

The background is a light pink color with a subtle floral pattern. Several large, vibrant red roses are scattered across the page, each with green leaves and a dark green thorny vine. The roses are rendered in a stylized, almost graphic manner. The title 'AFTER hours' is centered in the upper half of the page. 'AFTER' is in a large, white, serif font, while 'hours' is in a smaller, white, cursive script font.

AFTER  
*hours*

JADA  
*West*

*After Hours*

THE TIMELESS LOVE SERIES

BOOK ONE

**JADA WEST**

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After Hours

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Jada West asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition

Paperback ISBN: 9789766551131

Cover and interior formatting by Magherita Scialla

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*For those who find love in the most unexpected places and let  
it disrupt their lives in the most beautiful way. Here's to the  
mysteries of the heart and the secrets of the soul and to the  
love that transcends boundaries.*

*“In the chaos of disrupted structures and the ruins of our hearts, we often find the most intoxicating love. It’s a collision of two worlds, a dance of addiction and temptation. Sometimes, the forbidden fruit is the sweetest. This is the tale of Dillon & Azzaria, where time halts and the heart beats after hours.”*

# *Content Notes*

- Drug Use
- Mentions of assault
- Sexual scenes
- Mature language
- Violence
- Domestic abuse
- Grief
- Blood
- Death of a parent
- Cancer



# *Playlist*

- “I Can’t Help Falling in Love with You” - Elvis Presley
- “Cruel Summer” - Taylor Swift
- “Love Me Like You Do” - Ellie Goulding
- “Unsteady” - X Ambassadors
- “Torn” - Natalie Imbruglia
- “Bleeding Love” - Leona Lewis
- “Uh Oh” - Tate McRae
- “The Scientist” - Coldplay
- “Chaotic” - Tate Mcrae
- “Movies” - Conan Gray
- “Someone Like You” - Adele
- “Afterglow”- Taylor Swift
- “Shape of You” - Ed Sheeran
- “Addicted” - Saving Abel
- “Breathless” - The Corrs
- “Sexual Healing” - Marvin Gaye
- “Dancing On My Own” - Robyn
- “Crazy in Love” - Beyoncé

- “Take My Breath” - The Weeknd
- “Sweet but Psycho” - Ava Max
- “All of Me” - John Legend
- “Rolling in the Deep” - Adele
- “Earned It” - The Weeknd
- “Delicate” - Taylor Swift
- “Don’t Blame Me” - Taylor Swift
- “Dancing With Our Hands Tied” - Taylor Swift
- “After Hours” - The Weeknd

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## CHAPTER 1

# *Azzaria*

“*UGH,*” I GRUMBLED AS I ROLLED OUT OF BED. MY PHONE’S notifications chimed relentlessly at 5:45 PM, and I couldn’t help but wonder who the fuck it was.

Grabbing the phone to check, it was an e-mail.

---

**SUBJECT: ACCEPTANCE FOR INTERNSHIP**

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Acceptance for the internship meant I was one step closer to graduation. I’m pretty sure I wasn’t the only undergrad student who found this whole internship requirement a bit absurd, but that was beside the point. I got the internship, and I just needed to get in and get out as fast as possible—piece of cake.

The body of the email simply instructed me to attend an interview tomorrow and bring along a copy of my documents and banking information.

Xander Communications Limited wasn’t my initial choice, but after glancing at the other options on the list, they seemed even more mundane. Sure, it might not align with my dream career, but the prestige of this company was undeniable, and a well-paying “job” was an alluring prospect—two things I desperately needed.

The graduation checklist had been sent out two weeks ago, and the only outstanding items on my list were the final fee payment and the mandatory internship. Both would get sorted out in due time, I hoped so at least.

“Mom, do you have a pencil skirt I could borrow?” I asked.

She furrowed her brows in response. “What on earth do you need a pencil skirt for?”

“I’ve got an internship interview tomorrow, so I need something business-appropriate.”

Her eyes left her favorite TV series and focused on me, pride shining through them. “Go check my drawers for something,” she said with a warm smile. “Congratulations on the internship! I’m incredibly proud of you!” She exclaimed, rising from her seat to give me a comforting and rewarding hug.

A soft smile passed between us, and I made my way to her room.

My mother was my anchor, the one person who had been unwaveringly by my side throughout the years. Her love for me knew no bounds, and I couldn’t help but remind myself that I was pursuing all of this for her. The weight of knowing that my mother had sacrificed everything for my well-being, even if it meant missing out on life herself, was a heavy burden. One day, I was determined to repay her.

“I found this,” I said as I returned to the living room.

She nodded in approval. “Yes, and wear a cardigan over the white shirt. Offices can be chilly.”

She was absolutely right. “What would I do without you, Mom?”

Blowing a kiss my way, she replied, “I love you too, dear.”

I had initially planned to spend the rest of the day with Halley, but she canceled because her boyfriend, Bryce, needed her. So, I stayed in with my mom, had dinner, and turned in early.

The day ahead, would definitely be better than last and that single thought was the only thing keeping me sane.

---

## *Dillon*

The most pivotal and best decision of my life was the choice to divorce Annalise, a woman standing on the precipice of severe mental instability. It became abundantly clear when I had to make the agonizing decision to admit her to a mental hospital after the tragic loss of our twin daughters, her suspicion of infidelity leading to a devastating outcome. It was an utterly harrowing ordeal, a turning point that profoundly shaped my future.

*“You’re to blame for all of this,” Annalise’s anguished accusations pierced the air.*

*“My fault? I was away on a work trip, trying to provide for us, especially considering you don’t work,” I retorted, my anger palpable.*

*“You were with her, weren’t you?” Her voice quivered with suspicion.*

*“No, Annalise, I’m not like you. I don’t cheat on the people I love.”*

*She was left speechless, unable to acknowledge her own faults. I knew of her unfaithfulness, but after investing in marriage counseling and with her pregnancy, I chose to stay. Tragically, she overdosed, ending the lives of our unborn children, all due to her tormenting thoughts.*

*“Dill—”*

*“No, listen to me. I’ve been miserable for the past five years, and you’ve been the source of that misery. I’ll never forgive you for what you did to our unborn children and the torment you’ve caused me. I want you out of my house, or I’ll have you removed,” I declared, tears streaming down my face as I walked away.*

The memory of that traumatic time remains etched in my mind, a painful reminder of the unimaginable tragedy that unfolded. I’m slowly coming to terms with the belief that those babies are better off in heaven as Annalise would never have been a suitable mother. She continually attempted to

reenter my life, but I was prepared to spend any amount of money to ensure she stayed far from me.

“Xander, were you ready to leave?” Mikkel, my driver and friend, asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Yes, let’s go. I need to feed Pebbles.”

“Your mother stopped by and took care of her,” Mikkel informed me. My mother has an inexplicable attachment to Pebbles, but she’s not taking her. She tends to want everything that I have.

I left my office and headed home. Glancing around, the once love-filled space now felt painfully empty, and I anxiously anticipated the moment I could move into my penthouse. Despite the grandeur of the house, I questioned the purpose of having such a large space when there were no meaningful memories to cherish. The house carried the weight of betrayal, tarnishing the gift from my grandparents who would be disappointed to see it like this.

Upon entering the kitchen, Pebbles greeted me with enthusiasm, and I couldn’t help but smile at her exuberance.

“Hello, Pebbles,” I stooped down to pet her.

She barked in response and then returned to her doghouse. As I was about to prepare dinner, I noticed a box of food with a note on top of it.

*Here’s some dinner because you’re probably working late. I love you, son.*

*Regards: Amy (Mom)*

The note had a hint of irony, and I couldn’t decipher whether my mother was being genuine or not.

Surprisingly, I wasn’t planning to work late tonight. I was exhausted, and the thought of waking up at 6 a.m. for another repetitive day at the office was unappealing.

I needed some excitement in my life. I should have chosen a different city as my business base, as familiarity can breed

boredom. And trust me, no one is as familiar with this city as I am. I basically own all of it.

Pebbles jumped into my arms, placing her head on my bicep. That's her comfort spot, I'm not sure if it's because of the tattoo I have there but she just loves that spot—and I'm sure its uncomfortable.

Tattoos weren't my thing, but the one I have, is the most meaningful one. "Pridie melius quam ultimo," which translates to "the day ahead will always be better than the last." It's a saying my grandmother, of Latin descent, used to tell me, and I found it a fitting tribute to her after she passed away.

Life doesn't always go as planned, and things can change in the blink of an eye, but I'm still waiting for my moment. I may be flawed, but the right person will see past that. I won't rush it; patience is a virtue. Whatever comes my way will be dangerously beautiful, and I can't help but be intoxicated by the possibilities.

## CHAPTER 2

# *Azzaria*

TODAY ISN'T MY FUCKING DAY. I MISSED MY ALARM, AND ALL the calls from my mom. The only thing going for me is that I'm pretty, and I'm sure that won't put me in my boss' good graces, so that brings me back to my initial fucked-up state.

I arrived at this massive building ten minutes late and stood in the lobby, feeling like a fish out of water. The building had about sixteen floors, and each floor was enormous. I don't think I've ever seen a building this huge. *Ever*.

"Azzy?" I heard a very distinct and familiar voice call out. I was hoping he wouldn't recognize me, but of course, he had to.

"Nicholas," I said, fake smiling. "Hey."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, looking confused.

"Why else are people in the building, Nicholas? I'm here for the internship interview, but I don't know where to go."

"Oh, that was today."

"Mhm."

"Well, babe," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder, "you walk to the front desk and tell them why you're here."

Who was he calling "babe"? Just because we hooked up once or twice doesn't mean we're dating. He and I both knew there's nothing romantic or loving here, and if he wanted that, he came to the wrong person.



“Nicholas,” I said, taking a deep breath, “I know that you’re easily confused and probably think that because we slept together a few times, this is a relationship, but it’s not. There are no feelings here, so never call me ‘babe’ again, ever,” I said aggressively and walked off.

It’s bad enough that I slept with him, and he wants to make it even worse by thinking we’re in a relationship. *Hell no. Over. My. Dead. Body.*

Approaching the front desk, I encountered a stunning, curvaceous woman about 5’2” with long, silky brown hair and fair skin.

“Um, good morning,” I said, gulping. This was a lot more nerve-wracking than I thought it would be. *Was it too late to turn around and leave?*

“Good morning, dear,” she said, turning around and smiling at me.

“My name is Azzaria Willis, and I’m—”

“Oh, Ms. Willis,” she said, glancing at me up and down. “You’re here for the internship interview?”

“Yes, yes, I am.”

“Great, go straight down, then turn right. Knock, and then enter that room,” she said to me sweetly. I hope she’ll be here every day; I like her.

“Thank you, and congratulations on your pregnancy. You look great,” I said, leaving a compliment.

She smiled warmly at me and said, “Thank you so much, and hey, my brother may be an ass, so don’t take it personally.” She chuckled and winked at me.

The idea of being interviewed by someone with a lousy personality this early in the morning made me internally groan but, I went on until I saw a rather big black door.

Knocking on the door, I waited for about two minutes before I was acknowledged.

“Come in,” I heard. The person who answered me had a very familiar strong and rough voice.

I turned the doorknob and entered the room. My eyes immediately glued to the man in the chair. He was very good-looking. Who am I kidding? *He is so hot.*

Then my brain froze and my thoughts stopped...

*He's Dillon.*

*Dillon Xander.*

*Holy Fuck.*

*He's going to be my boss.*

“Good morning, sir,” I said and took a seat.

The room carried a strong and tense atmosphere, leaving me unsure of what to do or think.

“Who told you to sit?” He said unpleasantly. There’s no reason for this man to be so moody at this time of the day.

*Who pissed in his coffee?*

“I saw a chair, so I decided to sit.”

“Mhm,” he said and paced around me. “Tell me about yourself. I don’t want to hear about any of that boring stuff either,” he spoke confidently. What did he want to hear?

I inaudibly sighed. “My nam—”

“I read your application, so I know your name. Tell me about yourself,” he spoke.

“There’s not much to know, sir. How about you tell me about you since we’re doing introductions? I’m pretty sure you know everything you need to know about me.”

With all this irrelevant chatter taking place, I’m sure he either has zero plans of hiring me or he just really loves to antagonize the people he interviews.

He released a loud chuckle and walked over to his seat, crossing his legs.

“You remind me of someone I know,” he chuckled. “But I’m sure you know everything about me. Looking past that, why should I let you be an intern here?”

“Why would I know everything about you?”

The answer to this question was simple: he’s an attractive billionaire who’s the centre of every news article ever published, and I have no idea how I didn’t recognize this earlier; I just thought he’d have other people in his office regularly and not him.

He chuckled. “Why should I let you be an intern here?” He asked, ignoring my question.

“Why would I know everything about you?”

“This isn’t a game of twenty questions, Ms. Willis, why should I take you up?”

“Because I’m a valuable asset,” I answered.

“Confidence,” he noted. “Valuable how?”

“That’s where my resume comes in, sir. Or did you not read it?” I asked, testing him.

“Resumes are mostly filled with crap.”

“I’m competitive, and I’m not easily persuaded. A very firm person, and I’m sure you could pick up on that,” I smirked and got up from the chair. “Plus, I read about the architecture sector of your business and I’m definitely sure I could handle some of that, alongside my knowledge in business studies.”

“Very bold and straight to the point,” he said, walking closer to me. “Welcome to Xander Telecommunications.”

“Thank you,” I said, feeling extremely relieved. “When do I start?”

“Tomorrow at 8,” he said, and I left his office.

I’m not one to ever get too excited about work, but this is amazing. I’ve worked hard all my life, and to see it actually coming together and starting a new chapter is really comforting.

---

“I got the internship,” I said happily as I spoke to my mother on the phone.

“I thought you got accepted yesterday, but anyway, I’m so proud of you, honey,” she congratulated. “This was definitely expected from you, my dear.”

“I did but this was like the interview to see if they’d finalize the decision. Thanks, Mom. The interview wasn’t bad either. I was probably too bold, but all that matters is me getting the internship.”

“Yes,” she sighed with contentment. “When do you start?”

“Tomorrow morning, actually.”

“I’ll leave you to it, then. Have a good day,” she said and hung up.

I feel kind of excited going into this new phase of life. There’s still a lot to do, but it doesn’t all seem so impossible as it did before.

I showered and went to lay in bed. My friends were most likely busy and though, they don’t mind me bothering them, I just wanted to be alone.

But the thing with loneliness is the sudden shock of empty feelings that overtake my body, causing goosebumps all over my skin. I felt empty and broken, more than I’ve ever felt before. Something in me just felt like it was broken, but I couldn’t pinpoint what it was. Maybe it was that empty feeling I always have, or it was just the longing for something, but whatever it was, I hoped I’d *never* have to feel this way again.

---

### ***Dillon***

“What are you thinking about?” Mara asked me, startling me out of my thoughts.

“Huh? What?”

“You look deep in thought, so what’s up?”

“Running empires is hard, little sister,” I joked, “but I’m just thinking about life as a whole.”

“How was the interview with the intern?”

“Good.”

“You took almost two hours and it was just good?” She asked in disbelief.

“Yeah.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m going to set you up on some blind dates or maybe ask Arnaldo to see if they can get you on Love Island.”

“Mara, I will never go on a blind date or go on love island.”

“You can’t let what happened with Annalise keep you from moving on with your life, Dill.”

I sighed. She’s right, I can’t but that doesn’t mean I’ll look for love in every woman I interact with, nor does it mean I’ll be going to do blind dates or TV shows.

“Whatever,” I said and got up from my penthouse dining room table. “I’m going upstairs. Feed Pebbles for me and leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Are you upset?”

“No, I’m annoyed.” Mara does this with everyone. She magically thinks I’ll fall in love with every woman that has a pretty face and a nice smile, and as much as I wished it worked that way, it didn’t.

Annalise was definitely my biggest mistake and I hate being reminded of my mistakes.

*Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.*

“What is it, Ronan?” He’s been calling me all day, and I’ve been ignoring him all day. Somedays, I just don’t feel like talking to my best friend.

“I’ve been calling you since midday.”

“I know, I saw my phone ring.”

“Asshole.”

“I’ve been called worse,” I said, “What’s the problem?”  
Contrary to how harsh it sounds like I treat him, Ronan is definitely the best friend anyone can ever have.

“Do you believe in second chances?”

I stayed silent on the line to think. “Depends on the situation.”

“Think about it .”

Only one name came to mind and I hissed. “Ronan.....”

“I know, I know, but I’ve spent five fucking years watching her through everyone else’s eyes, I can’t live like this.”

“*Five years?*”

“Yes. So do you believe in second chances?”

“To be honest with you, I do, but do you think she will give that second chance? I know my cousin and what happened between the two of you hasn’t had the best effect on her, or both of you. By all means, if you think it’s a good idea, go for it.”

“Women are difficult.”

I laughed. “Are they really difficult or do we just go for the difficult ones?”

He sighed. “Maybe.”

“It’s late, I’m headed to bed.”

“Lucky you, I’m on hour thirty-seven of a twenty-hour shift.”

“I’ll leave you to it then, goodnight Ronan.”

“Night, Dillon.”

## CHAPTER 3

# *Dillon*

I FEEL LIKE I'VE BEEN LIVING MY DAYS REPETITIVELY. THERE are no highs, no lows, just monotonous feelings and emotions. But life goes on.

On the brighter side of life, the company has an intern starting today, which is not only a rare occurrence but it is quite surprising. However, after careful consideration, and how amazed I was during our interview, I think it'll work out really well for all the parties involved.

"Mrs. Emerson," I called out, "do you remember where I put my suits?" I asked her.

She's one of those elders that you spend all your life knowing and one of those people you have the utmost level of respect for. After the death of my grandparents, she stayed on to take care of Mara and I, and when the wealth came and life changed, I didn't let her go— I couldn't. She's family, and there's definitely not much of that to go around.

"Mr. Xander, they are laid out on your bed," she sweetly replied. Since everything was moved into the penthouse a few days ago, I had no idea where my belongings were put.

"Thank you."

"You know," she started, "it's okay to take it easy sometimes."

She's right, but if I move even five seconds slower, then I'll definitely lose all the structure I've managed to build all these years.

“I know, there’s just too much to do.”

She didn’t bother to answer, but instead, went about her day. The start of the day felt completely awful, like it was about to go downhill. However, I left the room and went to get some work done in my office.

Walking down the stairs, I was greeted by pebbles and Mara. I could’ve sworn she left last night.

“Good morning, D.”

“Morning, Mar. What are you doing here?”

“I’m pregnant, and my husband is annoying me, so here I am. But there’s something I have to tell you,” she said in an anxious tone. I’ve learned better than to get involved in Mara and her husband’s arguments; they have a very interesting relationship.

“Tell me what?”

“It’s about Annalise,” she said and gulped. Mara, above all, knows how sensitive of a topic that woman is.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I shouted and walked over to my desk.

“Dillon, it—”

“Honey, hello,” I heard and spun around, shocked. This can’t be happening today.

“What the fuck is she doing here?”

“I came here and saw her, and told the bitch to leave,” Mara cursed and hissed her teeth.

“Annalise,” I said after taking a deep breath. “Get the fuck out of my house,” I shouted.

“I called about a million times, and you didn’t answer. Is that how you treat your wife?” She asked and pouted. *Is this woman insane?*

“Annalise, listen to me and listen to me good. You are nothing to me. I don’t ever want to see you unless it’s in your



casket, and even then, I don't want to see you," I spat and left my study.

Whenever she wants to cause trouble or make a comeback in my life, she shows up, but I'm done with her. I tried my best, but I'm out of energy and patience.

I went to finish getting dressed, walked Pebbles a bit, and grabbed my things to leave the house.

---

Within the hour, we arrived. Traffic was a bitch.

"Mara, set up the meeting room for me, please," I said to her in a calm voice.

"Sure," she said, smiling at me, and walked off.

I walked into my office and noticed that the new intern, was already seated and waiting for me to arrive. I gave her points for being on time

I looked her up and down, realizing how simple yet appropriate she was dressed— a first for me. In my experience hosting interns, I had to let some go due to their attire, but I was impressed.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Mr. Xander, you're late," she said and spun her head around to face me.

"It's my company," I spoke and walked over to my desk.

"Your company, and you can't follow your own rules. How do you expect your employees to respect you?"

"Ms. Willis—"

"Don't even deny it; you know I'm right."

Ignoring what she said, I switched to a topic of more relevance. "You'll be my assistant for the next few months, your office is directly in front of mine."

"Great."

"Any questions?"

“No,” she spoke and left the office space. It’s about time too, my meeting was just about to start.

The meeting was boring, as usual—*all of them are*. I’m thirty- two years old; I should be on my yacht feeling the breeze of the Italian coastline slapping my face, not in a meeting room with power-hungry men who want to undermine me at some point.

“I need to be excused.” With my comments being acknowledged, I left the room.

Rather frustrated, I walked around the corner, and someone bumped into me. I couldn’t even see her face, but I had an idea of who it was.

Before I could say anything, my thoughts were interrupted by Shelby. “Oh, Mr. Xander, good your meeting is done; I see you’ve met the new girl, Miss Willis, the intern.”

“Yes, I’ve met her, and shouldn’t you be doing your job on the ground floor?”

“Yes, si—”

“Then get to it,” I said, raising my voice, and she left.

“I’m so sorry for bumping into you, was trying to find the bathroom.”

I released a low chuckle. “Don’t worry about it. There’s a bathroom in your office, but there’s also one down the hall.”

“Thank you.” She started to walk but stopped midway.

“There’s a woman waiting for you at the office door. I had told her that you were in a meeting, but she insisted on seeing you.” I didn’t give a response, but instead went to see who it was. Security and I would be in deep problems if this turned out to be Annalise.

“Mother?” You’ve got to be kidding me. *Can this day possibly get any worse?*

“Yes, Dillon, hello.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was in the area and decided to stop by. Where’s the lovely Mara?” I got the ick listening to her speak about us like she didn’t completely fuck up as a parent for all our lives.

“Probably eating chips somewhere,” I chuckled and walked into my office.

“You know, Annalise calle—”

“Mom,” I said and interrupted her. “I do not want to hear her name.” My mother wanted me to forget everything and move on to fixing that marriage with Annalise, but as far as I’m concerned, the only places I want her are in prison or six feet underground.

It always pained me how my own mother, if she could even be classified as that, was the biggest advocate for Annalise, and she didn’t even know the full story.

“Just give it a chance for the sake of your—”

“For the sake of my what? Happiness? That died a long time ago. If you came here to advocate on her behalf, I suggest you leave, and that’s said with all due respect.”

“You’ll never know real love because you don’t give it a chance.” She scoffed.

“I’d rather never know it than be with someone as vindictive and dreadful as her.”

“Stubborn as always,” she rebutted, grabbed her purse and left.

*Alas, some peace and quiet.*

---

### *Azzaria*

“Are you in the wrong office?” *Great.* Everywhere I go, Nicholas finds me.

“No, Mr. Xander told me I’m his new intern assistant,” I said and walked over to the printer.

“That’s cool. Do you need help with anything?”

As much as I didn't want to say yes, I couldn't be here acting like I knew how to do everything when I didn't. "Actually, yes, where do I start?"

"I'll ask Mara to help you. She can guide you a lot better than I can," he answered and smiled at me.

He went on his phone, dialed Mara, and a beautiful pregnant lady entered the room. I remembered her face; she's the boss's sister. She greeted me yesterday.

"Hey, Nicholas," she said. "What's up?"

"I have to go do lab reports, but can you help her out and tell her what it's like to be doing the assistant stuff?"

"Sure," Mara said and turned to me. "Of course, I will."

Nicholas walked over, giving me a very passionate hug, and left the room. My blood was boiling, but I couldn't show my anger—not here.

"Being Dillon's assistant is a bit rough, and it's the main reason this office is always empty."

"Aren't you his assistant?"

"No, I just help him out in every way I can. He's my brother, I can't say no to him," she said and smiled. It was good to know that he wasn't an ass to everyone, because I'm pretty sure this man hates my guts. But I wasn't here to make him like me. I was here to get this shit done, so I can progress.

"Oh okay, but any tips to help here?"

"Yeah," she said and took a seat. "The main thing is to just do your job to the best of your ability and keep it professional. He's fired almost everyone for putting their noses and privates where they shouldn't be. He doesn't believe in fraternization, and even if you are doing that, don't be as bold as you were earlier in front me," she stated and cleared her throat.

"Oh no, you have it all wrong. Nicholas and I are definitely not like that. I'm single; he just cannot take a hint," I awkwardly chuckled and took a seat around the desk.

“Oh, my bad then. But even so, Dillon doesn’t ask questions. He just assumes, and he won’t hesitate to let you go,” she spoke up.

“Yeah, I figured as much, and thanks for the tips.”

“You’re welcome, and don’t be afraid to ask if you need any help,” she said and started making her way out of the office.

“I will.”

“Whenever he calls you,” she said and turned to look at me, “drop whatever you’re doing and answer him. He never calls for help unless he really needs it,” she concluded and walked out of the office.

I opened the desktop, and his daily schedule popped up. I’ll be able to prepare for his meetings and inform him of the upcoming trips and work deadlines he has. I’ve got this in the bag.

*How hard can this be?*

## CHAPTER 4

### *Dillon*

“COME IN,” I SAID AS I HEARD A KNOCK ON THE DOOR.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Xander,” Azzaria said as she entered. “There’s a call coming through to you, you have a meeting with Jess Corporations in about half an hour, and your lunch is almost here,” she stated.

“Is that all?”

“Yes, it is.”

If my grandparents were in this room right now, they’d lecture me about projecting my problems, and I’d tell them, “*It’s just how I’m wired,*” and my granddad would call me a hardass, and we’d laugh. Sometimes, every moment that happens in my life reminds me of them, but on a day like this, remembering them only makes my day worse.

Azzaria went back to her office and decided to send off the reports and prepare the minutes and notices for the next meeting to come. There’s a monitoring task software installed on all employee computers, so I could see what each of them was up to.

I picked up the transferred call, knowing that I’d be even more irritated than I was before. Moments like this reminds me of how much I regret getting married. The lawyers on the phone were telling me bullshit. Our divorce should’ve been simpler than this. I’ve given into her every demand and yet, she won’t leave me alone. *What does it take for a man to get rid of a woman?*

“Can I file for a restraining order?”

“We’ve spoken to Mr. Reyes about that and we’re working out the specifics.”

“Alright then, we’ll speak again soon.”

My call with Jess & Co was pushed back for a few hours because they had rescheduled as well as I had to go over my speech for the museum opening tomorrow.

After months of filing for the business and operating license, it finally came through, and I can now legally operate a museum, and I was even gifted a few hundred artifacts from all around the world.

“Sir?” I heard a faint feminine voice call out.

“Yes?”

“Here are the minutes and notices for all your upcoming meetings. The Lancer’s report is there as well, and I tweaked your speech for tomorrow a bit,” she said and handed me all the documents.

“Tweaked my speech because?”

“It sounds like it was written by a high-schooler failing English. The run-ons, as well as it not putting you in the best light. Did you even proofread it or did you have your writer do it?”

“My writer and please,” I said, showing her the seat, “enlighten me on the changes.”

She took her seat on the far-end sofa and took the papers from me. “You know I don’t bite, right?” I asked jokingly.

“I wouldn’t be too sure of that.” She laughed, “but why did you say that?”

“You took the farthest seat in the room,” I noted.

“Professionalism, but let’s get to the speech. I can come a bit closer if you’d like,” she mentioned.

“Please do,” I said.

“So, the line where it starts off by saying ‘I’m here to speak on...’ take that out because what are you, five?”

“What would you suggest?”

She showed me the introduction she had written and it was better. She spoke eloquently and not to mention how extensive her vocabulary is. It’s not every day you find a college student being this educated; most of them in this city got here because of their parents or generational placement; they never work hard.

“I’m impressed. That sounds a lot better,” I admitted.

“I figured as much. I’d also change the last line and put something more attention-ending like ‘serving the city by upholding artifacts of the world.’”

“You sure you don’t want to be a writer instead of a business woman?” I asked her.

“I think I’m good with business and architecture,” she smiled, “but yes, sir, those are my recommendations.”

“I appreciate it,” I said, sharing a warm smile with her.

“It’s my job, literally my job,” she responded and got up.

“I think you sh—”

“Mr. Xander, I sh—”

“Dillon, my guy,” Bryce burst into the office. “Did you miss us?”

“Fucking hell,” I shouted, “ever heard of knocking and us? Who’s us?”

“Ronan and I, sorry for interrupting whatever was going on here and also, Halley’s looking for you.”

“We were working on a speech, Bryce, and let me go find her,” Azzaria spoke and left. “Excuse me, Mr. Xander.”

I went to sit around my desk, and Bryce sat on the sofa in front. “That was a very close look at the speech,” he noted, and Ronan walked in. He was the owner and the head cancer specialist at the hospital five minutes away from this office.

“Don’t you have a wedding and a family to plan?”



“I do, but this is more important. You’re not getting feelings for her, are you?”

“Bryce, I just met her, and we’re just doing our jobs. It’s not that hard to comprehend,” I said to him.

He needed to drop this, and quite frankly, everyone needed to drop it.

“Okay, well, how’s the bill going?”

“Great. The museum opens soon.”

Bryce, Ronan, and I sat down and had several drinks and conversation before Ronan decided that it was time for him to head back to the clinic, and Bryce decided it was time for him and Halley to leave.

---

### *Azzaria*

He’s not the asshole one would think he is, or maybe, this is just him on a good day. He reacted way better than I thought he would’ve.

This week felt like an entire year and I could definitely use some drinks with the girls tonight and that reminded me, Bryce said Halley was looking for me.

Calling her on the phone, her answer was the same: Bryce needed her.

I just sighed and moved on, the farther I went in life, the more I realize that fighting for people that don’t appreciate you makes no sense.

ME

Hey, what’s up?

ABIGAIL ANN

Azzy, how are you?? I just got back in town and was going to give you a call.

ME

Imao. I was just gonna text and ask if you wanted to hang out tomorrow night after I get home from my internship?

ABIGAIL ANN

Definitely, and we could even sleep over, if you want.

ME

I would love that, bye girl, love you.

ABIGAIL ANN

Love you more, Azzy <3.

Smiling at the last message she said, I shut the phone off and turn my attention to the screen in front of me. An article about Mr. Xander popped up and I clicked it.

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**JUST IN: Dillon Xander, 32, of Xander Communications Limited, is set to open the first museum which host an array of artifacts. Read page 2 on the inside for more.**

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It must be so exhausting for him to constantly have his every move watched. My curiosity got the best of me and I started googling his name.

There were articles on his quite provocative and active lifestyle, as well as the many rumours surrounding the many

women he's done business with that the world thinks he's sleeping with. To my surprise, they're all slender and blonde.

Almost every step he makes is documented... *this is definitely not creepy at all.*

My door swung open, startling me. I quickly switched off the tab and turned my attention to the door.

"Hey," she said and smiled.

"Hi Halley, what's up?"

She paused and looked at me. "I'm here to see you because I missed you."

"Oh. Good to know, but I'm busy right now. Long day and all."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure Dillon won't mind if you just stop working for a few minutes, and this isn't even a real job," she shallowly chuckled and took a seat.

I felt the heat rushing to my face and not because I was happy, because I was pissed. "Not all of us can fuck our way to wealth; some of us have to go through college and get it the hard way."

Her expression fell. "Why are you acting like a bitch?"

"I'm not acting like a bitch. I told you the truth, and I told you that I had a long day. The world doesn't revolve around you," I mumbled.

"Are you mad because I can't hang out?"

"No, I'm going out with Abigail instead," I harshly spoke and went to sit around my desk.

"Azy, I—"

"Halley, don't bother."

"But you're mad at me," she whispered.

"That's never stopped you before. The only reason you care now is because I'm going out with Abigail, and you fear being replaced even though you're always the one replacing people," I snapped.

“That’s not true.”

“It’s not what you want to believe, so of course it’s not true. I have work to do, so you can leave whenever you want. Have a good trip.” I walked out, leaving her alone in the office.

I needed some air, and I didn’t want to be in that space anymore. It definitely wasn’t the first time she’s done this, it’s something repetitive and I love her to death, but I can’t let another person come into my life and completely ruin me. It doesn’t work that way.

I needed her and everything draining out of my life.

## CHAPTER 5

# *Azzaria*

THE ALARM WENT OFF GIVING ME A MILD HEART ATTACK AND normally, I'd be annoyed but the realization of the day kicked in; it's Friday. The week has ended.

The first few days were good. Minimal contact with anyone and tons of filing to keep me distracted.

After my long, warm shower, I started getting dressed, so I could get my ass out the door before the traffic jam.

My phone pinged.

*Fuck*, it's Nicholas.

NICHOLAS SHARPE

Are you coming to work today?

There are approximately 3.97 billion men in the world, and out of that number, I chose to spread my legs for one of the most annoying ones.

Out of nowhere, I heard glass break and my mother scream.

*What the fuck?*

I panicked and ran down the stairs. "Mom, are you—"

My sentence was cut short by my alcoholic father rummaging through the house. The air reeked of dirty clothes and vodka, and I could see my mother shiver with fear of what

would happen to us next. I froze, unable to do anything to help, and I hated myself for it.

“W-what h-happened?” Mom stuttered.

The next thing I saw was his heavy white palms connecting with the side of my mother’s face. The force was so strong that she fell on the floor, screaming loudly. Her pale cheeks absorbed the outline of his hand print as if it were a tattoo.

He spat on my mom and then walked up to me, grabbing my shirt and speaking in a harsh, rigid tone, “You’re just the same as your mother, a worthless bitch.”

“Just go, please,” I pleaded with tears streaming from my eyes. Everything was wrong. *So dead wrong.*

The tears filled my eyes, and fear washed over my entire being. He let me go, walked through and slammed the door. I hurriedly ran over to my mother, and the two of us sat in the middle of the room in silence.

After a few long minutes, the situation slowly calmed down, and I left my mom in the living room reading so I could finish getting dressed. As much as I wanted to take the day and spend it with her, ensuring her safety; I couldn’t.

The pain felt unbearable, and the sad part was that breaking down didn’t need one event; it brought back every time you’ve been heartbroken and hurt. This was just another secret to add to the already big pile.

Despite whatever happened, I had to move on. *We all did.*

Dwelling on it would make me seem weak and affected, and I couldn’t let that happen, especially not after everything I’ve sacrificed for this life.

---

My attempt to be early fell through, and I was caught up in the rush hour heading downtown New York. Cars filled the streets. Men, women, and children on the sidewalk, and the strong smell of hot coffee filled the air. If only this would make the traffic move faster. I checked my watch, and the time

read 8:00 a.m. Work starts in thirty minutes, and I was going to be late.

The time started moving fast until 8:30 approached and I was still in traffic.

Thankfully, the traffic congestion eased, and I finally arrived at the office.

I pulled into the parking garage, parked my car, grabbed my purse, and headed to the front of the building. The closer I got to the 15th floor, the more my heart raced because I knew this man could be so extra and would give me a hard time for being late, and I couldn't do the whole argument game with him, not today.

“Good morning, Mara,” I said, approaching the front desk.

“Good morning, dear, and Mr. Xander wants to see you before you go into your office.” My heart stopped. *What did I do?*

“Do you know why?” I asked her, fear strong in my voice. Not even the fear of seeing him but the fear of the reason he wanted to see me.

“No, but it seems like it's an urgent matter,” she stated.

I ran down the hall to his office, slightly knocked and entered. “Good morning, Mr. Xander,” I said. “I was told you wanted to see me?”

“Good morning, Ms. Willis, and yes. Go over my schedule today, please,” he spoke chirpily.

“You only have three things scheduled for today; signing off on the payroll, presenting your opening speech for the museum, and a press conference.”

“Sounds good,” he said and went to grab peanuts from his snack drawer.

“Is that all you called me for, sir?”

“Yes,” he spoke sharply, and I left.

I called HR, asking them to send the payroll by 12, giving Mr. Xander enough time to sign off and send it back to

accounts before 2. In my short time here, I've picked up on a few things and done a lot of research.

My phone rang. It was Abigail.

"Hey girl," Abigail said as I answered the phone "what's up?"

"I'm here at work. Are you going to stop by school today?"

"Yes, you?"

"Yes, I wanted to. What time are you going?"

"I'm going at 12:30, and remember we're going clubbing tonight," she squealed in excitement.

"Yes, I remember," I chuckled, "and 12:30, got it."

"How are you doing, Z?" I haven't been asked that question in so long that hearing it actually made me think. I knew the answer, but did I want to get in depth over the phone? *Definitely not.*

"I'm doing okay, just tired and wanting to get this internship over with." I chuckled.

"Azzaria." She sighed. "What's wrong?"

"Huh?"

"I know you. We don't talk as much, but I know you. We're bestfriends. We don't have to talk about it right now, but I'm here for you. You know that, right?"

That's just what I needed. I needed this reassurance, especially today. "I know."

"I'm glad you do, and I love you."

"I love you too."

Suddenly, life felt better this way, or maybe it was because as days passed, everything I thought was important, simply wasn't.

---

*Dillon*



Today was short, and thank God; I wanted to stop by my club. I had this bad habit of attending to my businesses every other month and I needed to be more present or whatever Arnoldo tells me in meetings.

Opening a bar and sex club in this city wasn't only smart business but it was just fitting. People tend to underestimate the number of weird shit that happens in New York City.

“Sir?” Azzarria said as she walked into the office.

“Yes?”

“Is it okay if I leave at 12:30 today?” I could sense the dullness she had in asking me this, and the simple answer could've most definitely been “yes,” but that's too easy.

Hearing her speak quickly became my favorite thing to do because she was smart— not just textbook smart but intellectually capable and there was nothing more admiring in a woman than that.

“Why?”

“I have to pick up some documents from school, drop off the second commitment form that you signed as well as hand in my volunteerism hours,” she stated.

“Where did you volunteer? And please, have a seat,” I said.

“But sir, I have to fini—”

“I didn't ask you that. Now, where did you volunteer?”

She shared a slight smile and took her seat. “What if I don't want to answer that question?”

“Too bad you don't have a choice,” I said, sharing a devilish grin.

“I volunteered at the Windsor Heights charity home, a church off Main Street, and I did a program which fed homeless people in Brooklyn.”

“That's interesting.” Normal college students have their documentation forged, but to see that she went out of her way to get not one, but three acts done was impressive.

“How about you?”

“Hmm?” I mumbled, lifting my head up.

“Do you do anything charity or volunteerism wise?”

“Aside from my ex, nothing else I can think of at the moment,” I chuckled, but she was silent.

“That’s deep,” she shared with a gulp.

“I annually supply schools with electronic devices, especially since the world is becoming more digitalized, donate to endangered species, and I have a foundation for sexually abused victims,” I stated.

“Impressive,” she said.

“It’s smart business, you don’t agree?”

“I can’t agree with something I don’t know enough about, but I think that’s just the face you want to give.” *The face? What face is she talking about?*

“Face?”

“Yeah, a face. It may be good for your image but I think you do it from the goodness of your heart.”

“Most don’t think I have a heart.”

“Most opinions aren’t factual,” she said, looking me directly in the eyes.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“So you do have a heart?”

I let out a hearty laugh. “Sometimes.”

“Just sometimes, Mr. Xander? I think you’ve got the biggest heart but if you let anyone see it, you’ll be forced to live down the reputation you’ve made of yourself. The one that makes you the best in business. The one that makes even your worst enemies respect you.”

“I just—,” and there it was. That moment when time stopped, and the two of us sat there, staring at each other.

“You just?”

“Never mind,” I said, clearing my throat and breaking eye contact “and yes, you can leave at 12:30.”

“Thank you,” she said and left the office.

---

The payroll got sent up for review and I noticed two errors.

One: Ms. Willis’ name wasn’t on it.

Two: The dates are wrong.

“Ms. Willis,” I shouted from my office.

She came running briskly with a confused look on her face. “What happened?”

“Did you take your name off the payroll?”

“No sir.”

“Get accounts and HR on the phone, please.”

“Good afternoon. Xander Communications Limited, and you’re speaking with Marissa, the HR director.”

“I’m reviewing the payroll and noticed two errors. The intern isn’t on it and the dates are wrong. Why?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure?”

There was a pause on the line. “Yes, sir, I’m not sure. Her documents were not sent over to us and therefore, we couldn’t have added it to our system.”

“Noted, just get it fixed and sent to me in the next ten minutes.”

“Yes, sir,” Marissa said. “Our apologies.”

“No worries, just get it fixed.” And that’s exactly what they did.

After the phone call with HR, I sat back at my desk, feeling the weight of a long and tiring week pressing down on my shoulders. The room fell so silent that I forgot she was still standing right there.

“May I ask why you just did that?” she asked, her voice slightly hesitant, and her expression a mixture of curiosity and slight concern.

I glanced at her, taking a moment to gather my thoughts. “Well, Ms. Willis,” he began, “it’s related to the way we handle payroll here at the company. Payroll is curated every two weeks, and this week would mark the end of that two-week cycle. They need to finalize the list of employees and their hours worked so that the accounts can balance correctly. Even though you’ve just started this past week, they still need to account for your hours during this period.” This half-assed, bullshit response was the best thing I could come up with.

She nodded, taking in the explanation. “Oh, I see.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna go now.” I nodded.

She smiled and made her way out of the office. As she left, I reached for a crystal glass on my desk, pouring myself a measure of scotch. I needed a moment of silence before the day continued.

---

The moment of silence lasted for about ten minutes.

“Ronan,” I said, rubbing my temple. Having a best friend like him was a lot of work. “Why are you calling me?”

He chuckled. “Because I love you. Why else?”

I groaned in exasperation. “Ronan, please leave me alone. I have businesses to run, and so do you.”

“Are you free tonight?”

“I’m flattered,” I chuckled. “But I don’t feel that way about you.”

He laughed. “Firstly, shut up, and secondly, the guys and I wanted to hang out with you. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has, because you’re always out of the country. But I can’t tonight; I have to handle business.”

“Business as in actual work, or are you involved in some extra activities and calling it business?”

“The former. Club visits. Anything else?”

“No.”

“Goodbye, then.”

I hung up and went back to my moment of silence.

This was short-lived *again*, as my office door violently burst open.

“Mara.”

“If I murder someone, will you get me out of jail?”

I sat up in my chair, shocked. “What’s going on?”

“Answer the question,” she urged.

“Yes?” It came out as more of a question than a statement.

“Good,” I laughed. “Alex is getting annoying.”

“You *can*’t kill your husband.”

She scoffed. “I *shouldn*’t kill him.”

“What did he do?”

“That’s not the important part.”

“When’s your baby due again?” This had nothing to do with her initial problem, but what kind of brother would I be if I didn’t change the topic to something more peaceful?

“May 3rd, why?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be on maternity leave?”

“I should be, but I get bored just sitting at home with nothing to do but re-decorate the nursery for the billionth time.”

“What about your friends?”

“I’m looking at my only friend right now.”

“True,” I said and chuckled.

“You think you’ll ever love anyone again?”

Here we go again. My sister doesn't rest on this topic. "Why are you so persistent in my love life, and the lack of?"

"I want you to be happy."

"Don't you think I could be happy alone?"

"I do, but that's not you." She paused, as if she was considering the words to say. "Dillon, you will never be truly happy seeing the world through only your eyes."

Sadly, she was right.

"Is that what you think?"

"That's what I know. You're naturally driven by love. Why do you think you haven't been sleeping around with anyone?"

"Because I don't want to."

She scoffed. "No, because you want more. You want it to be pure. After how hard it's been for you, who can blame you?"

"I have to go to the press room right now. I do my opening speech today." The briefing wasn't until the next hour but I needed to get away from this conversation. The more I listened to her speak, the more I thought about her words and I'd rather my thoughts be anywhere except there.

## CHAPTER 6

# *Azzaria*

“ABIGAIL ANN!” I EXCLAIMED.

“Azzy,” she said and rushed in for a hug. I melted in her arms. She always felt so safe.

“You look amazing. I’m so happy to see you.”

“Ah,” she sighed contentedly. “What can I say? Time away was great, but I missed you more. How’s it been?”

“It’s been pretty stable recently. I got an internship, and we’re finishing college soon,” I squealed.

“*Finally*,” she responded, and we made our way to the main office. “It’s been five long years.”

It was fun being on campus today, especially since it was like a ghost town. I didn’t hate the people at college, but the more people here meant longer waiting times and I wasn’t about that life. Patience isn’t my strong suit. However, I saw a few familiar faces and had a few good but short conversations.

---

“What’s new with you?” Abigail asked as we sat down for dinner.

