heart attack two years ago, he looked healthy; there was no sign of the pale, old man who I visited in the ICU.

That day, Mr. Palmer had forgiven all his children, and had reunited his family once again. And I believed he was happy with his decision.

Everytime Lizzy would come meet him, he would have the biggest smile on his face; and his love for his grand children was unconditional. He loved every single one of the kids, even Abioye, and made sure everybody was treated equally. No longer was he the man who valued status and wealth, but a man who now valued family and love.

"Dad!" Chris and Keiran said at the same time, quickly giving their father a hug. Chris handed Lily over to me before going over to him.

"You know. I am so glad that bitch Helga is out of their lives," Jenny said to me, eyeing Mr. Palmer conversing with his sons.

"Tell me about it. You have no idea how happy I am that she isn't here anymore," I agreed. After the police had taken Helga away, Keiran made sure that she wouldn't get employment anywhere else, and had her driven off to God knows where.

Once Helga was out of the picture, the ban on the floors seven and above was finally lifted. Since Elizabeth was no longer a sore subject for the family, the whole castle was now open to everyone in the family. The good that thing that came out of Helga's departure was the fact that the Palmers no longer trusted the staff as blindly as they had been for the past years.

"Why are you ladies standing there? Come and give this old man a hug," Mr. Palmer ordered softly.

Shaking my head, I gave Lily back to Chris, before I went over to him and when Mr. Palmer wrapped his arms around me, I felt like it was my own father hugging me. I remembered my father's hugs to be warm and comforting, and that was exactly how I felt in Mr. Palmer's arms.

"Where are my grandchildren?" He asked me.

"Well, one is with her father, and the other two

are playing with each other. They should be here soon," I replied.

"Good, my car's trunk is full with gifts," he said before releasing me and engulfing Jenny in a bear hug.

"Grandpa!" Abioye and Jackson ran towards him, who barely had time to release Jenny before both of my sons captured his legs.

Mr. Palmer chuckled, bending down until he was eye levelled with Abioye and Jack. Both the boys were able to hug their grandfather properly once he was down on his knees.

"Here are my princes. Where have you two been?" He asked the boys.

"Grandpa, Abi and I were playing," Jack answered excitedly.

"Playing what?"

"Cops!" Abioye announced.

"Yeah!" Jackson agreed. "Grandpa, what did you bring me?" He asked.

"I got a lot of presents for the both of you." Mr. Palmer smiled at the boys.

I was surprised that he had accepted Abioye so easily. When Chris had announced that we would be adopting a baby, I thought Mr. Palmer would protest or would threaten to kick Chris out, but he didn't do any of those things. He accepted Chris's and my decision and even treated Abioye as if he was really part of the family. I doubted Abioye would ever wonder about his real family, he was getting so much love over here, I didn't think it would be possible that he would ever consider the fact that he was adopted.

A smile spread across my lips as Elizabeth entered with Henry and her three kids. Finally, everybody was here, now we could get the so-called party started. Elizabeth's daughter was

looking adorable in a yellow dress, while her sons were wearing matching outfits.

"Where is the birthday girl?" Lizzy asked, before taking Lily from me and giving her cheek a kiss.

"Hello Elizabeth," I said, watching everyone gathered around, laughing and conversing with each other.

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Can you please call me Lizzy. It's been two years and you still call me by my full name." She grinned at my daughter.

"Elizabeth is your name," I explained with a shrug.

"Your mummy will never learn, isn't that right?" She gave Lily another kiss.

"Hey! No need to tell my daughter that." I frowned.

"You can forget her for the rest of the evening,

she's mine now." Elizabeth told me.

"And what about your kids?" I raised my eyebrows in question.

"You can watch them." Elizabeth faced Jenny.

"Give me your daughter. These two girls are mine for the evening," she stated, eyeing Rose with affection.

"Why are you after the daughters, why not the boys?" Jenny asked.

Elizabeth scoffed. "Are you kidding?! Girls are fun. Plus it's nice to see girls in the Palmer family, I swear, this family is filled with boys."

"Yeah. The family curse," Jenny acknowledged.

"Yes. But lucky for you, you managed to break the family curse." Elizabeth looked at me. "Sorry Alice. But you could not break the curse. You got a boy first."

"So did you." I pouted.

"Yeah well I have Palmer blood in me, I was bound to get a boy," Elizabeth replied.