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see how off you look and how everything seems to weigh on you. I may not be here as much as other people, but I can still tell when things aren’t so good with you,” Abigail empathized.

“Abi—”

“You don’t have to tell me because I can understand and respect your privacy, but don’t forget that I’m here for you, and whatever you need, I’ll try my best to be there. I love you.” My heart was full; she’d never even begin to understand how much I love our friendship.

“Thank you.”

“Now that we’re finished with the sappy stuff,” Abigail said and laughed, “how’s your internship going?”

“It’s not too bad. I’m the boss’ assistant.”

“Tell me more.”

“My boss has an ego problem and thinks he can be rude to anyone.”

“Sounds like he’s your type,” she joked.

“No.”

“Maybe?”

“He’s my boss.”

“Technically, he’s an interim boss, and it’s not illegal.”

I rolled my eyes at her persistence. “It may not be illegal, but it’s wrong.”

*“You’re not attracted to him?”*

I took a sip of my water. *“I am attracted to him, but that’s all it is. An attraction.”*

“Interesting.”

*Very.*

We wrapped up our meal, settled the bill, and left the restaurant. It’s been a while since I was drunk and tonight felt like the perfect night for it.

“Your dress looks perfect on you,” Abigail exclaimed, glancing at me. I took off the sweatshirt I was wearing when we entered the club.

“Great way of telling me you want to sleep with me.”



“I’ll be more straightforward next time,” she smirked, and we walked to the entrance.

It was always fun to know that I could be myself around her. I didn’t have that level of love, connection, fun, and vibe with anyone else.

The club was a typical loud and colorful scene. There were bartenders at every corner, strippers on the poles, workers walking up and down waiting tables, and even a VIP section.

“What for you pretty ladies?” The bartender asked.

“I’ll have scotch on the rocks, and she’ll have some whites, neat.”

Laughing in shock, he asked, “Are you sure you ladies can handle that?”

“Are you doubting us?”

“I’ll get you those drinks.”

“That’s what I thought,” I said and turned to look at Abigail. *Twelve back-to-back scotches later, and I was seeing stars.*

“You’re drunk,” Abigail said.

“*We’re drunk.*”

I came up with the brightest idea to enter the VIP section.

*What’s the worse that could happen?*

“You can’t enter without a VIP pass,” the guard, dressed in a full black suit, told us.

“How much?” I asked, looking at him.

“No cash. A pass,” he said, raising his voice even louder. That slapped the weariness out of me.

“You don’t have to be an ass,” Abigail shouted, sort of making a scene.

“You need a—”

“Let them in,” a strange, rough, yet familiar voice shouted.

“But sir—”

“I said to let them in,” he growled and walked over to the entrance.

I glanced up at the man to say thank you but was facing shock. The shock of who the person was.

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

“Isn’t that—”

“Yes,” I whispered, “yes, it is.”

“I can hear you both. No need to whisper.”

He laughed.

“Hello to you too,” he said.

---

### *Dillon*

“Pour me a shot of something,” I said to the bartender as I sat in the VIP lounge of my club.

*Ah, it’s great to be back.* I’ve read many tabloids stating that I’ve “neglected this business”, but that wasn’t even close to the truth. There were different people set to the overseeing of the day to day operations here and at the head of them all, was Arnoldo, my lawyer and dear friend.

The briefing ran about three hours overtime and surprisingly, I didn’t hate that. After all, I am the first person aged under fifty to get the opportunity to open a museum that’s in tandem with the Smithsonian. I was breeding success in all directions and I couldn’t be prouder.

I didn’t remember the club being so vibrant, but then again, I came to visit every three months. And hell, a lot has changed over the course of three months.

“Take it easy, will you?” I heard a familiar voice say, and looking around, I saw it was Bryce. *What is he doing here?*

“What are you doing here?”

“Sister’s birthday got canceled, so we had to drive back,” he sighed and sat beside me. Things were looking rough in Bryce’s paradise. I can’t wait to tell the guys this.

“Where’s your girl?”

“She’s home,” Bryce said. “May I?” He asked as he pointed to the cup in my hand.

“Sure,” I said, passing it to him. “But what’s wrong, though? You never just come here unannounced.”

He started telling me about his want to not have children and her want to have. It’s safe to say he got into a relationship with someone who he barely knew and now it’s making him lose interest..

“If you don’t love her enough, let her go,” was the advice I gave him before he took a drink and left.

Flashes of light and shuttering of cameras caught my attention and before I could even move, I didn’t. It made no sense, these would be blasted by the second anyway.

Paparazzi.

And within the hour, I got a notification alert from Google.

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#### NEW YORK TIMES

**JUST IN:** Dillon Xander, the billionaire entrepreneur, was spotted having a great time in the VIP section of Club Limelight, one of his own establishments. Fans are curious about his Friday night activities.

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At least they caught my good side on camera. As I glanced at the dance floor, there she was.

*My intern.* She looked stunning in a simple dress that complimented her perfectly. Her olive skin shimmered under the dance floor lights, and her curly hair gracefully framed her face.

This was the first time I’ve seen her let her hair down, and I wished she did it more often. It was the first time I’ve really looked at her and appreciated her beauty. Her curves were flawless, her skin was silky, her hair was full of life, and her complexion was simply perfect.

Her dress is so captivating that it could make anyone swoon. I watched as her hips swayed to the beat of the songs and how radiant she smiled while ordering drinks.

She's beautiful but she's also my employee.

It was at this point that I saw her approach the VIP section. Johnny would've given them some trouble to enter but I watched it play out first before I intervened.

"You need a—" Johnny started to raise his voice, and I didn't appreciate that tone. No one should ever talk to a woman like that.

"Let them in."

"But, sir—"

"I said to let them in," I shouted and walked over to the entrance, pulling it myself.

"Thank you," she giggled and glanced up to look at me. As I stepped into the light, and she saw my face, the smile she had plastered all night turned into one of confusion. "Holy shit," she whispered.

"Hello to you too," I said.

"Sir, I didn't—"

"Wait, who's this?" Her friend asked, looking as confused as ever.

"I'm her boss, and you are? Also, it's nice to see you, Ms. Willis," I smirked without breaking eye contact.

"Oh, you're *that* Dillon Xander," she said in a whisper. "I'm Abigail, her friend," she whispered and walked inside.

"That Dillon Xander?"

"Yes. The excessively rich New York Page Six Dillon. One of the world's richest men, so yes, *that* Dillon Xander."

*That gave my ego the biggest boost.*

Ms. Willis stood at the gate.

"Azzaria?" I called out. That was the first time I've ever said her name, and Christ, it was beautiful.

"I'm so sorr—"

“Don’t apologize. I’m not your boss tonight. You’re not at work. We’re just two regular people.”

“What are you doing here?” She asked.

“I own here, and you’re more than welcome to enter the section if you want to.”

“You do not own here,” she said jokingly. “I come here all the time, and I’ve never seen you here.”

“Are you in VIP all the time?”

“No,” she said sharply and entered the area, stumbling. Someone definitely had one too many drinks.

“Then how would you have seen me?” I asked.

“Where’s Abigail?” She asked while looking around.

“She’s over there having drinks and talking to Mikkel,” I said and pointed to them. Abigail looked over, winked at her, and went back to sipping.

“Do you want to have a drink with me?”

“Are you going to poison me?” She asked as she sat beside me.

“No.”

“Water, please. I’ve had enough alcohol.” Personally, I thought so too. She’s a mumbling, shaky mess.

We sat down, taking in the scenery and enjoying each other’s company and silence.

“How many places do you own?”

“Quite a few,” I responded.

“So you’re like rich rich?” she asked and giggled, allowing her head to fall on my shoulder.

“Let’s not pretend like you haven’t done your research.” I chuckled.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t have the patience for you to be witty. Answer me.”

“*Yeah*, I’m rich rich,” I chuckled nervously. I didn’t like talking about my wealth; it made me seem like more of a cocky, arrogant asshole than I already was.

“When do you normally go home?”

“I’m not here often, but I go home soon. You?”

“I’m leaving whenever I feel like it,” she giggled. “You only live once, you know?”

“Definitely.” It was nice speaking with her on this basis. No work, no jobs, nor stipulations. Just two human beings enjoying an unexpected night together. I just hope Johnny kept the paparazzi away from here.

“I read somewhere that you have a girlfriend,” she said, looking up in my eyes. Her tone came out more of her asking me if I had one.

My body slightly tensed, and I sat up in the chair.

“Did I say something wrong?” She asked, sitting up in the seat.

“No, you didn’t say anything wrong and what you read is false, I’m single. I don’t have a girlfriend,” I said, grabbing my scotch glass and taking a sip of it.

“Got it,” she said and sighed. “Are you okay?”

“Am I okay? Why?”

“Yeah. Are you okay?”

“I am,” I responded. “Are you?”

“The world may never know,” she sighed. I didn’t know what to say about this.

“One day. Maybe not the world, but at least me.”

She laughed and looked back at Abigail. She was having the time of her life, laughing and drinking with Mikkel. She was definitely more drunk than Ms. Willis had been, but at least she was in a safe space. If they couldn’t manage to get home, I would’ve ensured that they got wherever they were going, safely.

Azzaria slipped into my arms even more, and we were basically hugging at this point. Her head rested on my chest, and my arms involuntarily hung around her. It wasn't everyday, or at all, that I'd be seen in these circumstances, but I didn't mind it. I didn't want to move, and by the looks of it, she didn't want to either.

“I can't stop looking at your face. Since I met you this week, something was just—”

“Different?” I asked, interrupting her statements.

“Yeah,” she said and sighed.

“What's so different?”

“I don't know.” She yawned. “Just different, good different.”

“Interesting.”

Looking behind her, she asked, “Did you see where my friend went?”

“Yeah.” I pointed to the other side of the room and she saw her.

She shrugged. “Thank you. This place is huge.”

“Yeah, that's the secret behind club success. A nice space.”

I leaned in a bit closer to her, my voice barely audible over the music. “I saw you on the dance floor, you've got some serious rhythm,” I complimented, my breath warm against her ear.

“You saw that?”

She met my gaze, her eyes sparkling. “Well, I couldn't resist watching someone who's got such smooth moves,” I replied.

“Are you lying to protect my feelings? Drunk me can handle the truth.”

I laughed. Heavily. “I'm serious, couldn't resist watching it.”

She looked up at me, laughing. “That must’ve been a depressing watch for you.”

I shrugged. “It was worth all my time.”

“Do yo—”

“Azz—oh,” her friend said, interrupting the question she was about to ask me.

Azzarria jumped from my arms, and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“I’ll be in the car,” her friend said and speedily walked out.

She turned to me. “I have to go now,” she said while grabbing her phone and purse.

“I’m going to head out too.” I smiled.

*What the fuck am I doing?*



## CHAPTER 7

# *Azzaria*

“I THOUGHT HE WASN’T YOUR TYPE.”

“Oh, don’t even start,” I said and laughed, “pass me the fries.”

“Here you go,” she said with a chuckle, “You two looked cozy.”

*We were. And I loved it.*

The whole time I forgot about the real world and it felt as if we were just two random people hanging out in a club.

“We weren’t cozy,” I mumbled, my mouth stuffed with potatoes.

“Whatever you say.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Not one bit.”

I laughed. “Fine, we were a *little* cozy.”

She inaudibly screamed. “I knew it. How was it?”

“It felt like I was talking to a real human or a random dude.”

“Let me guess, you prefer that setting than the office?”

I shrugged my shoulders and continued eating my food. I couldn’t muster up any complete words or thoughts at this time.

“Do you like him?”

*“I’m attracted to him.”*

She didn’t respond but instead took us home.

Abigail was sleeping over tonight because we had to do college documents tomorrow into this weekend, and then sadly, she’s leaving some days after to get things for herself sorted out for the upcoming move.

As soon as we got in, we did skin care and laid in bed. I forgot how much I loved being around her. Due to her ever so frequent travels, we barely see each other in person and it doesn’t help that she does majority of her classes online. But whenever we do get together, it’s always the best time, and tonight’s a great example of that.

It’s always easier to be around someone who makes you forget you have a partially shitty life and trust me she could make me forget everything.

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### ***Dillon***

Getting back from the club last night, I was greeted by a very daunting note. It shook every ounce of tiredness from my body and all my previously felt emotions, turn into disgust. *I really hate her.*

*To: Dillon T Xander*

*Don’t think that because the divorce is over, I’m leaving.*

*I will get what I want. ~A.*

I was not only repulsed that she was still finding ways to contact me, but even more so that she’s got the address of this penthouse building.

As soon as I awoke and got up and dressed, I called the divorce agency. In explaining the problem to them, the only

possible response I was told was that the letters are classified as *empty threats*.

I didn't need this negativity, not now, not today. *Not ever*. I just wanted peace of mind, and thanks to some people, I'll never be able to get that.

I was upset and I had the right to be.

*I'm tired*. It's been over five years, and I gave her an additional three years to get herself together and change for the sake of our marriage, but she *chose* the nuclear option. She *chose* to be difficult. She *chose* to be downright awful. *How can a woman who cheated, lied, and betrayed someone throughout the entire relationship possibly be the one with the most scars?*

I sat on my couch for a bit with pebbles in my lap and how ironic was it that getting a dog was her idea.

I wanted to get my exercise in, paint, and finish up any reports for Monday morning. These were the parts of my life that made me feel human, the parts that made me feel like more of a normal person and less of a “spoiled billionaire tycoon.”

I was beyond grateful for all the wealth I've amassed and the amazing life I lived, but with that comes labeling— most of which are false. *Very false*. In reality, I was just as human as the other person— I just didn't have the chance to live a normal life.

Most saw me as an egotistical maniac who stumbled upon wealth. I saw all the tabloids, the articles, and the comments, and each time, it left a sting in my chest and a bitter taste in my mouth.

If people started asking the question of “why I act the way I act” versus assuming I'm an asshole, then things would be a lot easier. But men, especially women like me, in this high-ranking, powerful position, don't get that.

The thoughts continued to consume me until I decided it was time to get up and get some work done.

**12 pm**

I had just finished getting ready for the day and went downstairs to make brunch. I made it a point of duty to get ready even when I was just staying home. The mind will wake up once your body does, and if you stay sluggish all day, then you'll get zero productivity.

Growing up around my grandparents, I picked up on a few skills. I knew how to cook, wash, clean, sew, paint, write, and the list goes on. The only thing I really never got around to was baking pastries.

"Who is it?" I questioned as I heard a knock on my door. I wasn't expecting any visitors today, and I really hate unexpected guests.

"Mrs. Emerson," I called out. She was sitting in the dining room, reading her newspaper. "Can you check who's at the door, please?" She smiled and walked off to check.

She came pacing inside. "It's Mara, should I let her in?"

"Yes, please, and you can have the rest of your day off."

She smiled at me. "Thank you, son."

I smiled. Of everyone in my life right now, she was the closest thing I had to a good mother.

"Dillon!" Mara shouted. "Good, you're cooking."

"Mara Jane Xander-Williams, good morning," I said. "I had no idea you were coming today."

"I had no idea I was coming either," she said while taking off her coat. "but here I am."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, Mrs. Emerson let me in. She's so lovely." She paused. "Anyhoo, I'm just home alone because Alex is on a trip, so I decided to stop by since it's your slow day."

"Why didn't you go on the trip with Alex?"

"I'm in my third trimester now, plus do I want to see him make negotiations with women who want to screw him? Definitely not."

“I was at my club with my intern last night,” I blurted. Secrets also aren’t my strong suit. I tell my sister everything.

“You know I hate liars,” she snarled.

“I’m serious,” I said while grabbing the eggs from the fridge.

“Fucking hell,” she squealed. “you’re back on the market now? I think she’s a good match for you.”

“This isn’t an opportunity for you to play cupid,” I warned. “It was just a conversation and it felt nice talking to her.”

“I won’t, but I think you should try to be open again. Just this once. It’s been about 10 years since the last one,” she said.

“Mara,” I said and sighed, leaning my hands on the kitchen counter. “You know my position when it comes to these things.”

“I do, but would it hurt? Did you kiss her?” I stared blankly.

“No, I did not kiss her.”

“Why?”

“We were just talking.”

“Do you like her?”

*“I am attracted to her.”*

“That’s the same thing.”

I sighed. *Why did I tell her this again?* “No, it’s not and can we drop this now?”

The issue wasn’t falling in love. I wasn’t afraid of love; the issue was finding someone real. Someone to be vulnerable with. Someone to cherish. Someone to respect. If I couldn’t find any of those qualities plus more in anyone, then what’s the point of settling down again? Nobody wants to experience pain from the same person’s factions twice in a lifetime, and that tragedy seemed to be befalling me.

She rolled her eyes. “*You* brought it up.”

“Mara.”

“Okay fine.” She sighed. “I’m hungry. Can you hurry up and make this?”

Simply grinning, I got to work finishing the meal.

**2:30 pm**

I’ve searched everywhere, and I can’t find my call plan. The one time I decided to make a formal plan, I had to lose it, and to make it even worse, the only person with another copy was my assistant. *Fuck.*

I didn’t even know the appropriate alternative. Should I text? Should I call? Should I email? The best person to ask was Ronan.

ME

Hi

RONAN ROMANO

Yes?

ME

If you had to contact one of your employees on a weekend, would you email, call, or text them?

RONAN ROMANO

Is it work related?

ME

Yes

RONAN ROMANO

Then you email. It's marked as professionalism and no one can tell you that you're crossing boundaries with them.

ME

Thank you

RONAN ROMANO

No problem. What's this about?

ME

Work, now goodbye.

RONAN ROMANO

Whatever, dude.

Ronan is many things, but two of them have to be smart and reliable.

I sent the email to her requesting the documents and I waited. The only problem with this was my impatience. I refreshed the screen every second and nothing. I get that it's a Saturday, but can one person be doing something that's so important that they can't—oh, *she responded*. Never mind that thought then.

She emailed the plan and it was impressive. In starting my call, I noticed that she had listed every item on the agenda in the business handbook's relevant pages and citations, which could be used as a reference.

This was actually some great work. It's precise, easy to follow, and high maintenance, which is exactly the kind of service I always invest in.

**4 pm**

"Mara," I shouted repeatedly and got no response.

As I walked out into the living room, I found her fast asleep on the couch, snuggled up to pebbles. *Dogs really do love pregnant women.* Chuckling at the sight, I went to put a blanket on her and walked into my painting room.

It is often said that art speaks where words are unable to explain, and I couldn't agree more. *After all, it was my grandfather who told me this.*

To be frank, I wasn't much of a talker, so everything I expressed was either through my various paintings, poems, or journaling.

Whenever I'm home and I needed a bit of peace, I resort to painting. It's an art my grandfather taught me and something he told me to never give up on. *"If ever you lose the passion for anything, never let it be art. It says the words your lips can't."*

Today was different, I didn't know what to paint, I just knew I needed to. Dipping the brush in the liquid colorful goodness, I started making lines and swatches on the canvas—nothing short of vibrancy and purpose. I loved being free and expressive; a softer side of me that not many people knew, and then those who knew, never ended up caring much.

The majority of the paintings hanging around my house, my offices, and penthouses were done by me or my grandfather.

The objective for me wasn't just to make art, but to be in that state of being which makes art meaningful. It has always crossed my mind to do an exhibit, but I haven't come around to the idea of sharing these vulnerabilities with anyone yet.

A few more minutes of stroking turned to hours, and as the clock struck 6:45 and the chime went off, another piece was made, but this was different, and I surprised myself. I don't



know what I was doing, but it ended up being something beautiful.

This wasn't the typical colorful and vibrant piece I normally do; this was filled with a contrast of both life and darkness.

There were many rifts, edges, and even brinks, which I couldn't even understand. Whatever feeling this was, it definitely came from someplace dark.

*Shit. I hate when this happens.*

"I've seen all your pieces, but this one amazes me the most," Mara said as she entered.

"Hey, little sis," I said while turning around to face her. "I thought you left."

"Naa, I'm sleeping over tonight because why not hang with my only brother and best friend, huh?"

"You have other brothers," I said and chuckled.

"You're the only brother that counts." I smiled. I truly loved my sister. Though I'm four years older than her, she's been the one person who went through the majority of life with me and I'll always love her for not turning her back on me. Even in the times when I didn't deserve her love and attention.

"Alright. I'm gonna make dinner then," I said, packing up the brushes and sealing the paints.

"I already did, but don't be hasty, Dillon," she said, "explain this to me. A piece of this magnitude must have some special meaning to it."

"Honestly," I said and paused, "I didn't think about this one. I just started painting."

"But looking at it now, what does it mean to you?" There Mara goes, always asking the right questions but at the most difficult times.

"You look in the center of the canvas and you see a black heart, but in the middle of the gear, there's a golden sparkle." I

chuckled.

“Is that like to represent light in darkness?”

“Not quite. The darkness represents fear and loneliness, but the light is giving a way out. The problem is that there’s too many layers of darkness, so the light gets easily buried. Looking to the left now we see streaks of heat colors, and to the right, it’s water colors, that just shows the different personalities and how much it’s affecting the heart,” I explained.

“But hold on,” she said, scanning the portrait, “what about the hand that holds it together and the veins?”

“Those are how to show how much people want to break the barriers but how much of them can’t.”

“I love this piece, but I don’t think it came from nowhere.”

I gave her a puzzled look, and she sighed. There Mara goes, always trying to make something out of nothing.

“It’s obviously about your thoughts about someone.”

“We’re not doing this today.” I rolled my eyes. “Let’s go eat,” I said, hurrying us both out of the room.

That painting was anything but something lacking thought and concentration. A true artist paints what they feel, and all I could feel was darkness and want.

Mara was right about something, the one person I had in mind was her. I haven’t been able to get her out my mind all day.

---

*I’m in my childhood home, the walls closing in around me, as the darkness consumes everything. My heart races, and I can hear my own frantic breaths.*

*My father’s towering figure looms over me, his eyes filled with rage, and his fists clenched. He’s shouting, “You’re worthless! You’re messing up everything, just like you always do! Why can’t you be more like your siblings?”*

*I look to my mother, who stands frozen, a silent observer to the violence unfolding before her. Her eyes are empty, void of any emotion, as if she's a lifeless puppet. She makes no move to intervene or protect me. She does nothing.*

*My small, trembling body is defenseless against my father's wrath. His fists rain down on me, and the pain is unbearable. I cry out for help, "Mom, please, make him stop!" but my voice is lost in the nightmarish abyss. Tears blur my vision, and I feel utterly alone.*

With a gasping breath, I jolted upright in bed, my heart pounding like a drum in my chest. Sweat drenched my trembling body, and the remnants of the nightmare clung to my thoughts, refusing to release their grip.

Panicking, I reached for the bedside drawer, my fingers fumbling in the darkness. It was there—the EVZIO, a small but dangerous device that could save me from the relentless torment of my past.

Desperation drove me to grab the bottle and prepare it. My hands trembled as I loaded the device, knowing it was my only way to find relief. Three clicks, three pills, a flick of the wrist, and the needle found its mark. I pushed down on the plunger, and the medication surged into my system.

The cool liquid provided an almost instant sense of calm. I lay back in bed, the anxiety gradually dissipating as the medication did its work. I knew it was only a temporary escape, but in that moment, it was my lifeline, a bridge between the horrors of the past and the promise of a better day.

The nightmare was suffocating, a cruel reenactment of my childhood fears and insecurities. I was trapped in that horrifying memory, reliving the moment when I was at the mercy of my father's violence, and my mother's silence was the loudest scream of all.

With the medication taking hold and my racing thoughts slowly subsiding, I realized it was essential to ground myself further. I reached for my bedside journal and a pen, and in the dim glow of a nearby nightlight, I began to write.

Each word, each sentence, was an attempt to translate the lingering emotions and fears from the nightmare into something tangible, something I could understand and process. The pages filled with the dark ink of my thoughts, bringing a sense of order to the chaos in my mind.

After pouring my heart onto the pages, I closed the journal and set it aside, feeling a sense of relief in having unburdened myself, at least in part. The demons of the past were not vanquished, but they were contained within the pages of my journal for the moment.

I pushed aside the covers and slowly made my way to the kitchen, craving comfort. I filled a small saucepan with milk and placed it on the stove, allowing it to warm, the sound of the bubbling milk a soothing lullaby. Finally, I poured the warm milk into a mug and held it close, the steam warming my face and the comforting aroma enveloping me.

Sitting in the quiet of the night, journaling and sipping the warm milk, I gradually began to regain my sense of self and push back the lingering darkness of the nightmare.

*I needed this to be over.*

## CHAPTER 8

# *Azzaria*

MONDAY MORNINGS: THE WORLD IS BACK ON ITS AXIS AND THE weekend is over.

I spent the entire weekend obsessing over the fact that I not only went to a club owned by my boss, but I also sat down, *very close to him*, having a comforting conversation.

Typically, that stuff doesn't bother me but I'll have to go to the office this morning and get flashbacks of how sweet and normal he was last week.

I'm hoping he forgot about everything and went through the weekend with other pressing issues like the call plans. Which by the way, I was totally shocked to see an email from him on Saturday.

*Note to self: Never, ever sit and talk with your boss in a club ever again.*

I parked my car in the lot and made my way up the elevator. "Good morning, Azzaria," Mara greeted me as I walked inside.

"Good morning, Mara. Shouldn't you be on leave?" I replied with a slight chuckle.

"I should be," she sighed, rubbing her stomach, "but I have to keep Dillon in check."

"That's great," I replied, my tone nervous. It was evident that his name struck a nerve in both of us.

"What are you doing for the next few Wednesdays?" Mara asked. I had no clue about my plans for the next hour, let alone

weeks.

“Not sure, what’s up?”

“It’s my birthday, and I wanted to invite you. It’s a party and then two Wednesday’s after that is my baby shower.” Two thoughts struck a chord with me.

*One: we barely knew each other so why would she invite me?*

*Two: I appreciated being included so let’s strike out the first thought I had.*

I hesitated before I replied. “I’d love—”

“Mara, my office now!” Mr. Xander’s abrupt entrance interrupted me.

I don’t know why, but I at least expected him to acknowledge my presence seeing as I was in the middle of speaking to his sister.

I retreated to my office and began sorting through the files on my desk, determined to finish my internship as soon as possible. Sometimes, I loathed my heart for having a mind of its own.

*Why was I constantly romanticizing the conversation as if it was anything more than two drunk people talking late at night?*

Mara exited his office with neutral expressions and walked towards me.

“You’re coming to my party and baby shower, right?”

I see both siblings have an art for deflecting. “Yeah, I will be.”

“Come to my office, please,” Mr. Xander said over the intercom, summoning me.

Within seconds, I’m sure he heard the loud tapping of my heels on the ceramic tile as I made my way to his office.

“Good morning, sir,” I greeted, avoiding eye contact. I couldn’t bear to look at his face right now.

“You know my face is up here,” he said, chuckling, “close the door and sit.”

“I’m fine standing, what did you need?” I responded.

He unbuttoned his jacket and cleared his throat. “Sit, please.”

My body tensed at his words, and I reluctantly sat before him, holding a folder in my hands.

“Sorry about that,” I said nervously, “how can I help you?”

“My schedule for today,” he responded. “What’s on it?”

“Before I get to that, I just wanted to apologize for Friday. I was drunk; we both were, and it shouldn’t have happened. I shouldn’t have been that close to you. Even if we weren’t in the work space, I should’ve still respected the fact that you’re my boss.” I wasn’t going to say that but I just felt like I had to. It felt like the right thing to do.

“Azzaria,” he said as he gripped the edges of the desk, calling me by my first name for the second time. It was the first time I had noticed his strong Latin accent.

“It was a mistake, on both our parts,” he said, “let’s keep things professional.”

*Oh.*

“You have one email to send, and that’s it for the day,” I said. “There’s something scheduled as “PT” as well but I was advised that meant you had business out of the office.”

He looked at me with confusion. “Your schedule. You asked me what was on it.”

“Oh, right, right,” he said and took a seat in his chair. “Thank you.”

“I’m going to get going,” I said and cleared my throat.

“Going where?”

*“My job.”*

ME

drinks tonight?

ABIGAIL-ANN

hey, zz, sure.

ME

great, see you then.

*I needed this. I needed a drink or several.*

5:00 pm finally rolled around, and I started packing my things to leave. Today was a rather boring day. I filed things and responded to his emails. I had no idea that there was a list of email responses set down for every kind of question possible. This man really was a control freak.

For someone who claimed not to care about what anyone thought, this affected me deeply. I spent the whole morning convincing myself that the conversation would mean nothing to either of us, but when presented with the confirmation, it hurt my feelings deeply. I didn't know what the hell I expected him to say, but it definitely wasn't that.

*It was a mistake? Let's keep things professional? What the fuck what that?*

I said the apology out of courtesy, not because I wanted to, but because it felt like the right thing to do.

---

“Keep them coming,” I told the bartender. As I left work, I met up with Abigail at Jerry's.

“Easy girl,” Abigail said. “Are you okay?”

I swallowed the entire glass of scotch in one go. “I'm dandy.”



“What’s wrong?”

“I apologized to him out of courtesy for Friday night and he told me it was a mistake on both our parts and we should keep things professional.”

She froze and almost broke the glass. “You’re lying.”

“I’m serious.”

“Are you sure he didn’t just say that because you apologized.”

I shrugged. “Maybe, but either way. I shouldn’t care. It’s not even that serious, I just didn’t expect that answer.”

“It’s serious to you because you enjoyed the conversation and you like him.”

I almost choked on air. “I don’t like him. *I’m attracted to him.*”

“What’s the difference?”

“Shut up.” I rolled my eyes. “Why aren’t you doing an internship?”

“I did mine from September to January, babe.” She laughed. “I told you and you said that you have all the time in the world.”

“Can’t believe I said that.” I drank again. “Anyway, it’s fine. How are you?”

“Confused, mainly.”

“About what?”

“It’s a long story.”

I looked at the clock and then looked right back at her. “What a good thing all we have is time.”

“It’s Joshua,” Abi said and sighed. “What happened?”

“He’s acting so weird and I can’t even explain it. He doesn’t want me to do or wear certain things and he’s behaving like I’m obligated to do stuff with him.”

“Stuff like what?”

“He told me to send pictures and I’m like not in the mood for that, then he tells me to fuck off and not text him,” she expressed with sadness and disgust in her tone.

Wait. “Pictures?”

“*Pictures.*”

“Oh.” Only a man would have the fucking audacity to be upset when a woman clearly doesn’t want to send him nude pictures.

I was repulsed. I never had a problem with him but he crossed a line.

“I’m so sorry that happened but let’s forget about Joshua. If you don’t want to send him your explicit pictures, then don’t send him. No means no and if he can’t respect that, he’s a shit guy. You have so much more to offer than cooch, ass or tits.”

“I know, thank you. It just hurts to hear it coming from him, that’s all,” she said.

“I know but look at it this way,” I said, passing her a glass of white rum, “You two *aren’t* dating. Make him see what he’s missing. We’re going to have the best time of our lives before you leave NYC, we’ll post literally everything and find you a great boyfriend just to top it off and most importantly, you’ll find out who you want to be and realize how much of an amazing person you are.”

“Are we actually?”

“Yes, we are,” I cheered, “no one manipulates my best friend and gets away with it.”

“Are we going to find you a boyfriend too?”

“Let’s not push our luck now babe.”

“The special for Mr. Xander, please,” I heard a familiar voice say. There’s no way.

I looked over to the side and saw Mikkel, his driver.

“Hey gorgeous, nice to see you again,” he said, looking at Abigail.

She blushed.

I felt someone's eyes piercing through the back of my head, so I turned around.

“Shit,” I cursed under my breath.

*He's looking right at me.*

“Abigail, let's go.”

She pouted as it was clear she wanted to speak to Mikkel but I needed to leave.

“Coming!” She shouted and we left the bar with haste.

Me - 1

Universe - 0

*Note to self: Never go to another bar or club in New York City. He probably owns them all.*

## CHAPTER 9

# *Azzaria*

I SAT DOWN AT MY COMPUTER, FEELING THE WEIGHT OF THE world on my shoulders. *Literally*. The burden of my life was getting a bit too heavy to bear.

I had all different type of debt to clear and had no idea how'd I get it all done

I sent an email to Mr. Xander telling him that I wouldn't be in today and giving him the reason.

Leaving my room, I headed towards the front door. My mom wasn't home which meant she went in for her shift earlier today. I noticed a letter in the mailbox from the car company, a painful reminder of my overdue payments.

I sighed, stuffed the letter back in the mailbox, and hurriedly typed an email to the car company, promising to settle the outstanding payments as soon as possible.

A heavy sense of sadness clung to me as I locked the front door. It was time to suck it up and put on a shiny smiling face for the world.

I met up with Abigail, and we made our way to campus. There was apparently a seminar we had to attend that would count towards our final grade. There was nothing I hated more than doing coursework but it was better than being in the office.

There we sat in the crowded seminar room at school, but my mind was anywhere but there. The lecturer's words drifted into the distance as my thoughts were consumed by the

looming car payments, the tuition and student loans and the constant pressure of work and studies. *I need a breakthrough.*

Suddenly, I was jolted back to reality by the lecturer's question, "Azzaria, can you tell us about the principles of sustainable architecture in urban planning?"

I blinked, my thoughts a hazy mess. "I'm sorry, could you please repeat the question?"

The lecturer repeated the question, and this time, I managed to gather my thoughts and respond, "Sustainable architecture in urban planning involves designing and constructing buildings that minimize negative impacts on the environment while enhancing the well-being of inhabitants. It includes the use of environmentally friendly materials, energy-efficient systems, and thoughtful land use."

As I spoke, I felt a comforting hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Abigail, her reassuring presence grounding me.

"What's going on? You've been so down all day," she asked, concern in her eyes.

I hesitated at first but then decided to share my worries. "It's the car payments and everything else. I just got another reminder, and they're threatening to cease it."

She gave me a reassuring smile. "I know it seems tough right now, but you'll figure it out. Things have a way of working themselves out. Until then, I'm here for you."

---

"Work ended early today?" My mom asked as I stepped through her front door. I should really go back to my own place. I was *exhausted*. As soon as the seminar finished and the lecturer signed off on our credits, we left.

I shook my head. "Didn't go today, mom. Had to do course work at school."

"Are you okay?"

I contemplated telling her about the car situation but I didn't. It would only add to her stress and that's the last thing I wanted for her. "Yeah, I'm just really tired. How are you?"

“I’m good. What do you want for dinner?”

“I’ll eat the leftover pizza, and where did you go so early this morning?”

“I’m going to make some steamed vegetables for myself then, and, I went to the doctor.”

*Is she sick?* “Why?”

“I had to do a check up, it’s nothing serious but I’m not getting any younger.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re the youngest forty-nine year old woman I’ve ever seen.” And that’s true. Whenever my mom and I are together, everyone thinks we’re sisters.

“I love you.”

I smiled. My heart warmed. “I love you too, mom.”

She went to go make her dinner and, I decided to finally go back to the gym, something I’d been trying to fit into my schedule for ages.

I stepped into Equinox feeling powerful. The gym’s sleek and modern design greeted me, an oasis of exercise in the midst of chaos. The ambient lighting cast a warm and inviting glow, and the buzz of activity filled the air.

Equinox was not just a gym; it was an experience. *An expensive experience.* The trainers were exceptional, the equipment top-notch, and the atmosphere motivating. I couldn’t come here everyday because it was definitely out of my budget but, I came here twice a month and have been doing so since last December.

Dressed in my workout gear, I made my way to the area where the weights and resistance machines awaited. The familiar clinking of weights and the low hum of conversation created a comforting background for my workout.

“You good handling all those weights?” A trainer asked.

I chuckled. “I am.” My eyes went to scan his name tag. *Zidan.* “Yes, Zidan, I am, thanks for asking.”

“You’re welcome, and now that you know my name, it’s only fair that I know yours.”

“Azzaria.” I giggled.

“It’s nice to meet you, Azzaria, I’ll see you around.”

*I definitely hoped I’d see him around.*

Tapping back into my focus, I began my routine. The minutes turned into hours and my timer went off. I finished an hour and thirty minutes of working out and it felt really great. With the determination to sort out the gym membership payment hanging over my head, I walked over to the front desk.

“Hi there,” I said to the gym receptionist, a friendly guy with a welcoming smile.

He looked up from the computer. “Hey, how can I help you today?”

I explained, “I’ve been receiving notices about overdue payments for my membership, and I wanted to discuss my options. I’m a college student, and I heard there might be a more affordable plan to help me clear off my debt.”

His eyes lit up, “You’re in luck! We have a college student plan that not only offers cheaper rates but also some great perks. Let me grab my colleague, he’ll explain it to you.” The perks weren’t my interest, I just needed to clear the debt and close this chapter of my life until I could afford to open it again.

He waved over his coworker, a fitness enthusiast who seemed genuinely excited to share the details. “Hey there, I heard you’re interested in our college student plan.”

I nodded. “I am.”

He started telling me about the switch and what the payment plan would entail. God really does have a way of working things out. “That sounds amazing! What do I need to do?”

“Are you employed?”

“I’m doing a paid internship right now, does that count?”

“It does,” he said and went on to explaining the process.

The process wasn’t hard, he advised me to get it cleared or pay something towards it as soon as I could.

“Thank you. This will help me big time.”

“You’re welcome.”

The staff was incredibly helpful, making the gym visit feel more like an exciting opportunity than a burden.

After finalizing the payment switch getting a plan, I went home and subsequently went to bed. *Tiring day, tiring year.*



## CHAPTER 10

# *Dillon*

TIME HAS BEEN SLIPPING THROUGH MY FINGERS LIKE GRAINS OF sand lately. The weeks feel like minutes and the days feel like seconds. I'm in desperate need of some excitement.

My real issue was my intern. My attraction to her was becoming a problem. I think about her too often. Last week, I left my office three times just to see if she was sitting at her desk. It's becoming bad and we haven't even had a real, sober conversation.

I just knew two things. One: She's gorgeous. Two: I *needed* to know her.

From her absence to sort out school issues some days ago, I haven't seen much of her. I knew she was here but she was just not in my sight or in my space.

Tonight is Mara's birthday dinner, and while I was excited to celebrate my sister, I hated the fact that our entire family had to gather. I didn't like them, and frankly, neither does she.

Two weeks from now, we'll be gathered for her baby shower. Her husband and I both suggested that she's do both events on the same day but she demanded them to be separated as she doesn't feel like sharing her attention. *Drama queen, I know.*

I picked up my phone to dial her number.

"Mara, hey."

She sniffled. Why does it sound like she's crying? "Hey."

"Are you okay? Are you crying?"

“I’m fine.”

“That didn’t answer the second question, are you crying?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Did Alexander do something?”

She started telling me that she was overwhelmed with the whole birthday planning and she felt like it wasn’t perfect enough. I assured her that all would definitely well and she needs to remember that she’s growing a whole baby and stress like this can cause miscarriages.

“Thank you for calling. I love you.”

“I love you too, happy birthday little sister.”

“Thank you.”

As I hung up the phone, Ms. Willis walked in and placed a folder on my desk as well as reminded me about a meeting I was supposed to have.

I looked up at her and asked, “Will you be in attendance?”

She replied coolly, “No, that wasn’t specified in my list of tasks.”

“Are you doing okay?” She didn’t look fine. She’s normally always cheery and perky. Now, she just looks...*cold, distant and sad.*

Her expression shifted slightly, and she retorted, “Why do you ask?”

I sighed, “Because I’m a human being.”

She responded, “I’m not having the best day, but it would be unprofessional of me to say anything. I know you appreciate professionalism.”

I scoffed at her words, but before I could make any other comment, I watched as she walked away, her presence leaving a lingering impression.

Resolving to maintain the professional façade that I was known for, I grabbed my jacket and left my office and made

my way to the meeting, still thinking about her. *What is wrong with me?*

“Good Morning, gentlemen,” I said as I walked in. They stood up to greet me and took their seats.

Arnoldo walked in after I did with his brown folder, as usual, and the pen lodged on his collar. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was in a good mood, but this man doesn’t know what the phrase even means.

“What’s new with stocks and investments?” I asked our statistics personnel.

She grabbed her folder. “We’re up by 45%, 52% higher rating, but we had a decline with the Whirlpool Sports investment.”

I hissed. *Shit*. “How much of a decline?”

She sighed. *Deeply*. “83%.”

My eyes, as well as Arnoldo’s, bulged open. *Did she just say 83%?*

“Fuck,” I whispered. “Reyes, can we fix it?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, but we’ll need to draft a merger with the 26 investors on that board.”

My expressions eased. That’s good. “Great, let’s get it done.”

“Yes, sir.” He agreed and went back to his laptop.

“Oh, sir,” Johnathan said. He’s the company’s real estate developer. “That property off Malen has an interested buyer.”

*Not a chance*. “It’s not for sale,” Arnoldo answered before I did and thankfully. I needed the property like a baby needed milk.

“Why?” My father asked.

“Because it’s not for sale.”

He rolled his eyes. “You’re missing out on a huge deal because of sentimental attachment?”

“Father.” I paused to collect myself. “I’m not selling my gifted property. If you want something to sell, sell your house,” I suggested.

He gritted his teeth and didn’t say another word. All of a sudden, I like it better when he doesn’t talk. I wish all men would shut up more often.

The meeting continued for the next hour, and I was dying for it to be done. There’s nothing fun about not being able to focus or having a million different declines for investments. Arnaldo will take care of it, I know it, but this needs pressure, so I definitely will be checking up on it.

“Where’s Ms. Willis?” I asked. I went back to my office, and she was nowhere to be found.

“She stepped out for lunch,” Mellissa advised me. “Should I tell her you need her?”

I sighed. “No, it’s fine.” It wasn’t fine.

It wouldn’t be fine until I got her.

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### *Azzaria*

The afternoon sun bathed the city, casting a warm and inviting glow over everything. I had received an odd text from Mara, one of my colleagues and Mr. Xander’s sister, asking me to meet her at a sandwich bar during my lunch break. With the boss busy in a meeting, I decided to take this time to get away from the office for a while.

The sandwich bar was a delightful little stop nestled in a quiet corner, adorned with hanging plants and chalkboard menus. What caught my attention was the mini bookstore and cafe inside, its charm radiating a sense of comfort and tranquility. *How long has this been here and why did I not know about this until now?*

Stepping inside, I couldn’t help but be amazed by the sights and sounds. The smell of freshly brewed coffee mixed with the subtle aroma of books, created a unique and inviting

atmosphere. I spotted Mara sitting at one of the tables, and I made my way over to her.

“Hey, Mara,” I greeted her with a smile, intrigued by her choice of meeting place. “This is a cute little spot. What’s up?”

Mara returned my smile, her eyes bright with excitement. “Azzaria, it’s so good to see you. I just wanted a change of scenery, you know? Thought it might be nice to catch up outside the office. I haven’t seen much of you lately.”

We engaged in small talk for a few minutes. She asked me how I was liking the office and how’s college going and I asked her about her pregnancy. It felt good to have a casual conversation, it’s something that rarely happened.

The waiter approached with a friendly smile on his face. I didn’t know what to buy because I’ve never been here but Mara was telling me that everything’s good to eat.

I can’t lie, the menu was filled with an array of tempting sandwich options, and the tantalizing aroma of freshly baked bread made my stomach growl in anticipation. I finally ordered a turkey club sandwich, and she just ordered chicken pasta.

Mara, with an air of enthusiasm, leaned in and asked, “Will you be able to make it to my birthday dinner tonight? I know I had already asked you but that was a while back and I wasn’t sure if you remembered.”

I could see that she just wanted someone to hang around with. That’s a sentiment I understood and could definitely appreciate. “Of course, I’ll be there. I wouldn’t miss it.”

She continued, “Great! I’m so excited about it. You know, I’ve been planning it for a while. It’s going to be a fun evening.”

“What’s the theme again?”

“The 1920’s.” *Got it.*

“I’m looking forward to it. Thank you for inviting me.”

Mara’s gaze softened, and she leaned in a bit closer, her voice taking on a more serious tone. “You know, I asked you

here today because my spirit likes you and that's odd, because I usually have a hard time around new people." That's the nicest thing I've ever heard someone say about me. And if it's coming from a pregnant woman, it must be true.

"Thank you."

She took a breath and looked directly into my eyes. "I would love for us to be friends. I enjoy your company." Her words didn't come off in a creepy way, it came off extremely genuine, and I really appreciated that.

A warm smile crept across my face, and I nodded in agreement. "I'd love that too."

"Tell me more about yourself, Azzaria. What's your ethnicity? I'm also obsessed with your hair."

I told her that I'm mixed, half-Caribbean and half-white. My father's white and my mother is Jamaican and then she told me that she's mixed with Italian, Latin and American. It was an interesting mix but it could be distinctively seen on her and her brother.

The delightful smell of freshly made sandwiches filled the cozy atmosphere as the waiter arrived with our orders.

The sandwiches were so pretty that I didn't want to eat it. Such art should be framed. Everything looked and smelt so fresh.

I picked one up, took a careful bite, and my eyes lit up with delight.

Mara noticed my reaction and grinned. "I told you these sandwiches are amazing. Dillon loves them too."

At the mention of his name, I had to clear my throat, trying to hide the sudden twist in my gut. He was a constant presence in my thoughts, even when I tried to focus on other matters. While I knew our relationship was purely professional, the attraction I felt was undeniable and seemed to grow stronger each day.

I decided to steer the conversation away from Dillon, and I asked Mara, "Are you and him close?"

A warm smile crossed her face, and she leaned in a little, as if sharing a well-kept secret. “We’re best friends. I have other brothers, but he’s the only one who’s ever treated me like family. We’ve been through a lot together, and we rarely hide anything from each other.”

I had half-expected to hear stories about his ruthless business persona, but Mara’s words revealed a different side of him that I hadn’t yet encountered. Well, that’s a lie. I’ve encountered it once. Back at the club when I was drunk.

“He’s one of the most loving and caring people I know,” she continued. “Dillon’s heart is bigger than he lets most people see. He’s had his fair share of challenges, but it’s only made him more compassionate.”

As I sat there, I couldn’t help but soak up Mara’s words. Her perspective on Mr. Xander was far from what I had expected, and I was left feeling a mix of emotions. The man was clearly more complex than I had ever imagined.

Our conversation soon ended as I realized my lunch break was ending. We asked for the bill, settled it, and made our way to the exit.

Mara smiled warmly at me. “I really enjoyed our lunch, Azzaria. I’m looking forward to tonight and hope we can hang out again soon.”

I nodded, returning her smile. “Me too, Mara. Happy birthday again, and I’ll see you later.”

It was clear that there was more to discover about the enigmatic man who had managed to capture my attention in ways I hadn’t anticipated.

Ways I needed to get rid of.

---

I was all set for Mara’s 1920s-themed birthday party, and I had gone all out with my outfit. Most of the stuff were already in my closet and just needed to be paired properly and whatever I didn’t have, Abigail got for me.

I'd chosen a sleek, form-fitting flapper dress that was a deep shade of emerald green, adorned with shimmering fringe that danced with every step I took. The dress came down to my knees and was paired with a matching feathered headband, adorned with sequins and pearls.

I decided to let my hair flow naturally in loose, cascading curls, and I wore a deep red lipstick that added a touch of vintage allure.

Arriving at the venue, I was mesmerized by the stunning decor. She was right, she did go all out. The party was set on the Golden Gates Lawn, which I soon found out was owned by the Xander family. It was as if I had stepped back in time to the 1920s, with every detail meticulously recreated.

The space was intimate, and the seating arrangement was cleverly designed. Round tables with white tablecloths and elegant centerpieces were scattered around the beautifully manicured lawn.

Vintage street lamps cast a warm, soft glow, and a jazz band played smooth melodies in the background. The atmosphere was simply enchanting.

Waiters and waitresses moved gracefully through the crowd, serving champagne and an assortment of delectable hors d'oeuvres on silver platters.

The clinking of glasses, laughter, and lively conversations filled the air, creating an ambiance that transported us back to the roaring '20s.

I had brought a small gift for Mara, carefully wrapped in vintage-inspired paper, and I placed it on the designated gift table. It wasn't much but one can never attend someone's birthday party empty handed.

Finding my seat, I couldn't help but admire Mara when she entered the party. She looked absolutely radiant. Her dress, a deep crimson with intricate beading, clung gracefully to her baby bump. The dress featured a drop-waist style, another nod to the fashion of the 1920s.



Her hair was elegantly styled in soft waves, and her makeup highlighted her natural beauty. She wore a stunning headpiece with a silk rose that matched the color of her dress.

As she walked into the party, all eyes were on her. Her entrance was a breathtaking moment, and I couldn't help but feel grateful to be a part of this special evening, celebrating a wonderful woman.

The night carried on, each moment as enchanting as the last. As I savored the lively atmosphere, Mara came over, wearing a beaming smile, and introduced me to her husband, Alexander.

“Azzaria,” she shouted as she approached me, “hey!”

I smiled and reached out to give her a warm and gentle hug. “Happy birthday, you look really beautiful.”

She blushed, her cheeks staining red. “Thank you, and you look so gorgeous too.” Mara continued, “And oh, I'd like you to meet my husband and father of the huge ass baby I'm carrying, Alexander.”

I extended my hand, and he shook it warmly, “It's a pleasure to meet you, Azzaria. I've heard wonderful things about you.”

“It's lovely to meet you too. I wish you and Mara all the best on your new family.”

“He's also one of Dillon's bestfriends,” she said, turning to face me, “And Alex, she's the intern we were telling you about.” He didn't give a verbal response but maintained a very pleasant facial expression.

“If you'll excuse me,” he said and started walking off.

“So, how are you? Are you enjoying yourself?”

“I really am. This a really lovely party and the food is amazing. How are you?” I wasn't lying. It was nice.

“I'm glad you're having fun, and I'm good. I'm just nervous about parenthood.”

That's not something I couldn't relate to, but it's something I could understand. She started telling me about how rough her relationship with her parents were and she didn't want that for her baby, and I assured her that she would definitely be nothing like her parents.

I hurriedly changed the topic as I could see how sad it was making her and the conversation flowed naturally. Mara was a really nice person to talk to.

After we finished speaking, Mara headed to the head of the table. She took a moment to address everyone, her voice full of cheer, "Ladies and gentlemen, it's time for a little game! Let's see who knows me best among my dear family."

"Husbands included?" Alexander asked.

Dillon chuckled aloud. "No."

"Come on, babe?"

"No Alex, you can't participate."

He jokingly sighed. "My money's on Dillon."

"Fuck yea," he shouted and dabbed Alexander up.

I must say that Mr. Xander is absolutely the most gorgeous man I've ever seen. If they had a prize for best dressed person, he would've definitely won. His tailored gray suit, high-waisted trousers, and sharp black tie framed his built, confident figure. Slicked-back hair revealed striking hazel eyes, and polished shoes completed his look. He looked absolutely scrumptious.

The game began, and the questions rolled in. Mara's siblings and relatives took turns answering. When asked about her favorite childhood memory, Dillon recounted a particular incident from their youth, a story filled with laughter and shared secrets. When questioned about her favorite song, he immediately named a song she had played on repeat during their teenage years.

I couldn't help but be surprised by Dillon's in-depth knowledge of Mara. The way he remembered the most intricate details about her life was both endearing and

impressive. I couldn't understand why Mara had referred to him as sweet, but it was becoming clearer with each passing moment.

The night continued, filled with laughter and whole lot of fun. As I sat, engrossed in the festivities, I felt the weight of someone's eyes on me. With a discreet glance around the room, I realized it was Dillon who was watching me, his gaze hidden in the shadows of the night.

Sensing his eyes on me made my heart race. It was both exciting and unsettling knowing he was watching me with such intensity. I didn't want to make a scene, so I decided to step away for some fresh air and a closer look at the exquisite scenery. The garden was bathed in soft moonlight, creating a breathtaking backdrop.

As I strolled amidst the vibrant blooms, I couldn't resist the temptation to capture their beauty. "Abigail would love this," I thought and immediately snapped her the pictures. My attention focused on the screen, I was entirely absorbed in my texting.

Suddenly, as if from nowhere, I bumped into someone. My heart leaped, and I tried to run away, but strong hands steadied me. I looked up to find Mr. Xander there, standing tall and firm, his eyes locked onto mine.

"Shit," I murmured. "Hi, Mr. Xander, nice to see you here."

"I could say the same, and please, just call me Dillon."

I was about to say something about keeping things professional but I didn't, I just let it slide. "Well, if you'll excuse me," I said, indicating that I wanted to leave but he stopped me.

"Let's go have a seat by the lake."

"I think I sh—"

"I'm not going to hurt you, and I don't bite."

We stood there for about two minutes, in silence, before I decided to go sit with him.

“Happy now?” I asked him. He just smirked and continued staring at the lake.

“Enjoying the view?” he asked.

It was damn beautiful, but I couldn’t resist a bit of playful banter, and I teased, “Of course, but you know, it could use some improvement.”

He raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. “Really now? What kind of improvements are we talking about here?”

I chuckled, meeting his playful energy. “Well, for starters, I could use a more charming man for my company, don’t you think?”

Dillon grinned, his eyes holding a mischievous glint. “Ah, but you already have the most charming man sitting with you, don’t you?”

I tried to act nonchalant, but his compliment sent a pleasant warmth through me. “Flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Xander.”

He leaned in a little closer, his tone dropping to a low, intimate register. “Does that mean I get extra points for being your boss?”

I could feel the flirtatious tension in the air. “Hmm, let’s see... extra points, but this isn’t professional.”

Dillon leaned back, feigning an expression of regret. “That’s the second or third time you’ve mentioned the word professional to me.”

“I wonder why,” I said sarcastically.

“Me too.”

“Are you oblivious?”

“Not really.” *He really doesn’t know?*

I scoffed. “You told me the conversation we had was a mistake and that we should keep things professional, so that’s what I did.”

“You apologized to me,” he argued.

“Because it was the right thing to do.”

“Was it?”

“Are you always this argumentative?”

“I am, but seriously, was it?”

“Maybe not, but still. I didn’t want you think I was some girl who goes to clubs on weekends and gets drunk and then goes up being all close with her boss and has very intimate conversations.”

He rolled his eyes. “Does it matter? At the end of the day, we’re still two human beings who are free to talk if we want to.”

“Human beings who hang that close to you, go on tabloids.”

“You’re pretty enough to be on the front page.” *How does he keep saying these things, and why do they make me smile?*

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“You’re my boss.”

“Temporary boss,” he corrected, “And?”

“What do you mean by ‘and’?”

“As in what’s the point in stating the obvious.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I’m reckless.” Trust me, I could see that.

As we continued to talk by the lake, the conversation flowed effortlessly, filled with moments of playful banter and undeniable chemistry.

Dillon leaned in, his eyes curious as he asked, “So, how are you enjoying your time at the internship?”

I smiled, genuinely pleased with the experience. “It’s been incredible, actually. I like it there and, well, it has its perks, too.”

He chuckled, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Perks? Care to elaborate on those?”

My heart raced as I felt the tension build. “Oh, you know, in house coffee machine, how amazing it’ll look on my resume...”

Dillon’s gaze intensified, and he softly said, “that’s all?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I find my boss interesting.”

“Obviously, who wouldn’t?”

“Cocky?”

“No,” he said coolly, “*confident*.”

In that moment, the world seemed to disappear. Our eyes locked, and it was as if there was an unspoken understanding between us.

And then it happened, a kiss so gentle and electric that time seemed to stand still. Our lips met in a sweet, stolen moment that left us both breathless.

As we pulled away, I just realized what happened. I kissed my boss.

Wait no, he kissed me. Holy shit, we kissed.

And what did I do after? I ran away and drove straight home.

## CHAPTER 11

# *Azzaria*

I GOT HOME, MY HEART STILL RACING FROM THE EVENING'S events. I probably shouldn't have ran away but what else was I supposed to do? Of everything to expect that night, I didn't expect that I'd kiss him. And what's even more disturbing, I liked it. I'd do it again. My attraction to him was becoming a problem.

I kicked off my heels and flopped down on my bed, trying to process what had happened at the party. That had been a moment of madness, but not regret. And now, I was freaking out.

I knew I needed someone to talk to, so I grabbed my phone and dialed Abigail's number. She answered almost immediately.

"Hey, Azzy, how was the party?"

I took a deep breath and hesitated before blurting out, "I kissed Mr. Xander."

Silence followed on the other end, and then Abigail gasped. "You did what? Azzaria, you're joking, right?"

I wished I were, but there was no denying the truth. "No, I'm not joking, Abigail. It just happened, and now, I don't know what to do."

"Okay, start from the beginning. What led to the kiss? How did it happen?"

I recounted the story, from me bumping into him and then him asking me to go sit by the lake, the flirty conversation, the

undeniable chemistry between us, and finally, the kiss. Abigail listened intently, and as I spoke, I could hear her shock slowly morph into concern.

When I was done, she sighed and said, “So, does this mean you like him?”

Of course that would be her take away from everything. “Abigail.”

“Sorry. What did he say after?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“That’s what I said.”

“How?” She looked at me as if I was insane.

“Because I ran away. I ran and jumped in and car and rushed home.”

She started laughing and I looked at her with my serious face. This was hardly a time to be laughing. “I know this is funny to you, but this is—”

“Relax, Azzy, I’m laughing out of shock because you running away was not what I expected.”

“What do I do next?”

Abigail responded, “Well, first, just don’t panic. It’s not like you were planning for this to happen. I think you should let him address it and see where he stands. It could be a one-time thing, you know, and it could mean something else.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I just hope it’s not awkward tomorrow.”

“Aside from him being your boss, you two are actually people and technically, it’s only going to last for a few months. Stop using that as an excuse to deny what you feel.”

“I can’t deny what I don’t have.”

She scoffed. “*What you don’t have?*” She rhetorically asked, “The attraction is eating you up so much that you’ve spent the past two weeks sitting down and googling him.”



You've used my Instagram account to look through his, you sit here with the biggest smile on your face and you're blushing so much that you don't need to buy any from the store. So stop with the bullshit about "I can't deny what I don't have", because you and I both know, you're bullshitting me and yourself."

*Oh.* She ate me up. There's nothing left for me to say. "I only used your Instagram account because I don't have one for myself. I only have the account I do reviews on."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, I don't care what you use it for, but stop denying your feelings. Yes, Matthew fucked up. He's going to hell for what he did, but it was years ago, babe. You've grown. You've gotten help. *You're better. You deserve better, so stop thinking that you don't.*"

"I love you."

"I know, I love you too."

Shifting the conversation, we continued talking about less stressful topics, discussing the 1920s theme, Mara's party, and our plans for the coming weekend. Eventually, we said our goodbyes, and I headed to my mom's room to tell her her goodnight.

As I entered her room, she was already in bed, reading a book. She looked up and smiled. "How was the party, dear?"

I gave her an edited version of the night, omitting the part about the kiss. "It was great, Mom."

Mom's smile widened. "I'm glad to hear that. I'm also glad that you're making friends and socializing. Now, you should get some rest. It's been a long day."

I agreed, kissed her goodnight, headed back up the stairs to my room, my mind still filled with thoughts of Dillon.

I lay in bed, feeling restless and confused about the kiss. *What did it mean for our professional relationship?* I couldn't stop myself from scrolling through Dillon's Instagram account, as if trying to decipher something from his posts and photos.

But my attempt at Instagram psychoanalysis was interrupted when my phone rang. It was a call from Mara. I immediately answered.

“Hi, Azzaria!” Mara’s cheerful voice came through the phone. “I just wanted to say thank you for coming tonight, even if you had to leave early.”

I quickly replied, “Oh, Mara, I’m so sorry for leaving early. I wasn’t feeling well.” I wasn’t lying, technically, I started feeling uneasy after everything unfolded.

Mara was understanding. “No worries at all, babes. Your presence was enough. And speaking of that, I wanted to say thank you for the beautiful gift you gave me.”

I smiled, grateful that my handmade gift had made an impression. “You’re welcome, Mara. I’m so glad you liked it.”

Mara then asked, “Where did you buy it? It’s so unique, and I’ve never seen anything like it before. I’m going to have to buy one for my son and my husband.”

I hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether to tell her the truth. But honesty won out. “Actually, I didn’t buy it, Mara. I made it myself.”

There was a brief pause on the other end, and I could hear the surprise in her voice. “You made it? That’s amazing, you’re talented! It’s one of the most heartfelt gifts I’ve ever received.”

I felt my cheeks warm with gratitude. “Thank you. I’m glad you appreciate it. I wanted to make you something special for your birthday.”

We continued chatting for a bit, discussing the party, her pregnancy, and how Alexander was handling everything. Her gratitude and genuine nature warmed my heart. It was reassuring to have this connection with her.

Our conversation eventually came to an end, and we said our goodnights.

As I lay in bed, I couldn’t help but think about the tangled situation I’d found myself in. With thoughts of Mr. Xander on

my mind, I drifted off to sleep, wondering how the next day at work would unfold.

The next morning, I woke up determined to face the new day at work. I dressed in a simple yet professional outfit, opting for a close-fitted pants paired with a fitted white long-sleeved T-shirt and added a gray sweater over it. I looked and felt great.

After a quick breakfast downstairs with my mom, I grabbed my bag and headed out to the internship.

The familiar route to the Xander Enterprises building did little to soothe the fluttering nerves in my stomach.

As I approached the front desk, Melissa, the new receptionist who usually greeted me, wore a warm smile that seemed out of place for early mornings. She greeted me with a nod, her voice holding a note of excitement.

“Good morning.”

“Morning, Mel,” I replied, my curiosity piqued by her unusual cheerfulness. She and I weren’t close but she’s one of those people who made the environment a whole lot better to be in.

“You look great,” she complimented.

“Thank you.” I answered. “Any news for today?”

Melissa leaned in and whispered, “Well, Mr. Xander won’t be in the office today. He’s got a seminar out of town.”

My eyes widened in surprise, and I couldn’t help but release a relieved breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. “Oh, I see. Thank you for letting me know.”

The thought of facing Dillon after the kiss from the night before had been daunting. A day without his presence in the office would provide some much-needed respite for me to regain my composure.

I settled into my usual tasks and made progress on my projects. There were emails to respond to, PowerPoints to organize for his weekly meetings and documents to collect from the different departments so he could sign off on them.

*Heavy thoughts really do breed productivity.*

When it was time for lunch, I decided to stop by the little sandwich place that had become my go-to spot. The delectable aroma of fresh sandwiches welcomed me as I walked in. Everything tastes and smelt so fresh and delicious. I placed my order and sat down to enjoy my lunch, grateful for a moment of peace.

Back at the office, I continued my work and wrapped up my tasks for the day. As the clock ticked toward the end of my work hours, I felt a sense of accomplishment.

With the day behind me, I packed my belongings and headed to the gym.

*Yeah, I loved it there.*

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### ***Dillon***

As the memory of that kiss with Azzarria continued to haunt me, I couldn't help but wonder about her motives. I dreamt about her, I accidentally called my housekeeper her name and I even opened her messages with the thought of texting her. I didn't though, but I thought about it and that was enough to send me off the deep end.

*Why had she ran away from me?* Despite the confusion, I had a seminar to attend, and I was eager to shift my focus and it was good to be away from the office for a day.

Arnoldo and Mikkel, my reliable friends, met me for the day's event. Arnoldo was here on a legal standpoint as he's always present at these things, he's my lawyer after-all and Mikkel was here because he's my driver. I had no problem driving but he said he wanted to be here, so who am I to stop him?

Ronan was to be here but he had back to back patients.

The seminar revolved around the technology program and scholarships we were awarding to gifted children. It was a cause I was passionate about, and I couldn't wait to see the impact it would make.

Navigating through the crowded venue, a reporter approached me. She asked me about my involvement in the scholarships and the main focus. I responded by telling her that the seminar's centered around our technology program and the scholarships we're offering. We discussed the impact of technology on society and how nurturing young talent in this field can drive innovation. Of all the things I've been asked today, these questions were the most on target and topic.

The interview continued, delving into the seminar's various discussions and the broader implications of supporting youth in the field of technology.

We delved into a brief yet informative conversation about the scholarships and the importance of nurturing young, talented minds. The reporter diligently jotted down notes while occasionally flashing me a flirtatious smile.

As the interview concluded, we moved away from the reporter, and I couldn't help but notice a sly smile on Arnoldo's face. "You certainly have a way with the press, don't you?"

Raising an eyebrow, I wasn't surprised by Arnoldo's observation. "It comes with the territory, Reyes."

Mikkel, who had been eavesdropping on our conversation, chimed in. "But it seemed like you weren't the only one doing the charming back there."

Arnoldo chuckled, his self-satisfied grin intact. "It's all part of the game, my friend. You know how it goes."

Mikkel and I exchanged knowing glances, and I couldn't resist a light-hearted tease. "Manwhore."

"At least I'm not single."

"At least we possibly don't have STD's."

He gasped. "Firstly, I'm tested every three months, and secondly, both of you are single. Ronan, Lucio and Alex are the only taken ones."

"And Bryce," Mikkel added.

"Him too, but he's barely our friend."

Silence filled the space and then laughter ensued, momentarily easing the tension that had lingered from earlier.

The seminar carried on, featuring inspiring discussions and the announcement of scholarship recipients.

As the event came to a close, we left. Mikkel dropped Arnaldo off and we continued driving around the city.

“Where to?” Mikkel asked as we stopped at the four-way crossroads.

“Equinox.”

I didn’t exercise very often, nor was I going there to exercise.

The complex has three different floors. The first two were the gym, but the top floor was one of my bars, and this month has been about going to my establishments and being present, as Arnaldo kindly put it.

Aside from owning that one floor, I owned the whole complex. My grandfather gifted it to me in his will. I held equal amounts of love and disdain for the man. He was the most callous person I’d ever met, yet I admired him profoundly. I respected him in every way, even as I despised his actions.

The majority of the Xander family’s assets had been inherited from my grandfather and subsequently *enhanced* by me.

Mikkel seemed puzzled as he stared at me through the rear view mirror. He knew I hadn’t visited that location since my grandfather’s passing. Even during meetings or new opportunities, I would send a representative. But today, I had to.

“Don’t worry. We won’t be long. Just stopping by top floor and then heading out,” I reassured him.

“Your mother called. She wants to know if you can see her on Wednesday.” As long as the gathering wasn’t at her house, of course, I’d be there. Family—what remained of it—

mattered deeply to me, even though I held no love for that house.

“Did she mention where?”

“The Flower Garden.”

“Tell her I will be there.” He nodded and stepped on the gas. After what seemed like an hour drive, we arrived at Equinox. It was an impressive sight to behold. The modern crystal and glass architecture blended seamlessly with the old wooden seats and furniture, giving the place a unique and opulent ambiance.

Most people were unaware that I was the mastermind behind this facility, and I had no intention of revealing my involvement. It would spark conspiracy theories and unwanted media attention.

On many occasions, I’ve been asked about whether it was my doing or his, but even in death, I never wanted to outshine him, and as such, I gave him all the praise and he deserved it. None of this could be possible without him.

I entered the gym dressed in my casual business attire: a plain blue long-sleeved shirt and jeans.

I anticipated recognition, but I didn’t want it. Today was one of those rare days when I longed to slip in and out unnoticed, yet, being who I was, that was nearly impossible.

“Wow,” a medium-built guy remarked as he saw me. “Mr. Xander, we weren’t aware you were coming,” he stuttered.

“And you are?” I asked, unimpressed by overly shocked individuals. Encountering me might be a treat for some, but the dramatics were wholly unnecessary.

“Mason,” he replied, flashing a nervous smile. My gaze, however, shifted to a gorgeous girl entering the gym.

*Fuck*, she was impossible to escape. Dressed effortlessly sexy in her workout two-piece set, if she visited here often, so would I.

“Dillon,” Mikkell’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

“Yes?”

“Is everything okay?” I sensed concern in his tone, something that rarely happened.

“Everything’s good, Mikkel. I just spaced. By the way, remind me to check in with my mother later.”

“Of course, Mr. Xander.”

I returned my attention to the stunning woman in front of me, but my gaze followed her to the front desk, where a verbal altercation seemed to be happening.

“Excuse me, what’s the problem?” I intervened.

“Mr. Xander, this woman was—”

“Give her whatever she wants,” I snapped.

“Sir, she has a number of outstanding payments,” the receptionist whispered.

As I glanced at Azzaria, I could see her embarrassment at the woman’s remark, but I didn’t care about what she said. The whole reason I implemented the college special was for students like her, who couldn’t afford it but wanted the luxuries like the rest of us.

“Clear all of them,” I instructed.

“No, you don’t have to,” she interjected. “I’ll clear them.”

“It’s fine,” I insisted. “Clear the bills and don’t harass the customers. Do you understand?”

My words were firm and abrasive, but I didn’t care if they hurt the front desk representative, as long as they didn’t hurt or offend Azzaria.

By the time I was done with the representative, I noticed that she had left the gym. I rarely chased women, but I was certain I had to chase her.

*Literally chase.*

I ran through the very dark and wet alley.

“Damn,” I muttered under my breath and sprinted after her. I had to figure out why she was running and why I cared.



I found her in a dark alleyway behind Equinox, hands on her knees, sobbing.

“Azzaria,” I called out, and she turned, ready to bolt.

“Don’t run. I’m sure you’ve never been around these parts. Just wait,” I urged, jogging to catch up with her.

She gave me a blank look, her eyes red from the obvious tears. “What is it?”

“Why did you run?” I got closer, placing my hand on hers. “Why are you running?”

“Because... it’s so embarrassing to have that happen, especially in front of your boss,” she sighed.

“Why do you keep running? I saw you at Jerry’s, you ran there, and at my sister’s birthday after the kiss, you ran. *Why?*”

She stared at me, her gaze unwavering. “Does it matter? Can I go now?”

“No,” I said firmly. “I just want to talk to you without the hassle or the bolting, but you’re so impossible,” I complained.

She scoffed. “I’m impossible? Put yourself in my shoes. You said that us hanging out at your club and talking was a mistake. You told me that we should keep things professional and then you’re basically flirting with me at the dinner. So, no, I’m not impossible. I ran away because you confuse me. I am confused and I didn’t know what to do. It’s not everyday I wake up and kiss my boss.”

I fell silent, my pride momentarily silenced. “Azzaria,” I signed. “I said that because you came to me apologizing. What else was I supposed to say?” I stepped closer, and she stilled. “I kissed you last night because I wanted to.”

“I don’t believe you,” she whispered.

“What can I do to make you believe me?”

“Can I just go back to close my account? I’ve been through too many embarrassing confrontations today.”

“Just wait.” I didn’t know what else to say to keep her there, but I had to do it until she gave me the chance I needed.

“Wait for what? What are you even doing here? Are you following me?”

“I wish it were that. I own this entire complex and I just happened to see you here. I don’t come here often because it’s not my favorite place, but I needed get business done,” I said, ending with a slight chuckle.

“I’m not here often, but it’s not in my budget. I just like the facilities,” she confessed. I’d never seen her so vulnerable, and I would never take it for granted.

“What do you mean?” I was intrigued and wanted to know more.

“I meant that I’m not as wealthy as I might appear. I’m not rich at all. I can’t afford a lot of things, but I do my best. My gym payments got backed up, and I came here today with the intention of switching to the college plan after my workout. It’s embarrassing, I know.”

“The only embarrassing thing here is that you ran from me, Azzaria. You don’t need to worry about your membership. Consider it taken care of,” I implored, not wanting to hear any objections. “And don’t fight me on this. I hardly take no for an answer.”

“I won’t fight you on it, and thank you, really.” Her face was adorned with a permanent smile, and it brought me immense joy to know I was the cause of that smile.

“There’s just something,” I remarked, studying her face for an explanation, something to blame for my growing fascination.

“Something?”

“Never mind,” I said, snapping out of it. It was too early to say anything and potentially scare her off. I couldn’t lose her before getting to know her.

“Okay,” she replied hesitantly. I could tell she wanted to challenge me, but I also knew she wouldn’t. Behind her dominant exterior, she harbored an abundance of fears.

“If I asked you to dinner, what would you say?”

“I’d ask why someone like you would want a girl like me?” Her response was genuine, revealing her confidence and self-perception.

“I’d reply and say because I want to get to know you.”

“Why?”

“Is there a problem?” I challenged.

“There wouldn’t be just *one* problem,” she stated, placing emphasis on the “one.”

“Don’t fight me on this. Whatever opposing reason, I don’t care.”

“Because you don’t have to care. You won’t be the one being slut-shamed or harassed. You can’t breathe in peace without being photographed...” She began explaining, but I cut her off.

“But you’re a gorgeous girl, fit for the camera,” I argued.

“Charming, and you’re also my boss,” she continued.

“Temporary boss,” I clarified. “And why should that matter? Why do you care about public opinion to that extent?”

Her smile softened slightly, and she looked up at me.

“Are you planning on finding more excuses?” I asked.

“That depends, on how many answers you have for each.”

“I’ll take care of you, Azzaria. I can make it worth your while,” I said, attempting to persuade her. *I meant every word I said.*

“I don’t know—”

“Give me a chance, I’m begging you.”

“Fine,” she said.

“Thank you.” We started walking back to the gym.

“Dillon,” she said, looking up. “Did you regret that kiss?”

“No,” I responded quickly. “I don’t regret it.”

“Okay,” she replied with a slight smile.

*Note to self: Dillon, don't fuck this up.*

## CHAPTER 12

### *Dillon*

A WEEK HAD PASSED SINCE MY EQUINOX VISIT AND IT'S ALL been a blur. I feel like I've done so much but nothing at all.

As I lay in the dark, trying to find some respite from the relentless nightmares, the old scars on my body ached. My night terrors have been coming more frequent now and I didn't know how to control it. The EVZIO on my nightstand had become my nocturnal companion, offering the only escape from the clutches of those haunting visions. But the downside was, the addiction to this could ruin a person and I didn't want it to ruin me.

But it wasn't just the nightmares that had become a constant companion. Thoughts of Azzaria filled my days. Her vibrant presence at the office had cast a new light on an environment that I usually navigated with ruthless determination and an air of cold detachment.

There were moments, oh so secret and sweet, when her laughter would crack through the walls I'd carefully built around myself. Our work-related interactions became playful, like a hidden dance only we knew the steps to. The way her eyes met mine during meetings held more than a professional exchange, but it was never overt enough for anyone else to see.

I had tried to distance myself, to regain control and preserve my well-protected solitude. But my attempts were futile, as if some invisible force kept pulling me back toward her, like the relentless tide of the sea.

The truth was, she was an enigma I couldn't decipher. Her openness and guarded moments baffled me, and it was that very mystery that held my fascination hostage. Her presence, both in my thoughts and at work, was a constant contradiction that challenged the walls I'd so carefully erected.

As the new day approached, the sun would soon cast its light over the city, and I would be forced to confront another round of professional challenges and personal dilemmas. Yet, there was a spark of curiosity and longing that I couldn't deny.

On a typical weekday, there would be little time to paint, but today I made time. Tuesday's were the slow days and the only days I didn't need to go in to office early, there was nothing important on schedule.

My oil paints and acrylics filled up the room with their strong fumes. My lungs were immune to all of this by now—my ten years of practice can be thanked for that.

It's such a mystery when it comes to getting hot for someone. There was so much about me that would kill her if she knew, but I couldn't just stop myself from all of this now. I couldn't just give her up.

Shaking myself from that thought, I got back to painting, but thanks to my overthinking, my brain was all shambled. There was no use in doing this.

"Fuck," I scowled and walked out of the room, making sure to close the door.

With my rumpled thoughts, I had no choice but to get my ass in my study and do something.

Between the hard-on that started to grow because of her and the headache I was getting as I was thinking about her, I was tapped out. No use in painting now. I got dressed and headed to my home office.

Work is the most effective kind of diversion.

My phone buzzed. It's a notification from Google.

Forbes has now named CEO Multi-billionaire, Dillon Xander as number 6 of ten on the world's richest men list. Swipe to see all of his achievements.

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Oh.

*Well, congratulations to me.*

I lifted my head up from the phone and examined the room, noting the presence of a familiar face.

“Dillon,” Arnoldo quipped. *Ah, Arnoldo Reyes*—the country’s best lawyer, in my opinion. Hiring him was the best move I’ve ever made, and I’ve made a lot of wonderful decisions in my life.

“Arnoldo,” I said, greeting him. “What brings you here today?”

“The Brown.co building plan. I went over it, and they’re trying to rob you out of your money and business,” he related in a fast and professional manner.

“How so? What have you found?”

“I got the building valuation done and went over all their legal terms and legality statements... nothing is worth more than five hundred thousand dollars.”

“What’s our possible outcome?”

“We buy it for what they’re selling or we call them out on their bullshit,” he said, his tone remaining unchanged and frank.

As simple as those options sounded, contractors and contracts have been drawn up for them since the start of the fiscal year, so backing out would waste a lot of time—time which is forever against me.

“We need a meeting with Brown.co, and you need to be there,” I stated.

“With all due respect,” he said and paused, “scheduling meetings is the job of your new assistant.” He scowled.

He’s such an ass. “You’re an asshole, Reyes. Just schedule the meeting.”

“You’re more of an asshole than I am,” he mumbled. I’ll always leave it to my good friends to curse me.

“Piss off,” I hissed. “Let’s go over the plan. Draft up the evidence we have, all the legal terms—everything, and have it sent to Ms. Willis so she can get the room ready.”

“Got it. Anything else you want done? Maybe move the earth a little further from the sun?” He joked.

“Let’s start with the fact that you came here—on your own, Reyes.”

“The day you stop acting like you don’t need people will be a good day for all of us.”

“Whatever.”

“I got an invite to your sister’s baby shower.”

“Speaking of parties, why weren’t you at her birthday dinner?”

“I had to lecture a youth group on criminal law, but I still made sure she got her gift.”

“What did you get her?”

“A green Birkin. What did you get her?”

“An airplane.”

His jaw dropped. “*An airplane?* For how much? Did you make sure to read the fine print of the contract? Why didn’t you contact me?”

I laughed at his panic. “You approved the purchase months ago but I didn’t go through with it, until last week.”

“Well shit, brother of the year.”

“Brother of the decade, also, I want a file on my desk by tomorrow at noon.”

“File on who?”

“Azzarria Willis. Her name. Her past. Any and everything you can find. Don’t give me the bullshit on confidentiality. Get it done, Reyes,” I said and got up from my desk, giving him a pat on the back before I exited the room.



“Isn’t that y—”

“Yes.”

“Oh,” I heard him mumble, and I just chuckled.

Arnoldo Reyes was not only my attorney but also a long-time friend. A best friend, actually. We attended the same schools and grew up in the same neighborhood. It only seemed fair to include him in the team, and he has never let me down since.

Granted, he spews a lot of nonsense at me on a daily basis, but I’m used to it and know it comes from a place of love and concern.

That Azzaria file I wanted was a complete breach of privacy, but I needed to know what I was getting myself into before I went any further with her. Not that anything or anyone could stop me from moving on, but I needed to be aware of the possibilities.

Even for someone as open as she was, she had a lot of secrets, which I could see in her eyes. I sensed tension and concealment in every word she spoke and every glance she gave me. She and I have a lot more in common than I’d acknowledge. Everyone has secrets, but I need to know hers in order to be at ease.

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*Azzaria*

*Am I daydreaming about him? Yes*

*Do I have other important stuff to do? Also yes.*

I just can’t help it, he’s so dreamy.

I was dripping wet just thinking about Dillon in his three-piece suit, the way he walked, and how each word he spoke came out at a commanding pace. My biggest suit has always been self-control, but with him, I wanted to be unraveled. After hours, anywhere, at any time.

And I’ve never hated myself more for wanting that.

How did I manage to get to this space with someone I barely knew? Folklore is right; it really does start with a kiss.

“Well, Azzy,” Abi said, leaning in for a hug, “I’ll see you in two weeks or less.”

Here came the depressing part. She needed to go back to San Francisco to get her belongings packed and ready for her upcoming move to New York, as well as to end her relationship with Joshua.

He was testing her sanity, and she didn’t need that. She deserved the happiness and I would make sure she got that.

“Do you have to leave? But be safe and call or text me.” I pouted as I leaned in for the hug. “I love you, and please remember the goal of this trip,” I shouted, a little too loudly.

“The goal?” she questioned, confused.

“Abigail-Ann. You’re going there to break it off, not give him a good-bye fuck.”

“You’re no fun since you’ve been hooking up with your hot tycoon,” she added, rolling her eyes.

“I kissed a guy once, or twice, and you think I’m hooking up?”

She laughed. “He wants you. You want him. I say you should let him fuck.”

I rolled my eyes. “This isn’t about me. This is about you and Joshua. Break it off, no sex, and then you can pursue Mikkel.”

“I’m not going to pursue Mikkel.” She said, trying to convince me.

“Sure.”

“What?”

“Nothing, just please remember the goal.”

“Got it. Bye, Azzy.”

“Call me.”

“I will.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

She stepped through the door and was on her way to the airport.

“Azzaria.” She came running back inside.

I rubbed my temple. She’s going to miss her flight at this rate. “Yea?”

“Let the good magic happen,” she said and left.

I had my fingers crossed that the magic would happen.

My phone started buzzing and glancing at the caller ID, it was my mom.

“Yes, mom,” I said, answering the phone.

“Azzaria Jane. I’ve been calling you forever. Why haven’t you been answering?” *Because I was fantasizing about my boss who’s not my only boss but is my boss.*

“I was seeing Abigail off and just getting around and ready for my day.”

“How’s that been going? How’s Nicholas?” *Ugh.* This is the reason why I could never let my mom know who I’m involved with. She’d get attached to them— even if she’s never met them.

“It’s been great,” I said with a chuckle “and Nicholas and I aren’t dating so I don’t know how he is. He looks fine at the office,” I shrugged. I could hear her sigh on the end of the line, which was followed by a line of silence.

“Azzaria,” she sighed, “you can’t keep pushing yourself away from love, sweetheart, and you can’t spend your entire years worrying about what could go wrong. I’m not saying that you have to find love, but you’ll find out how beautiful life will be when you’re in love with a good man. Don’t use your father and me as an excuse either,” she noted. For the first time in my life, I agreed with her— I’d never give her the satisfaction of knowing that she was right about this, but I agreed with her.

“Yes, mom. Enough about me. How are you? Have you heard from dad?” I asked and gulped. It’s never easy mentioning him , but I hoped he didn’t reach out to her and she’d never tell me if he did. She wanted to protect me too much, but soon enough she’ll realize that it doesn’t protect anyone, it makes us unprepared.

“I’m good, darling, and no, I haven’t spoken to him, nor will I. Go get ready for work and call me later. I love you.”

“Goodbye, mom, I love you too.” The line died, I grabbed my purse and headed out the door.

The traffic going down was so smooth this morning, that I got to the office within twenty-five minutes.

As I made my way up to the office, feeling oddly happy, my phone buzzed in my purse. I fumbled to take it out and saw that it was a call from my school. I’m praying this isn’t a bad call.

“Hello?” I said as I continued walking.

“Good morning, Azzaria,” a cheerful voice on the other end greeted me.

“Good morning. How can I help you?”

It was my school calling to let me know that I was all set with the requirements to graduate, and I just needed to clear up the loan balances and finish the internship. Despite the constant reminder of the two things I had outstanding, I was relatively contented. *I was graduating.*

With the call ending on a positive note, I continued my ascent to the office, this time with a sense of accomplishment and the anticipation of the upcoming graduation ceremony. I’ve worked so hard to get to where I was and I can’t wait for my mother to watch me walk across the stage in that cap and gown.

“Good morning, Mellissa,” I said, flashing a smile at her.

“Good morning, Azzaria,” she smiled, “Mr. Arnoldo Reyes is in the office to see you.”

*Oh, that couldn't be good.* I've never had someone wanting to directly see me this early. She and I engaged in a bit of small chatter, and I made my way walking down the hall.

Piercing my way through the hallway and simultaneously greeting the office members, I finally arrived at my office.

I was greeted by two things—a rather large bouquet of crimson and black roses and a tall, slender and handsome Latino male being seated. I presumed that it was Arnaldo waiting for me.

Before I had a chance to speak to him and introduce myself, he did the honors. “Good morning, Ms. Willis. I’m Arnaldo Reyes, Mr. Xander’s lead attorney here.” His tone was professional, and he extended a hand for me to shake. I respected the way he greeted me.

“Good morning. A pleasure to meet you, I’m sure,” I said, flashing a brilliant smile, “I’m Azzaria, his interim assistant. I’m an intern. Would you like a coffee? Some tea? Water?”

“Neither. What I would like is a conversation.” He was straight to the point, and I got it. Next time, I’ll skip the pleasantries.

We both took our seats and got in the right state of mind. “Are there any meeting spots or openings he has this week or anytime soon. Urgency is required.”

I grabbed the company iPad from my desk and started checking the schedule. “The best date we have is next Monday at 9. He’s swamped this week, and none of the meetings can be moved as they have already had previous concessions or been long overdue.” The more I worked here, the more I got used to business concepts and got used to being a part of a team. I was also getting smarter using business terms whenever I spoke.

“Monday at 9. That’s perfect,” he added.

“For what exactly?”

“I was getting to that. We need a meeting with Brown.co. They’re playing dirty with his money and he needs them to know he’s aware. The best way to get our card rights is over a

board meeting. Pencil that in, and get in touch with Mr. Brown and his team. Let them know the meeting is non-negotiable and we're not changing the deal. This is a breach of contract as well as theft."

"Consider it done. Anything else?"

He rose from his seat and fixed his tie. "No, that'll be all. Tell Dillon that he should give me a call too, and those are gorgeous flowers you have there," he noted and walked out.

"Thank you," I mumbled and walked over to check the note.

*these are almost as pretty as you.*

*Yours Truly, DX.*

This was the first time I've ever received flowers from a man in my life, and I'm on the verge of sobbing. *It's too early to cry.* I took the note and placed it in my purse. I'd cherish this for as long as I could.

I put the flowers on my side table and started getting my to-do list cleared. There was about seven to ten minutes before he had to be in the office and distract me for the entire day.

He has a meeting at 10 this morning, so I had to get the room prepped, as well as run the minutes by him before that time. He's buying another development in the city. One would think that owning 3/4 of the city would be enough, but no, definitely not for him.

As I was moving to grab my coat, The hairs on the back of my neck stilled, and my heartbeats faltered when I felt his presence and heard the knob on the door turn.

I walked into Mr. Xander's office with a sense of anticipation, my heart racing with a strange combination of excitement and nervousness. As the door closed behind me, I couldn't help but notice the powerful atmosphere that seemed to envelop his workspace. The room was spacious and exuded confidence, much like the man who occupied it.

Mr. Xander, in his impeccably tailored suit, was seated behind his desk, his dark eyes locked onto mine. He flashed a devilish grin, and the chemistry between us seemed to crackle in the air. “Good morning,” he said, his deep voice sending a shiver down my spine.

“Good morning,” I replied with a playful smirk. “Your flowers really brightened up my day.”

“Ah, those were nothing compared to what you deserve,” he said as he leaned back in his chair.

He gestured to the chair across from him. “Why don’t you sit down? I have a few things to discuss.”

I took a seat, trying to maintain my composure, but he made it *impossible*. He leaned forward, and the distance between us seemed to disappear.

His gaze was intense as he said, “You walk into this office, and it’s like the world outside doesn’t matter.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not.”

I couldn’t help but feel a blush creeping onto my cheeks. “You’re not so bad yourself, Mr. Xander.”

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, we lost ourselves in the silent promise of something more.

“I’ve been trying to not cross this line with you.”

My heart raced as he reached out and gently traced his fingers along my jawline.

“Mr. Xander,” I whispered, “I think we’ve already crossed that line, ages ago.”

He chuckled, a deep, throaty sound that sent a thrill through my body. “Well, then, Ms. Willis, let’s make the most of it.”

Completely shifting the topic, I went on to talk about his schedule.

“You have a 10 am meeting with JepCorp on the new land you want in the south, lunch with your mom at 12, Arnaldo Reyes said to give him a call. There’s some tabs you need to go over and well as your speech for the upcoming red carpet and social event. Press details and you have a Japanese conference call for the airport you’re buying in Asia.” Such little words, but such heavy tasks for the day. Being an intern for one of the world’s most powerful men makes me think about how much I couldn’t be a boss.

“Is the meeting room ready?” *Fuck. I forgot about that.*

“I’ll go get it ready now.”

“I’d rather have you hear all day, so we can talk, so I can get to know you.”

“Flattered,” I said smiling, “but I still have to get my hours for the internship and I have to do something or I’ll feel guilty about it. Especially because I’m involved with my boss.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Definitely.”

“It’s 9:30, get the meeting room ready and come see me before it starts. Have a good day.”

“Thank you and have a good day, too, Mr. Xander.”

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Abigail called me on Facetime to let me know she landed and was getting settled and she told me about a hot guy she met at the airport. Any guy was better than Joshua.