"That—That—" I had no retort for that, so I settled for a disapproving look.

"Hey. Why don't you go and tell the maids to bring the cake. Everybody is here, so why not cut the cake?" Chris suggested.

Giving the others a glance, I nodded. "Yes alright, I'll go and tell them to bring the cake." With one last look at the kids, to make sure they were all right, I headed to the kitchen.

When I spotted a couple of maids fussing around with a bunch of glasses, I called out their names to get their attention.

"Abbie? Anne?" They both looked at me, forgetting the glasses. "Can you please bring the cake out now," I requested.

"Yes of course, Mrs. Palmer. We'll bring the cake immediately," Abbie replied with a small

smile.

"Thank you." With a smile, I strode out of the kitchen and back to the dining room.

"When will the cake come?" Jenny enquired.

"Why? Hungry already?" I chuckled.

"Yes. I'm pregnant," she defended.

"Of course. Forgive my ignorance," I teased.

"Why are you teasing my wife, little mushroom?" Keiran came over, kissing Jenny on the lips.

"I'm hungry." Jenny told Keiran.

"It's alright, strawberry. Why don't you go and help yourself to some snacks," he suggested.

"But it would be rude in front of so many people," she responded.

"Those rules don't apply to you. Come, I'll eat with you."

"Wait for two minutes, the cake is almost here,"

I stated.

"Listen to Alice. We'll wait for two minutes," Jenny said to her husband.

As soon as Jenny finished speaking, the maids brought out the cake, and the sight of it had my mouth watering. The cake was four tiered, white chocolate cake; it looked fit for a princess, but then again, Lily was no less than a princess; she ruled our hearts. Abbie and Anne placed the cake on the dining table before taking their leave. Almost immediately, the palmers took their respective seats. Since the addition of the children, Chris had ordered a bigger dining table, which seated everyone comfortably and no one was left out.

"Alright, where is my daughter. It's time to cut the cake." Chris stood up and spotted Lily sitting on Elizabeth's lap. "Lizzy, give me my daughter back." He went over to her and picked our daughter up. "Come Alice. It's time to cut

the cake."

I stood up and went over to where Chris was standing with Lily in his arm in front of the cake, holding a knife with his free hand. Placing my hand over his, we slid the knife through the cake, while the Palmers sang the traditional Happy Birthday song. When the cake was cut, Chris gave Lily a kiss on the cheek, before he transferred her over to Mr. Palmer, while I cut the cake for everyone.

"First slice is for you, Jenny." I slid the plate over to her, and she dug in like she had been starving for days.

"Daddy, I want a hot air balloon for my birthday," Jackson stated, causing Brenton to burst out laughing.

"Brent? Did you put him up to this?" Chris asked.

"Oh no. I'm innocent," Brenton replied.

"Yes. He is so innocent he hasn't even asked a

girl out in two years. I'm starting to think he's gay," Keiran stated, causing Elizabeth and Henry to laugh.

"Can you guys use decent language in front of the kids," Mr. Palmer chided.

"Sorry dad," Brenton and Keiran chorused.

"Sometimes I wonder if you'll ever grow up," Mr.P Palmer muttered.

"Alright, if everybody is done talking, I would like to make a small announcement," Chris said, effectively getting everyone's attention.

"Thank you. Now as you all know, my daughter, Lily, the second female who has managed to capture my heart, has turned one today. And all I want to say is that she gets all the happiness she deserves, and I vow to protect her from all the evils and dangers of this world."

"Aye!" The Palmers chorused, surprising me with their unity.

"I'll make sure no guy is able to come within fifty feet of her," Brenton announced.

"No! Don't go over protective on my daughter," I objected.

"Sorry little sister, I am the uncle here," he replied.

"We can debate how over protective we'll be once Lily grows up. But for now, let's eat!" Keiran stated. And all at once, everybody helped themselves to the snacks.

While everybody was busy eating, I took a moment to reflect on the love and happiness this family had given me. I thought I would be Chris's temporary wife, one he would leave once the year long contract was over; but fate had a funny way of playing with us, and turned one year into a forever.

I did not come from money, I was poor. And I valued family and love, but being with the

Palmer's truly made me realize the importance of family, and I was sure of one thing. Money was not what made you rich, it was family and the number of people who loved and supported you unconditionally that made you rich. Money would come and go depending on time, but family and friends stayed forever.

And that was the true wealth.

.....The End.....