“Dr. Green reached out to me, Azzy. I think she maybe misses you.” Dr. Michelle Green; my onetime therapist. She’s helped me through most things, and it was a hard decision to stop going, but I couldn’t do it anymore. I felt helpless and shut everyone out, including her.

“I miss her too, but I think I’m good now,” I said, trying to convince her.

“Would you consider going back? There are still dozens of things you’ve not spoken about, which I think you should,”



Abigail said, trying to persuade me.

“I’ll think about it.” I flashed a smile at her and took a bite of my food. *I could marry these sandwiches.*

We continued talking for a bit longer until the iPad battery died.

On the thought of therapy and eventually going back, I was very conflicted. Whenever I was getting help, I tended to push it to the side or ended up pushing them away, and that’s exactly what happened with Dr. Green.

ME

Hey, mom, are you busy?

MOM

always free for you. What’s up?

ME

do you think I should start therapy again?

MOM

I don’t think you should’ve even stopped, Azzaria. We both know you have a long line of trauma, and no amount of outlets you have could fix that. But why the sudden thought?

ME

Abi told me that Dr. Green had asked for me, and now I’m thinking about going back.

MOM

Do you want me to make the appointment for you? I think going back is a great idea.

ME

alright. Make it and text me.

Switching the phone's power button off, I slid back in my chair and released a loud groan. Starting therapy again would affect me in two ways—it would either help me or break me more than how I'm already broken. It's messed up to think again, but let's just rip the bandaid off before the walls clatter.

There was still fifteen minutes left on my lunch break, and I took it to walk in the streets of the city.

Walking around, I remembered having to study the architecture of the city for school projects and drafting plans for them in AutoCAD. The buildings in New York City were designed to perfection.

After my stroll through the lively streets, I got back to the office building, feeling oddly refreshed.

When I reached our floor and entered the office space, Mellissa gave me an impish smile. "Azzaria, Mr. Xander asked for you. He's in his office," she informed me.

I arched an eyebrow, a sly grin forming on my lips. "I see. Thank you, Mel. I'll head to his office right away."

I started to walk away, but I turned back. "Mel, do you have a second?"

She looked up. "Sure, what's up?"

"I was thinking, if you're free, then maybe one of these days we could go and have some drinks after work?"

Her face lit up. "That sounds great. Thank you." We exchanged numbers and I went on my way.

I pushed open the door to his office, and there he was, standing by the window, his gaze fixed on the cityscape beyond.

With a self-assured stride, I sauntered into his office. “You called for me, sir?”

He turned to face me, his eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine.

“Where’d you go?”

I leaned against his desk, crossing my legs in a way that could not go unnoticed. “For a walk in the city.”

“How was it?”

“Really nice, did you need something?”

He chuckled and looked up at me. “No, I just wanted to see you.”

“I’m flattered.”

“Do you have plans tonight?”

“Why?”

“I wanted us to get ice cream.”

I don’t think I can handle this cuteness. Where is the Mr. Dillon Xander I met a month ago? This one is making me smile way too much.

“We’ll see.”

With that, he drew me nearer, and our lips met once again, reigniting a fiery connection that we both knew was impossible to quench. We were locked in a passionate embrace, the undeniable chemistry between us driving us into a realm of desire and longing. The world beyond his office door ceased to exist, and I found myself captivated by whatever this was.

“We will.”

I left his office and couldn’t stop smiling. Everything about this felt so wrong but so right at the same time.

Getting back to my desk, I started arranging the files and putting meetings on his calendar. He had about twenty back to back meetings this week going into Monday.

The chime of a notification on my phone interrupted my concentration. I reached for my phone and saw a message informing me that my pay had been deposited into my account.

*Perfect timing.*

I started to allocate money for various expenses, starting with the most important ones. Some money was set aside for my car payment, another portion was set down for the loan bureau, and a small amount went into my gym membership debt. I could manage to survive on my savings for personal well being, but I just wanted to make sure that those were done.

I immediately sent a text to my mom, letting her know that I got paid and I'd be sorting out some of the finances.

Before I started this 'job', I was a full time student and had no time for work. I'm talking classes from 8:00 in the morning to 9:00 at night, with little to no breaks. As such, my mom picked up two jobs just to help me pay back my loans and help with expenses.

Her response arrived almost instantly, and to my surprise, she told me that she had scheduled a therapy session for me the following day.

*Maybe this was all for a good cause.*

*Maybe everything was happening the way it's supposed to.*

*Maybe I'd finally be happy.*

As the workday came to an end, I made my way to Mr. Xander's office once more, a sense of excitement building within me. He looked up from his desk as I entered, and a playful smile crossed his lips.

"Are we on for ice cream tonight?" he asked.

I grinned, feigning uncertainty. "I don't know, Mr. Xander. I might have to pass this time."

He nodded with a hint of disappointment. “Alright, maybe next time.”

Unable to keep up the charade any longer, I chuckled and leaned closer. “I was just joking, of course, we’re on for ice cream.”

His face lit up with a warm smile as he grabbed a notepad from his desk. “Great! Meet me at the Flower Garden on 5th Avenue at 7:30. I’ll be waiting.”

I nodded in agreement, a sense of anticipation growing inside me. “Sounds good. I’ll see you there.”

## CHAPTER 13

### *Dillon*

I STOOD IN THE SERENE AMBIANCE OF THE FLOWER GARDEN, A picturesque setting I'd chosen for our ice cream date. Well, it wasn't really a date nor would it count as a first date but it was just my way wanting to hang out with her without the confines of the office, but also without the public and media getting grabs.

As I waited for her, my thoughts couldn't help but wander to Azzaria. She was a puzzle, a mystery that had captured my curiosity from the moment we met. Her beauty was undeniable, but it was her inner strength and independence that drew me in like a moth to a flame.

My good friend Ronan approached me, and I greeted him with a nod. "Everything's all set, Dillion," he said, and I couldn't help but thank him profusely. This was a really big and short notice favor, but it helps having friends in high places and he always came through for me.

"Thanks Ro," I told him.

"Do I want to know why I closed down my ice-cream park for you? I'm losing a lot of money here."

"Don't worry, you'll make twice as much within the hour. And I told you, I'm doing an experiment."

His eyebrows furrowed. "The experiment has to take place at one of my properties?"

"Yes."

He laughed. “Alright, well, I’m on my way out. I’m headed to Italy for about two days. Leave the keys with the guard when you’re done.”

This man travelled more than he did anything else. But with him gone, I went on the inside to ensure that everything was set up as I had envisioned. The display of ice cream flavors was impressive, with twenty different options, each more tempting than the last. Toppings, sauces, and all the sweet accompaniments were also arranged, creating a colorful and appetizing spectacle. This wasn’t only going to be delicious, but very pleasing to the eye.

At precisely 7:25, I saw her walking towards me.

As I watched her approach, it was impossible not to notice how her outfit hugged her curves with a perfect balance of elegance and allure. The one-shouldered brown bodysuit seemed custom-made to accentuate every inch of her alluring figure, showcasing her natural grace. It was as if the fabric had been designed to cling to her body in all the right places, revealing the subtle contours that left little to the imagination.

The white shorts she wore only emphasized the graceful curve of her hips, and they were the ideal canvas against which her legs, toned and sculpted, found their spotlight. A pair of brown slippers added a casual, yet charming touch to her attire, allowing her to move with an unmatched grace that drew all eyes toward her.

*She really was beautiful.*

Her natural, curly Afro was wild and untamed, a testament to her confidence and authenticity.

And let’s not even start on the skin. She was glowing like a dozen golden Christmas lights.

I couldn’t help but gush over her beauty in my thoughts. Shaking that sentiment aside, I walked over to greet her.

“Hey,” I said with a warm smile. “You look absolutely stunning.”

Her laughter filled the air as she replied playfully, “Well, Mr. Xander, you don’t look so bad yourself.”

Azzaria looked around the enchanting setup at the Flower Garden, a mix of curiosity and admiration twinkling in her eyes. The soft lights, the gentle breeze, and the array of ice cream flavors surrounded us.

With a playful glint in her eye, she turned to me and asked, “So, Dillion, would you consider this our first date?” This was the first time she’d ever mention me by name and I don’t think I’d ever want her to stop.

I chuckled and shook my head. “No, not the first one. This,” I gestured to the delightful ice cream setup, “is just a nice little evening outing.”

She raised an eyebrow playfully. *“Technically, it’s still a date.”*

I smirked and replied, “Okay, fine, let’s call it a pre-date then.”

We both shared a laugh before I took her by the hand and led her inside.

As we entered, she seemed mesmerized the set up.

She turned to ask, “Where is everyone? The place seems empty.”

With a soft smile, I explained, “I had the place cleared out for the evening. I didn’t want us to be disturbed by the public. I didn’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Her eyes sparkled with appreciation. “That’s thoughtful of you.”

I smiled in response.

We moved on to testing different ice cream flavors, creating various mixtures with toppings. After a delightful taste-testing session, we sat on the benches at the back and continued our conversation.

I asked, “So, Ms. Willis, what’s your all-time favorite ice cream flavor?”

She thought for a moment and answered, “Coconut. I absolutely love it.”



I teased, “Really? I think the best flavor is pistachio.”

She jokingly gagged. “Pistachio? You have no taste!”

I chuckled and countered, “Well, we might have to agree to disagree because, in my opinion, coconut isn’t that great.”

We both ended up laughing, the lighthearted banter adding to the joy of the evening.

She then turned to me and asked, “Okay, your turn. What’s your favorite childhood memory?”

I leaned back and reflected, “It would have to be the summers I spent at my grandparents’ ranch with Mara. They had this big, beautiful garden, and I would spend hours there, exploring and picking fruits. It’s where I learned to appreciate nature and silence.”

She listened intently and smiled. “That sounds wonderful. It’s amazing how our childhood experiences shape us.”

I nodded in agreement. “Absolutely. Tell me, what’s your most significant life achievement so far?”

Azzaria’s eyes brightened as she shared, “It hasn’t happened yet, but graduating college would be the highlight of my life. I worked hard for it, and I just can’t wait to get my degree.”

“I know that feeling.”

“What university did you go to?”

“Stanford. I did my double major in Business and Media Communications. Then, I did some other foundational courses in Law, Real Estate and even a bit of Architecture.”

She looked at me as if she was impressed. “Architecture? That’s my field too.”

“I know, saw it on your resume.”

“Yeah. I initially wanted to be an intern in that field but with time against me, I did it at your company.”

I had always wondered why an architect major would intern at a media and communications company.

“Once you get your degree, it’ll be easier to slip into any job that does architecture or construction too.”

“That’s the plan.”

“What’s your favourite colour?”

“Hmm,” she said while taking a mouthful of her ice cream. “Any shades of green. Sage, emerald, olive...I love them all. What are yours?”

“Crimson.”

“That’s an insanely attractive colour, it suits you.”

I smirked. “Are you calling me insanely attractive?”

“I am.”

Our conversation flowed effortlessly from then as we shared bits and pieces of our lives. It felt comforting getting to know her, it felt right.

The peaceful evening came to a close, I walked Azzaria to her car. The moon hung high in the sky, casting a soft glow on the world around us.

With a smile, I asked her, “Did you have fun tonight?”

Azzaria grinned warmly and replied, “I did. Thank you for this beautiful evening.”

I leaned in, placing a soft and gentle kiss on her cheek. As I pulled back, I watched her drive away into the night, a sense of contentment washing over me.

*Note to self: you’re totaling nailing this.*

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### *Azzaria*

After Dillion walked me to my car, we said our goodbyes, and I drove back home. The cool breeze through the car window was soothing, and I couldn’t help but smile as I recalled our ice cream “*pre-date*.” It had been a lovely evening filled with laughter, ice cream, and more getting to know him.

It's not everyday a man rents an entire ice cream store for the sole purpose of a "pre-date".

I'm swooning. *Hard.*

I don't think I'm just attracted to him anymore. I think I like him.

As I pulled up to my mom's house, I saw her fast asleep on the couch. I quietly locked up the house to avoid disturbing her.

Heading to my room, I let out a contented sigh. I picked up my phone and decided to call my bestfriend. There's no way I could wait another second to spill everything. She didn't even know I was going in the first place.

"Hey, Abi," I began excitedly. "You won't believe the evening I just had."

"What happened?" Abigail's voice was filled with curiosity. "And you look pretty, where are you going?"

I proceeded to recount every moment of the pre-date, sharing the laughter, the playful banter, and the flavors of ice cream we'd tried. Abigail listened intently, interjecting with occasional "oohs" and "ahs."

After I'd finished sharing, Abigail said, "He rented the Flower Garden? Do you know how expensive that place is?"

"That was exactly my thought. I was swooning."

"I should've made a bet on this. I'd be cashing out right now."

"Shut up." I playfully rolled me eyes. "I had fun. It was great and he wasn't focusing on sexual stuff, it was just calm."

"When are you gonna let him you know..?"

"Huh?"

"When are you gonna let him fuck?"

My eyes bulged. "*Abigail-Ann.*"

"Sorry." She laughed. "Well, I'm excited for you," Abigail replied. "Take things slow and enjoy every moment."

Our conversation was filled with excitement and laughter as I shared more stories from the evening. Abigail had a way of making me feel at ease, and her support was invaluable.

After we called, it was time to call it a night. I settled into my cozy bed, my mind still racing with the fun moments of the evening. With a smile on my face, I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep, filled with dreams of what might come next.

## CHAPTER 14

# *Azzaria*

THE FOLLOWING DAYS WERE FAST PACING AND DILLON'S gestures and attention never ceased to amaze me. He was a master at the little things that made me smile. From surprising me with my favorite flowers to ordering sandwiches from that charming deli I adored, he made it clear he was genuinely interested in getting to know me.

As I settled into my internship, balancing work and college became more challenging. The coursework was finished but there were still other factors which kept on occurring, like the release form and gown fittings. They sounded super simple but were actually very complex and time consuming.

There were days when I felt like I was living out of my office, buried beneath stacks of paperwork and research materials.

Melissa and I decided to go have lunch together and of course, I chose the sandwich stop. They were getting all my money and I could've cared less.

"Have you heard about Jessica and Mark from the marketing department?" Melissa whispered, leaning in with a conspiratorial grin.

I raised an eyebrow. "No, what's going on?"

Melissa's eyes sparkled with mischief. "They've been sneaking around, meeting in the supply closet during lunch breaks. Office romance at its finest."

I laughed, shaking my head. "I didn't hear that, plus the supply closet is quite comfy." I should know, Dillon and I

made out there last week.

Melissa nodded. “True. It’s like a secret hideaway in there.” Our conversation flowed easily, touching on various office matters and she even managed to talk about her personal life.

I was careful not to spill too many details. Things were still working themselves out.

Workdays eventually came to an end, and I went to see Dillion before my therapy session. I headed to his office, knocking on the door before entering.

He looked up from his desk and flashed me a warm smile. “Hey there. How was your day?”

I took a step closer to his desk, feeling an inexplicable sense of ease when I was around him. “It was busy, but good. How about yours?”

“Productive,” he replied, leaning back in his chair. “I can’t complain.”

We talked for a little while, discussing our respective days and other topics.

“Here,” he said, handing me a brand new cell. My face twisted with confusion, especially since I already had a phone. “We’ll use this to get in contact with each other. When I call you, answer it. When I reach out to you, reach out to me. Got it?”

He could definitely sense the rigidity in my posture, a reaction to his possessive words.

“You could’ve just asked for my phone number,” I replied, my voice laced with curiosity.

He leaned in closer, his eyes locked onto mine. “The thought of sharing your attention with anyone isn’t appealing. This is better for both of us.”

My resistance softened as I understood his intent. Or I thought I did. “When do I text you?”

He flashed a knowing smile. “Whenever you feel like it, let’s start off when you get home.”

“Okay. I’m going to head out now, Mr. Xander.”

“Be safe, Ms. Willis, and text me soon,” he told her, his voice heavy with anticipation.

I leaned in, placing my soft, warm lips against his, sharing a tender yet passionate kiss. As I pulled away, I couldn’t help but smile, feeling a sense of connection that had been missing from my life for so long.

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The sleek, modern building housing Dr. Green’s office loomed ahead, and I found myself standing at its entrance, fighting an internal battle. I couldn’t deny the mix of emotions that washed over me. Therapy had always been a double-edged sword—a source of both solace and dread.

I haven’t been to a session in years and now that I was back, I couldn’t help but feel anxious.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp, antiseptic scent of the office building, my stomach starting to churn. My legs felt like they were made of lead, resisting my attempts to move forward. The idea of revisiting the dark corners of my past was intimidating, even though I knew it might be necessary for my healing.

The reception area seemed far too bright and cheery for my current state of mind. I approached the receptionist’s desk, my heart pounding, and checked in for my session.

The receptionist gave me a polite smile. “She’ll be with you in a second.” I nodded.

As I sat in the waiting area, my fingers tapped nervously against the armrest of the chair. Memories of past therapy sessions flooded my mind, and I began to doubt my decision to return. The therapist had always probed deep into my emotions, and revisiting those feelings was far from pleasant.

Yet, there was a glimmer of hope within me—a desire to untangle the complexities of my mind, to find a way forward.

Dr. Green had always been a supportive presence in my life, and it was time to reconnect with her, to share my struggles and victories.

With each passing moment, my anxiety waned slightly, replaced by a sense of resolve. I had come this far, and I wasn't going to back down. Whatever lay ahead, I was determined to confront it.

The memories came hitting me at a million miles per hour as I laid my eyes upon the gracious Dr. Green. She was as pretty as mature women get. A plump and voluptuous person with bright green eyes and short blonde hair.

"I see you got my message from Abigail, but first, how are you feeling, Azzaria?" She said, sharing a pleasant warm and welcoming smile with me.

"I'm feeling very uneasy. I did get the message from Abigail, and I'm sorry for leaving so suddenly. Things just got too much to bear." My chuckle of awkwardness filled the room, and she glanced at me, her smile fading.

"It's my fault for letting you off so easily, but that won't happen this time around. I looked at your file, and the last thing we spoke about was your dad. So, let's pick up where we left off."

"He's still alive." That's all I could manage to say.

"Let's use this approach. Tell me about how you've handled being around him or how often he comes around you."

"He doesn't come around me much, but I have fear when he's around my mom. She sees him a lot more, and she's not as sturdy as I am. When he's there, my brain either shuts down or I violently retaliate by throwing things or lashing harsh words at him. He doesn't get phased by them, but I still do it."

"If you know he's not impacted by the retaliation, why do you still take that approach?"

"Because I want him to feel even a quarter of the pain he has let me and my mom feel over the years."



“I’m leaning towards diagnosing you with intermittent explosive disorder or just borderline temperament. It’s when you’ve faced so much trauma that your brain gives you the only option when faced by your abuser, and that’s anger. You get frequent outbursts or impulsive anger when they’re near you. While you might love that approach,” she paused and looked at me for a while, “I think we should revisit and revise the approach.”

“How?” Her smile at this point was more malicious and telling than before.

“Let’s go back to the root of the problem and see how best we can evaluate it. Why do you hate your father?”

The real question to ask is why don’t I hate him? And there’s still not an answer.

“He’s a bad person, to say the least.”

“I know, we’ve covered that, but what did he do to you that was so bad?” My body stiffened, and the tears were forming. I’m not prepared for this, but it’s too late to go back now. “I’ll give you time. Whenever you’re ready to talk, I’m ready to listen.” That gave me an added amount of comfort.

“My dad molested me for the majority of my childhood. He would let me do sexual things with him, he’d beat me, shove me, and potentially use my curling iron to burn parts of my breasts. He beat my mom too. When she got pregnant with my sister, he beat the child to death. He’s a drunk and a drug addict.” As distraught as I felt, a feeling of settle and release came over me.

“Let me take the time to extend how sorry I am, but I’m well aware that you don’t want anyone’s pity, so I won’t give it to you.” Finally, someone who gets it. Everyone thinks that all we want is pity or that all we want is to be heard and let people feel bad for us. *Definitely not.*

We just want to put the story out there, so other victims aren’t too scared to do the same. “Your father is a menace. Did you ever report this to anyone else? Or ever told anyone else? How did you find your body reacting to all that happened? Tell

me about Leann's reaction. How did she react to it? What did she do? I remember her always being protective of you. Did that have anything to do with it?"

"My mom found out before I told her. She noticed my different behaviors over the years, and when I was about 8 or 9, she asked me if everything was okay and if I needed to talk to someone, I could talk to her. I eventually told her everything, and she believed me. She gathered enough money to get us long-term restraining orders against him, and she bought this tiny place on 5th Avenue. We gradually moved out, but while all of that was happening, he was still abusing us. One weekend he left, and we were out of that place. It hurt to leave my home. That's what I knew as home, and it sucked. We went into hiding, and I had to stop school. My mom changed her entire physical personality and worked three jobs to sustain me. I was sent to the hospital to get tested and treated, and the bills were way too much. She hit it off with a doctor, and my dad came back, found out, and beat the hell out of the man. The rest is history."

"Does it still have lingering effects?"

"Every day."

"Before we move on, let's go from the top." I nodded in agreement that I was paying attention, and she smiled and acknowledged that. "We established grounds with your father. We know where he stands in your life and all the things that you have to be mindful of. We spoke about your relationship with your mother and her level of support. Now, let's move on to talking about your triggers, present-day life, relationships, effects, and medication. It sounds very hefty, but I promise you we have a purpose with all of this, and as the sessions go by, you'll be a lot stronger and more comfortable with the life you have now." This was what I needed, and if it was the one thing I'd do for myself, it would be this.

"Alright. Let's do it." My tone and body language were all giving hints of agreement. So she knew I was comfortable and serious.

“What would you say are some things that triggered you in the past?”

“Bright lights, loud noises, when unknown men touch me, I can’t eat anything related to fish because that’s all my dad gave me, and I’m terrified of planes. Haven’t been on one for the past fifteen years, and I don’t plan on doing air travel anytime soon.”

“Do they still affect you now?”

“Everything except being touched by unknown men and the eating of fish.” She gave a perplexed glance as she jotted down these for file purposes. “I’m hyper-sexual. There was a time where I’d have sex just to get a sense of feeling, but other times I’d be highly disgusted by the thought of sex with men.”

She analyzed my face for a second and took in all the words I was saying. “Alright. Hyper-sexuality due to sexual abuse is a very common effect, if not the most common effect there is. Are you still hyper-sexual?”

“Yeah, but I haven’t done anything with anyone in a while.”

“Understood. Let’s get you a way to manage the triggers, but before that, how often are you affected by the triggers or is it when the opportunity presents itself?”

“I wouldn’t say it’s any of them. I’m really only affected if I’m faced with my abusers or if I’m in a shut-down period, then everything affects me. The food and flight trigger is all the time.”

“So you have a visual and non-visual trauma aggressor pattern. Got it. How do you manage triggers? Like a situation where you’re faced with triggers?”

“I don’t. It just overwhelms me until I pass out,” I embarrassingly admitted.

“That’s not good, and as such, we’re going to use my favorite and most effective method; grounding. It’s one of the techniques used to help bring the person experiencing the symptoms of a trigger; this involves bringing the mind to focus on the present moment. We use the five senses to

exercise. Name 5 things you can see in the room right now, name 4 things you can feel right now, name 3 things you can hear right now, name 2 things you can smell now, and name 1 good thing about yourself. Let's try it."

We spend the forty-five minutes trying the grounding method and talking about the effects of trauma and the ones I've faced. Hyper-sexuality, trust issues, abandonment issues, attachment issues, daddy issues, and post-traumatic stress-induced nightmares are what I've been working with. It's totally abnormal, but then again, nothing about my life has ever proved to be normal.

She asked me about my love life to which I responded by telling her about Matthew and all the flings I've had in that space. She wasn't surprised by it though, as she said with everything I've faced, all of that is normal.

We spoke for hours, and by the time I left, it was about 7:00 pm. I learned a lot, and I was ready to get out of the place that had my anxieties pouring like rain. Don't get me wrong, the session wasn't bad, I just hated opening up to people.

"Am I supposed to message you with feedback or my progress report or something?"

"You can, and I'd appreciate it if you do. It's not a must though. If you're uncomfortable, you don't have to, but I'd appreciate it." She smiled kindly, and I smiled back. "I'm here, so if you need anything, I'm here for you, and I'd love to talk to you."

We both smiled, and I left. The day was long, but I was glad it was over. I just wanted to get some sleep. I had another session with her on Wednesday, but I really wanted it to be over as soon as possible.

I was now left with the big question: *what did the future hold for me?*

## CHAPTER 15

### *Dillon*

“GOOD MORNING, MELISSA,” I GREETED UPON ENTERING THE building. It’s unusual for me to be here so early; usually, I clock in at my regular 9 am or even closer to 10, but I had an early morning, off the books meeting.

“Good morning, sir. How can I assist you?”

“Please contact my florist and request the same order as the last.”

“Where should I bring them upon arrival?”

“My office.”

Melissa nodded, and Mikkel and I proceeded to my office. “Flowers again, D?” Mikkel asked with smirk.

“Yes, Mikkel, again,” I chuckled and entered my office.

Inside the room, I saw Arnaldo sitting on the sofa with a cup of coffee and Bryce gazing out at the city view. They both acknowledged my arrival, and we exchanged greetings.

“Why the sudden meeting?” I asked, placing my bag on the ground.

Bryce reacted, “You act like you have better things to do.”

I considered how I could be doing other, more pleasant things. “Whatever.”

“The bill has arrived, and we reviewed it. Bryce will pay seven million, and you’ll pay the remaining ten million to secure our joint club venture. We can negotiate, but that’s the

rough draft,” Arnolde stated, handing the respective files to Bryce and me.

We sat down reviewing the files, which took about half an hour. Arnolde really is the most precise person I’ve ever met.

Bryce was skilled at running clubs, being the mastermind behind most in the state. I handled the remaining twenty percent, along with other independent contractors.

“Sounds good. I’ll have accounts draft a—”

“Good morning, sir. Sorry to interrupt, but the flowers have arrived,” Melissa announced as she opened my office door. She placed the rather large beautiful bouquet of flowers on the side table.

“Flowers?” The men turned to me, astonished.

“Yes, flowers. Thank you, Melissa.” She left us in the room.

“Dillon Xander, giving a woman flowers? That’s something new,” Arnolde commented, sounding a bit offended.

“Let’s leave him alone,” Mikkel interjected.

“I see you want to be unemployed this year, Reyes,” I grumbled. “Also, where’s that file I asked you for?”

“There’s no background. I’m going to have to dig deeper.”

“There’s always a background, dig deeper.”

I had asked Mikkel to deliver them to the respective place, he and I knew where, and then told him to come back to the meeting.

Returning to business, I asked, “I’m paying 10 million dollars. What’s my expected profit rate this year?”

We discussed potential profits and payouts, with Bryce getting a smaller share due to the NDA and contractual agreement we both signed.

Bryce, who had remained quiet, suddenly voiced his agreement, bringing light humor to our discussion.

“Lovely. Well then, here’s to a venture with my oldest friend,” Bryce teased which caused us all to let out small cues of laughter. Aside from working together, we were a friend group. The only persons missing were Ronan, Alexander and Lucio and they were otherwise occupied.

“Sound goo— good morning,” I said.

There she stood, dressed in a red pencil dress that accentuated her curves, fitting snugly on her body. Her shoes appeared to add an extra two, maybe three inches to her height, and her hair was down—I loved when she let her curls out. It’s mesmerizing how stunning she looks, and it’s incredibly arousing. Just the sight of her sends a rush of desire straight to my dick.

“Good morning everyone,” she said, sharing a smile.

“I’m sure you’re familiar with everyone here except for Mikkell but for introductory purposes, Mikkell is my driver, you already know about Bryce and I’m sure you’ve met with Arnoldo, my lead attorney.”

“Yes, I’m familiar and it’s nice to meet you Mikkell and nice to see all of you again.”

“Nice to meet you Ms. Willis,” Mikkell said, turning to face her.

“I just came to let you know that I was here:”

“Alright. Send over the documents to HR and get started on your day.”

She walked out and Bryce, as well as Arnoldo started exchanging glances with each other.

“You’re fucking her?” Arnoldo asked.

“No.” Technically, I didn’t lie. She and I haven’t fucked but the real reason I said no was because she didn’t want anyone else to know— not yet. And as much as it’s against my better judgement, I respect her wishes.

“Interesting,” Arnoldo said.

“If you men will excuse me,” Arnoldo said, “I have paperwork to finish.” Bryce and Mikkel shortly followed.

With the room cleared, I was finally able to get my day started. It had been an interesting morning.

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*Azzaria*

I got flowers. *Again*. This time, the bouquet was even larger, and the note sweeter. I could definitely get used to this.

Opening an incognito tab on my laptop, I searched for “Dillon Xander.”

I found the same articles I’ve been seeing for the past month. One’s on his wealth, how he achieved it, but nothing about his family life, except for brief mentions of his grandfather’s death and legacy.

All the stuff, I already know.

*Great.*

As the men left his office, they greeted me, but Bryce lingered at my desk.

“Can I help you, Bryce?” I’m sure he knew that he wasn’t my favourite person.

“Does your best friend know that you’re seeing Dillon now?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s obvious.”

I scoffed. “Whatever you think you know, I assure you, you don’t.”

Bryce walked out and I re-entered Dillon’s office.

To my displeasure, he looked off. He looked sad. He had his elbows on the table, supporting his head, and was looking down. He’d taken off his jacket and vest and was now wearing a white shirt with the top buttons undone.



“Hey,” I said, walking over to him and rubbing his shoulders. “Are you okay?”

He lifted his head, staring at me. The silence said it all for me; something was definitely bothering him, and I had no idea what it was.

“Are you okay?”

“I asked you first. Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” he answered. “I’m just annoyed at Bryce.”

I laughed. “That makes two of us.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “It’s fine. He just talks a lot.”

“That I know.” Dillon laughed and started kissing my shoulders.

“Thank you for the flowers, I really love them.”

He smiled. “You’re always welcome.” I stayed for a while longer so we could talk but his meeting started, and I went back to my desk.

“Wow,” I mumbled when I saw a recent text from Abigail. She is really the most unhinged and unserious woman I’ve ever met.

ABIGAIL ANN

that turned into the longest goodbye fuck ever. i’m over him now, tough.

ME

LMAO, how was it?

ABIGAIL ANN

7/10, could be better.

ME

Got it, he's good for nothing, seriously.

ABIGAIL ANN

True. How's your day?

ME

It's good. I got flowers. Again

ABIGAIL ANN

HOLY SHIT.

ME

Cry me a river. Text you later, okay? I love you.

ABIGAIL ANN

I love you more, and of course.

“Azzaria!” Nicholas exclaimed, bursting through the door with two coffees. “Are you alright?”

“Do I not look okay?”

“I know you're probably uneasy because of therapy...” My heart stopped, and my expressions froze. *What did he just say? How did he even know this?*

“I would strongly advise you to shut the hell up and let me be. This is a warning, Nicholas.”

“Your mom said you—”

“My what?” I shot up from the chair, anger in my eyes.  
“Get out. Now,” I shouted, and he left.

I knew that if I were supposed to talk to my mom in the anger I have right now, I would never forgive myself. All the more reason why my phone will stay off.

I loved her, endlessly, don't get me wrong, but she definitely crossed a big line saying all of that.

Shaking that thought, I went back to getting work done. The day was boring and overly annoying anyway.

## CHAPTER 16

# *Azzaria*

“WHAT DO PEOPLE EVEN WEAR TO A BABY SHOWER?” I ASKED Abi as we were on a FaceTime call. I was ranting to her about literally everything.

My hair and makeup were already done, but now it was time to choose an outfit. I didn’t have the most vast closet nor did I have time to go and buy something new.

Abigail, while munching on grapes, spoke, “Wear a nice dress. How about the red bodycon dress?”

“Abigail, I have about four red dresses. Which one?”

“The one that shows your curves—the tight, sexy one. After all, your boyfriend will be there, so you gotta look sexy and classy,” she said with a wink.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes, reaching for the hanger with the dress she had in mind. “Oh, stop it, and he’s not my boyfriend.”

“You’re in denial.”

“Sure.”

“I think he’s good for you, Azzy.”

I chuckled again, “Yes, I think so too.”

“You deserve happiness, and you look stunning. Go have fun and text me when you get there. I can message your mom as well, considering you’re still upset about what happened.”

“Thank you. I love you.”

“You’re welcome,” Abigail replied warmly. “I love you, too.”

We finished our talk, and I headed downstairs to get in my car.

Mara had shared the event’s address, and I typed it in on google maps. Judging by the location, it was evident that this event was beyond my usual social circle’s reach. Nevertheless, who would turn down an extravagant party? Everything involving the Xanders consistently exceeded my expectations.

With Taylor Swift blasting from my car’s speakers and my confidence soaring, I cruised along the open road, the wind dancing in my hair.

Nestled in a serene, wooded area of the city, Mara’s home, unassuming from the outside, was breathtaking. Its large, welcoming windows seemed like shy eyes inviting any ray of sunlight. The concrete walls looked as though they had organically grown from the earth, as if they had been summoned to protect and provide warmth for those dwelling within.

The mansion, with its concrete structure and towering glass windows, offered stunning views of the mountains and provided an ideal setting to enjoy the changing seasons from the comfort of an armchair.

If house porn was such a thing, Mara’s home should definitely be listed on page one. This house was fucking beautiful.

I parked my car in the nearest space and stepped out. There were men stationed at the entrance, along with a velvet rope – a touch of elegance that felt surreal in real life.

I messaged Abigail to let her know that I had gotten to the party and slipped my phone back into my purse.

“Good evening, madam. May I have your name?” A brawny security guard, dressed in full black with an earpiece, questioned me. I thought these things only happened in movies.

“I’m Azzaria. Azzaria Willis,” I replied, offering a simple smile.

“Very well.” He released the ropes, granting me passage. The behavior of the affluent continued to fascinate me.

The scene inside was truly remarkable. The gathering appeared intimate, with a limited number of guests. I overheard conversations suggesting that the main party was yet to begin, and both Mara and Dillon remained unseen. So, I took a seat at a table, took my phone out, and started playing games while I waited.

Melissa was supposed to be coming, but she’s sick and so didn’t want to risk getting anyone sick, especially Mara.

A waiter, impeccably dressed in black and white, approached me, offering a cocktail. I accepted and savored the martini, complete with olives.

As I looked around the party, I loved the atmosphere and the vibe it gave. It wasn’t short of positivity, love, and laughter. Games among the guests were being played, gourmet dishes were being served, and the gift table continued to fill.

Every detail was filled with baby-themed decorations—pacifiers, rattles, and baby bottles. Even the cake was shaped like a diaper, and the cupcakes took the shape of tiny pacifiers and the letter “I.” I’m assuming that’s what her son’s name will begin with.

The event’s color scheme was mainly shades of blue, a nod to Mara’s soon-to-arrive baby boy.

Guests passed around adorable baby books, filling them with encouraging messages and advice for the soon-to-be mother.

I loved everything about this baby shower.

While I loved to be observant, my satisfaction was tinged with discomfort and irritation. In the corner of the room, I couldn’t help but notice a woman who was excessively friendly with Dillon. She appeared too young to be his mother and roughly the same age as him.

My eyes were inexorably drawn to their interaction. Her beaming smile, full red lips, and gleaming teeth accentuated her beauty. Dressed in a sunny yellow sundress and white sandals, her fashion sense was impeccable. She possessed a different body type than mine, not as curvy, and had distinct features. Her long, blonde hair contrasted with my brown hair. And then something struck me.

*She looks like every other woman he's ever been photographed with.*

Just as adhesives bond objects together, my eyes remained glued to them. I fervently hoped Dillon would sense my gaze and move himself from the situation. She planted a soft kiss on his cheek before departing. My heart sank. It was just a kiss on the cheek, yet the beauty of the woman was disconcerting.

Adjusting his attire, Dillon met my eyes and strode towards me. A part of me thought of walking away, but where'd I go?

"Hello, gorgeous. You look ravishing," he greeted me, planting a soft kiss on my cheek. I did what I do best, pretend people aren't important.

"Where's your sister?" I asked, my tone cool and measured.

"What's wrong? You didn't kiss me back," he said, sounding perceptive.

"Weren't we supposed to keep things private?" And I'm sure you got plenty of kisses earlier from your 'friend,'" I retorted.

Dillon let out a deep sigh. "That's just Camilla, she's an old friend. You don't need to be jealous."

"Right," I responded sarcastically, "Where's Mara?"

"I don't know where she is, are you upset?"

"No."

He sighed. "You're upset. Can we go for a walk?"

"Whatever," I responded curtly.

Dillon and I continued to roam the event grounds, though our interaction was interrupted when a sophisticated woman, exuding an air of wealth and elegance, called his name.

“Dillon, there you are, my dear,” the woman said, touching his cheek.

“Mother, hello,” Dillon greeted her.

“Hello, son. And who’s this lovely lady?” She directed her gaze toward me.

Unaware of Dillon’s relationship with his family and not wanting to put him in an awkward position, I responded, “I’m Azzaria, an intern at his office, but I’m also close friends with Mara. She invited me. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Xander.” I extended my hand for a handshake, but she embraced me in a hug, complimenting my appearance. During the embrace, Dillon appeared puzzled and mouthed “what?”

“The pleasure is mine. Dillon, can I steal you for a moment?” Mrs. Xander asked.

“I’ll be back, Azzaria,” Dillon informed me before offering a kiss on my cheek and walking away.

As I continued to explore the outside of the venue, the baby shower showed no signs of starting anytime soon. The splendid surroundings, complete with grass, trees, and nature, made it clear that Mara and her husband were strong lovers of the outdoors.

“You like nature too?” I was taken by surprise, as I was sure I was the only person there. However, when I glanced to the right, I spotted a man who bore a striking resemblance to Dillon approaching me. He looked successful but he didn’t look or give off the same essence as Dillon. Then again, no one did. He was in a class by himself.

“Yeah, just a bit. Being outside has always been my thing. Who are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I’m Nico.” He extended his hand, and we shook hands. I appreciated his composed demeanor, a rarity when men encounter an attractive woman. “I’m Nico Xander, Dillon and Mara’s younger brother. And you are?”



“I’m Azzaria. A friend of Mara and Dillon’s. It’s a pleasure to meet you. What are you doing out there?”

“*Azzaria*, such a fitting name for a lovely girl, and it’s my little escape,” he commented vaguely, evoking the same enigmatic style of response that Dillon often used, enough to leave one slightly exasperated.

“An escape from what?”

Nico sighed and started to walk away. My initial offense at being left behind was soon quelled when he turned and said, “Are you coming or not?”

I quickly joined him, and we set off on our walk. The conversation felt like an opportunity to gain more insights into Dillon and his family to quench my curiosity.

“My family isn’t perfect. We may be wealthy, but we’re far from perfect. Dillon doesn’t particularly like me, and neither does Mara. We’re all quite estranged. But if you have siblings, you probably understand that,” Nico shared. Although I wished I had siblings, I was cautious about revealing too much to a stranger, so I simply smiled. It was a smile without words, meant to alleviate any awkward silence.

“Mara and Dillon are close, and the rest of us aren’t. After our grandfather’s passing, Dillon took it rather personally, as he was the closest to our grandpa. We often say he resents us because we didn’t grieve as deeply as he and Mara did. When Dillon loves someone, he gives it his all. But his reputation following his last relationship is somewhat tacky,” Nico explained, awkwardly chuckling. It seemed as though he needed someone to talk to.

We strolled over to another grassy area just outside the back door, where the party was underway. Nico picked up a bottle of scotch from the deck and brought two cups. It seemed a bit old-fashioned for him to choose scotch, but it worked for me, despite being more of a vodka enthusiast.

“Scotch?”

“Sure. Did you have a close relationship with your grandfather?”

Nico took a sizable gulp of his drink and responded, “He favored Dillon and Mara above all else, just like our grandmother did. They were the apple of her eye. They were her prize babies but the rest of us didn’t feel any specific way because we had our parents’ love and attention over that of Dillon and Mara. It’s a very fucked up thing but I guess that’s how the world works isn’t it?” It shouldn’t work that way, and I could now better understand why Dillon was so perturbed when he sees his parents.

“You go around spilling your secrets to everyone?”

He lightly chuckled. “Only the pretty ones.”

I see all the Xander men have the ability to flatter but not all have the charm. “That’s quite a lot to take in. Are you at least on good terms with each other?”

“I owe him a lot, so I try to maintain cordiality. But he sometimes goes as far as forgetting to wish me a happy birthday. We all have our demons; he simply has more than most,” Nico revealed, emphasizing the complexity of Dillon’s personality. It was apparent to anyone that Dillon harbored deep-seated issues that he had yet to address.

“Wow. I hope things improve,” I offered, extending a genuine smile and taking a sip of the scotch. It was surprisingly smooth, possessing a unique blend of flavors that I enjoyed.

The baby shower was in full swing, but we remained outside. I was sure I’d send my regards to Mara soon and eventually meet the people I was supposed to. According to Nico, we’d be called inside shortly for cake cutting, well-wishes, and more. But for now, I was engrossed in his stories and the scotch.

“Me too, but it won’t. Dillon is unstoppable. Just last week, he was number 8 on the richest men list, and now he’s at 6,” Nico said, with a hint of jealousy in his voice. His envy was a bit perplexing. If he didn’t care much for his grandparents, why was he jealous? He clearly had the love of his parents and never had to work a day in his life.

“Is all that wealth generational?”

“Definitely not. Our grandfather left the family’s businesses in shambles due to his gambling addiction. He gambled away the family fortune. Dillon built everything from the ground up, which is why he’s achieved his current status. If he knew I was sharing all this, he’d probably kill me.”

I believed him. Dillon was undoubtedly a gifted and driven individual. The insights I was gaining were truly astounding. I was mostly speechless but grateful for the candid revelations.

“Are you single, Azzaria?” Nico took an abrupt turn in our conversation.

“No, she’s not single,” Mara interjected, her tone confident and matter-of-fact. Startled, I turned my attention toward her.

Mara then redirected her gaze to me and asked, “Nico isn’t harassing you, is he?” Her expression held a mix of concern and curiosity, hinting at the underlying complexity of their relationships.

I quickly shook my head in response, reassuring her, “No, Mara, he’s not harassing me at all. We were just having a conversation.”

A sense of relief washed over me as Mara’s features softened. She turned her attention back to Nico, who had appeared somewhat startled by her interruption.

“Nico, come with me for a moment,” Mara commanded, her voice firm but not rough.

He complied with his sister’s request, and the two of them stepped away to have their private conversation. I couldn’t hear the details, but it was apparent that the family dynamics at play were intricate and not without their tensions.

Left to my own thoughts and feeling slightly confused, I watched as they walked away. The background chatter and the sound of celebration gradually filled the void left by their departure.

It was then that Mara returned her focus to me, and the lines of worry on her face seemed to ease as she began to

speaking.

“Thank you for understanding,” she said with a grateful smile. “Nico can be a bit unpredictable and vulgar.”

“It’s okay, he was just talking to me, that’s all.”

“Good. Are you enjoying yourself?”

I nodded. “I am, thanks for the invite. Everything is so perfect and you look so good.”

“Thank you dear,” she said. “My husband planned most of it.”

I found that really cute. Alexander wasn’t much of a talker, but even the blind could tell how much he loved Mara.

After catching up with her and relishing in the festivities of the baby shower, the night was gradually drawing to a close.

As the evening wrapped up, I approached Dillon to say my goodbyes.

With his hand casually resting against my car, he leaned in closer, his eyes locked on mine. “You’re gorgeous,” he mused, a hint of seduction in his voice.

I couldn’t help but smile. “Thank you.” I was still a bit pissed about earlier, but it wasn’t that serious, so I moved on.

“Are you still upset about earlier?”

“Hmm. “I wasn’t upset. I was unsettled. And no, it’s not that serious.”

He sighed. “I meant what I said, she’s just a friend of mine, a business partner, if we’re being specific.”

“I believe you.”

Dillon’s smile widened, and he leaned in just a bit closer, his voice lowering to a sultry whisper. “Good. When do I get to take you on that dinner date?”

I met his gaze. “Soon. I like the pace we’re at.”

With that, we exchanged one more flirtatious and I reluctantly pulled away and headed into my car.

“Goodnight, Ms. Willis.”

“Goodnight, Mr. Xander.”

*He’s definitely getting some soon.*

## CHAPTER 17

# *Dillon*

MORNING SUNLIGHT GENTLY STREAMED INTO THE OFFICE, painting everything in a soft, golden hue. Azzaria and I sat in an investors meeting. I wanted to let her get a feel how a meeting room in the corporate world was.

She pushed her chair back and gracefully leaned in, whispering in my ear. “Mr. Xander,” she spoke, her voice laced with an undeniable hunger. *What was she doing?*

I looked up from the document in front of me, and her presence alone sent a rush of heat through my veins “Ms Willis,” I replied, my voice heavy with longing.

She excused herself from the meeting, and I watched as she walked out. I couldn’t help but notice the extra sway in her hips and the deliberate slowness of her steps. In that moment, I felt an undeniable desire for her.

I couldn’t wait for this meeting to be finished. There was business we desperately needed to attend to.

The next hour felt like the longest hour of my life. “I’d like these reports of my desk by the end of the day.”

The meeting was adjourned and she texted me.

PRECIOUS

I’ll be in your office.

I made my way there speedily.

There's no way I was letting this opportunity slip through my fingers.

As the door clicked shut behind me, all inhibitions fell away. "That was the longest meeting of my life."

I groaned. "It was. Next time, be more subtle."

"I was subtle," she said.

I scoffed. "Walking up to me, your tone dripping with sex in the middle of a meeting? Hardly subtle."

"Maybe, but let's use the time wisely."

"Hmm?"

"Touch me," she whispered, "right here, on the desk." She ran her finger tips along the edge of the desk, all while maintaining the most intense eye-contact with me.

I groaned and took up the phone advising Melissa that I didn't want to be disturbed for the next hour or two as I was in an important meeting.

Azzaria stood up from the seat, crossed her arms, and snatched her tee shirt over her head. Through her thin white bra, I was able to see her bullet nipples.

*She has no idea what she is doing to me. How much she's confused and occupied me from the first time I saw her.*

Don't get me wrong, she's sexy as fuck in her clothes, but nothing beats the sights in front me.

*Naked.*

*Bare.*

*All mine.*

I twisted the rods and closed the horizontal blinds as soon as I got up, and then I did something I'd always wanted to do.

I swept everything from my desk onto the floor. Except for the monitor and keyboard, of course. In all my sexual escapades, I've never fucked someone on an office desk.

She tugged down her jeans, and unable to wait, I dropped to my knees, and helped her, dragging the stiff fabric over her

fat ass, exposing her thong, and the front moistness at the lips of her cunt, just visible through black lace.

As she stepped out of her jeans, I grasped her ass, pulled her to me, and inhaled the scent of her feminine arousal. Hooking her thong to one side, and roughly smacking her thighs apart, I buried my face in her groin, my nose rubbing against a sizable clit.

“I could eat your pussy all day.” I groaned.

She whimpered. “Please.”

Her labia was fleshy, almost rubbery... I rolled and held them back with my thumbs, exposing a slick, coral cunt of exquisite beauty, and incredible promise.

Pointing my tongue, I delved into her for the first time, and heard her moan of pleasure. She edged back until she was sitting on the edge of the desk, she opened her thighs wider and her fingers began to massage my closely shaven scalp. I tongue-fucked her deliciously, savouring her taste, the silky surfaces of her cunt.

“Oh yes... that’s so fucking good,” she groaned.

“Quiet,” I cautioned her.

She mumbled sorry but when I looked up at her, I saw a devilish smile on her face. I rubbed my thumb over her clit, and she shuddered. Slipping my tongue out, I slipped two fingers straight in. I felt the heat, the tightness.

*I was in pussy heavy and I haven't even fucked her yet.*

“Please don’t stop...,” she hissed. She lifted herself onto the desk, until she braced her bare feet on the edge. Almost as an afterthought, she shucked off her thong, and then splayed her legs wide.

She looked incredibly sexy, laying back on her elbows, tits lolling just a little to the sides, nipples pointing skywards, my fingers fucking her, digging deeper, feeling her meeting my thrusts...

Her hips rose and fell, winding out a sexy slow dance of welcome. Her flesh felt so good, so warm and slippery from



her ever-increasing flow of juice. I worked my fingers in the tightness, stretching her walls apart, twisting and turning my hand until the base of my thumb was hard against her clitoris, the side to side swooshing making her gasp and shake.

She was panting, lips parted and expectant, her excitement was palpable. Mine was almost overwhelming. I had made the right choice. We didn't say anything, not daring to break the spell. I couldn't believe it.

"I could do this all day." I gasped thickly, relishing each word as I began to screw my hand from side to side, leaning into her at the same time.

"Fuck," Was all she could've managed to say but glancing at her eyes and the way her body accepted me, gave me enough consent to know she was comfortable.

"Quieter."

"I can't go any quieter." She was breathless and I laughed. Her vulva spread right around the full thickness of my fingers, and then slid, slowly, stunningly down the other side. I could feel her milking it in with a slow peristaltic action. She knew exactly what she was doing, even better than I.

The sensation around my fingers was incredible. So tight, so hot... each ripple and whorl of her inner flesh clearly transmitted through my skin.

"Don't stop," she growled, and I could only agree. My fingers rubbed hard on her g-spot as I twirled and rotated them. Her fingers splayed and trembled. Her eyes rolled back.

"Right there please. Fuck, fuck," she wailed.

I sped up, and my cock drooled pre-cum as Azzaria began to orgasm. She grunted, and shockingly, fluid spat from her cunt, right onto the desk.

I reeled back, spluttering, laughing, licking my lips as soon as I could. Her teeth were clenched, eyes blazing, body jerking with each spasm, spasms that I felt on my fingers, clamping it hard.

It took quite a while for her to come down, and I kept two fingers in her all the while, clenching and unclenching my fingers in slow pulsations that triggered off many delicious after-shocks. It was barely thirty minutes since I had locked the door and I had just fingered my biggest obsession on the desk.

Sounds like a good day to me.

The twinges eventually stopped, and I began to ease my fingers out. She grasped my wrist and shook her head.

Here I was thinking my dreams were good, *fuck*, there's nothing better than real life action.

"I'm in heaven," Azzaria mumbled, her voice croaky from her cries of rapture.

"There's a bathroom in there to clean up. If you need me, let me know," I told her.

Her eyes softened, and I fell on her, my mouth meeting hers in a kiss before she left to get cleaned.

There was absolutely no going back for me.

I got the taste I wanted so badly and now I can't have enough and I won't.

*This woman is mine and I don't care if it's been three days, three minutes or even three fucking hours.*

While she was in the bathroom, I took the liberty to write in my journal. This book was about twenty years old and it contains all my deepest secrets. Whenever the pages were filled, I brought it to the bookbinder and had him extend the spine and add more pages. Some things in life can't be let go, and I thank my grandfather for this book. He's a selfish bastard, but he's a good gift giver.

Today's entry was like the last twelve. *Her*. They mentioned her and only her. They detailed the deep and dark feelings I have, how much the lust and passion have consumed me. How precious she is to me.

I expect loss, love, change, but she's one thing I never expected to happen.

“What have you got there?” she asked, strutting to me in her bra and jeans. She was a sight for sore eyes, *definitely sore after those orgasms*.

“Nothing important,” I said, shoving the book into the desk and pulling her on top of me. “What’s left on my schedule?”

“Two meetings, and that’s it for today.”

“Zoom or meeting room?”

“Zoom, and can you sign the documents for me to take to school, please? I need to log the internship hours.”

Zoom meetings were the better type. I could multitask while listening. I just hope my partners weren’t being pains in the asses today.

“No need for that. All your forms and time sheets have been done already, up to the four-month period, and they’re on your desk in a black envelope with crimson seals.”

“Wait,” she paused, her eyes bulged. “Four months?”

“Yep,” I answered, rechecking the email her school sent me.

“Your school emailed me and said the period was four months.”

“Okay, the meeting starts soon, I’ll leave you to it.”

We smiled at each other and she left.

This was the best way to set the tone for the rest of the day.

---

### *Azzaria*

A wave of euphoria still lingered within me as I sat at my desk. I couldn’t help but smile to myself, lost in the blissful memory of our passionate encounter. I’d definitely be daydreaming about this moment for the rest of my life.

Shaking the thought, I grabbed the files placed on my desk and started sorting them in alphabetical order as well as marking them as “done” or “incomplete”.

I heard a sudden knock on the door and looked up, it was Mel.

“Hey,” Melissa greeted me with a friendly smile. “There’s someone here to see you.”

My curiosity piqued. “Who is it?”

“Mr. Laing.” *Who?*

“I have no idea who that is, Mel.”

“He’s a developer. Should I send him in?”

“Yes.”

As stepped inside the office, my gaze landed on a well-built gentleman.

“Hello, I’m Marco Laing,” he introduced himself, extending his hand. “I’m the chief real estate developer for the company’s real estate portfolio.”

I shook his hand, intrigued. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Laing. I’m Azzaria, the interim assistant.”

As we exchanged greetings, Mr. Laing’s eyes sparkled with curiosity. “I’ve heard that you have a background in architecture and a strong interest in the field. Is that correct?”

I nodded, genuinely surprised. “Yes, that’s true. But may I ask how you know about my background?”

Marco leaned back in his chair, looking pleased. “Mr. Xander mentioned your background and your passion for architecture to me. He thought it would be a great idea to assign you some architectural work.”

A rush of excitement and gratitude welled up inside me. I remembered our conversation at the ice cream park, where I had shared my dream of an internship in my field of interest. *He really did this for me?*

“That’s amazing,” I replied. “I really appreciate the opportunity.”

His enthusiasm was infectious. “Come with me. I’ll show you where we draft all our architectural drawings and plans.

You'll be working closely with us, for today, and I'll teach you everything you need to know."

I followed him eagerly as he explained the intricacies of architectural work and showed me the drafting process in detail. The conversation was engaging, and I found myself soaking up knowledge.

He led me to a room within the office building that I hadn't explored before, filled with drafting tables, design software, and various architectural blueprints. The room felt like a hidden treasure trove for someone like me who loved architecture.

*I felt like I was in Heaven.*

This was all so beautiful and way better than the practice ones we used at school. As we walked in, I couldn't help but marvel at the detailed architectural drawings hanging on the walls. They were intricate and beautiful, each telling a story of design and precision.

Marco noticed my fascination and smiled. "I can see you appreciate architectural drawings."

I nodded eagerly. "I'd love to learn more about this."

He started by explaining the basics of architectural drawings, showing me the different types like floor plans, elevations, and sections.

"I remember learning this at school."

"It's normally in the first semester, if I'm not wrong."

His passion for the subject was contagious, and I couldn't help but be drawn into his explanation.

Mr. Laing went on to demonstrate how architects use various symbols and conventions to represent everything from walls and windows to doors and structural elements. He handed me a drafting pencil and showed me how to make straight lines, curves, and angles precisely.

It felt so good doing something I'm actually interested in.

We delved into specific projects the company was working on, and he showed me real architectural blueprints and design plans. He explained how to interpret them, read measurements, and understand the architect's vision.

Hours flew by as we immersed ourselves in architectural discussions, and at around midday, we made our way back to the day office.

My day was well spent.

I still can't believe he got this all done for me.

---

Might as well I spent the entire day in the drawing room. The rest of day at the office was moving at a snail's pace. Time seemed to drag, and I couldn't help but feel a bit restless.

I spent most of my day sorting meetings, answering phone calls on his behalf, and taking messages. The same two journalists call everyday to ask the same question and end up getting the same answer: *Mr. Xander is out of office right now.*

Finally, as the day wore on, he returned from yet another meeting and signaled me to come into his office. I walked in, feeling a bit out of sorts.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, noticing the concern on my face.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine. Sorry about my expression. Thank you."

"For what?"

"Mr. Laing and him letting me do architecture today and looking at plans. I really appreciate it."

He smiled at me. *Big.* "You don't have to thank me. I just wanted to make your internship period more enjoyable. Once a week, until the four month period ends, you'll be spending it with that department."

I could've screamed.

*What?*

*“Are you joking?”*

“No, I’m serious.”

Excitement burst within me. “Thank you.”

*He’s so close to getting laid.*

He gazed at me, a flicker of concern in his eyes. “Can I take you somewhere?”

“Where?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Are you gonna kidnap me?” I playfully asked.

He couldn’t help but smile. *“No, Azzaria, I’m not gonna kidnap you.”*

A warm smile spread across my face, and my earlier frustrations seemed to melt away. “Sure.” And we set off to parts unknown.

“Where are we?” After two hours of driving on some of the world’s worst roads, we arrived at this colossal building. It was like a small village tucked into a single property.

He gracefully stepped out of the car and came around to open my door, extending his hand to help me out. “This is where I live, *where I used to live*, but I wanted to show you something special.”

If you ever wanted to know someone’s wealth, all you had to do was take a look at their home, and Dillon’s was nothing short of extravagant. You could have hosted a marathon with a million participants and still not covered all the acres he owned. What was he doing with such a huge home?

“It’s *really* nice,” I commented, making sure to emphasize the “really.”

We walked inside, and the area resembled a luxurious office. Dillon gestured for me to take a seat. “I brought you here for some privacy.”

I beamed at the thought. “This is incredibly sweet of you.”

“Are you allergic to anything?” he asked, his eyes focused on me.

I considered the question for a moment. “No, not allergic, but I avoid pork, peanuts, and I’m not a fan of fish.”

“Got it,” he replied, already dialing a number on his phone. “Hello, good afternoon, Mrs. Emerson,” he began.

“Wait, you don’t—” I tried to interject, but he hushed me with a finger to his lips and continued his call.

“I’d like two surf and turf deluxe meals, one mild and one spicy, both with lemonades, please, and no fish,” he ordered, then ended the call and turned his attention back to me.

It was a kind gesture, and I appreciated the thought. I loved being in serene, quiet places, and there were so many books in this room that it didn’t matter what genre they were—I just wanted to snap pictures of those bookshelves for my book review account.

“Let’s forget about the world and the internship, if only for a moment,” Dillon suggested with a warm smile. “Let’s have lunch together.”

With a shy smile of my own, I teased, “Do I have a choice?”

“Of course, you always do,” he said, leaning back. “But I know you’re going to say yes, especially since I drove you two hours away.”

I laughed and agreed, “Good point.” I took a seat on the plush sofa. “Is this where you want me to share my life story?”

“No,” Dillon replied, shaking his head. “I’ll get to know you because I have my own intentions, Ms. Willis. But let’s not rush things.”

“Intentions? Like what?” I asked playfully.

“The good ones,” he assured me. “I promise.”

I chuckled. “I can only hope so.”

“Don’t worry. And I hope you ordered the spicy for me and the mild for yourself.”



He raised an eyebrow, feigning surprise. “Who told you I ordered something for you?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure you did,” I retorted, watching him closely. “But, answer my question.”

“It was the other way around,” Dillon admitted, leaning closer. “I didn’t expect a girl like you to handle spice.”

“Why not?” I asked, a twinkle in my eye.

“You radiate all the spice,” he said with a grin and took a seat next to me.

“I’ll take that as a compliment but I loved eating spicy foods. Especially with Abigail and Halley,” I replied with a light laugh. But as the topic of Halley came up, my spirit dimmed.

Dillon noticed the shift and asked, “What’s wrong?”

I hesitated, then answered, “Nothing,” trying to brush aside my feelings with a forced smile.

“Don’t lie,” he insisted, his eyes showing genuine concern. “Is it about Halley?”

I admitted, “Well, yeah.”

“Let’s talk about it, if you want to,” he offered.

I opened up, my words spilling out. “Do you ever feel like you’ve been there for someone forever, and as soon as they find happiness, they just start drifting away?”

He nodded with understanding. “Yes, but I tend to not take it personally.”

“That’s how I feel about Halley,” I continued. “I’m happy that she’s happy, but it’s like she completely forgot about our friendship. And then she lied to me, repeatedly.”

“Have you tried talking to her?” Dillon asked.

I sighed in frustration. “I’ve texted her, and she doesn’t respond. I’m over it now.”

Dillon offered sage advice. “You might never truly be over it because Halley is a significant part of your life, much like

Abigail. But, you'll eventually learn and realize that you deserve better. How did you meet Abigail?"

"Elementary school, and then we ended up at the same college. But she doesn't live here; she's on a scholarship and does classes online," I explained. "She comes around every few months."

"Halley will come around soon too, but don't let her back into your life too easily. No one deserves to hurt you and then simply walk back in," Dillon said, placing his hand on my thigh.

My initial surprise was soon replaced by a strange sense of comfort, and I appreciated his touch. I leaned into it, enjoying the intimacy.

"Sorry," Dillon said, moving his hand away as if concerned he had overstepped.

I halted him. "No, don't move it. I was just taken off guard for a moment."

"Alright," he said with a half-smile and moved his hand back to my thigh.

Then, an endearing old lady entered the room. "Good evening, Mr. Xander and company," she greeted us warmly.

Dillon jumped to his feet with surprising energy. "Mrs. Emerson, thank you for bringing it," he said, and she kissed him on the cheek.

"And you are?" she asked me.

"I'm Azzaria, it's lovely to meet you," I replied with a smile.

She smiled at me and took my hand. "È carina, vero?" she said, and while I didn't understand the words, her tone indicated it was a compliment.

Dillon responded, "lo è. Ti piace??"

She nodded in agreement. "È davvero carina e sembra genuina. Prenditi cura di te e mangia bene."

Dillon thanked her in the same language. “Lo è. Grazie, signora Emerson.”

She released my hand, waved goodbye, and exited. As she left, I couldn't help but be intrigued by the foreign language exchange between them.

I couldn't contain my curiosity. “That was interesting. Who is that lady?”

Dillon took a sip of his drink. I hadn't even noticed that he had poured scotch for himself. “She's my housekeeper and someone who basically raised me. We were just discussing household matters, but she's not the best at speaking English.”

“Oh, I see. What language was that?”

“Italian,” he replied, and his voice carried an air of confidence that made it sound incredibly attractive.

Then, I decided to test the waters a bit. “I heard you used to have random whores?”

Dillon sighed, admitting, “I used to, but I'm not that person anymore.”

“Anymore?” I prodded, wanting to learn more.

He took a deep breath. “After my last breakup from an abusive relationship, I went through a wild phase, not more than two weeks. I wasn't proud of it, but it's the truth.”

“I'm really sorry to hear that. No one deserves to go through something like that,” I offered, feeling a mix of intrigue and sympathy.

“It's fine.” Dillon shifted the conversation to a lighter note. “What about your hobbies? What do you enjoy doing?”

I smiled, genuinely enjoying our conversation. “I like to read books. I'm a bookworm.”

“Any favorite genres?” he asked.

“Romance.”

Dillon admitted, “I read too, but it's mainly business books, not the kinds you enjoy.”

I couldn't help but comment, "That sounds a bit boring."

"It depends on how you view it," he replied. "But I've never given myself the chance to explore other genres. I haven't had the time."

I recommended, "If you ever decide to read for pleasure, try 'The Kiss Quotient.' It's a great book, and I think you'd love it."

"I'll keep that in mind," Dillon said with a nod. "Any hobbies?"

"I paint and journal, a lot."

"That's actually amazing. Not many men engage in those activities."

"Because most men have toxic masculinity. I'm comfortable in my sexuality, and I believe that no activity is gender-specific. If a woman or a man wants to paint, dance, do makeup, or whatever it is, they can."

This just made him 10 times more attractive. It wasn't every day that I heard a man speak like this.

"I'm shocked," I blurted.

"Why? Do I come off as an ass that much?"

"It's not that. You're often perceived as one-dimensional—*an egotistical, narcissistic rich person.*"

"Fair enough, but what do you see me as?"

"I see you as a man who's experienced more pain than he likes to admit and is simply searching for some genuine happiness," I explained. "I also believe there's more to you than meets the eye, but people aren't patient enough to discover it. Many just view you as a wealthy person who needs nothing but power."

"You see a lot."

"I do." I smiled. "Power is nothing when you're alone, I've heard."

"You've heard right."

“And hey,” I called out to him. He seemed to have been getting distracted. “You’ll have to give me a tour of your favorite paintings soon.”

We spent the rest of our lunch in delightful silence, both of us savoring the rare comfort of being in each other’s presence. “Thank you for this,” I said as we returned to the office, sitting in the parking lot. “I appreciate you bringing me here and getting me to go architecture with your company. And just for being amazing.” I couldn’t wait to tell Abigail this. *I was happy, he was making me happy.*

“The pleasure is mine,” Dillon replied. “Let’s go back to the office.”

“Let’s go.”

My excitement bubbled over, and I couldn’t help but feel butterflies in my stomach. Suddenly, the prospect of a committed relationship that I had shied away from seemed more possible. But I knew, in the world of romance novels, two good days in a row usually meant that the storm was just beginning.

“Let’s do that dinner date Friday, if you’re free.”

“I’ll always be free for you.”

## CHAPTER 18

# *Dillon*

MY GRANDMOTHER OFTEN TOLD ME THAT IT WASN'T ABOUT how long you knew a person, it's about how that person came into your life and made you feel. I never believed her, until now.

*Azzaria made everything better.*

*Her smile.*

*The way she spoke.*

*The way she did her work.*

*Everything.*

I settled into the car next to Mikkel, my thoughts still reeling from what had just happened. I had no intention of ever going back there but there was a voice in my head telling me to take her, and I did, and it was great.

Mikkel glanced at me and said, "That was brave."

I furrowed my brows, not entirely sure what he meant. "Brave? What do you mean?"

Mikkel chuckled softly. "I mean, it was brave of you to bring her to that space, Dillon."

I nodded, finally understanding his perspective. "It just felt right, you know?"

Mikkel leaned back in his seat. "Do you like her?"

I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to reveal too much too soon. He was one of my best friends, but I didn't want to

say anything much and then jinx the entire vibe. “I’m attracted to her.”

He scoffed. “I think this is long past the attraction.”

I let out a knowing sigh. “I don’t want to scare her away.”

Mikkel, the voice of reason, offered his advice. “Just take it slow, Dillon. Let things unfold naturally, and don’t rush. Sometimes, patience can be your best ally.”

“Patience isn’t my best quality.”

He laughed. “I know, but trust me, it works.”

I appreciated his guidance and said, “Thanks, Mikkel.”

As we drove, a thought crossed my mind. “Hey, can you do me a favor? Can we stop here?” We were right in front of a Barnes & Nobles.

Mikkel raised an eyebrow. “Sure and what favor?”

I nodded. “Could you buy me a book?”

Mikkel looked puzzled. “A book?”

I smiled and confirmed, “Yes, ‘The Kiss Quotient.’”

We made a quick stop to get the book, and then Mikkel dropped me back at the penthouse.

Once inside, I was greeted by Pebbles and then I grabbed the book, settled into a cozy spot, and started reading.

Let’s see if she was right about this book choice.

*She was right.* I couldn’t put the book down, engrossed in the world of “The Kiss Quotient.” Time slipped away, and the clock struck 1 am. My excitement got the better of me, and I decided to call her.

Drowsy but still answering, she picked up her cell. “Hello? Are you okay?”

I could hear the sleep in her voice as I said, “Hey, sorry to wake you. I just couldn’t put the book down.”

She yawned. “It’s okay. Are you okay? And what book?”

I assured her, “Yeah, I’m fine. The one you told me about earlier.”

Curiosity perked her up a bit. “Oh, ‘The Kiss Quotient’? I didn’t know you’d actually read it.”

“I stopped in Barnes and Nobles and got it this evening.”

“That’s... amazing. Do you like it?”

“It’s amazing,” I replied enthusiastically. “In fact, I was thinking... would it be weird if I invited you over to talk about it and hang out?”

She hesitated for a moment and then answered, “No, not at all. I’d love to.”

I grinned, even though she couldn’t see it over the phone. “Great. I’ll send someone to get you. Text me the address.”

Despite the late hour, seemed genuinely excited about the idea. Then it just dawned me that I’d invited her over my living space and there was no going back.

---

There was a knock at my front door and I knew it was Lucio.

He kindly brought her up and ushered her inside. Curiosity got the better of her, and she asked, “Where are we?”

I smiled and replied, “We’re at my penthouse.”

“Your penthouse?” she asked, looking around in awe. “I thought you lived at your house.”

“Not anymore, it’s a long story.” Changing the subject, I introduced her to Lucio, saying, “This is Lucio, my other driver, and my other best friend.”

With a warm smile, she said hello to Lucio and then came inside. I gave her on a mini tour of the penthouse, and I couldn’t help but notice her surprise when Pebbles, my little Pomeranian, bounded into the room. She looked at me with a smile and asked, “You have a dog?”

“Yes, this is Pebbles. She’s been with me forever,” I told her as Pebbles darted into her little dog pen.



“I thought you were joking about reading the book,” she said as she glanced the well annotated book on the coffee table.

“No.” I chuckled. “I was pretty serious.”

“You surprise me everyday. Also, I brought a bag with work clothes, pretty sure I won’t be making it back home in time.”

“That’s fine, now shall we?” He asked, pointing to the book. As we settled into the chairs, I took a deep breath and started the conversation about “The Kiss Quotient.” A slight smile played on her lips as she listened, and she soon joined in with her own thoughts.

“It’s fascinating how the author explores Stella’s character,” I began.

She nodded in agreement. “Who’s your favorite character?”

“Stella. Who’s yours?”

“Michael, I just think he’s way more fun.”

I shrugged. “He may be more fun but Stella’s structured. I like structure.”

We continued to talk about the book, and it felt great. I’m a person who’s used to big gestures and doing things extravagant. I never thought the day would come when I was contented by simply sitting in my living room, after hours, with a beautiful girl discussing a romance book. *It never gets better than this.*

“I must say,” She yawned, “When I told you about the book, I never expected you to get it,” she said with an excited gleam in her eyes.

I leaned in. “Why?”

She sighed and shrugged. “I’m just not used to people doing that for me and It’s actually pretty cute that you invited me over just to talk about a book.”

I laughed, feeling at ease. “Get used to it, and there’s no one else I’d rather be here with.”

“I’m sure there’s a couple thousand at least.” I nodded.

“Not even close.”

She leaned in for a kiss and I felt my walls drop. She was it for me. I just needed to convince her that I’m it for her.

---

### *Azzaria*

I’ve experienced a lot and of everything I’ve experienced, this has to be the best moments. I had no idea which planet he came from, but it was definitely not Earth.

Men like him were the ones you dreamt about. The ones you read about in books and watched on the TV. The ones your mother told you would sweep you off your feet. The princes in the Disney movies.

But no. *He was real*. He was not a prince in a Disney movie or a fictional character.

*He was real.*

*Very real.*

*And he was here with me.*

I couldn’t contain myself and what I wanted next, so I didn’t.

“I’m so wet for you right now,” I leaned in, whispering in his ears. My hormones were overtaking my body. This has been a long time coming and he deserved everything he was going to get.

“Oh” he said, staring into my eyes. *That just made me even wetter*. My body’s response to him was so faltering. “Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“I don’t have a condom but I’m negative.”

“I’m on the pill and I take the shot.”

“I trust you,” I told him. And for the most part, I did.

“Are you sure about this?” He asked again, for reassurance.

“Very sure.”

He tilted his head back. “Let’s go upstairs then.”

“Or we can do it here.”

“The first time I take you, will be in a very comfortable bed, precious.”

*Precious.* I liked where this is going already.

We didn’t even reach the top of the stairs before we started undressing each other. I may or may not have worn my most expensive and sexiest pair of underwear tonight.... I just always have to be prepared.

“Wait, Dillon! Don’t rip them off. They’re expensive,” I scolded, slapping at his hand.

“I can buy the company that makes them for you, precious. One wouldn’t hurt,” he panted.

We got into his bedroom, which was massive, probably the size of my entire house and threw himself on the bed.

I undressed myself, completely and he was in awe, admiring my naked curves.

“You are perfect,” he whispered before pulling me down on top of him.

I bent my knees, straddling him and leaning up over him as we kissed, grinding my hips against him. I softly kissed my way down his body, stroking his skin gently.

Dillon nodded and folded his left arm behind his head and hummed, looking down at me as I reached his thighs. I kissed his inner thighs and teased my fingertips lightly over his taint, his balls and up his thighs.

He gasped and twitched at my touch and I smiled lustfully making eye contact with him. I lifted his cock and gently

pulled back his foreskin, looking at me seductively in the eyes as I softly flicked my tongue over the head.

*“This is perfect.”*

He sighed and reached his right hand down to stroke my cheek while he watched me slowly slide my mouth over his cock. He panted and groaned at the sound and feeling of my wet mouth working up and down his cock and I rolled his balls gently between my fingertips.

I paused occasionally to work up more saliva and looked down as I let it drip in strings down his length before I forced my mouth around his cock again. I held him tight in my hand and stroked him firmly as I sucked, running my tongue over his head and tasting his pre-cum

*“Azzaria.”* I looked up at him, Dillon groaned and breathed my name, grasping my arms.

“Fuck” Dillon gasped. “Shit baby, wait.” *Baby.*

I let go of him and sat back, holding my hands in the air as I breathed heavily and looked at him. Then I leaned up on my knees over him and kissed his chest in soft kisses.

Dillon exhaled forcefully and caressed my thighs, up over my ass and up my back. He ran his fingers through my hair and caressed my face. I leaned up to his face and kissed his lips while we both looked at each other.

“You almost had me there. I can’t have my release before you get yours,” he groaned and laughed. I pursed my lips and gazed at him laughing in a soft giggle.

“My turn,” Dillon groaned, nudging me.

I licked my lips and groaned. “But I’m not done yet. 69?” I asked.

“Are you comfortable with that?” He asked, pausing for a second.

It made me melt as my comfort and consent would *always*—*always*— be a priority for him. “I am, are you?”

“Once you’re here.” He smirked.

Dillon's eyes flickered with excitement. I turned my body round and straddled him, backing up to his face and stopping when he wrapped his arms around my wide hips and held my pussy wide.

"Oh God," I moaned.

I felt him kiss my ass, thighs and pussy softly before he began licking my pussy in steady, flat tongue strokes.

I gasped and moaned. "*More.*"

I laid down along his body, licked my finger and lifted his cock, sucking firmly on the head and gently running my finger over his taint. I rocked my hips over his face and moaned loudly as he continued to lick me.

I reached my hands down and squeezed his ass. "I love your ass. It's so grabable. I love it!" I groaned.

"I know you do, I catch you staring at it at the office all the time," he teased.

"No, you don't," I gasped.

"I really need to fuck you now." His voice was low and raspy. He sat up on his knees between my legs and let out a low moan while he rubbed his cock firmly up and down over my pussy, then grazed my clit.

"I like when you're playful like this," I noted, with joy in my face and smiles on my face. *There's no way we were just reading a book before this.*

*"I like you."*

*His words rested on my soul. Deeply.*

*Madly enthralled with this man. My short-term boss.*

I jumped, instinctively forcing my knees together and down against him to push myself up the bed away from him.

"Fuck," I shouted.

Dillon reflexively grabbed my knees and held them firmly in his hands. "Calm down, precious. You almost kneed me." He chuckled.

He called me precious. *Again.*

“Would’ve been your own fault,” I laughed, raising my eyebrows.

I held my body tense for a moment then let out a long, slow breath and relaxed.

He ran his hands from my knees, up my thighs over her hips and up my stomach as he leaned down over me, gazing in my eyes and kissing me, trying to hide a smile. His hands held my face and tangled in my hair.

“I know, I forgot. I’m sorry,” he said quietly with mock remorse. “Let me make it up to you.”

As we kissed, Dillon stroked my legs, grasping my thighs and pulling them round his waist. My hands roamed from his ass, up his muscular back, across his shoulders and down his sides. We kissed in soft, short kisses, moving to long, slow kisses where our tongues got lost in each other’s mouths until we stopped and gathered our breath.

I held my finger to my mouth as if thinking and then lifted my legs, resting my feet on his shoulders and guided his cock inside me.

*This felt like heaven. Hot, sexy heaven.*

He pulled slowly into my wetness and I shifted my hips, adjusting to him.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he groaned loudly, drawing back and lifting my left leg over his right shoulder.

*“Shit, this is the biggest I’ve had.”*

*“The last you’ll ever get,” he growled.*

I nodded, furrowing my brow and moaning as he fucked me steadily.

I bent my right leg out to the side and Dillon leaned on it with his left arm. I rested my right foot on his left hip and reached my hand down to cautiously stroke my clit. “God! I’m so wet,” I murmured.

Dillon breathed a laugh. “Yeah, you are.” He watched me tease my clit and begin bucking my hips. “You feel so good!” he groaned.

I moaned his name. “*Harder!*” I groaned loudly.

He complied and got into a steady rhythm of fucking me hard. “Yeah, that’s it,” I groaned.

Our skin slapped together and the bed creaked. I groaned and panted at the force of his thrusts. I grabbed his right thigh, pulling him further towards me.

“Cum for me,” he whispered.

Dillon gasped, holding my left thigh against his chest and fucking me harder as I continued stroking my clit and my hips began to roll.

“Wait, not yet,” I moaned urgently.

Dillon exhaled forcefully with a laugh. “Hmm?” he panted and slowed his thrusts.

I watched his face as I reached down and gently tugged his balls. Then I resumed rubbing my clit as Dillon stayed still inside me and stroked my thighs and watched with a thrill as I brought myself to the edge.

I nodded and moaned signaling to Dillon who resumed fucking me hard. He felt me start to clench and grip his cock inside me, I moaned loudly that I was ready.

He panted as his balls tingled and tightened and he felt himself about to cum. I moaned loudly in agreement as I came hard, my body convulsed and my back arched off the bed.

My eyes were squeezed shut and I rolled my hips forcefully against him in uncontrollable thrusts. I heard Dillon grunt loudly as he thrust hard into me. My grip squeezed him tight.

“Fuck!” he groaned loudly and I felt his cock throb inside me. I grasped his right thigh, accidentally digging my nails into his skin as I pulled his body closer to me, wanting him as far inside me as possible.

Dillon held my hips, pulling my body against him. We groaned and breathed heavily, grinding together as our orgasms subsided. I opened my eyes to see Dillon's head hanging down over his body, his chest rising and falling rapidly as I felt his cock still throbbing inside me. I moved my left leg from his chest and he let go of it, looking up at me and we smiled at each other, breathing heavily.

"*You're so hot.*" He kissed me then rested his forehead on mine. We gazed into each other's eyes and tried to recover our breathing.

*I need to be fucked like this everyday.*

"Fucking hell, Precious," Dillon said, pulling out and lying down beside me on the bed. *Precious. I was his precious.*

I reached my right hand up and stroked his face while he ran his fingers softly over my inner wrist as we lay in silence, recovering and then quickly fell asleep.

I woke up disoriented. My mouth was dry, I had a headache, my body was aching, I was naked and my face was tight. I was lying sideways on the bed, the duvet was hanging mostly on the floor, the bedroom door was wide open and the hall light was on.

I groaned and moved slightly to try and get my bearings and felt Dillon stir behind me.

"Morning," he whispered in a croaky voice, sliding his arm down my curled up legs, pulling me against him and kissing my hair and my temple as he leaned over me. I could get used to this.

I felt his cock hard against my back and reached behind me to grab it. Dillon groaned and we both giggled sleepily.

"Don't tell me you're already raging to go after last night?" he asked, his croaky voice breaking.

He obviously doesn't know I have the stamina of a horse.

"I am," I croaked, shifting in the bed. "But I need to shower. I need to get ready for my internship," I sniggered.



I stroked my hand along his arm as it snaked around my waist and clasped my hand over his as I snuggled back into his embrace.

“The boss won’t mind,” he laughed.

“Oh. I know. But his employees will slut shame me if they knew I spent the night riding his dick and sucking him off.”

He lifted his head slightly and leaned on his arm, looking down at me. “Are you alright?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Hey?” he whispered, stroking my hair and turning my head towards him as he leaned over me. I looked at him, my eye make-up was smudged round my eyes. “Are you alright?” he asked again.

I nodded again.

“Yes, I’m good,” I shrugged. “It’s just post-sex aches.” I giggled. “I’ll take some paracetamol when I get up, no biggie.” I smiled and kissed him.

“I’ll get you it now, how about breakfast in bed before you go?” he asked, kissing me.

I stroked his beard, smiled and nodded.

“What do you like?” he asked.

“You cook?”

“I was married once upon a time, so yes, I could cook.”

“Oh,” I said and gulped. It wasn’t that I didn’t know, I just didn’t expect it to be said so blatantly.

“How about everyday we tell each other two things we didn’t know,” he suggested.

“Sure. You go first.”

“I have a tattoo,” he said, “it’s a statement my grandma use to say all the time.” As he mentioned his grandma, my mind trialed back to the conversations I had with his brother at Mara’s baby shower.

“What does it say and where is it?”

“It’s on my right bicep and it says *pridie melius quam ultimo* and it means...”

“The day ahead will always be better than the last,” they said in unison, their eyes meeting each others gaze.

“Wait, you speak Latin?” Dillon asked.

“I don’t but that’s a saying I say all the time. We have a lot more in common than we think,” I smiled.

“Yeah we do,” he agreed, “now tell me your two things.”

I thought long and hard about what I should tell him as anything I said would lead back to my traumatic past and that’s just too much for any of us to handle..

“I can’t cook at all. Not even soup, but I can bake.”

“I can teach you to cook and you teach me to bake. Deal?”

“Deal,” I smiled, “and as for breakfast, whatever gourmet delights you’ve got this morning are good with me,” I smiled sleepily.

He left the room and I started looking around. His house was clean and had the best smell. *How much more attractive can he get?*

He returned several minutes later, setting plates and cups on the nightstand and carrying a box of paracetamol in his mouth. “Breakfast in bed served by the sexiest man. *Yum,*” I teased, sticking my foot out from under the duvet and running it up his thigh.

He dropped the box on the nightstand and chuckled. He threw back the duvet and climbed on top of me, pulling my legs around his waist.

“I hope this is as delicious as you are,” he teased, leaning down to kiss me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him just as we heard his phone ring.

Grabbing his phone, Dillon’s face turned to one of shock. “I need to go to the office now. Lucio will ensure you get to the office on time.”

“What’s happening?” I asked, sounding very alarmed. I searched his face for any strain or struggle, but instead found him looking peaceful.

The anger only surged when he is. It’s easy to see that Dillon was a mastermind of hiding everything but what he didn’t know was I’m the same.

“Precious,” he said, approaching my whole body, buckling his black pants. “Don’t worry about it. Get to the office before 9. We have the Brown.co meeting today.”

I didn’t argue, mainly because I had no energy to, but instead watched as he got dressed and saw him leave.

I wondered if it would always be like this. Him, being the most secretive and always leaving, and me, being confused and wanting him to stay. Brushing off my thoughts, I got up and got dressed.

The one thing I could always do was drown myself in work.

## CHAPTER 19

### *Azzaria*

“GOOD MORNING, MELISSA,” I GREETED HER. MELISSA looked stunning, her hair falling beautifully across her face.

“Good morning, Azzaria. You are glowing,” she giggled. “How are you?”

It must be the mind blowing sex I had earlier. “I’m good.”

I glanced at the door to my office, and more broadly, Dillon’s office. Instead of heading that way, I took a right turn, entering the meeting room to set up for the upcoming meeting.

“Ms. Willis,” Arnaldo greeted me as he stood up. I was surprised by his presence this early but got used to it.

“Mr. Reyes, you’re here early,” I noted.

“I have to be. You seem troubled. Is everything okay and please, call me Arnaldo?”

“Is Mr. Xander always so difficult? I thought you’d know, being the lead attorney,” I asked, hoping he’d share his insight.

“As a lawyer, I signed an NDA, so I can’t say much. But I’ve seen Dillon as a husband and interact with women too, plenty of them. Some I have to really think, ‘I don’t think you should...’”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Oops, my bad. Got the wrong message,” he nervously laughed. “Sorry. If he doesn’t tell you something right away, there’s a good reason. It’s never been easy for him.”

I sighed, and from Arnoldo's expression, it was clear he was being honest, which frightened me.

"Thank you, Arnoldo. I have to finish setting up the room, so..." I gestured for him to leave for a bit.

"Ah," he said, getting up. "I'll see you in a few minutes. Is he in the office?"

"Yes, he is, but he doesn't know I'm here."

With Arnoldo's departure, I felt like he either knew about my entanglement with Dillon or was trying to confirm it.

I had faced many trials in life, but I feared my most significant challenge would be navigating whatever this was.

Thinking about last night, I was amazed. I'd had my share of experiences, but Dillon had been different, making me crave more. I still can't seem to get over the fact that he bought the book, just because I told him to, read it and invited me to over to discuss. Which resulted in hours of mind blowing sex.

*Great sex.*

*Hot sex.*

*The best sex of my life.*

The meeting room was ready, and I had only a few minutes until Dillon and his team arrived. I was barely at his board meetings but he asked me to sit in and learn a few things about business meetings today.

My phone buzzed, displaying "Bryce Duke." I groaned in irritation.

BRYCE DUKE

hey, can we meet up for lunch later?

I reacted to the message with a thumbs up and went about my day.

“Ms. Willis,” Melissa called as I approached the door. “The meeting guests are here. Should I send them in?”

“Have them wait in the waiting room. I’ll get Mr. Xander.”

ME

Hey, can you come to the meeting room? The guests are here.

DILLON XANDER

Ok

Within minutes, I heard his distinct footsteps. The meeting room was spacious and modern, with sturdy yet crystal-clear chairs.

“Ms. Willis,” he called out.

“Mr. Xander. Hello,” I responded with professional formality, mindful of the need to maintain discretion.

He moved from the door, approaching his seat. Dillon sat at the head of the table, in the biggest chair. “How long have you been here?”

“A while but you had a bad morning so I didn’t want to see you. That’s besides the point, let’s get the meeting started,” I said to him, dismissing any further conversation.

As the meeting began, the tension in the room was palpable. Eric Brown, the CEO of Brown.co, was shocked by the valuation and price Arnaldo had presented. It was evident that he was unaware of this discrepancy.

He was either a really good liar or he was honestly unaware, but either way, Dillon was pissed.

“We’re not paying over two hundred thousand for that building plan,” Arnaldo insisted.

“I don’t understand,” Eric responded, passing the documents to his legal representatives. Their shocked

expressions mirrored the confusion in the room.

I was curious about Eric Brown's past, especially since Google search results indicated he had engaged in deals with Dillon's grandfather and had been under suspicion for fraud in multiple companies. Given this background check, it raised questions about why Dillon would choose to partner with him. But, who knows the business better than the business man?

"That's impossible," Eric said, starting to object.

Dillon interrupted, offering an ultimatum. "You can leave here two hundred thousand dollars richer, or not. Choose wisely."

"Your grandfather never conducted business this way," Eric scoffed as he angrily snatched the documents.

Dillon's gaze snapped toward Arnaldo. "We're finished here, Arnaldo. Cancel the deal. We won't proceed with it at all."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. And Eric," he said, turning around, "my grandfather may have wanted to maintain a good relationship with you, but I, on the other hand, couldn't care less. I have a fondness for my adversaries." And with that, he walked away.

The guests departed one by one, and I quickly made my way to Dillon's office, leaving Arnaldo behind, still visibly shocked. I hadn't been here for long, but it clear this building was more than just another business plan to him. It was a lot closer to his heart.

To see Dillon cancel the deal so abruptly was surprising. But, based on what Nico had recently shared with me, I could now understand why. His grandfather was a highly sensitive topic for him, and the casual mention of his name had clearly rattled Dillon, leaving him feeling tested and uneasy—an unusual and uncomfortable experience for someone of his stature.

"Hey," he said, rubbing his temple, "are you alright?"

"I'm fine, but are you?"

“I’m not so sure,” he admitted. I could see the turmoil in his expression, a look I knew all too well.

“What’s troubling you?”

“The quickest way to get under my skin is to mention my grandfather. Eric pushed my buttons the wrong way,” he said, his frustration evident in his tone.

I struggled to find the right words. “Were you genuinely interested in that deal?”

“Mara was,” he confessed, “when we were kids, we used to play there, and I wanted to give it to her as a gift. But Eric made it nearly impossible.”

There it was—the Dillon I yearned to understand and connect with. The kind, tender side he had. That’s the Dillon I longed to know better. But building that connection would take effort on both our parts, and I hoped he was willing to work alongside me.

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I entered his office. “You know what’s best for your business. If I can help with anything, please let me know.”

“What are you doing now?”

“I have lunch with Bryce. He texted me to meet up and oh, I’ve got therapy tonight.”

“See me after your lunch? I have a free 1 pm.”

“I will.”

I flashed a smile, feeling the intensity of his gaze as I swayed out of the room.

---

Bryce had messaged me to meet at “La Esquivel” for lunch.

“Azzaria,” he called out when I neared the table, “how are you?”

“I’m good. Why are we here, Bryce?” I wanted to cut to the chase and get this over with.



“We’re here to talk. I hate seeing Halley like this, and I don’t know what to do,” he sighed, visibly distressed. As I suspected, it had to be about her.

“Continue.”

“Her father showed up, and now she’s just empty.”

“How am I supposed to fix that? I don’t understand.”

He went on to telling me how much she’s changed since we stopped talking and how much she misses me. This is all shit I’ve heard before and quite frankly, things I don’t have the time for.

“Bryce, if you came here to bitch on her behalf, you chose the wrong day and the wrong person. She had her chance and now I’m over it.”

He looked at me with shock and I walked out. There’s nothing I could do to help and I truly just stopped caring. If it’s not worth my time, it’s not worth it.

I stopped at the sandwich shop and grabbed my favorite bite before heading back to the office.

Dillon was busy writing in his journal when I approached him. He didn’t seem startled by my presence and continued writing. I got the hint that he wanted me to leave.

“Where are you going?” he asked without looking up from his desk.

“You seemed busy, so I was heading back to my desk.”

“I felt your presence, and that was enough to fill the space for me. I’m also writing in my journal.”

“Oh, will I ever get to see your journal?”

“One day,” he said, quickly tucking it away in a bottom drawer and locking it with a key. Then, my attention was drawn to a specific novel on his desk.

“No way,” I blurted out, maybe a bit too loudly, as Dillon looked up at me with wide eyes. “You’re reading a romance book. Where’d you get this one?”

“Yes,” he shyly smiled, running his fingers along the book’s spine. “I had Mikkel get it for me.”

Every day, I found more reasons to like him, even in small gestures like this. He was reading one of the books from the twisted series.

“How far along are you in the book?”

“Ten chapters in.”

“This is so getting you laid, again.”

“Good for me.”

“I love romance. It’s just so fun reading about people falling in love and being together.”

“It is. An escape from reality.”

“Yeah, that’s why I love romance books. I can give you a list if you want.”

“Please do, and I’ll have Mikkel get them.” I felt like I had found someone who shared my interests, and I hoped it would last.

We spent the rest of our free time continuing last night’s discussion. We were debating whether Michael was wrong for walking away or if Stella should have fought harder for their love. Or if Stella had made it too difficult for him.

Most of all, I loved that we were becoming friends.

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The day ended and therapy time rolled again. Our sessions have been good so far and though we had said we are doing once a week sessions, she said it’s beside if we did twice a month, seeing as I was not half as bad as I was when we first met years ago.

That definitely counted for something.

We did the warm up exercise and she asked me about how I’ve been since the last visit. I told her all about how work has been and I talked to her about Dillon. I didn’t mention him by name, but I spoke using aliases.

“So, is he your boyfriend?”

“I’m not big on labels but he treats me like a girlfriend. We’ve been on dates and we hang out often. Slept together which was a big thing for me.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“It feels good to have that connection with him but I also feel that my dependence will come on that now and I’ve been trying for years to get out of that habit.”

“The best thing to do is remember that you’re in control. From what you’ve been telling me, it’s all about consent and it is more focused on your pleasure than anything else.”

“He just makes me feel....” I paused. So many words came to mind and I didn’t know which to use.

“Wanted. You feel wanted. Listened to. Appreciated. You feel deserving.”

“Exactly, and it’s scary,” I admitted. The fear stemmed from the possibility that something might go wrong, and I’d change too much for him, only to end up heartbroken. That was the last thing I needed.

“It’s not scary; you’re simply protecting your heart, and that’s a very good thing. But be careful not to protect it so much that there’s nothing left for him,” she cautioned.

The session went on with us touching on different topics and I felt freer. My chest wasn’t as heavy and that made me content.

My life was gradually becoming more normal, and I could finally credit myself for that. I was putting myself out there, investing more in myself, and I was content with that. Even if it wouldn’t last forever, I was happy with the present moment.

## CHAPTER 20

# *Azzaria*

“IT’S BASICALLY A BOOK ABOUT OUR SITUATION, AZZARIA.” One thing I hadn’t ever expected him to pick up was reading romance novels, but here we were, discussing yet another great book.

“No,” I stressed, “it may have the same storyline, but the plot isn’t the same. I’m nothing like Chloe, and you’re not like Bennett.” He convinced himself that all my book recommendations were solely based on our relationship dynamic.

“The only similarity is that you’re a bit similar to Chloe.” He chuckled.

“So you think I’m like other women?”

“Don’t twist my statements, precious,” he said, almost in a warning tone.

“I’m not twisting them.” I got up from his lap and walked directly to his kitchen island, petting Pebbles.

She’s the cutest dog ever and I loved her so much.

“You are.” He charged towards me, removing the dog from my hands and putting her in the cage. “You’re thinking on it too hard. I didn’t say you were like other women; you have a similar persona to that of Chloe in this book.”

“You should probably go find someone like Chloe then,” I rolled my eyes and spun around, turning my back to him. This was definitely pushing him too far, especially out of stupidity,

but I loved seeing him possessive over me. *It made me feel safe and protected.*

“Azzaria.”

He took several deep breaths before walking closer to me. It’s more than obvious that he didn’t like this game we were playing, but I liked it.

“It’s nice to see you all riled up,” I chuckled, “makes me think you want me.”

“*I need you.* It’s said that you can’t need and want someone simultaneously, but I need and want you. You’re mine. I’m yours.” He leaned forward, grabbing me from the chair and flinging me gently over his shoulders. I swear he’s like a giant puppy, always wanting to play.

“Dillon,” I shouted with hints of laughter in my voice, “put me down.”

“If you wish,” he laughed and dropped me gently on the bed, allowing his large body shadow to hover over me.

These playful moments were the ones I could live with—the ones I could count on and the ones I loved.

“What are you wearing tonight?”

“Tonight?” I asked, looking shocked. I totally knew what it was, but his reactions are always my favorite things.

“Our date. Damn it,” he gritted, tightening the grip of the sheets and lowering his body weight on me. I’m not sure if I’m supposed to be turned on right now or squealing in pain because he’s pressing out my body.

“Hey, big man,” I called out, running my hands through his hair, “I know it’s our date. I chose something lovely. You’re getting your world rocked later,” I giggled.

“Can I rock your world now?”

“Patience.”

“Your pussy is just as addicting as you are. I don’t ever not think about having you, Azzaria.” His voice remained raspy

and rough, turning me on with each word he said. “I’ve had you once and I can’t get enough.”

Dillon’s lips brutally claimed mine. I wasn’t even sure when his head moved from my stomach, but it did.

His hand shaped my neck, his thumbs held my jaw in place for his aggression. The urge to fight back and resist him was strong, but I just surrendered to him, no fight in me right now, not wanting to be the difficult woman.

He deserved to enjoy this, *enjoy me*. I let him work my mouth, slide his tongue inside, map the roof of my mouth.

He broke the kiss, his eyes hazy with a strange brew of lust and compassion

“Precious,” he growled.

He turned me so I faced the giant mirror, its luster diminished but still bright enough to show my body’s potent reaction to this astonishingly sexy man. Nipples a lot perkier than I felt, hair the wrong side of sexy tousled.

“You need to see how beautiful you are, Precious. *How powerful.*”

“Huh?”

“I want to look at your reflection while I fuck you senselessly.”

Trailing a blunt hand along the border of my shorts, he tested the boundaries. I shuffled my feet apart. His grin turned disgracefully wicked.

“Do you want to direct?”

“No, just do it right. Make it good.”

He bit down on my earlobe, a tender puncture to that sensitive flesh, then yanked my shorts halfway down my thighs so roughly I gasped at the contrast. *How was he going to fuck me now and expect me to walk in heels properly all night?*

Moisture flooded my sex at the thought of what would come next. One strong forearm banded beneath my breasts

while his other hand tunneled through my tawny curls, parting my swelling folds to where I was already shockingly hot and slick. Reaching up, I cupped the back of his head and set anchor. He kissed my wrist over my rocketing pulse.

Dillon made my heart rate exceed the limits. He fumbled my brain and overall messed up my head. *All the time.*

“That’s my girl,” he whispered.

He slid a finger inside me. Then, giving me the intimate stretch I needed, a mind-melting two.

“You really need this, don’t you? You need me deep inside you, baby.”

“Yes. God, yes.” Every fluid thrust massaged my clit perfectly on the return and increased the spirals of want low in my belly. The raging evidence of his own need jutted into my spine.

“There, right there.” I grasped his hand and pressed it closer to where I needed it.

“Don’t stop, Precious. If you need to tell me what makes you feel good, do it. I’m yours.”

Thoughts vaporized. Muscles dissolved. Desire flew loose in my core as those words smashed me senseless.

“I need...” *God.* I couldn’t finish the statement aloud. He was too good, too rough, it was great. I’m floating on a cloud of pure bliss.

“What, baby? Tell me what you need.”

*This. You. Everything you have.*

“You.”

“Like that?” He asked in an assertive and sure tone. He definitely knew he was pleasing me and getting me to my climax soon, but he also loved getting praised.

“And my breasts. Squeeze my nipples.”

His meaty paw yanked away, then replaced, the triangle of fabric over my aching breast. He covered me easily, molding

my soft flesh to his rough ministrations.

“Please, Dillon,” I begged. “More.”

Another bite on my earlobe, a further pinch of my nipple, and he adapted quickly to my raw, desperate needs. “Watch yourself cum,” he whispered roughly in my ear.

I swallowed. *Hard*. He took his free hand, turning my face to the mirror.

“Look how perfect you are. *How you shudder for me. How your eyes roll.*”

An invisible thread of pleasure shot straight to my sex and produced another gush of pleasure on his hand. The blatant look of male satisfaction on his face said he approved.

Faster, he rubbed against that taut bundle of nerves, drawing the blistering sensation to a peak. All I could do was writhe. And watch. And feel. His much more tan skin against my lightly pair flesh, heightened our contrasts, yet also showed how well we complemented each other. I stood cradled in his arms, naked, a sleazy mess, which made it filthier and sexier and so, so good.

I could get used to starting my day like this. Dillon was getting dressed and cleaned up and I was just looking around. It’s almost time for me to head home. Abigail was expecting a call; I missed my mom, and I missed the gym but I needed to cut some expenses.

“I’m going to my office, Azzaria.”

“Why are you always so grumpy?” He stood at the corner of the door jam, basically eye-fucking me and giving me silence instead of an answer.

“Are you ready?”

“No. Not until you tell me why your mood changed from happy to grumpy in the space of ten minutes.” His gaze softened on me, but his smirk remained the same, getting especially larger.

He thought this was a game, so let’s play. He’d lose.



He walked over towards me and brushed the loose hair out of my face. I was a sucker for the way he touched my face and stared into my eyes. “I don’t like working on weekends, but projects have to be done, so I’m needed at the office.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t worry,” he said, wrapping his rather large, cold arms around my lower body. “Mellissa will be there, she’s helping me with the new software assessment for our inter-clubbing and countenance database.” I remember seeing her work on a draft plan for this, but I wasn’t in the know that she was doing it on behalf of Dillon. I thought it was more of independent work or just going over the files she’s given daily.

“Tech stuff, *gross*.”

“Exactly. Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” I wasn’t.

“Are you sure?”

“I just don’t like the idea of you going to work on weekends with o—”

“Just to make this clear, I’ve never slept with Mellissa. I’ve never even looked at her that way. I’ve fucked a lot of women in my day, but never one that’s an employee.”

“I never said that.” I wasn’t lying. I didn’t say that, but I was thinking it.

“You were thinking it.”

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever.”

He laughed and kissed me even deeper than the first time and I left to get home.

I had just returned to the apartment, finding myself once again enveloped in the familiar coziness of my space.

Yet, despite the comfort it offered, my mind was anything but at ease. I couldn’t help but reflect on the events of the day, and well, the past few months, particularly the time spent with Dillon. Each moment with him felt like a secret, something thrilling and irresistible that I couldn’t get enough of.

As I sat down on my couch, thoughts swirled through my mind. The connection between Dillon and me was undeniable, but it was also something we kept hidden.

I sometimes wondered how people would view our relationship. *Would they think I'd gotten to where I was because of him? Or would they think I'm not of his standard?* Our bond was deepening, but society had a way of twisting things.

I learnt the importance of balancing my personal and professional life. My connection with Dillon was intense, but it also brought worries. The two of us were both adults who had the right to be in a relationship but the worrisome part was he was my boss and that could be read completely wrong as well as him being drawn with the whole Matthew fiasco. I don't think I could survive walking on campus with persons thinking that the only reason I have good internship hours or a "good living standard" is because I was fucking one of the world's richest men who happens to be my interim boss.

Despite my doubts, I believed Dillon's intentions were sincere. I just hoped that in the end, this would all work out.

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"I think I'm falling in love, and I hate myself for it. This isn't what I was supposed to be doing," I groaned in frustration, my voice filled with anxiety. Abigail was on the other end of the line, helping me choose an outfit for my date later.

"What happened to 'Ms. I can't fall in love ever because I'm heartless'?" Abi teased. My own words were coming back to haunt me, and I wasn't happy about it.

For all I knew, this newfound feeling might lead to judgment or disappointment.

"Now is not the time to quote me," I hissed, "but what should I do?"

Abigail mumbled an apology before offering some advice. "You'll always end up with the person you're meant to be with. If he's the one, don't let your fears hold you back."

Everyone has flaws, but not every red flag is a deal-breaker. So far, all I've seen is good things between you two.”

“But some of those tabloids...” I confessed, admitting that I couldn't resist checking Google alerts about Dillon daily. It was an unhealthy habit, and I often regretted delving into old articles about him and his past relationships, like his ex-wife.

Abigail sighed, trying to reassure me. “I see the tabloids too, but remember, the media isn't the whole truth. They may paint him in a certain light, but he treats you better than anyone else. You can't control who you fall in love with, but don't dismiss him too soon. Give it some time, Azzy. You're not in a rush. If he proves himself to be good for you, don't let anything stop you. You deserve happiness after everything you've been through. Give it a chance. I have a feeling it'll be great between you two.” I contemplated her words while trying to get ready for the date that was both exciting and nerve-wracking.

“Well, if you aren't the therapist of the year,” I teased Abigail, trying to lighten the mood.

“Let's leave that to Dr. Green, but it's clear to see how much happier and content you are. Enjoy it to the fullest,” she advised with enthusiasm. She seemed even more excited about my love life than I was.

We moved on to talking about Joshua and she dismissed it stating she's focusing on herself and she's taking her therapy seriously.

I was genuinely proud of her and didn't hesitate to convey that with a smile.

“Go get 'em. I'm here for you whenever you need,” I assured her.

“Yes, but now you need to get dressed. I'm sure he'd love nothing more than to see you in that crimson dress. You know how to make him drool,” Abigail teased, ending the conversation with a playful wink.

We ended the call, and I finished getting ready. I was counting the seconds until she returned to the city. Life was

different without her, but with Dillon around, it wasn't as bad as it could have been.

After moments of worrying and getting ready, I stood in front of the mirror. I'd chosen a crimson satin silk lace-up mini dress, paired with gold accessories and clear 3 inch heels.

As I was about to head out, my phone's distinct message tone drew my attention. It was a call from Dillon, asking if he should come up or wait in the car.

"I'll meet you down there," I responded quickly, a tinge of excitement in my voice.

My heart raced as I entered the elevator to go down. The anticipation was building, and a sense of bliss began to replace my initial worries. With each floor that passed, I couldn't help but giggle softly, my excitement growing.

Dillon had a way of making me feel something special, something different, something I couldn't define, but I didn't want it to stop.

Stepping out of the elevator, I made my way to the shiny black Bentley parked by the curb. All of Dillon's cars had golden license plates with "X's" engraved on them, reflecting his possessiveness in every aspect of his life.

Lucio, emerged from the car and opened the back door, and I was frightened. I was expecting Mikkel.

I'd seen Dillon in various states, but nothing compared to Dillon in formal attire. The perfection of his suits left me breathless. I couldn't help but gaze at how attractive he was.

"Are you going to come inside the car, or will you just keep drooling?" he teased.

"Both," I mumbled.

I managed to climb into the car, and Dillon promptly pulled me onto his lap, enveloping us in a warm, passionate hug. He admired my appearance, praising the crimson dress I'd chosen, leaving me feeling flustered.

"You're gorgeous," he gasped, taking in every inch of my appearance. "I can't wait to show you off."

“Where are we going?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

“That’s a surprise,” he smirked, pressing a light kiss on my lips before the car pulled away.

“Before I forget,” he said, and looked up at me, “I have this for you.” He handed me a rather heavy box wrapped in velvet crimson fabric and a note which read: “Flowers aren’t your thing, but this is.”

My eyes softened, and I glanced at him, placing a tender kiss on his lips. Nothing too passionate, at least not yet, but something soft to show him how grateful I am for this. Tucking the box under my arm, I sat down and enjoyed the silence for the rest of the ride which turned out to be excruciatingly long.

“How much longer?” I asked, getting restless. This was the longest ride of my life, and I got bored easily.

“Just a few more blocks. Patience is a virtue.” I rolled my eyes and sank into the seat.

The vibrating sensation of my phone shocked me so badly that I sprang up in the chair. Glancing at the phone screen, I realized it was an alert from Google. My contemplation weighed on whether to click it or leave it alone, but after opening it, I knew I should’ve left it.

Google alert headlined:

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**Billionaire Playboy CEO Dillon Xander is spotted having lunch with an old speculated flame, Nalena Fisher. Read page 6 to find out more.**

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The only thing I’d be reading was how to not have a panic attack in a moving car. My head was spinning, eyes glued to the phone screen, and my blood was boiling. I was sure an egg could fry on my skin right now.

This disturbing pit of jealousy welled up in my body, crawling all the way up to my throat.

Her hands brushed lightly on his bicep as she displayed a million-dollar smile. What made it worse was that the date this

was taken was today. I should've noticed, especially because it's the same clothing he wore as we left his house this morning.

"Precious," he said with a low growl. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," I said, pressing the power button on the phone and turning around in my seat. I just wanted to get this date over with and move on.

The rest of the drive was silent. We could only hear the sound of the car's engine or the wheels against the roads. I assumed we arrived at our destination when I saw Mikkel standing at the entrance and Lucio pulled over into this open space and stopped the car.

Before anyone could help me out, I carefully placed the velvet box on the seat and exited the car.

Mikkel walked over to my side of the car and assisted me around the path, while Dillon walked off with Lucio.

"He'll be back in five minutes," Mikkel said, "would you like to sit by the pond?"

"Sure," I answered, a smile creeping up on the side of my face. This wasn't a smile of attraction but a smile of kindness. He could definitely tell I wasn't in a good mood, and I'm sure he knew why. He gets Dillon's alerts too.

We walked over to the pond and sat at the edge in two leaf-shaped seats and waited.

"Precious," Dillon said, placing his hand on my shoulder. I jumped at the cold feeling of his fingertips touching my shoulder blades, leaving their frosty mark on me. "Let's go."

He held his hand out to help me up, but I asked Mikkel to help me up instead.

We walked over to the date spot, and as mad as I was, I couldn't ignore its beauty. Pink and crimson roses were scattered everywhere, and there was a candlelit dinner in the far side of the garden.

Nature is a fail-safe for me. I loved it. I loved being around it, and it kept me at peace. The candles seemed to be vanilla-

scented, as the more steps I took, the stronger the scent lured me in.

Dillon had asked everyone, including Mikkel and Lucio, to leave us alone in this location.

“What’s up with you and Mikkel?”

“He’s was being nice,” I spat out angrily, with a cloud of annoyance washing over my face.

“Why are you behaving like this? You’ve been off since we were in the car. I thought it was just restlessness due to the long and tiring journey, but obviously it’s something else. Care to enlighten me?”

“Am I your type, Dillon?”

He expressed a confused look and released a heavy sigh. It wasn’t my intention to cause tension or ruin the mood, but someone had to ask the question, and that someone was me.

“I don’t have a type.”

I gave him a smug look.

“That woman in your latest picture looks like your type,” I said, lowering my voice and walking closer to him with the phone.

Dillon grabbed the phone from my hands, assessed the picture, and read through the article. His expression gave me the impression that he was surprised, but I wasn’t entirely sure.

“Yes, that’s me. That was taken today, but don’t feel threatened by Nalena. I’m in business with her and her husband’s company. She’s been a good associate of mine for years. I’ve never been intimate with her or moved on to her. The photo was taken at an awfully misleading time, as the media always does with me,” he scoffed, tightening his grip on the phone, “I can see why you’re upset. I’ll get it removed within the hour.”

Before I could even speak, he grabbed his phone and called his PRC team. It was already 9 at night, and I didn’t

expect him to call, let alone for them to pick up the phone at this late hour.

I stood there in shock for about 20 minutes before he pulled me into his lap, planting kisses on my neck. This wasn't about being intimate; he wanted me to feel safe, to ease my worries.

I couldn't help but melt into his embrace. I stopped talking about the picture; I got all the reassurance I needed.

"Now that we've put that behind us, can we enjoy our dinner?"

"Yes," I said and placed a lingering kiss on his lips, leaving a smudge of my lipstick and to think, I was hoping to keep my makeup intact.

I've been on a few dates, but this one left me completely speechless. I was in awe at his charms.

"Why are we in the middle of nowhere?" I asked while eating my chicken salad.

"We're this far because of you," he said, in a rather harsh tone. *Ouch*. Before I could manage to say a word in response, he continued speaking. "You're the reason I do everything these days. It's driving me mad. Getting jealous was never a part of who I was. I don't envy anyone. But all of a sudden, you swooped in, and all I can think about is hurting the next male who walks close to you. All I do is breathe you. I've never lost control over myself. I don't ever plan dates. I'm not romantic, but for you, the moon would be delivered at your feet if you asked. I've never been that way with anyone. So yes, we're this far because of you. You want us private, so I gave you a space where the only persons here are us. You're free to breathe, speak, and act. It's all because of you."

I thought I was going to pass out.

My heart rate sped up. *Was it possible to get a heart attack from just listening to someone?* I felt my entire body shift, and my heart sank. The lines, *"All I do is breathe you. I've never lost control over myself. I don't ever plan dates. I'm not*



*romantic, but for you, the moon will be delivered at your feet.”*  
The tears welled in my eyes, but I quickly held them back.

*Now’s not the time. Get yourself together, Azzaria.*

Nothing I could ever say would be sufficient enough to counter that strong argument he had, so we now sat, facing each other in utter silence.

“Dillon, I—”

“You don’t need to respond. I just needed to say that. I needed to let you know that my head is no longer mine because you have captivated it.

“You don’t need to worry about any other guys. I’m here with you,” I said, my tone soft and smooth.

“I do trust you; however, this is hardly dinner chatter. Tell me my two daily things about you; we didn’t do it today.”

My gaze upon him deepened, almost like I was losing my mind.

“I either eat a lot or not at all, and I’m good at gymnastics.”

“That explains your performance in bed. It’s immaculate. I should give your gymnastics teacher a gift,” he laughed.

My eyes bulged, and heat rushed through my body.

My cheeks flushed, but not from embarrassment.

“There’s nothing immaculate about the things we do in bed, but moving on, what are your two things.”

“Contrary to popular belief, I do, in fact, have friends, and I color-code my journal entries. Whenever I’m writing on good topics, I use light blue, and when I’m talking about bad topics, I use a darker blue.” *What? Color-code? He surprised me more and more everyday.*

“You’re a softy at heart. No one can tell me otherwise,” I exclaimed.

“Shhh, don’t let people know that.”

“Who are your friends?”

“Well, there’s Bryce, Arnoldo, Mikkel, Lucio, Ronan, and Alexander.”

“Tell me how you met them.”

“Bryce, Ronan, Lucio, and I grew up together. Mikkel, Arnoldo, and I went to the same college and shared a dorm,” he shared a reminiscent and hearty chuckle. He was happy to talk about this, and I was happy that he was sharing it with me. “Lucio and Ronan are twins, and they’re Italian. We have joint ventures here in the US and over in Europe too, and Alexander is Mara’s husband. We’ve bonded, and we paint together whenever he’s not busy.”

The “asshole” Dillon Xander isn’t an asshole, at least not behind closed doors.

A permanent smile was placed on my face while I sat down listening to him speak excitedly and eagerly about his friends and even sharing some college stories.

“Ronan seems charming,” I expressed.

He tightened his grip on the fork and stared me dead in the eyes. “Yeah, you’re never meeting him.”

“You’re too jealous for your own good, Mr. Xander.”

“Well— excuse me.” His phone started to ring, which ruined the mood, might I add, but I understand how important he is. Dillon excused himself from the table and went to take the call.

I could see that he stepped into a shed-like building with glass doors and windows. I couldn’t hear anything he was saying, but it was easy to tell he wasn’t happy. The variation from pacing to arms being flared in the air, and even the way his jaw moved in such an asymmetrical manner.

As I was approaching the area, Mikkel and Lucio appeared and stopped me in my tracks. “Ms. Willis, we were instructed to take you home.” *Home? What do they mean?*

“Wait, but our date isn’t o—”

“We know, and he’s sorry about it, but he has to leave now. I’m not at liberty to tell you what the matter is, mainly because

I'm unaware of it, but he advised us by text to make sure you get home safely. Compliance is necessary, so please." *I'm livid*. No matter what has happened, I didn't expect that Dillon would have to leave and didn't say goodbye himself.

A cloud of darkness was forming over my heart, and I felt like I was getting breathless. It wouldn't even make sense to ask him because I know he'd just change the topic. Glancing back in the room, I saw him still on the phone while I walked away with Lucio and Mikkel and they took me home.

They dropped me off at the curb, and I made my way up the elevator, in a worse mood than when I left.

The velvet-covered box he gave me was still tucked under my arm, but I had no intentions of opening it just yet.

He just left. There was no text message. No call. No voicemails. He just left. I had no answers, and I wanted answers so badly. I knew him better than this to know that he wouldn't have just left.

I stripped, butt naked, and I went to lay down. My hand rubbed across the velvet fabric, and my brain processed the note over and over again.

*"Flowers aren't your thing, but this is."*

My curiosity got the better of me, and I opened the gift.

*Holy shit*. This was not the time to get all smiley with him, but how could I not? Stacked in the box were five hardcover, limited-edition cover, signed books by Sylvia Day. *Wow*. I've told him about these books before, but I didn't know he'd actually get them.

The passion for reading was always a strong one since I was little, but my mom didn't have nearly enough money to buy the books in paperback. I'd have to read them on the school computers or download them on my phone.

My hand roamed over the call button about twelve times before I had to remind myself of what I deserved. I wouldn't call him first about anything; he needs to explain it to me. If I let him get away with this once, he'll feel compelled to pull this trick all the time.

Plus, for a man who sets the bar so high, he better have a good way of making it up to me.

Thoughts flooded my brain, wild thoughts, but I shoved them to the back of my mind and went to sleep. Nothing beats a crappy day better than a nice long slumber.

## CHAPTER 21

# *Azzaria*

THE SMELL OF STRONG BLACK COFFEE, WAFFLES, AND BACON filled the air. I wondered if I was dreaming, or if I forgot to close my window before bed. Either way, I jumped up from my sleep and looked around. Climbing out of bed, I saw coffee in the percolator and sizzling pots on the stove.

A cold air also rushed over my body, hardening my nipples, and that's when I realized I was fully naked. There's someone in my apartment, I'm naked and just standing here. I should be more alarmed, but I felt safe, almost like it's Abigail here.

Picking the robe off the ground, I dragged it over my body and walked around the flat. There's a 0.1% chance I did all this in my sleep, or someone's actually here.

"Abigail," I shouted, "Abigail-Ann. Abi—holy shit," I screamed and backtracked my steps. *This wasn't what I expected.*

"Scream louder so the entire city can hear you." I've never met a more snarky person than the one standing in front of me right now.

"Dillon, why are you here?" As I saw his face, the memories of the night before flooded my brain. The way he left me without explanation and how much it hurt to see all that happen.

"I came to apologize. I thought about texting you, but that wouldn't be enough. I'm sorry for walking out on our dinner.

It was immoral of me, and it wasn't fair to you. I came off as an—”

“Asshole? Yes, you did. I know you're busy—one of the busiest ever. But you could've taken a minute or less to tell me that we had to cut it short. It fucking sucked to hear from your drivers that you had to leave.”

By the way, how did he get in? Did I leave my door open? What the fuck? “And how did you get inside?”

“I'm sorry. Alex called me because Mara almost had a tiny stroke. I panicked and had to leave but I should've told you first. You deserve a lot better than that. I got inside because I fund your school's housing programme, so it wasn't hard to get in.” He stood tall in his lazy sweats and a plain T-shirt. If you saw him the way I was seeing him right now, you'd never think he was the billionaire CEO that's displayed on TVs and magazines. He looked vulnerable.

*And wait. Did he just say Mara had a stroke?*

“Thank you for telling me and thanks for coming here. I appreciate it.” My steps toward him quickened until we were wrapped in each other's arms. My head on his chest, listening to how beautiful his heartbeat was.

“And why didn't you tell me that you fund my school's housing program? And is Mara okay? How's her baby?”

“Because I thought you would have realized the connection with the name; Xander Towers.” *He's right.* I never thought about my school's housing name before, and wow, what a small world this is. “She's good now, but she wasn't before and her baby is okay.”

His manly scent was overcrowding my brain. I couldn't think straight. I love how he smelt, how he felt, how he tasted, how he spoke— oh God, he's completely inhabited my body and my thoughts.

“Thank you for the books,” I said and pulled away from the hug, walking over to the coffee maker. “They're beautiful.”

“Let me,” he said and started making the coffee. I watched as he put the right amount of creamer and sugar using the tiny

measuring spoons I had.

I've never told him how I made my coffee, but I've made it many times at the office. He pays attention, and that's the best thing to ever know. "You're welcome. You deserve the best." He handed me the cup of coffee and poured his out. He's a black coffee type of guy. No added sugar. Nothing. Straight black coffee. What a psycho he is.

"The coffee is good. How'd you know I liked this?"

"I texted your friend Abigail, and she told me. I had an idea because I've seen you do it in the office, but as I stepped through the door and took the first glance at you, I could only think of how beautiful you are. She also threatened me," he said, with a light chuckle.

I choked on my coffee and let out a laugh. Only Abigail would threaten one of the world's most powerful men and get away with it. I loved her to death. "How'd you get her number? And what did she say?"

"When I explained the situation to Mikkel, he gave me advice along with her number. I think they're fond of each other." *Trust me, I think they're fond of each other too.* "As for what she told me, I'm sure you already know, but either way, can we do a do-over date?"

"I don't know," I said playfully, "what if the president calls you next, you know?" His expressions softened, and he grabbed my waist, pulling me in. I love these moments between us. The "fight" wasn't gone from my brain, but it was the least important thing in my life right now.

"Precious," he said in a low voice, "what are you doing today?"

"I'm going to call my mom."

"Let me know how it goes. I have to do painting today, and Mara's going into labor anytime soon. I'm getting a nephew..." His tone didn't give off too much as he seemed very neutral on the matter, so I didn't push it along too much.

As I stared into Dillon's bright hazel eyes, I felt captivated. I want to believe he was the one, and I wanted it to work, but I

knew how much of a fuck up I was. I knew how sad I was, and how my past reeked of disgust, embarrassment, and shame. However, a small feeling came over my body with a voice popping into my head saying it was going to work out. I hope it did work out. I needed it to. Something told me that we both needed it.

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### *Dillon*

Azzaria messaged me saying she had to get stuff done at school because her graduation is upcoming, and she told me about the talk with her mom.

Aside from us being whatever we are—I don't know the labels yet, she's a great assistant. Everything's been done timely, and she doesn't even need the training. Which saved my team and I a lot of time. I sometimes find myself forgetting that this is just an internship.

I sat around my desk, staring at the file Mikkel and Arnaldo gave me some time ago. My mind weighed on opening it, but I didn't know what to do.

This was an ultimate violation of privacy, and if she saw it, I'm sure whatever we had would be done. But on the other hand, I needed to know. I needed to know something more about her— everything. *Fuck it. I'm opening it.*

The first page made me sick to my stomach. There was background on her family life, and then a few lines about her father. There was a story about how much he abused both Azzaria and her mom—there was even mentions of rape but it was speculated. Nothing confirmed.

My brain quickly ran to the first sexual encounter we had, and I saw some very distinct markings and scars over her body. The obvious thing to do was to not point them out, but my mind did wonder about them, and now I know why.

By the time I've read page 6, I threw the file down, stopped reading, and called Arnaldo, Lucio and Mikkel. Her protection needed to be ensured.



“You called?” Arnaldo said as he took a seat on the couch, followed by Mikkel and Lucio entering the room.

“Yes. I did. We have matters to discuss. First things first, I need a discreet watch on Ms. Willis. Nothing obvious, please, but a close watch on her. I just want to know where she is at all times. This protection order may be extended to her mother and her best friend, Abigail.”

“Are you sure you’re not fucking her? Why are you so interested in this one girl?”

I sighed. “No, I’m not *just* fucking her. We’re dating.”

Arnaldo looked at me with shocking expressions and turned to Mikkel and Lucio. “Did you two know?”

They remained silent but the look they gave him answered all the questions. “Does Ronan know?”

“Is it important if Ronan knows?”

“Yes, actually.” He jumped. “How am I the last to know, and I’m the attorney? What happened to being friends?”

God, this was so dramatic, but somehow I expected this behavior from everyone except Arnaldo. “Arnaldo.” My voice raised. “You can bitch later. Do what I ask.”

“Got it. Anything else?”

I had one more thing I needed, and whenever it was done, I’d handle it myself. “I need the whereabouts and a file on Michael Willis. He’s her father. Get me that as soon as you can. Relate the message to your legal team.”

I finished up my conversation with them and walked back over to my seat. This was the only way I knew to protect her. I needed her safe and protected at all times. It doesn’t matter who or what else got hurt, as long as it wasn’t her.

At times I felt like I was losing the control I’ve tried so fucking hard to keep all these years, but in retrospect, everything looked to be happening for a reason.

“Sir,” Mellissa said as she walked in looking all chirpy. She was a morning person like myself. A well-respected one.

“You have the call with Bahrain Communications now. Send it through?” I advised her to send it through, and I drank some water while I waited for the connections to happen. Bahrain communications may be a small entity, but they were one of the smartest. Their vast technology, the staff, and even down to their programming had me mesmerized. It wasn’t anything like the one we had here in NYC, but it was a really good system.

Mr. Shanfani, the CEO, wanted us to enter a twelve-month contract whereas we both gained profit and capitalized on our staff. The ones here would swap with the ones there for a six-month period, and then we’d have rotations. I sent the file to Reyes for him to proofread and make any adjustments he saw fit.

Melissa nodded at me through the glass, and I picked the phone up. “Good morning, Mr. Shanfani.”

“Mr. Xander, the world’s busiest guy, what’s going on?”

*Rule number one of business: Do not buy the whole nice act from anyone. They’re all vultures.*

I was well aware that my grand-father cheated him out of twenty-seven million dollars just a few years ago, and I know that vengeance was always on the table with these types of men— they never let anything go.

But good God, Neil Xander. He ruined, he destroyed, and he was a fucking shit businessman, but he was the best grand-father ever.

We began by discussing the contract that was executed some time ago and how my team and I believed it required a revision, as I was set to receive a rather minimal payout. He explained to me that it was an oversight, and as a result, we finalized the agreement, leaving me feeling victorious.

The rest of the Tuesday was just press conferences and sending emails to our various stock brokers. HR has been slacking off lately. I wouldn’t have a problem if the circumstances were different, but it was costing me clients, and that was something I didn’t find amusing.

“Reyes,” I said smoothly as I answered my phone.

“Get to the press room now. We’re running a business, not a shit show.” He was clearly still mad about being left out of the loop.

“Arnoldo, I’m on my way— give me a few minutes.”

“If you’re going to use the time to kiss your girlfriend, it can wait. You have important things to do.”

“Make no mistake, Arnoldo. Talk your shit on everything else, but leave her name alone. It’s no one’s fault you’re stuck fucking way through the 50 states in America.”

The line fell silent for a while until I cut the call and went to the press conference, which was boring, so much so that I stayed for thirty minutes and then went back to my office.

Moments later, I heard a conversation coming from her office.

“Hey Azzaria,” I heard Mellissa say as she approached the door, “is he busy?”

“Why?”

“He messaged me because we need to speak logistics. I was at lunch, so I came after. Can I go in?”

“Let me go che—”

“Mellissa, you can come in. I’m free,” I said when I walked over to the door. She entered the office, and I went to Azzaria.

Whispering in her ear, I said, “It won’t take long. I’ll see you after.” She smiled and walked over to her seat.

“Let’s talk about Operation 12.” Operation 12. I haven’t heard that file name in years. I thought she left after our brief encounter at the baby shower but I stand corrected, Camilla’s back long term.

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“Camilla.” My tone was low. “Operation 12? You’re back?”

Camilla Rodriguez, the most vindictive yet charming blonde you'll ever be acquainted with.

“Dillon Xander. *My muse.*”

Never did I ever expect that I'd be here having dinner with her, not after how nasty everything went down, but she called, and here we were.

“How have you been? Are you done buying out Europe?”

“I left a little piece of it for you; don't worry,” she leaned into my ear and whispered, ending with a slight chuckle, “I'm in town for the week, and I missed my best lay. The lay of the century.” A deep level of unease came over me.

“I thought we were friends and business partners.”

“We could've been, but life didn't quite work out that way. What have you been up to? Have you gotten rid of Annalise yet?”

My expressions hardened at the mention of her name. I hated her with every bone in my body. “You love to play dirty. We both know my hatred for her runs deep.”

“It's funny how you hate my sister, but here you and I are being life-long friends,” she grinned, placing her hands over mine. I pulled my hands from hers and sat up on the seat. The feeling of unease washed me once more and my spirit dampened. I wished I was here with Azzarria instead.

“You hate her more than I do,” I noted. Camilla and Annalise cut contact the minute she found out I was marrying Annalise.

“She took what's mine, but we don't cry over spilled milk. Are you ready to take over Operation 12? Your grandparents would be so proud if they were here to see it.” I felt the genuineness of this statement, and it gave me some warmth but I knew Camilla, she wasn't just here because of this.

Operation 12 was pivotal for them. It not only served as the launchpad for my grandpa's brand but also coincided with the moment he met the love of his life, Evelyn Ramona Smith-Xander, my grandmother.

Camilla's involvement stemmed from her father—he was a direct engineer of my grandfather. We worked day in and out to add to the plan, but once my grandparents died, I shut the plan down and refused to continue, as it felt wrong—like I was cheating them.

“Always ready to take over anything.”

“I won't lie,” she said, twirling her hand around the rim of her drink. Whiskey on the rocks—a classic. “I've missed you. Doesn't matter if it's years or months. We had something real, and then you broke my heart—the only way of life you know.”

My teeth gritted and my muscles flexed. I know that behind every ounce of charm Camilla possessed, there was also deep hatred and loneliness after I married Annalise. She hated me for months. Ended every business contract we had, backed out of all deals, and even left the city.

I even remembered her words: *I can't watch you love my sister in front of me. I should be happy for her, but I'm not, and I'll never be. I never want you two to work out, but I always want your happiness. I have to leave.*

My infatuation for both women were long gone. And even if they weren't, Azzaria removed every nerve in my body that could need another woman the way I needed her.

“Camilla, we had good years, but it's over. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't. It's not fair to her,” I sorrowfully admitted.

“Her who? Annalise?” She asked in disbelief but soon her eyes widened, and she gasped. “The girl you took to Mara's baby shower. Does she know how messed up you are? How twisted you are? How much of a goddamn heartbreaker you are?”

“She knows everything she needs to. Why are you actually here, Camilla? I'm sure it's not to wish me well on Operation 12.”

I grabbed my things, walked out of the restaurant, and went directly to the silver BMW parked on the side. There was

no reason to stay any longer; the dinner was a complete mistake, and I should've known better than to meet with her.

“Dillon,” Mikkel shouted, “you’ll want to see this.”

Taking the iPad from him, I saw the latest tabloid which I’m sure Azzaria was looking at too.

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**JUST IN: Dillon Xander reunited with his ex-lover Camilla Rodriguez at Rosseau Road, NYC. Scroll to page 10 to see more spicy pictures and insiders on them.**

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“Get the press on the phone now. I need this down.” This was my life. Tabloids always coming up at the wrong time, and I could only imagine what Azzaria was going through reading this.

## CHAPTER 22

# *Azzaria*

I WAS STUCK ON THE PICTURE. MY MIND WAS BETRAYING ME as much as my eyes did. *Why did I check my notifications this morning?*

When he told me there was a dinner with a friend, I thought he meant Ronan or Lucio or one of the others. I didn't know he meant her.

I spent the last few hours in the supply closet googling "Camilla Rodriguez", looking at all the articles and how many times she's been pictured with Dillon. Which might I add, is a lot, though there's nothing recent. It irked me that I couldn't have that same public image with him, but I couldn't do any better. *Too much was on the line.*

"Hi."

"Hey ZZ, how are you?"

"I'm not even sure, but how are you? How's things been with a newborn?" I had to call Mara. She was the only person who could've given me the answers I so desperately needed.

"They've been good. He's a sleepy little guy. When are you coming to meet him?"

"I'll come by soon. I have something to ask if you're not busy."

"Go ahead. Alex has the baby so we're good."

"It's about Dillon," I started, "I saw a Google alert come in of him close to this woman and I—"

She interrupted me with a sigh and started talking. “Camilla.” I’ve heard that name before but I can’t pinpoint where. “She and Dillon had a sexual relationship in the past, but Dillon ended up marrying her sister because he fell in love or he thought he did. He was manipulated by Annalise. Camilla is a scorned lover, and she put up fights to keep Dillon, but he didn’t want her the way she wanted him, so he left. Life moved on, and she always pops up out of nowhere, like at my baby shower.” *Yes. That’s where I knew her from. She was standing with Dillon.*

I couldn’t stop myself from asking. “Did he love her?”

“No. It was purely sexual, and when he called it off, she wasn’t ready for that and made a huge spectacle which costed him millions.”

The line fell silent for a few minutes until she spoke up again. I was speechless.

“Talk to him whenever you get the chance. He can never deny you, and that’s where you have your leverage.”

We finished up the conversation, and I went back to my desk. It’s either I spoke to him about it now, or I let it eat me up inside. And I wasn’t planning on the latter.

“We’ll talk later, Dillon,” I heard Camilla say to him as I approached the door.

I scoffed and walked inside.

“Do you think this is a fucking game?” I stormed into his office. Dillon’s head spun around in shock.

“Good morning to you too. Where have you been, baby?” I rolled my eyes.

“Don’t act like everything is fine.”

“I’m confused. What is happening? I haven’t seen you all day and I texted you, you didn’t answer and then I got held up in a meeting so I couldn’t come and see you.”

“Where were you last night?” I asked.



He stared at me, blankly. “I told you I had a din—you saw the tabloid.”

“Not only did I see the tabloid, I saw her leaving your office a minute ago, looking as pleased as ever.”

“Bab—”

“Don’t baby me. If you’re gonna fuck her the—”

“Don’t go there,” he said, interrupting me, “She and I did not have sex, nor am I planning to. Have we had sex? Many times in the past, but that’s all it was, in the past.” He leapt to his feet and took a next step forward, gently pushing me into the corner. I remained still, her expressions frozen. “I’m sure I’m not the only person you’ve ever slept with.”

“You don’t see me going to dinners with the men I’ve slept with, and that isn’t the point.”

“Look, I—” I was over this conversation because he clearly wasn’t seeing my point.

“I’m going to go. Do you even want me, or is this all a joke? Do whatever you want. I don’t think you’re understanding my point, and you could’ve also told me.”

“Camilla is a long-time friend, from when my grandparents were alive. Do she and I have history? Yes, but that’s all it is. She made her move, and I made it clear that I was with you and that I want you. And to answer your question, of course, I want you. All I ever want is you. These past months have been fucking hell. Everything I do reflects you, and it’s maddening. I am sorry for not telling you about the tabloid, and for the impression it gave, but don’t ever question whether I want you or not.”

“I get it,” I said, my small arms around his torso, “it just makes me uncomfortable.”

“You want her gone?” He asked, petting my hair. I nodded softly in response, just resting on his chest. “Then I’ll have her gone, precious. I’ll do anything for you, and I’m so sorry.”

We pulled apart from the hug, staring each other in the eyes. “I’ll let you get back to work,” I said to him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I am.” I wasn’t.

“Okay, I promise I’ll make it up to you.” *Oh, he better.* He kissed me senselessly, and I walked out the door to use the bathroom.

I got back to my desk and peeked into Dillon’s office. He was busy on a call, so I just decided to check my phone.

MOM

Azzaria. Call me now.

The last time she texted me like this, she told me of a very violent incident with my father. I could only imagine the devastating news I was gonna get.

There were tons of other messages from Abigail and even Doctor Green. My level of concern immediately rose— *what the fuck was happening?*

“Hey, Mom.”

“Hello, Janey.” The only times my mother used the pet name “Janey” was if she was buttering me up to tell her something or if something had gone terribly wrong. “How are you?”

“Mom, what happened?”

“The police called me. Matthew’s in town. I’m so, so—”  
Everything stopped.

My heart stopped beating.

My lungs stopped receiving air, and the only thing that started was the tears flowing down my face.

My feet went numb, and my heart ached. I’ve never quivered so badly at the mention of anyone, but I knew the damage he could do. I knew what he was capable of, and that scared me. Matthew ruined me in ways and I couldn’t explain and everytime I move from it, he comes back.

My mom continued talking, but I didn't hear anything. My brain was on a pause, a shocker, and suddenly, I was reliving everything that happened. All the dirty names he called me, and most importantly, that stupid tape. *God.*

“Mom, I'll call you later.”

As I hung up the phone with her, it vibrated, and I saw that Abigail left me a message. She didn't expect me to respond or call her with any form of urgency; she just wanted me to know she was there, and that's all I could ask for.

ABIGAIL-ANN

my flight just booked. I'll be with you within the next two days or less. I love you, Azzaria. You're my best friend, and nothing will happen to you, I promise.

Reading it, my mind flashed back to five and a half years ago.

*Our relationship wasn't the best one, but it wasn't so bad. Matthew's an okay boyfriend, but maybe if I had done a better job at pleasing him, he would've liked me more. That's something he always tells me anyway. Today was our anniversary, and I was very excited about it.*

*“Hey,” he said, greeting me with a kiss, “You look hot.”*

*“Thank you.”*

*“Let's have some fun,” he said with a smirk. I wasn't in the mood to have sex; my body didn't even feel like it's ready for all that—not while I'm this sick.*

*I sighed and started walking out of his sight. I hated telling him “no,” especially because I had the most grand idea of how odd he would start behaving. To him, “no” didn't mean “no.” He'd never take it for an answer, but I prayed that tonight would be very different.*

*“Where the fuck are you going?” He shouted and leapt to his feet. I could definitely see where this was now headed, and I hated it.*

*“I’m going to bed. I can’t have sex right now. I’m sick.”*

*The anger was evident all over his face, and before I knew it, I was pushed down to my knees, and he had unbuckled his belt. The tears in my eyes just flowed without any warning. I was tired of living like this—I needed a way out, but I couldn’t get one because everyone loved him, and his dad is the governor.*

*Everything went to a blur, and all I could recall were the names he called me.*

*“Your mouth is definitely better like this.”*

*“My ex’s did a better job.”*

*“For someone with the body of a whore, you definitely don’t know how to use it well.”*

*And. That. Fucking. Hurt. To. Hear.*

*He ejaculated, got dressed, and left me on the ground. I was a cold, sad, teary-eyed shell of a person, and I hated it. It had to stop here, and that’s when I reached out to Abigail.*

*Nothing hurts worse than being sexually harassed and left by your boyfriend. One who’s supposed to love you, give you care, and make life a little bit better. But instead, all Matthew gave me was trauma, fear, disassociation, and emotional scars that would never heal. He was not like my dad. He was my dad, and that’s the realization I needed to get the fuck out of there.*

My body shuddered at that flashback, and I was almost sure my skin was pale. I got a Google alert about Dillon, which snapped me out of my thoughts.

It wasn’t anything terrifying, so to speak, but it gave me the biggest realization.

I needed to tell him about Matthew, and I needed to do it before Matthew showed up. It wouldn’t be long before he did. It wasn’t his style. Matthew was truly never himself if he didn’t come on and wreak havoc in my life. All those years weren’t enough for him; he had to permanently damage me so I’d be good for nothing else but death.

My fear wasn't even finding the words to tell him. My fear was his reactions.

I couldn't hold back anymore, and I ran to the bathroom, throwing up the contents of all the food I've eaten for the past two weeks.

After washing up, I ran back to my desk and went over everything I needed to do today. I had to see Doctor Green, and I needed to talk to Dillon. If not now, before it's too late. The only thing that hurt worse than the thought of losing him was the thought of him leaving me.

"Precious," he said, peeking his head through the door, "come here."

I somehow found the strength in my legs to get up and go to him. I'm hoping that today's one of the days where he doesn't notice anything about me. Where he'll overlook the fact that I'm actively shaking and my skin is as pale as it's ever been, but knowing my devilish lover—he won't.

"What's wrong?" He asked after looking at me, but I looked everywhere except in his eyes.

"Nothing," I plainly said, looking down at my feet.

"Who do I need to kill, Azzaria? Who hurt you baby?" If it were anyone else who asked that question, I would've cringed, but I knew he was serious.

He would kill for me. And that made me even more so terrified about telling him.

"Dillon," I said and released a breath, "you don't need to hurt anyone, baby. I'm okay. I'm just sick."

"I've seen you sick, but right now, you look terrified. You look like you want to be obliterated or you wouldn't mind if the earth swallowed you whole. So, I'll ask you one more time, what's wrong?"

"I feel awful. My body hurts. I just want to rest. I'll be okay." In reality, I was trying to convince myself more than I was trying to convince him.

He took small but greatly impacted steps towards me and looked me straight in the eyes. I've always noticed his eyes, but I've never spent minutes looking at the beauty. They were easy to get lost in, and the minute they fluttered and softened, a tear streamed down my cheek.

I was breaking down... in front of him, and I didn't know why, but I just knew I had to break eye contact and look down at my shoes. I didn't want him to see me like this— he didn't deserve to.

The once so soft glint in his eyes turned into feral rage. He was angry. But not at me. His hold on me increased. He was holding me as if I needed protection and not comfort. I felt safe.

He lifted my chin with his index finger, brushed the tears from my cheek, and whispered, “when I find out who did this to you, they better pray to God that I'm in the best possible mood or they'll pray they never came into close proximity with you.” All while he's trembling with anger and sorrow.

“Dillon, I—”

“Don't talk. Did you drive here today?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I don't want you to be alone, I want you to be protected. So, if it's okay with you, could Lucio drive you home and take you wherever, just until you're better. I want you safe especially when I can't be there to protect you.”

I went silent. “What would I do with my car then?”

“It's safe here. You don't have to accept, I just want you to be safe.”

I sighed. “Okay.”

He smiled and grabbed his phone making a call.

“Lucio. Ora sei incaricato di proteggere e portare in giro la signorina Willis. I tuoi ordini ora provengono da lei e me, capito?”

The phone call ended, and Dillon's gaze returned to me. "This is going to come off as me being overprotective, but Lucio is at your service. Anything you need, he's there to give it to you." He's right, it did, but at least I knew he cared about me.

"Thank you. I just don't want to be a burden."

"You're not a burden, precious. I'm glad you're allowing me to do things for you."

"Yeah, but we're not boyfriend and girlfriend, so, and just because we're screwing around and you're a millionaire doesn't mean you should—"

He released a low growl and gripped my waist tighter. He was annoyed at what I just said, and it wasn't until I said it that I had realized how badly it sounded.

"Firstly, I'm a multi-billionaire, precious. And secondly, labels are weak, but you're mine. Mine to kiss. Mine to have. Mine to taste. Mine to fuck. Mine to spoil. *All mine*. So I don't give a fuck about stupid boyfriend and girlfriend labels. You're mine, and the minute we crossed paths, you and I both knew that."

*"You're mine, and the minute we crossed paths, you and I both knew that."* I faced him, and that's the only thing that replayed in my head.

"When I'm better, remind me that I need to give you the most unforgettable night. *You deserve it.*"

His expressions softened, as did my heart, when he replied, "when you're better, we'll go somewhere far away and take your mind off whatever is hurting you."

"Are you downplaying my talents?"

"No," he answered icily. "Never that. I can't downplay something so good. But intimate moments can come after."

"If you say so. I have to run to accounts and then—"

"No. I'll get someone else on that. The rest of the day is yours."

“Dillon, you can’t keep favoring me over your employees. They’ll know about us, and I don’t—”

*How much can I go through in one day?*

“Camilla,” he said, his voice laced with shock.

“Dillon,” she said with a smile, “I came to finish discussing, but you’re busy,” she said, turning her gaze to me. “I’m Camilla, Dillon’s oldest friend.”

“I’m Azzaria.” I said and turned to face him. I didn’t need to introduce myself, I’m sure she knew who I was.

“What are you doing here?” He asked.

“I just came because you were ignoring my calls, but to my surprise you’re here with her. Does she know? Or is she like the rest of us who think you’re the gentleman and prince of peace?” She scoffed.

Dillon’s teeth gritted, and he was opening his mouth to answer but he didn’t. My guess was he didn’t want to give her that satisfaction.

She turned to face me. “Has he ruined you that deep? He doesn’t do face-to-face contact, he doesn’t let women in his house, he doesn’t even do dates. And a woman like you seems to love sweet nothings and happy cuddling. He fucks. He dominates. He punishes, and he doesn’t chase.” Her tone indicated that she was trying to scare me, and I even caught myself wondering if we were talking about the same man.

“Camilla. That’s enough for you. Leave. I’ve had—”.

“Poor Dillon. Always so temperamental. Is that why you told your lawyer that you’re backing out of business with me?” *He did what?*

“Speaking of,” he said and handed her an envelope. She grabbed it roughly, and her eyes bulged as she read what was in it.

“You’re joking. You don’t have that power,” she protested. She clearly doesn’t know who Dillon is then. If he wants the earth to stop spinning, I know it would’ve stopped. He’d find a way.



He chuckled and relaxed his muscles. “You’re nothing, Camilla. I told you, you’re nothing. It’s over.”

“All this for a woman you just met? For new love? God, you son of a...”

Dillon stepped toward her. Not in a sexual way, but in a threatening way.

“Let me make this clear. Say what you want about me, but when it comes to her, I’ll kill you. You and I both know that I’m not a good person, and I can gladly live with killing you and not caring. Remember what happened when your brother crossed me and now he’s resting six feet under, or the parts of him that remained. I don’t play around when it comes to those I care about, Camilla, and I suggest you don’t do the same.”

She looked at him with nothing but a hint of heartbreak and I almost felt bad for her.

“You’re a heartless monster. You destroy people. You are \_\_\_”

“Enough. I made my intentions extremely clear and you kept coming for more. I stayed respectful because we had business but now, you’ve crossed a line. I won’t tell you to leave again.” She couldn’t find any words to respond and hastily left the office with her envelope. I turned to Dillon, and his gaze had softened. It amazed me how he could be ruthless in his professional life, but when he looked at me, his demeanor warmed.

“What was in the envelope?”

“I ensured she won’t be able to work on American soil again. She’s financially ruined. I told her to leave, and she didn’t, which made you upset.”

*Note to self: never provoke him.*

“I’m not the man you think I am, Azzaria,” he continued. “I’m not a person with a clean record. I can be ruthless, but for you, I’m trying to change, to be better.”

Trust me, I knew. I could sense it, and I should be frightened. I should be able to walk away, but I couldn’t. I

didn't want to. "I know."

"I need you to understand that I'm not a Prince Charming. I'm not a man who's all purity." He was trying to make me reconsider, but we were both stubborn. He'd have to try much harder to make me leave.

"You may not be an angel, but if I wanted an angel, I'd date the guy who serves me coffee on North Street. You are Dillon Xander, and I want you as you are. I want your dark, complex, and even your uglier sides because, when combined, they don't even come close to outweighing your best qualities. You can't push me away. I'm not going anywhere."

He sighed and pulled me in for a kiss. My life was anything but mundane.

---

"Do you have to tell Dillon everything?"

"I don't have to, but I prefer to be honest with him. I love my life, not planning on dying anytime soon." He said this playfully, but there was a hint of seriousness beneath it. "But if you're involved, he'll be nice."

"Nice?"

"Yes. You make him nicer. Without you, he's like the Antarctic—cold as ice."

What was odd was that I believed him. Dillon's reputation painted him as ruthless, cold-hearted, and a shrewd player with one concern—himself. But they didn't know him the way I did. "He's different with me."

"We know that or well most of us. Ronan still doesn't know."

"It's fun hearing about him with his friends. He doesn't socialize much," I pointed out with a chuckle, "but you guys are still alive and kicking, so it must count."

"Yeah, we don't go around expressing our love for each other, but we've been through thick and thin together. Why did you ask me that earlier?"

“Curiosity.”

“Okay, and Ms. Willis,” he said as he looked at me through the mirror, “he’s never been happier or calmer. Please don’t break his heart. He may be an asshole, but he’s been through hell.”

I took his words to heart and offered only a smile in response. For once, I had no words, just a comforting silence. Yet, in that silence, a multitude of thoughts swirled in my mind, and one dominated.

*Matthew.*

He could show up at any time, and I wouldn’t even know it. For all I knew, he could be watching me. This further emphasized the importance of telling Dillon everything.

Lucio dropped me off at the therapist’s office, and I made my way inside.

“Azzaria,” I heard Dr. Green call out, and all the fear that had left me earlier returned.

“Abigail called me today. She’s worried about you, but she knows I’ll take care of you and do my best to help you. With that said, what’s going on?”

With the fear rattling my bones, I told her everything. I told her that Matthew was here and how terrified I was and for the first time ever, she was speechless.

“Azzaria.” She sighed, the water pooling in her eyes. “I’m so sorry. But we’ll get you through this. Not just in therapy but also in terms of seeking justice.”

The words I wanted to say eluded me, so I shared a smile with her and clung to the nearest pillow. In my mind, it was Dillon. That’s who I wanted it to be, and frankly, that’s who I needed.

She switched the topic by getting me to talk about my relationship with Dillon, and I told her just about everything. It wasn’t easy talking about this with anyone, but she made me feel safe and listened to.

“Why am I like this?”

“In our first session back, you mentioned Matthew.” The mere mention of his name made my skin crawl with disgust. He wreaked havoc on my life, and it frustrated me that I didn’t have the courage to do the same to him. “You spoke about how he never listened to you, and when you wanted love, he offered the opposite. I believe that you feel you don’t deserve love due to that experience. The trauma from your last serious relationship has a profound impact on your self-esteem.”

It was frustrating that one relationship could have such a lasting, negative impact on everything I did.

*I despised Matthew. I loathed my father.*

*And I just wanted them gone.*

By the time our session ended, night had fallen, and I was emotionally drained. I longed to melt into my pillow and never leave, but how could I be sure it was safe? How could I know that I wouldn’t walk into the residence and find Matthew waiting there, possibly to hurt me?

I pushed my paranoia aside as I walked down the street to catch a cab.

“Could this day get any worse?” I muttered in frustration and sought shelter in the nearest place. Fuck, it started raining.

## CHAPTER 23

# *Dillon*

“GET YOUR HEAD OUT OF YOUR ASS AND HAVE A DRINK,” Ronan shouted.

Ronan Emanuel Romano, also known as my best friend.

He’s pretty wealthy, ranking number 20 on the list, moving up from 25, while I recently moved up from 6 to 3. The sudden elevation was terrifying, but when I was with my friends, wealth didn’t matter. I was thankful for that.

All of us were gathered in my game room for our game night. Due to Ronan’s frequent travels, we missed about three games, and he had the audacity to waltz in like he owned the place. *Asshole*.

“I’ve had my drinks; shut the fuck up. Talk to me when you can win a game of chess.”

*Ronan: Great doctor? Terrible chess player.*

“You’re such an asshole,” he said, rolling his eyes. “What are you thinking about? What did I miss?”

The guys cleared their throats and glanced at me.

“He’s whipped, Ronan. We lost another soldier,” Alexander quipped, a hint of affection in his voice.

“You’re married to my sister and, you just had a baby. Let’s debate the levels of ‘whipped’.”

“Is it Camilla? And what do you mean ‘whipped’? I’m interested.” Did I forget to mention that he was a gossip monger?

I rolled my eyes. “No, it’s not Camilla.”

He looked around, dropped his jaw in shock, and exclaimed, “You’re with the assistant? Isn’t she a student? What?”

“Ronan,” I sighed, “how is this relevant?”

“I’m your best friend; of course, it’s relevant.”

“You all are ins—”

“Dillon,” Lucio called out and rose from the mat, “can I have a minute?” I could see the distress in his eyes, which meant something was wrong with him or with her.

I gave him the nod to approach me, and his words ignited anger within me.

“I’ll be back soon,” I informed the group and made my way out of the room.

“Wait!” Ronan protested, “where are you going?”

“Out.” The more he talked, the angrier I became. “I shot you once. I will do it again.”

“But we’re—”

“Let him go, Ro. Knock it off,” Mikkell hissed.

I slammed the door and rushed down the stairs to my Aston Martin. The roads were slick and wet, but I didn’t care; I had to get to her. I never thought I’d be driving like a lunatic just because my girlfriend was standing in the rain in a dark alley outside her therapist’s office.

She was standing under a crooked bus stop, drenched from head to toe. Her discomfort was evident, and that made me uneasy.

“Don’t speak. Just get inside.” It wasn’t my intention to project my anger but seeing her like this made me frustrated.

“I’ll get your seats wet.”

“I don’t care about the seats. I can buy eight more cars, but I can’t get eight more of you. So get in, or I’ll bring you in

myself.” *Did she not understand how far I was willing to go for her? Did she think it was a sick joke?*

*Breathe, Dillon, breathe.* She was probably flustered, and I didn’t want to be an asshole.

I couldn’t tell what was going on in her mind. I just wanted to protect her from whoever was responsible for her current state.

“I’m cold. Can we turn down the AC, please?”

The rain was getting heavier by the minute and I could barely see the road, so I pulled over, my fingers gripping the steering wheel extremely tight.

“I don’t think it’s wise for us to have sex in a car; I’m not in the mood,” she said, staring into my eyes.

“That’s not why I pulled over or why I’m taking my shirt off. Put this on.” I removed my button-down shirt and handed it to her. The shirt would fit like a dress and cover her body adequately. If her underwear was wet, I’d give her mine.

“What are you going to wear? I’m sorry for the sex comment; I’m just not okay, and—.” She burst into tears, and I drew her close. I’ve never wanted to see her like this and whoever was responsible, needed to count their fucking days.

“I hate seeing you like this,” I said, gently stroking her hair. “You’re staying with me. I don’t trust anyone else to take care of you except me.”

She made me feel weak, which was a new and unnerving sensation. I’d witnessed bears fighting, lions bursting through zoo gates, killed people in broad daylight, and done many unspeakable things, but I had never felt this kind of vulnerability. I hated the feeling, but I would count every stone on the ground and every grain of sand on the beach if it meant she’d be happy.

We arrived on the top floor using the back entrance to avoid any cameras capturing her.

Approaching the door, the sound of deep masculine voices frightened me. I forgot I had friends over.

“Wow, she’s so—”

“Ronan, if I were you, I’d think carefully about the next word that comes out of your mouth.”

“That’s Azzaria,” he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. “Hello. I’m Ronan, Dillon’s bestfriend,” he said with a smile.

“Hello,” she replied awkwardly, clutching my hand tightly.

“I don’t bite, you know?”

I rolled my eyes at his comment, and she walked off to my room. The sooner they left, the better.

“Look at you, scaring her off, asshat.” There were times I couldn’t stand my friends, and this was one of them.

“Why are you underdressed? You left here in a full suit, as far as I remember.”

“Because it was raining, and she got wet.” I was waiting for one of them to make a snarky remark, but they just stared at me in silence. *Fantastic*.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Alexander and Ronan said in unison.

“You guys do remember I’ve been married before, right?”

“Yes, but you didn’t care that much.” Ronan’s words stung because they were true, but it reminded me of what an asshole I could be.

Annalise and I had a different kind of relationship; I would have done much for her, but she didn’t appreciate anything.

Looking back, I didn’t fall in love with her; I fell in love with the person she pretended to be. And a thing about people is that they can only pretend for so long.

“Is that true?”

“Precious,” I turned to face her. I couldn’t tell what her expression meant, but I hoped she didn’t see me as lifeless and soulless.

“I asked you a question. Is what Ronan said true?”

“Yes, it’s true, but it’s—”



She ran over to me and our lips met. I don't know what I was expecting, but it definitely wasn't a kiss.

"Don't you ever break my heart. I need to talk to you in private once your friends leave. You're an awesome boyfriend; she didn't deserve to know you the way I do, and I'm glad she didn't."

"Gentlemen," I turned around, hinting at them.

"Oh yes, Mara just texted me. She wants bottles for the baby. Nice to see you, Azzaria, and goodbye, Timothy." Alexander caught the cue, and we exchanged goodbye. Everyone left except Ronan, who was predictably stubborn.

"I'm leaving, so don't get all pissy, Xander. Azzaria, do me a favor?" I was dangerously close to snapping his legs with my bare hands.

"What's up?"

"Take care of him. I might hate him sometimes, but he's still my best friend."

And then he left. I didn't expect him to say that but I was appreciative.

Now, it was just us. *Her and I*. Pebbles was here too, but she was asleep.

I could see a shower of burdens and fears in her eyes. She looked uniquely terrified and sad.

"Who hurt you, baby? Just tell me. You can trust me as much as I trust you with my life." Those words were the most honest I'd ever been with myself and the most honest I'd ever be.

"I need you to listen carefully, Dillon, without interruptions. Can you do that?" I nodded in agreement, and she took a deep breath, fidgeting with her fingers and feet.

She sat there telling me everything about her father and her ex-boyfriend. She told me about all the abuse and the maltreatment and the miscarriages she suffered due to his violence and I was speechless. Her tears flowed and I felt like I was helpless.

I needed to ruin them, in the same damn way they ruined her.

My heart ached for her, and I wanted to bring those people to justice.

“My mom called me at work today to say Matthew’s in town and may come after me. We have something together that will eventually go public. I didn’t want this to cause a scandal; I understand if you’re embarrassed or want to end things. I’m so—”

“Shut up,” I said, my voice laced with frustration. *What did she mean by embarrassed? The only ones embarrassing themselves were those men, not her.* “Don’t apologize either. You were just a child. You were literally a child. And you were young, looking for love but got everything except that. I’m so sorry that happened to you, baby.” I pulled her closer, my arms wrapped around her body tightly enough to make her feel safe but loose enough for her to breathe.

My heart was shattered, and the words played on repeat in my mind. I felt consumed by a murderous rage.

“I’m okay, really, and I’m just scared he’ll show up again and do the same things.” Her words came out in stutters, and she looked weary. I could tell she was. “Thank you for listening to me.”

“Thank you for telling me,” I sighed, kissing her forehead. “Tell me what you want me to do about them.”

She sighed and looked up at me. “They’re not worth it. Don’t give them any pieces of you.” No matter how much she pleaded, it wasn’t my style. They were going to pay, and I was going to make sure of it.

“What’s Matthew’s last name?”

“Why?”

“Just to see if I’ve had any dealings with him.” And so I could hunt him down.

“Nelson.” she replied, yawning in between.

We stayed on the couch until 2 a.m. when she fell asleep. For the first time, I found myself in shock, torn between following her wishes and doing what was necessary to keep her safe.

“Reyes.”

“It’s 2:30 a.m. Unless Rome is on fire, I don’t see why you’re calling me at 2.”

“I need you and your team at my house in an hour. I don’t care if it’s not happy hour. This is urgent.”

He groaned and muttered some curses, but he’d pull through no matter how much we annoyed each other.

## CHAPTER 24

### *Dillon*

IT WAS FIVE MINUTES PAST THREE IN THE MORNING, AND THE legal team had gathered in my living room.

Witnessing her unveil the painful scars of her past was unsettling. It left a nauseating feeling in my stomach. She was the one person who truly mattered to me, and her pain resonated deeply within me.

*“He raped me on many occasions, when I’d be sleeping or even wide awake,”* that sentence kept replaying in my mind. I couldn’t shake the sickness it stirred in me. I wanted to make them pay for every ounce of pain they’d inflicted on her. I wanted them to feel the torment they’d subjected her to. But for now, I needed to speak to Arnaldo.

“I didn’t want to believe what you showed me in that folder the other day,” I sighed, taking a sip of scotch. “But it’s true. And I need her protected.”

A while ago, Arnaldo had presented me with a file containing information about Azzaria’s past, including the dark details she had shared with me earlier. While not as extensive, it confirmed what it had revealed.

“So she was actually...” Arnaldo’s voice trailed off, and I nodded in acknowledgment. I didn’t want to dwell on those details any longer, and I suspected the sentiment was shared by anyone with a shred of compassion. “Wow, man,” Arnaldo muttered as he sat on the couch. “What’s our plan to keep this under the radar?”

“I need her to have a security detail but one that blends in with the crowd. Nothing that makes her feel like she’s losing her freedom,” I stated firmly. She had already lost so much in the past, and I didn’t want her to feel restricted with me. “The same goes for her mother and her best friend.”

“Understood. What about the therapist, the ex, and her father?”

“Find them. I need regular updates on their whereabouts, and once we have them, I’ll take care of them myself. It’ll be handled.” Arnoldo left the room to inform his team of the new instructions and protocols, effective immediately.

The advantage of being my own boss was the flexibility to work on my terms, but the downside was the potential for distraction, and Azzaria had proven to be a delightful distraction. I had missed deadlines and postponed meetings to accommodate her needs and desires. I had a backlog of work to catch up on, and I intended to clear it by sunrise.

As much as I treasured her, I couldn’t lose focus on my professional responsibilities. I couldn’t fail my family name or allow the empire I had painstakingly built to crumble before me.

Arnoldo and Mikkel had shared their concerns about my work-life balance, which was a rarity. I was usually meticulous and never slacked, but life had changed significantly since Azzaria came into it.

“Are you all right, Xander?” Arnoldo broke into my thoughts, snapping me back to the present. I wasn’t ready to accept the implications of that reality just yet.

“Yeah,” I replied, “I have work to catch up on. I’m afraid I’ve fallen behind, and we can’t afford that. There’s much development to accomplish.” I offered a lighthearted remark, but it contained a grain of truth. My work was my life’s mission, and I couldn’t let it falter.

“You’re not falling off the rocker. You’re the best in the business, and that’s high praise. Everyone wants to work with you, and some even aspire to be you. You’re a formidable son

of a bitch, and having a girlfriend won't change that. *It shouldn't change that.* Just find the right balance. I've never seen you this happy and at peace. No one can be as tolerable an asshole as you are."

"Are you getting soft, Reyes?"

"Oh, shut up before I show your girlfriend the baby pictures of you on my phone, or worse, I'll post them," he threatened, a wide grin on his face.

The great and challenging aspect of Arnaldo was that he had been there through thick and thin, through every failing and adversity. He, along with Ronan, Mikkel and, Lucio, were my earliest and most enduring friends. It had its share of ups and downs, but they've been with me forever.

"I'm heading out. I'll see you at the office tomorrow. And, Dillon," he said, grabbing his briefcase, "happy birthday."

"Thank you."

After the lawyers had left, I checked on Azzaria, and she was still asleep, her peaceful demeanor giving me some reassurance. The remaining hours of my sleepless night were dedicated to catching up on the workload for the week.

- ✓ Japanese Call
- ✓ Auditing filing
- ✓ Emailing HR about staff affairs
- ✓ Reviewing the organizational roster
- ✓ Confirming my interviews
- ✓ Forbes 50 Under 50 photoshoot confirmation
- ✗ Contact Azzaria's College

These seemed like straightforward tasks, but by the time I had completed them, the sun had risen, and the clock had struck 6 a.m. I had seriously grown tired of battling insomnia.

Nevertheless, I had caught up on my work, and the feeling of achieving world domination was invigorating. The world was back on its axis.

I opened my bottom filing drawer and retrieved an envelope marked “Financial Disclosures.” It contained all the fees and loans that Azzaria owed. Her graduation was less than two months away, and she wouldn’t have been able to clear these debts on her own, even with her substantial salary.

One day, I would tell her that I had taken care of it, giving her with a fresh start. I wanted her to build herself and lead a life free from the shadows of the past, filled with happiness and fulfillment.

*...Total fees owed by Azzaria Willis... one million, seven hundred thousand dollars... to be paid three weeks before the upcoming graduation date.*

She had received a scholarship for her undergraduate program at the age of sixteen, but her graduate program didn’t offer scholarships, so she had to manage the financial burden herself, with some assistance from her mother. Still, the amount was insurmountable, so I took care of it.

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**Notification Alert:**

**Two million dollars has been transferred from account number 00977282 to 02862828.**

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Good deeds.

Good day.

“You work too much,” she stated as she woke up. By the time Azzaria had risen, I was already dressed and ready for my workday.

“I don’t work enough, but good morning. How did you sleep?” I asked.

“I slept great,” she yawned, then moved over, straddling me. “Your bed is soft, and Pebbles came to cuddle me. I love her so much.” I couldn’t help but smile; I appreciated how well Azzaria got along with my dog Pebbles.

“Pebbles stealing you from me?” I playfully pouted. “She’s lucky she’s so cute.”

Azzaria giggled and rested her head on my chest. I felt her letting go at this moment and I'm sure it wasn't eating at her anymore. But I knew she wouldn't feel too safe on her own and so I reached out to Abigail. Just to ensure that she'd be safe and happy around those she loves.

"I don't have clothes here, so I'm going to head home to get ready. I'll see you there." She pressed her cold, soft lips against mine, tugging at my hair.

"I'll see you later."

She grabbed her stuff from the previous night and made it through the door. About three minutes after the door shut, she messaged to confirm that she was safe.

"Mother." I could've went through the day without her.

She sighed. "Don't take that tone with me. Happy Birthday my son. Remember the gala is tonight."

How could I ever forget? It's my annual gala, a tradition that aligns with my birthday.

Ever since I was twenty and secured my first cyber software deal with the highest bidder, I've had the means to host this event. It started humbly with around 20 attendees, but with each passing year, as my wealth grew, so did the number of guests.

Now, we're looking at an impressive count of three hundred and ten attendees. The gala wasn't centered about celebrating my birthday; it was a meaningful event that supported a cause very dear to my heart.

"Thank you, and yes, I'm well aware of the gala. Anything else you need? I have a busy day ahead," I responded. My words held a ring of truth, but it was also a subtle attempt to encourage her to end the call.

"Please, call your father. He's concerned about the growing distance between you two," my mother urged, her voice carrying the weight of her concern.

"It's my birthday," I stressed. "Tell him to call me, and just so you know, I won't be visiting today or any other day."



Goodbye, Mom.”

It’s hard to hate the people you should love and it’s easy to love the people you should stay away from. The people who were to give me all the love in the world, ended up giving me nothing but hurt and heartbreak and I was tired of it.

“Fine,” she sighed, “I love you.”

I pressed the end call button and continued with my day. Deep down, I knew her declaration of love was empty.

After all, she had always shown an affection for wealth, power, her lavish lifestyle and I definitely wasn’t about to fall for her web of deceit and false sentiment.

In other news, I looked down at my phone and a smile took permanent form on it. My beloved sister had messaged me to which I quickly responded with a “thank you, I love you.”

MARA XANDER-WILLIAMS

Happy Birthday! I love you. You’re my bestfriend and I’m so glad you’re in my life.

Mara has always excelled in the art of extravagance, radiating sunshine and embracing the extraordinary.

I fondly recall our childhood days when she’d enthusiastically shout “Happy Birthday!” at the top of her lungs and present me with a cupcake adorned with a flickering candle. It became our cherished tradition.

Although I may not have matched her extravagance, I consistently made heartfelt cards. Now that both of us are financially secure, we’ve transitioned to more valuable gifts, yet the true essence of sentiment remains unsurpassed.

As the clock struck eight-thirty, I swiftly collected my belongings and headed downstairs to meet Mikkel. To my surprise, his typically stoic facial expressions bore a rare sight today—he appeared happier. *Interesting.*

“Happy Birthday, Xander,” Mikkel greeted me.

“Thank you, and drive a little faster, Suarez. I’ve got a hectic day ahead of me,” I responded with a chuckle.

I strolled into the sleek, modern building that housed my office. The familiar scent of polished wood and fresh flowers greeted me as I made my way through the double glass doors.

The elevator ride was swift and silent, and soon, I was on the top floor where my office was located.

“Happy Birthday,” Azzaria practically shouted when I entered my office. *Wow.*

This must’ve been why she left the left the penthouse early. A pout crept up on my face, not because I was sad, but because I was in shock. There was even a personalized banner with my name on it. Helium balloons with the numbers “33” were floating around, streamers and confetti were everywhere, and balloons filled my ceiling. A banner that read “Happy Birthday Dillon” was also hanging in this space.

“I’m in shock, excuse the lack of words,” I said, putting my bags down and walking over to her. “You did all this?”

“I got a little help, and it’s not much, but happy birthday, baby. It’s not a party because you hate that type of thing, but just something to make you smile.”

“Thank you. I love it.”

She smiled heavily. “You’re always welcome.”

“Did you wear this dress for me?” The seduction was strong in my voice, but who could blame me? If I didn’t know any better, I’d spread her out on this table and feast on that magnificent pussy God blessed her with.

“Yeah. Can’t wait for you to rip it off me later,” she leaned into my ear and whispered. *Christ, she’ll be the death of me.*

“Only time is stopping me from bending you over and making you scream on this desk.”

A wicked grin came over her face as she walked over to me, placing her hands around my neck. “It’s *your* birthday. I’ll come to suck you off when you have that free hour later, baby.”

I knew what a devil she was in bed, but she never spoke like this, and somehow it made my cock twitch in my pants. It turned me on, but all I could do now was kiss her, and so I did.

My kisses were never gentle. They were hot, rough, passionate, and long, filled with greed and hunger. I kissed her like my life depended on it.

“I’m here! Happy Birthday Dil—Oh.” Azzaria and I broke from our kiss and turned around. We weren’t as shocked, especially because the person who entered was Abigail.

I didn’t hate Abigail, but she was widely insufferable and always showed up at the wrong time.

“Ever heard of knocking?” I asked harshly.

“She knew I was coming. I need to gouge my eyes out after seeing that,” Abigail said and fake gagged. I’ve never met a person as dramatic as she was.

I rolled my eyes in response to her immature statement and went to sit in my chair.

“As much as I’d love to be in both of your graces, I have something to do. Happy Birthday Dillon and bye Azzaria, I love you, precious.” She locked eyes with Azzaria, and they both laughed out loud. Abigail only said that last line to piss me off, and it worked.

“You better pray to the Lord that you and my girl remain friends,” I spat out harshly. .

“Oh, we will. She and I used to make out a lot, occasional scis—”

“Abigail!” Azzaria shouted, “stop. I can’t save you every time.”

“Yes, you can. He’s whipped. You have him wrapped around your fingers. I’m pretty sure he would bring Neptune to your feet if you asked. But I’m leaving now. Don’t miss me too much.”

I shouted, “we won’t” and laughed. I truly couldn’t stand her, but she made Azzaria happy, and that made me happy.

“I think she likes someone.”

“Where’d you draw that conclusion from?”

“I went into her phone and I saw her texting someone named ‘S’. There was nothing incriminating but still.”

“Let’s not meddle.”

“Mhm,” she mumbled and walked towards the door.  
“Precious. What’s on your mind?”

Her next words shocked me as she was still doubting what we had. I could understand her doubt, after all, she’s been through hell. But still, her words tugged at my heartstrings as she expressed her insecurities and questioned the nature of our relationship. She needed reassurance, and I was ready to give it.

“Let me be very clear,” I began, my tone firm and genuine.  
“Of course, this is real. Do you think I’d give you everything I have if I wanted just a quick fling? No, we’re not friends with benefits. Yes, we’re exclusive, and no, you’re not seeing other men unless you want them to die. I don’t want to be with anyone else but you, and I’m whatever you want me to be.”

She kissed me and it was beautiful.

“We have a gala tonight. I want you to accompany me as my date.”

“Gala?”

“Yes. It’s a gala that I host every year and give a speech. It’s for abuse victims and survivors. We raise enough money to donate and help them. It’s been my birthday tradition for the past decade.” It felt different revealing this side of myself to her. There’s so much I want her to know, but so much she can’t know, not yet. Not until I’ve guaranteed she won’t run when she does find out.

“Dillon... That’s a really good cause, especially given... well, you know what,” she said and sighed. I wish I could change everything wrong in her past, but I could only try to make her future a thousand times better. “But I’m proud of you for doing that. Not many people care, but I’m proud of

you. I'd love to be your date, but I'll maybe be the worst dressed. My wardrobe is limited."

I've heard many words in my life and I've been told just as many things, but hearing the words *'I'm proud of you,'* especially coming from her, hit home. It sank into my soul, almost as if it's etched on my brain. *"I'm proud of you."*

"There's going to be a stylist at your apartment for 4:30, and I know that look. Yes, you can invite Abigail, but make sure she doesn't provoke me."

"I will. Thank you." She ran over, gave me a kiss, and left the office. It's been a great birthday so far, but I need this cleaned up. I'm running a business organization, not a party shop.

"Ms. Julet, can you get my office cleaned, please?" I pressed the button dialing her quarters.

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I had a short meeting with a benefactor, and then my day had ended, but I had one stop to make, and I wanted to do it with Azzaria. We left the building at our usual times and headed to separate exits.

Entering the car, neither of us said a word, but we were comfortable. The silence was enjoyable as she rested her hand on my shoulder, and my palms took residence on her thigh.

"Are you sure about this, D?" Mikkel asked, looking through the rearview mirror. I knew why he asked me that question, and I didn't have a solid answer to give, but we were already this far.

"Yes." My grip on her thigh tightened, not to hurt her but because of my nerves. Talking about this wasn't the easiest, but it was only fair that I met her halfway. Azzaria sat looking confused but didn't make a sound. She trusted me, and now I had to prove to her that I trusted her. This was a long time coming, and so much has changed in three months. I moved from being fearful of this disease to now bending every single rule and moral I've ever had for one girl. I didn't see this coming, but the best things always creep up on me.

As my eyes landed upon the post-modern structure in front of me, I felt unease, discomfort, and displacement, but being with her made it all better. I already took her here once, but the circumstances were different. She made it easier to face this, and on that note, we exited the car.

I grabbed her hands in mine, and we walked to the front door. A place that once gave me so much warmth, love, and comfort was now a place that gave me tension, anxiety, and night terrors. “I think we’ve been here before,” she said and started looking around, “This is your old house, right?”

“This property was given to me as a gift from my grandmother. She knew I loved real estate and housing, so my first gift from her was a house. I remember the vivid moments where she’d take me up here with grandpa and Mara.” It felt good being nostalgic, and I was maybe even a little sad. Not a day passed by where I don’t miss them.

“Baby,” she whispered. It wasn’t all the time she called me that, but whenever she did, it felt electric. “Let’s walk, even though we have about an hour, and I don’t know the route,” she said, her cheeks high and red from the laughter she laid out.

*I was captivated. Too captivated.*

I brought her to the old maple tree Mara and I used to play and I started telling her about how our parents didn’t care much for us and that’s how we became extremely close with our grandparents.

“Your grandparents sound lovely. This sounds like an entire dream. I’m happy you got that.”

I chuckled and nodded my head. “Definitely. They were, until they weren’t, but we can’t get into that today. My grandparents died, and it was a tradition for Mara and me to come here and do activities until I met Annalise.” I winced at her name. The nasty memories flooded, but this was a form of closure I wanted and needed.

“That’s your ex-wife,” her tone was plain, which only meant that she was jealous.

“Yes, but don’t worry about getting jealous,” I pointed out as we stopped by the picket fence.

“Annalise and I hit it off. We had fun, but back then, I was very different. Gullible, naive, easily led, but I wasn’t dumb. Her sister, Camilla, and I had a sexual relationship. When my grandparents died, I became the worst version of myself. I lost all care for everyone except Annalise, so I chose her. She proposed, and it was pressuring, so I said yes. Two weeks later, we got married and moved here. She fucked me up so badly. For the first month of our marriage, I hated her. For five years, I hated her. I was married to a woman who completely ruined me. I filed for a divorce, and she ruined the house. I came here today to ask you what I should do with this house?”  
*God, it felt like a knife piercing my heart.*

The memories came flooding back, flooding my brain, and my skin paled. All the abuse and maltreatment I faced in that marriage was nowhere near okay. But I endured it, with hope she would change.

Azzaria’s eyes watered, and I’m sure she was touched and hurt by the situation, but it hurt me to see her cry.

“I’m so sorry. You didn’t deserve that. Anytime I see that woman, it’s on sight.” She giggled a bit at the last part and wrapped her hands around my lower body. “I think you should rebuild it and then start fresh with someone who deserves that space in your heart. It’s a bold statement to make, and I know it’s hard for you to trust people’s intentions, but it’s worth it. Don’t let one nasty soul ruin the thousand memories of a great place,” she said and concluded.

The only sad part was that she was yet to realize the only person I wanted to build it over with is her.

“You’re leaving me soon, and therefore—” she shot me a ‘what are you talking about?’ look, and I was confused too for a moment, but then I realized. “I meant the internship. The company. Anyway, I have a real estate and contracting company. I want your final month to be dedicated to that. I know I told you to work with them for a week, but I want you to work for your final month here.”

“You want me to draw the plan to rebuild the house?”

“No. It’s your project. Do what you want with the space. There’s no budget. Make it brand new. You did two years of interior and exterior designing, and you can do architectural plans. So can Abigail; isn’t that what she studied?” The look she shot me gave me all the confirmation I needed. “Exactly. Do it for me.”

“This is a lot, but I’ll do it for you, and thanks for taking me here. I hope we get to talk more about you, your family, and your past. Now, let’s go before I’m late for your gala.”

I didn’t bother responding; instead, we walked down to the car in silence and headed back into the city. It felt great talking about that and even better that it was with her.



## CHAPTER 25

# *Azzaria*

“I LIKE BEING YOUR GIRLFRIEND EVEN THOUGH YOU HAVEN’T officially asked me out yet,” I said in a playful tone.

He looked up at me and pouted. “I’m not a labels guy, but is that what you want us to be? Boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Yeah!” I exclaimed, “that’s what I want us to be, though most couples don’t date so quickly.”

“Just know that I’m yours, and only yours. The stylists for you and Abigail should be there already. I’ll see you later,” he said, and I ran from the curb to my building.

He and I agreed that it’s excessively risky for him to accompany me to my building or even park too close to it. We weren’t hiding our relationship, but we needed to safeguard it, as the worst-case scenario would be the public tearing us apart due to his status and my position.

I’ve seen how heated crowds and women get when he walks by, or the number of Instagram accounts that have fan pages for him. I’m not ready to be shoved into the forefront of that.

I opened my front door and was greeted by an entire walk-in closet. There were racks of dresses, shoes, bags, and people walking around with hors d’oeuvres. *Was I living in a movie, or was this actually real?*

“You’re here,” Abigail shouted and flung her arms around me, “I missed you.”

“I’m here, but what’s going on?” This couldn’t be what Dillon had planned. He only told me that a stylist was coming. “A” meaning one. A single person. Why was there an entire boutique in my living room that I cannot afford?

“Your very generous... boyfriend,” she whispered, “organized it. Don’t question it. Go shower and let’s get dressed.”

I left Abigail in the living room and hopped in the shower. This was probably the quickest shower of my life considering the party started in less than two hours, and I had no idea what I’d be wearing, and my hair isn’t even done.

I grabbed the phone to call my mother and check up on her but something about her sounded off, she sounded weary and when I brought it up, she said she just woke up. I really want to let it go but something’s just not right.

I then started to tell her about Dillon, not by name, to which she responded with silence and slight approval.

“As long as you’re happy and whenever you’re ready, I’ll be willing to meet him.”

“Thanks mommy, I love you.”

I grabbed the phone charger from the bed and walked out of the room to see Abigail halfway ready.

“Ah! You’re finally here,” she exclaimed, “let’s find you a dress,” she squealed and jumped up from her chair. If you ever saw a happy child on Christmas morning opening gifts, then you’d know exactly how Abigail looked right now.

“Anything in particular you’d like, dear?” A woman asked in a British accent. My gaze dropped to her tag, where I found her name. It was Melinda, and it was gorgeous.

“Something crimson, please, if possible. If not, then we’ll work with red,” I answered, and we walked over to the clothing racks.

Melinda had the perfect dress in her hands. I’ve never seen something so gorgeous or fitting ever. *Holy shit.*

“That’s the one,” I said eyeing the dress. Could clothes possibly turn someone on? Because I’m on a high staring at this dress. It’s effortlessly perfect. I’ve seen none like it before. “I knew you’d like it. It’s an exclusive piece, and it hasn’t even been on the market yet but Mr. Xander got it here for you. He told us that he wanted it for you,” she said. Dillon’s the most romantic person I’ve ever met. He just doesn’t know it yet.

My eyes were close to watering but I just sucked it up and sat in the makeup/hair chair beside Abigail. She was definitely enjoying this. She loved this too much but she deserved a little fun because she was always so busy with everything else.

“Are you okay?” She asked sounding concerned.

“Why wouldn’t I be? But yeah, I’m good,” I responded and chuckled.

“Just everything with Matthew and how he’s back, so I’m just checking up on my best friend.”

I sighed and pushed my head back. “I’m good. Matthew had dictated too much of my life. I’m in therapy, I have a new boyfriend, and trust me, he’s the most perfect man I’ve ever laid eyes on, and I’m just working on getting myself better mentally and emotionally.” For the first time my response to a question like that, was utterly true. “It doesn’t mean I’m not in fear of what Matthew can do to me, but he’d be a dead man by the time he lays a finger on me, and that’s a guarantee.”

Abigail chuckled at the ending statement I made and leaned her head on my shoulder for a while. This was what we were, the best of friends. *She’s my platonic soulmate.*

“Alright. I’m glad you have Dillon. He makes you happy and that’s all I ever wanted for you. I love you a lot, and I’m right here with you.”

“I’m here with you too, and I love you too. Now,” I said shifting the conversation, “how are you?”

“I’m pretty good. I found a place right nearby and I’m moving in pretty soon.”

I was so happy to hear that. The only thing better than having a best friend, was having one that lived close to you.

One hour, three missed calls, and about a hundred messages later, I'm finally ready. Dillon was undoubtedly annoyed because we're running late, but I'm confident that when he sees me, timing will be the last thing on his mind. I looked absolutely flawless in this dress, and the makeup was to die for.

I checked the Tiffany & Co watch on my wrist, placed there by a jeweler. *What is my life?* I never thought the day would come when I'd be dressed by stylist and jeweled by jewelers.

I grabbed my clutch, phone, and sandals, then made my way down the elevator. The dress was long, so I had to hold the end to keep it from brushing the dirty ground. This dress costed more than my rent, and I definitely couldn't afford to replace it if it gets damaged.

Abigail had already left in the car with Lucio earlier. She had been ready since about 5 pm, so I told her to go.

The elevator finally dinged after what felt like forever, and I briskly walked out into the lobby which was mostly empty, with just the guards and a few residents who I didn't know and didn't have any interest in knowing.

"Looking great, Ms. Willis," Smith, the front desk clerk, complimented me. "Thank you, Smith."

I spotted the limousine pulling up in front of the building, and the back door opened as I approached, so I quickly got in. Dillon didn't step out, which was a relief.

I couldn't help but gawk at how incredibly sexy he looked in that suit. His sharp haircut alone had the power to make me swoon, and that hint of stubble? It couldn't be more enticing. A well-groomed man was my biggest turn-on, and Dillon was the epitome of that.

"Hi," I said in a flirty tone.

"Hey," he responded, pulling me closer. His warmth made me feel at home; *he was home*, he just didn't know it yet.

"How attached are you to your lipstick?"

“I can always reapply. Do you want to kiss me, Mr. Xander?”

“I do,” he confirmed, even though I knew it already. I loved teasing him, keeping him on his toes, and savoring his responses.

“Kiss me then.” He chuckled, his head tilting back slightly before he brought his lips to mine. It was a soft, meaningful kiss, not passionate and rough. It was like he was giving me everything in that kiss, and I cherished being the one to receive those parts of him.

“How many women do you kiss like that?” I teased.

“Just one. She’s my firecracker,” he giggled, and I could see Mikkel’s eyes widen. I’m sure he had never seen Dillon display so much emotion before, which was adorable and intimidating. “She better be me, or you’re going to be in trouble,” I playfully warned.

He grabbed my thigh and planted soft kisses on my neck. “She is definitely you. You look gorgeous, if I haven’t already mentioned. I can’t wait to take this dress off you later. I don’t fuck you nearly as often as I should,” he leaned in and whispered in my ear.

Wearing lace panties on a day like this was a mistake. The way he was talking to me was driving me wild, and my body was reacting in ways I hadn’t expected.

“Mikkel,” I interrupted, “how long until we arrive?”

“Forty minutes,” he replied, keeping his eyes on the GPS map.

“Thank you.” I pressed the button on the remote to raise the black soundproof partition.

“You were right,” I said, “you don’t fuck me as much as you should because you’re always so busy. But that’s why we cherish moments like these,” I giggled.

“You’re killing me,” he groaned, extending his hand toward me.

“I’m in charge. Don’t mess up my hair. And don’t finish outside my mouth, this dress is too delicate,” I instructed, my tone bold and direct.

He groaned and threw his head back. Dillon wasn’t used to me talking to him so candidly, but I had my needs, and I wasn’t afraid to voice them.

“Your mouth,” he said, pushing his fingers into my mouth. I wished it were something else, but this was foreplay. “It’s driving me wild. You’re such a slut for me, aren’t you? Wanting me to take you right here in the limo, and look at how you’re sucking my fingers. What am I going to do with you?”

Dillon knew how to say the right words, and it drove me wild. I groaned as I continued sucking his fingers but maintained control over the saliva.

“I’m so hard for you,” he mumbled and widened his legs. I’d almost forgotten how big he was. This was going to be intense.

His cock was thick, long, veiny, and absolutely perfect. It was a divine creation.

“I can see that from the bulge in your pants,” I commented, sliding my hands down and caressing his hardened shaft. He pulled his fingers from my mouth and sensually licked them clean, making me shiver with desire.

“I can’t help it around you,” he admitted. And I knew that very well.

“Well, let’s see if we can do something about it,” I said, moving closer to him.

Carefully, I removed the top half of my dress and reclined on the seat, presenting my barely clad body to him. I kept my hand over my bare mound and asked him to take out his cock.

It wasn’t fair for him to stay dressed while I was exposed and naked. He was quick to comply, unzipping and revealing his rock-hard cock, which seemed even bigger than the last time I saw it.

I leaned forward and tasted the precum on the tip of his member. *How was I going to fit this enormous thing in my mouth?* When we'd had sex two days ago, it hadn't felt this massive. I was in trouble.

I wrapped my lips around it and started working my way down. He gently face-fucked me, all while his hand wandered to my soaking wet pussy, finding my hard clit and teasing it, making me even wetter. I wanted to scream, and I was hoping not to climax. Not tonight, not in this dress.

"Precious," he growled, "you're amazing."

"Fuck," I groaned, trying to stay quiet but failing as I writhed in pleasure.

I was so incredibly turned on that I didn't stop him when he began fondling my breasts. He ripped my body stocking down, exposing my bra, and roughly grabbed at my breasts. I should have brought a backup outfit.

"I love it when you take me like this," he whispered. I had forgotten we were in a limo, but when you're lost in pleasure, even the most uncomfortable places feel comfortable.

He increased his pace, ravaging me. He tore my panties and garter to shreds, his hands roaming all over my body. It was clear that the dress was going to be ruined, but I didn't mind.

I pulled his head closer and kissed him passionately. Our tongues danced with wild passion, and my pussy ground forcefully against his enormous shaft, thrusting into my eager hole. I felt his balls tighten, and then I felt the rush of his seed filling me. I came, shuddering and gasping, as he drained himself into my dripping, wet core.

"Happy Birthday, Baby," I said, giggling, "I'll give you your real present later."

"You're something else," he said, taking a deep breath. What a way to start the evening. We spent the next ten minutes cleaning ourselves up.

I looked like I'd just been made love to, but not in a messy way—more like a radiant glow. My hair and makeup remained

intact after a few adjustments, and my dress hadn't been ruined, thankfully. He looked just as perfect as when I first saw him earlier. We lowered the partition and sat close, as if we hadn't just engaged in passionate activities in the backseat.

The gala was scheduled to begin at 8:00 in the evening, but Dillon liked to arrive early to greet sponsors and ensure everything was running smoothly. We had an hour to spare before 8, so he was right on schedule.

"You look nervous," I observed, looking at him. "What's up, handsome?"

"I get anxious before speeches, but I'll be fine. I always am," he reassured me. Even when he was a bit arrogant, he always managed to shine.

"You'll do great. I'll be right by your side if you want me to be."

"There's going to be paparazzi here, tabloids, and all that..."

I interrupted his concerns with a kiss, cupping his face and saying, "I knew what I signed up for. Paparazzi is the least of our worries. I just want you to have a good time. Got it?"

"Got it," he said, gently squeezing my arm.

We stepped out of the car, and I took a few deep breaths. We decided it would be best for me to enter first and then him.

A multitude of camera and TV crews were lined up, ready to capture videos, photos, and conduct interviews.

Anxiety still churned in my stomach, but I pushed it aside for him. This gala was beautiful not just because of the decor and the wealthy attendees, but because of the cause it supported and the immense compassion of the person behind it.

When Dillon got to the front line, everyone made way for him. Reporters seemed surprised but delighted to see him, and his name was shouted a thousand times by different people.

He flashed his million-dollar smile, and I was in awe, especially when I realized he was already staring at me. A



TMZ reporter stopped, asking Dillon, “Mr. Xander, happy birthday! How do you feel being here?”

“It feels great. I’m here to enjoy the evening and to raise support for abuse victims. It’s a cause that doesn’t receive enough recognition, and it’s truly heartbreaking,” he responded smoothly, not missing a beat. Whoever trained him for the media did an excellent job. It wasn’t often I saw him in the public eye, and I couldn’t be prouder.

“Everyone expected you to attend with Camilla or Anna...”

“I have no association with either of the women you mentioned. They’re in the past, and I’m thrilled about that. No more questions,” he said, and we walked inside, the door closing behind us.

Dillon joined me and I confessed, “I don’t think the public will like me very much,” anxiety creeping into my voice. My palms were sweating, and so were my feet.

“I like you more than enough. Fuck the public; let’s go.”

He continued walking, greeted by a sea of people. There must have been a billion people here, all looking stunning. My eyes recognized a few individuals: Bryce, Dillon’s family, some of my colleagues, Lucio, Ronan, and other people I’d seen before but couldn’t name.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Just anxious. There are so many people,” I admitted, my voice shaking.

He smiled warmly and said, “You’ll be fine. We’re going to say hi to a few people and then sit. Is that okay with you?”

I nodded, and we moved to the first group. They appeared to be investors, which I deduced from the booth they were standing near.

I exchanged pleasantries with all of them before we moved on to the next group and all the groups that followed until we made it to where his friends were.

“Hey, gentlemen,” I greeted them, offering friendly hugs and smiles. They greeted me, and we stood in slightly awkward silence. It was easier talking to them, mainly because they were good friends of Dillon’s, but I couldn’t help but notice that Bryce and Mikkel were missing.

“Where’s Bryce and Mikkel?” I asked.

“Bryce is at the food bar, and Mikkel went outside for a smoke,” Ronan informed. “By the way, you look nice, you too Dillon.”

“Thank you, Ronan. Where’s your date?”

I knew Mara was here with Alexander, Lucio was married, Arnaldo didn’t do relationships, but I spotted him with a redhead earlier, Mikkel was single, and Ronan was just here...

The boys, including Dillon, started to chuckle softly, visibly irking Ronan. This was a group of males that was somewhat bizarre, dysfunctional, and funny family.

“I’m here with my ex-girlfriend,” he confessed. Dillon’s head turned sharply, his features hardening.

“Which ex-girlfriend?”

“Nina,” he said, stepping back a couple of paces, “She and I are working things out.”

“Give Nina my best, and this time, don’t fuck it up. Is your and Lucio’s crazy sister here?”

My eyebrows shot up, and I crossed my arms, my natural stance whenever another woman was mentioned in connection with Dillon. “Even if she is, what does that have to do with you?”

“Precious,” he said, his face showing panic, “I didn’t mean it like that. She’s mentally challenged, to say the least.”

He seemed to be deliberately vague, which further piqued my curiosity. I shot a questioning look at Ronan, and he knew it was his turn to provide more information.

“You’re so intimidating, just like your boyfriend,” he muttered, glancing at me. I couldn’t help but smile. “Dillon

helped her out once because he owed Lucio and I a favor, and she's been obsessed with him ever since. She's just our half-sister, and we don't even talk that much, but she's a donor at this event, so she might be here."

"Great," I said sarcastically, "another woman after you. When does it end?"

Dillon rolled his eyes and pulled me closer to him. My anxiety faded into the background; Dillon's friends might be a handful, but they were more tolerable than I'd imagined.

We continued greeting other sponsors and guests. We met representatives from Bank of America, Apple, Samsung, and some of my favorite authors were also here. It was a night to remember.

I noticed that we hadn't seen Dillon's family, but we were now making our way toward Mara. For a woman who had just given birth, she looked incredibly put together.

"Mara," I exclaimed and went over to give her a hug. "You look stunning, and the baby is adorable. I must babysit him someday," I cooed.

"You look gorgeous, Azzaria, and you're always welcome at my house," she replied.

Dillon joined us but snatched the baby from Mara without even greeting her. She didn't seem to mind and instead took pictures of Dillon with baby Isaiah.

His name was fitting, and he was the cutest baby. I couldn't help but imagine Dillon as a father one day; it was a pleasant thought, but not anytime soon.

"Are you going to say hi to your favorite sister?" She finally asked.

"Hello, Mara. You look stunning," he replied, shifting his attention back to the baby. "Can I keep him, please?"

"No... But you can come visit and spend time with him. Azzaria will give you all the babies in the world soon," Mara said, implying a possible future with him. I saw it too.

“I hope so,” he replied, his tone tinged with a touch of sadness.

He kissed the baby’s head and handed him back to Mara, who placed him in his stroller to nap. It was heartwarming to see how she didn’t let a big event stop her from taking her baby.

I didn’t know what to say, so I remained silent, sipping my free champagne and surveying the room. The topic of children was a sensitive one, especially since it was apparent that they were in his future.

“Where’s the bathroom?” I asked.

“Straight to the left. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just need to use the restroom,” I giggled. “I’ll be back soon.”

As I walked away, I overheard Mara saying to Dillon, “I’m so sorry for bringing up children, I forgot...” before I moved out of earshot. My thoughts were a jumbled mess, and I accidentally bumped into a woman.

I recognized her from the tabloid photo with Dillon that I had seen earlier. Anxiety struck me for the second time that evening, and I just wanted to disappear.

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized and bent down to pick up my clutch, which had fallen to the floor.

“You’re Dillon’s date,” she remarked in a judgmental tone. I told Dillon that I sensed she had a thing for him, married or not.

“And you’re his business partner, right?”

“He didn’t mention you at all when we had lunch earlier today, but it’s nice to meet you,” she said, smiling and offering her hand for a handshake. The mention of their lunch earlier took me by surprise. “I’m his business partner and friend. You don’t strike me as his type, though,” she commented with a hint of disdain.

“You clearly don’t know your friend all that well, then,” I retorted.

“You’re as feisty as Annalise. It’s funny because she’s as fiery as you, and Dillon still left her. He usually goes for blondes with slimmer bodies and taller statures, but I guess you’ll do for him for now.” Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, and my insecurities surged. Fortunately, I had mastered concealing my emotions.

“Good to know. But where’s your husband? I remember Dillon telling me you’re married.” My response seemed to strike a chord with her, as I noticed her blinking rapidly and clearing her throat.

“I’m in the process of getting a divorce,” she finally admitted, confirming what she had been insinuating.

“I see,” I replied, and she seemed visibly uncomfortable. “I have to go meet others now. Goodbye.”

I rushed to the bathroom and sent a text to Abigail, asking her to meet me there. I needed her before I lost my composure in this place.

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### *Dillon*

My mother summoned Mara and I, so we left the baby with Alexander. Azzaria wasn’t in my sight, so I shot her a quick text. She probably went to sit with Abigail or joined my friends in the designated area. They made me feel comfortable, and I had no complaints about them.

ME

Precious, where are you? Are you doing okay?

I waited in the chat for about five minutes without receiving a response. With a sigh, I decided to head over to my “family.”

“You called, and here we are,” I spoke on behalf of Mara and I.

“Stop being so harsh with us. We’re your parents,” Amy said, running her hand down my arm. She was putting on a show, playing the role of the loving mother, likely because cameras were everywhere, and her reputation mattered more than being a decent human being.

I rolled my eyes and managed a fake smile as my dad approached, and of course, he brought Annalise. I despised him more than anyone.

“Dillon, I’ve missed—”

“Cut the crap. Dillon doesn’t miss you. You’re the most vindictive person ever. You betrayed him, and if you want to remain in one piece for the next few minutes, I suggest you leave my brother alone. You’ve caused him enough pain, don’t you think?” Mara shouted at her, almost causing a scene. She had taken the words right out of my mouth.

Mother and father were stunned. They didn’t expect this, and as I saw my father about to raise his voice to Mara, I stepped in, “Be careful about what you say next to my sister. You’re not going to bully Mara, not tonight, you asshole.” I moved closer to him, and he backed down slightly.

Those were only a fraction of the words I had for my father, but it would have to suffice for now. Annalise took her seat, appearing suitably ashamed, and my father stepped away. This left only my mother and Mara.

Amy looked quite distraught, almost fearful, but I knew better than to buy into that. I wasn’t in the mood for anyone’s nonsense tonight, and having Azzaria absent only made it easier to be an ass.

I guided Mara over to Alexander, and she seemed a bit shaken, as usual. These harsh exchanges were something we had grown up with, and you’d think they’d hurt less over time, but they only seemed to hurt more.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” Melissa said as she took the microphone. She was our annual host for these events. “You all look stunning tonight, and as we’re about to begin, let’s welcome our esteemed and eloquent speaker of the

evening... The one and only, Mr. Dillon Timothy Xander.” The crowd’s applause was enthusiastic, the camera shutters were clicking away, and I made my way to the stage.

Anxiety started creeping back, but making eye contact with her was the most reassuring thing in the world.

“Good evening, everyone,” I began, my tone both warm and weighty. “It’s a source of great joy when we come together for this gala. There’s nothing more heart-wrenching than learning about the hundreds, even thousands, of individuals—women, men, and children—who endure sexual assault, rape, and abuse on a daily and quarterly basis. This foundation exists to raise awareness and deliver justice to all victims and survivors. In all my independence,” I let out a wry chuckle, “I couldn’t do this alone. I’m truly grateful for every single person in this room that helped me turn this childhood dream of mine into a successful reality. Any questions?”

The Q&A portion following this speech was often the challenging part. Reporters tended to ask me the same questions every year, expecting different answers, which was a kind of stupidity at its peak.

A sea of reporters clamored for attention, but I typically only took questions from Jasmine and Belsib. They were my favorite reporters, known for not portraying me as a scoundrel or an unpleasant character. Jasmine asked about the shelters I was building to which I told her that we were planning on expanding and opening across the world and Belsib asked about the agenda to which I referred him to our website.

I thanked them as well as everyone, and made my way to my girlfriend.

Even before I approached her, I sensed that a difficult conversation lay ahead. As long as I was in the public eye, peace with Azzaria seemed elusive.

“Hey, baby,” I said, leaning in for a kiss on her cheek, but she shifted away.

“Don’t ‘hey, baby’ me,” she whispered.

“We’ll talk about this outside; there are too many people here.”

Outside would probably be worse, but I led her to the empty room upstairs. This was the room where Mara and I would hide out during events at this place, a room full of good memories.

“Care to tell me why I’m being attacked?”

“I was minding my business when a woman stopped me, basically implying that I’m too fat to be your type, suggesting you prefer thinner, blonde women. Furthermore, it seems you forgot to tell your girlfriend that you had lunch with other women,” she said with anger, even if her voice remained calm. I approached Azzaria, wrapping my arms around her. She didn’t resist, and I gently tilted her chin up with my fingers.

“My love, you’re perfect. I don’t care about what any woman says except you. It doesn’t matter if your hair is blonde, purple, or green. My type is you. And I didn’t have lunch with Nalena. I had a scheduled lunch with LanCorp today, and she’s apart of that company.” I regretted my past flirtations and promiscuity, for I was now paying the price.

“Whatever.”

“Arnoldo,” I said when he answered his phone, “meet me in room four right now, please?”

“I’ll bring booze; you sound mad.”

“Just get here now, Reyes,” I hissed and hung up. I could hear women in the background, and I’d have to apologize to him for interrupting whatever he’d had going on. However, this was more important.

Azzaria stood there, agitated and irritated, and I understood her emotions. I approached her, placing several kisses all over her face and a final one on her lips.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” I pleaded.

“I’m not mad at you. I’m just upset and insecure right now, okay? I’ll get over it. I just need to go home, read my comfort books, and eat something. This fancy food isn’t for me.” Truth



be told, it wasn't my thing either. I preferred cooking my own food in generous portions.

The door burst open, and a visibly alarmed Arnoldo Reyes entered. It was about time.

"I was in the middle of handling two," he wiggled two fingers, "two blondes when my boss and best friend summoned me. For what reason, might I ask?"

I explained to him that I need him to draft a withdrawal contract as I wanted out of the deal with Nalena. He then told me that I'd bare no loss and I should go ahead. Everything's coming up Dillon, today.

Azzaria just stood to the side, speechless, staring at Arnoldo and me. "You didn't have to. It's okay n—"

I placed my hands on either side of her face, our foreheads touching. "You want her gone? She's gone. Nothing will stop me from ensuring you're in a good mental space, especially after all you've been through in your previous relationship."

"Thank you, baby. I appreciate it."

At that moment, I felt something intense in my chest. It was a new sensation, a spark I'd never felt before. I didn't know what it was, but I was certain it was the best feeling I'd ever experienced in my life.

## CHAPTER 26

# *Azzaria*

TONIGHT HAS BEEN ONE OF THE WEIRDEST NIGHTS, AND I JUST wanted it to be over, but it's also been a good night. Seeing Dillon on stage made me feel full. It was amazing to see him so happy and passionate.

But it also brought a strange thought to me, and I hoped I was wrong. I had only hoped he didn't go through the same form of abuse I did.

Brushing that thought aside, I walked over to where Abigail and Mikkel were seated. Ronan and the rest of the group were probably knee-deep in women, and Dillon was in several interviews. I watched him as he moved from station to station, looking handsome, educated, and dapper.

"Where's Dillon? He's normally attached to your side," Mikkel pointed out. And that's very true. For two people who wanted to keep a relationship private, we sure couldn't leave each other alone.

"He's in interviews, but enough about me, I'm bored. Are these things always so long?" It's after 11 in the night, and the party seems to have just started, but I'm running out of energy. There's too much going on, and the music is just getting louder.

My phone pinged, and I glanced down to see a text from Mara. She was telling me that she and the baby were tired and, as such, she left.

I smiled at how close she and I had become. We didn't talk every single day, but we were there for each other, and she

could offer advice in ways that no one else could, especially because she knew her brother better than most.

“Yeah. It normally ends around 1 or whenever Dillon leaves.”

“You needed a night out,” Abigail said, drinking her fiftieth glass of wine.

I took the glass from her and switched it with a glass of water. She didn't even notice the switch; that's how drunk she was. “If you'll excuse me, I'm going to change out of these heels. They're getting uncomfortable.”

I walked off, and a man stopped me. He looked like Dillon, and then I put the dots together. It's his father. “I don't think we've met,” he said and held his hand out for me to shake.

I observed him first before I made a move or said anything. He was definitely intimidating but not as much as his son. He's very tall and has nice black hair with silver streaks. His clothes were expensive, but given how easily it catches lint, I could tell it wasn't as expensive as Dillon's. There's so much one person can note by just looking.

“We haven't met,” I said, offering a smile. “I'm Azzaria.”

“You're the woman who's got my son so distracted lately,” he said in a judgy tone.

My soft chuckle didn't give away much emotion, but it gave away enough. I wouldn't ever let him know that I was bothered by him. Powerful men don't deserve that knowledge. But something told me he's not as powerful as he wants people to believe.

“I should hope I am,” I replied nervously. “How's your evening?”

“It's good. I just had dinner with my wife and Annalise. She's such a joyful young woman, and I'm particularly sad that she and Dillon didn't work out. They were a beautiful couple,” he noted, sounding excited.

I swallowed, hard, and rubbed my palms against my dress. The anxiety was creeping up on me, once more. “I’m sure they were, but everyone has to move on.”

“Not Dillon. He’s just distracted. I remember him bragging about her all day. A man never forgets his first love, and even earlier when they were waltzing and having conversations at the table. It felt like old times. It felt like my family was back to the way it was.” His tone was reminiscent, and he was convincing. I didn’t have much to say, and it was clear that his family, excluding Mara, didn’t and wouldn’t approve of me, and I was good with that. But while I could argue my way around a tricky ex or around a woman-obsessed, I couldn’t do the same with an ex-wife. He was married to this woman for five years. They slept together, planned a life, and exchanged sweet words. Of course, he’d always love her, and I was such an idiot for thinking I could fill that space.

“It’s getting late, and I have errands tomorrow,” I said, sounding composed and gracefully walking away.

He made mumblings, but I didn’t hear and didn’t want to hear it. I’ve heard and been through enough tonight. It’s making me sick, and I did what I do best; *I ran*.

Glancing at my phone, I somehow found myself at my mother’s doorstep at 3 o’clock in the morning. She always left a key under the welcome mat, and I just lifted it and let myself in.

All the composure I held tonight broke loose as my body sunk on the floor. The sobs were turning into louder cries, and I felt like I was losing my mind. *I could never win*.

My phone buzzed, and I checked the message. It was from Dillon. I couldn’t respond, not right now.

What I needed was time and space to be by myself and make a mess of everything on my own. The first mistake was falling in love, and the second one was loving someone with a powerful background, and the worst part was, it was a mistake I’d make a million times over.

Words were spoken in such controlled conditions, but the damage that they did was too extensive. The damage that words did, brought too much pain. I wanted to be able to put it behind me, and I wanted to run right back to him, but I couldn't. I felt too weak. I needed to make sure that I was in a good space before I went back to him, even if it meant I'd break myself in the process.

I don't know why I was afraid, but I was afraid of everything at this moment. It's maybe my mind working against me, but I don't know. I hope I'll wake up later feeling better. Or I won't know what to do with myself.

---

### *Dillon*

I've searched twelve apartments and every single living and accommodation space within a fifty-mile radius, and none of them have her.

The last I saw her was while doing a brief interview with New York Times. We shared glances and she walked over to a booth. I left from the gala and went straight to my office. Home meant nothing if she wasn't there.

"Here's the files you wanted," Reyes walked in and dropped the files I asked him for on my desk. "And you look like shit. What's up?"

Pity was the last thing I wanted, but would it hurt to talk about things for once? "I'm good. I can't find Azzaria. She's ignoring me, and I have no idea why." I leaned back in the chair, rubbing my chin.

"I'm not a relationship expert," he pointed out, "but I've seen how she looks at you. Give her some days to be absent. Don't burn the city down when you get mad, but just give her three days, and if she's not back by then, you can become as crazy as you'd like. You have the best lawyer representing you anyway." It would never be advice if Arnoldo didn't use it as an opportunity to gloat.

I rolled my eyes, thought about it and disregarded it. *How am I supposed to live peacefully for days if I don't know the*

*status of her safety?*

I glanced through my office door and saw every other possible worker except her. I kept hoping that she would show up or even send me a one-worded text message, but I didn't get any of that. My heart weighed heavily, especially because I knew Matthew was out there.

I didn't want to think the worst of the situation, but what was a guy to think?

*It's been forever since I've written in this, but I always find my way back to my thoughts. It's been almost a full day without knowing if she's safe, and it's driving me mad. I've searched every hotel, every housing scheme, and every place she could've possibly been. I checked bistros, bookstores, libraries, Barnes and Noble. I've checked every place in this city that she loves, and there's no trace. The camera footage from the gala last night had nothing of substance. I had my guys down at the PR and software unit searching and scrubbing everywhere. I had my guys at the Fortune 500 hunting and tracking down her ex and her father. I needed a punching bag, and they're the most deserving.*

*When I think of a world without her, I want to burn it down to the ground. Before today, our relationship was going so well. It's like every time we step forward, life comes in and we move ten steps backward. It's tiring and I always knew my past mistakes would catch up with me, but not right now. Not with her.*

*The only happy note was my gala as it went well, and we raised thirty-seven million dollars for the foundation. I'm proud of that, and I'm glad to be active in my charity again. There's so much to be done, and so now's the time to do it. I just feel like I've fall—*

My brain went blank, and I couldn't finish writing.

I went decades without knowing she existed, and now, I couldn't go through a full day without seeing her face or hearing her laugh. Those weren't even the big things. I just wanted to know that she was safe. She could be mad at me or even taking any amount of space, but I just wanted to know

she was safe. And nothing else could shake that feeling. Nothing could shake the feeling of not knowing whether the person you live for is safe or not.

My day wasn't going to get any better, so I headed home to get some sleep. Hopefully, all this worrying would put me to sleep, even though I doubted it.

"I'm stepping out, Mel," I advised her as I walked out. I needed to get out of here, and I needed to do so now.

All the tiredness I had earlier went away as soon as I stepped foot in my living room. My willpower to do anything went down severely, and this was never me. I was a workaholic nut job, but right now my spirit was broken more than anything else.

I found a box in my living room marked "important," and I opened it just to find the list of books I told Mikkel to get for me. If I couldn't be productive doing work, I might as well do it while reading one of these novels.

I flipped through the book titles and landed on one titled, "Throttled." It's about an F1 lover romance which interested me. There weren't many F1 books, and I enjoyed watching the men drive their cars around the track. Hopefully the book will be good.

My phone was put on loud just in case of any emergencies or in case anyone needed me or if Azzaria decided to text me.

I've started this novel, I'm twelve chapters deep, and all I could think about was her.

ME

I'm reading Throttled. It's one of the recommendations you gave me. I miss having you here, and I just need to know what's wrong, please. I need to know you're safe.

I had to send this message as much as I didn't want to. She left the most longing print in me and was capable of bringing me to my knees. I didn't know how if it was possible to go

through the rest of time without knowing the status of her safety.

I rang her cellphone twenty times and nothing. No one has seen her and it was irritating how I was the only who was affected. I tried to locate her mother, but nothing.

RONAN

I'm at your door.

I groaned and walked over to open it.

“You look like shit,” he said and walked inside, “but I brought this for you.” He had a box with my favorite bottle of scotch.

“Why are you trying to bribe me?” He was a nice man, but he was never this nice. Unless Reyes went and blabbed to the boys about my predicament.

He sighed and walked over to my couch, “I was in the store and picked it because I didn't get you a birthday gift yesterday asshole. Plus I need to talk to you about two things.”

“I'm not a therapist.” He chuckled and I stared blankly at him.

“Your girl's mom has cancer,” he spat out.

*What the fuck?* My head shot up the fastest it's ever and my heart pulsated. Azzaria would've told me if her mom was sick, and the bills were so fucking expensive. She couldn't do it on her own.

“Now's not the time to joke,” I said, punching him in the knee but he didn't move or flinch. His expression remained the same, and that's how I knew he was being honest.

“It's terminal, and she's had it for 5 months.” Cancer was a disease Ronan and Lucio hated. Their parents died from it, and so did their younger sister. Those deaths plus more drove him into medical school, and he worked tirelessly until he got the chance to open his own place and then buy a hospital. He's a



bit extreme, but we do things that make us happy and hospitals make him happy... as questionable as that sounds.

I sat in shock and disbelief. “How do you know?”

“You sent us to get background info on Leann. At the time when you told me the name I was wondering why it sounded familiar. I ran back to my clinic and went through patient files and saw her name in the system. I couldn’t include it in the report because I wasn’t sure. This morning I went into clinic and she was there sitting in the waiting room—”

“Was she there alone?” My curiosity peaked. Was that why Azzaria had completely gone silent with me? Because she was hurting over this? And I could understand but I wouldn’t ever leave her to handle anything alone. I always want to be with her. “Yes and I went to examine her. Stage four terminal cervical cancer which is spreading very rapidly and damaging her organs. I asked her if she was having any troubles, and she mentioned the inability to pay as well as leaving her daughter behind and then I remembered—”

“Your mom. You remembered your mom,” I said, cutting off his statement. It took me back to the time he went through his mother’s death and how much it hurt him.

“Exactly. I put her on a payment plan, and she hasn’t told Azzaria yet. She’s waiting on the right time to, based on her words. It’s a very messed up disease, and it brought me back to a time I don’t want to be in,” he sighed, frustration clear on his face. I offered him a drink of the strongest alcohol we had, and we just sat in silence.

Azzaria loved her mother to no end, and I knew losing her so abruptly would shatter any remaining happiness in her. At this point, I wasn’t even worried about whether she still wanted there to be an “us.” I was worried about if she’d be able to get herself back when her mother dies. It was a tragic inevitability.

“I’ll take care of the bills.” I grabbed my checkbook from the table beside me while sipping my scotch. “How much is the whole thing in total?”

“I have no idea. I’ll have to get you an invoice, but you have time. I won’t let them stop treating her, even if she’s behind on every payment. I may be an ass, but I’m not that cruel,” he chuckled and sighed.

“Get that invoice to me. I’m not worried about you. If you could help every cancer patient, I know you would, but your auditors are ruthless sons of bitches,” I pointed out, and he knew it was true. “How long do you think her lifespan will be?”

“Five months if she’s lucky, but it’s unpredictable, as you know. These things change ever so often,” he sighed.

The two of us sat in silence until night fell. Ronan was snoring loudly, and I couldn’t take it, so I went into my bedroom, and to my surprise, I saw pebbles laying in her spot.

“You miss her too?”

She looked me and pouted. At least my dog and I were feeling the same.

I jumped into the bed, hugging the pillow she slept on and started petting pebbles’ fur.

I grabbed my phone to text her and lingered in the chat. It took a lot for me to be thrown off my normal axis. But the world wasn’t spinning as it should be. It felt alone, I felt alone without her and I felt lost.

ME

Please come back to me. Whatever happened, we can fix it, but we can’t do that if I don’t know where you are or if you’re safe.

I hit send and went to bed. Day one without her was a mess, and I just hoped, by some miracle, she’d call me or even show up at my door. I needed her, especially for a day like tomorrow.

## CHAPTER 27

# *Dillon*

### **JUNE 21.**

This day marked thirteen years since the worst day of my life. The day I lost my grandparents to the selfishness of the world and their own tribulations.

Many people question why I claim to love and hate my grandfather equally, and it was because I held him responsible for the way he and grandma passed away. He had the power to prevent it, even to delay it. After all, he was Neil Xander, but revenge took precedence. Settling scores was more important, and for that, my hatred endures.

But while I had that feeling, I'd always love him. He should've been my dad. He believed me when I told him anything. He got me the help I needed. I never wanted to be away from him even when he was doing the most ruthless things in the world. I loved him.

He left a dozen businesses and enough money to buy the world, but I didn't just take it. I invested, I fixed every blunder made and got back all his clients who he had screwed over. *I didn't do it for me; I did it for him.*

I was just twenty when it happened, and Mara was eighteen. I remember it like it was yesterday.

We were so excited to come home and spend summer vacation with them. They had planned for the four of us to spend the summer at the lake house, and we were excited. It never mattered what we did or where we went, as long as we were with our grandparents.

Ms. Lauren, our old nanny, was a better mom than Amy ever was. While my mom tended to her other children, she always forgot Mara and I. We were always put last, but never by Ms. Lauren and, as of late, Mrs. Emerson. Ms. Lauren was such a sweetheart, and I sometimes find myself missing her or missing the role she played in my childhood.

We got home from school, and Ms. Lauren sat by the patio looking lost. It was never normal to see her that way. Even at eighteen years old, I was still a bit dependent on her. We ran to give her hugs, and she burst the news to us. I felt like my life was ending. I no longer had the will to live, and suicide crossed my mind a few times.

They left notes for Mara and I, and up to this day, I have mine framed. Whenever I need strength, I read the notes, or I look at my tattoo. Amy may have carried me in the womb and Tim just provided the sperm, but it was really Miss. Lauren, Grandma, and Grandpa who raised us.

I woke up feeling excessively down. There was no source of happiness for me. Azzaria still hadn't texted me or reached out to me, and my grandparents were dead. Every day I hoped that their death was just a joke, but it was real.

It was Mara and my tradition to visit the cemetery four times every year. On the anniversaries of their death, their birthdays, the day they got married, and one other day when we really needed guidance from them.

I was never as tough as I was portrayed, and as much as I wanted to hold it together, I couldn't do that today. Between the guilt of their death and the burden of not knowing if Azzaria was safe or not, I was crumbling.

Behind all the layers of the enigmatic billionaire tycoon mogul was just a person who has been through too much at a young age. A person who had to keep his barriers up so he doesn't get too much hurt. And one who all he wanted was love and got everything but.

But the world would never get to know me like this; as far as I was concerned, they didn't deserve it.

I grabbed the box of stuff, my car keys, and went downstairs. To avoid contact and conversation with anyone at this moment, I took the back exit. That was an upside of living in the penthouse of a building I owned.

The minute I realized Azzaria and I were getting serious and that the media would be a problem, I had the contractors build a back exit which took us straight down via stairs. It was a lot of walking, but there's no price too much to pay for privacy.

My hands gripped the steering wheel so tight that my knuckles turned white. I wanted to get this day over with, but I also needed it to last forever. The only thing we had when people died were the memories they once left us with, and while mine were clouded and disturbed, the ones of them were pure and innocent as they should be.

I drove up to the cemetery parking lot and saw Mara standing outside of her car. She had boxes in her hand, and by the look of it, Alex and Isaiah were sitting inside. I quickly got out and made my way over to them.

"Hey, little sis," I greeted her with a warm hug and a kiss on the side of her face. She was the only other person in this world who has seen me through everything, and I remember the first time I shed blood was because of her. And that was a murder I'd always be proud of.

She hugged me back and said, "Hey, are you ready?"

"I hope so," I said and nervously laughed, "Hey Alex, what's up?"

"I'm good. Be safe today, guys, and call me if anything. Isaiah and I will be at my mom's house today," he said. He was mainly directing his words to Mara.

Mara and Alexander hid their relationship from me for a year. I knew my sister was dating, but she didn't tell me that she was dating one of my closest friends. I found out the night she and I were hanging out and he rang her cell. I didn't care who she dated, I just didn't want to see her hurt.

Five years later, they're married, still in love, and have a son. I'm happy for them, even if I don't show it.

"You didn't tell me you were taking him there," she said, sounding a bit angry.

"I know, but I just thought it would be a good idea, babe," he shrugged, fixing Isaiah in the car seat.

"You think a lot lately, but whatever," she rolled her eyes, walked closer to the car and turned her focus to Isaiah, "Mommy will see you later, okay, my golden boy. I love you so much." She kissed him goodbye, and we walked off.

After five more minutes of walking, we stood right before their headstone. The one thing our parents did right was ensure that they were buried side by side. They were completely inseparable as lovers, and what was even more heartwarming was the fact that they were best friends.

"I got someone to come here and clean up their headstone yesterday," Mara said, "I miss them so much." Tears welled up in her eyes as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"I miss them too." A single teardrop formed in my eye, and I caught it with my index finger before it had a chance to fall. "But we're doing everything for them. You know nana would've loved to see you like this," I said, encouraging her.

"What do you mean?" She sniffled, her eyes as red as her Louboutins.

"Seeing you happy and in love. Seeing you living your dream and graduate college with honors. Seeing you having a baby and being the best mom ever. Nana would be so proud of you, and Papa would be scared."

"He'd think he was losing his baby, but no one can ever take me away from him, and I'm just so sad that they took him away from me." She sobbed and completely broke down. I could do nothing but hold her.

"It's going to be okay," I said, comforting her and rubbing her hair, "I love you so much, Mara."

“I love you too, Dillon,” she said in between sobs. It broke my heart once again to hear my sister go through this. It happens every year. It’s the day we relived their death. Every single emotion we felt years ago comes back and just crashes down on us, leaving the most painful heart.

“Grandma was right,” Mara said, “she told you Annalise wasn’t the one. You weren’t thinking of marrying her then, but you were dating her. Or having a relationship with her, I don’t care. And Grandma told you she wasn’t the one,” Mara recalled. *And so did I. She went on and on about it. I should’ve listened.*

“I know,” I said with a loud sigh, “she was right.”

“She said your heart would be full one day and you wouldn’t expect it. She said you’d deny it because you’re so stubborn, but the more you do, the more you’ll fall deeper in love. I think it’s Azzaria,” she said. It was so soft it came out as a whisper.

“Huh?”

“That love she told you about. I think the person for you is Azzaria. You can deny it, but I’m not blind,” Mara scolded.

“I think I love her, Mar.” It slipped out. I didn’t mean to say that, but I can’t take it back, and I won’t.

“I know you do, and Grandpa would be proud that you found a lover who loves you just as much.”

We spread a blanket in front of the headstones and took our seats. It wasn’t a picnic, but we had traditions that we did every single year.

Soon after they died, a lawyer gave us a box of individually written letters from Grandma. She was sick and knew she would die soon, but she didn’t know that it would’ve been on that day. Or that’s what I tell myself at least. Mara and I read one each time we visited just to savor the moment a little longer.

She opened the box, asking, “You pick, or should I?”

“I’ll pick and read.” I searched around the box, looking for the perfect one and grabbed the letter on the far left with the number “15” on it. She numbered each of them from 1 to 100, and we’d pick from it.

I untwined the wire she used to seal the letter and saw her fancy writing flash before my eyes. She had the fanciest handwriting, almost resembling calligraphy, and she only wrote with one kind of pen—a black and gold fountain pen with her initials on the side.

After we cleared out their old house, Mara and I found a box of them, and those are the only pens I’ve ever found myself using. The ink was refillable, so I had no problem there. *I do it for them, for her.*

“Ready?” I asked Mara.

She nodded in response, and I cleared my throat to start reading.

*My dearest grandbabies,*

*By the time you get to this letter, I’ll be long gone. The kidney disease would’ve taken me, but I lived a long, full, and healthy life. There’s no complaining from me. I anticipate that Mara would be the one reading this because Dillon’s not so sentimental. He has a big heart but he’s not so big on heartfelt words. The sickness is taking me out faster than I ever imagined, but it’s my time to rest, and I know that you both will definitely be alright. Not now, or not even in years, but one day you’ll wake up and realize that life is okay and it’s meant for living. I’m proud of you two. You two have always been my little firecrackers, and I wanted to get the chance to see you both as parents and graduates, but the timing isn’t right for me. I’m writing about a hundred of these just so you two aren’t lonely when I’m gone, but do not read them all at once, or you’ll run out. Even if I’m not there, Grandpa is in perfect health, and he’s there. He’s tough on you two sometimes, but he loves you. I’ve had the best years parenting you. I’ll never forgive your parents for what they did to you both, but I can’t sit here and say I’m not too glad. If they didn’t flake on their duties, I wouldn’t have had the chance to raise and shape you*



*the proper way. You two may have been legally my grandchildren, but I saw you as nothing less than my own. Dillon, please remember, pridiē melius quam ultimo. And Mara, you're my princess. Keep both your heads up and continue to make Nana proud. Te amo meam magnam infantēs.*

I wasn't sure when Mara or I started crying, but I do know that we're both deep in tears right now.

"Wow," Mara said, sniffing, "I'm never getting over her death." I didn't think I was getting over it either.

There weren't notes from our grandfather, as I'm sure he didn't expect to die on that day he left the house. But he left a fortune for Mara and me, between money, land, and any number of assets were split 50-50. No matter what was left, they cared enough to remember us, and that brought a smile to my face. It was a glimmer of sunshine in this place of darkness.

---

We spent the next three hours writing letters, drinking alcohol, and laying flowers. There were pools of tears, as expected, but everyone needed one day to be weak, and today was our day.

Night was approaching, and Alexander had joined us. He and Isaiah got here around fifteen minutes ago. It was a bit abnormal to be gathering like this in the middle of a cemetery, but being here made us feel like our grandparents were there with us, and that was all we needed for today.

"It's time for the lantern," Mara said and jumped up from the ground.

Each year, we wrote our grandparents' names on lanterns, said a message to them with hopes of them listening, lit it, and let it float into the sky. Contrary to popular belief, it was my idea. I believed that they were good enough to be up in the sky with the angels and all things happy, so the best way to honor them was to do this.

I grabbed the lantern shades, lighters, and markers. Mara had pre-written them, as she tended to always do. Every single year, and we stand there now.

“Should I go first, or should you?” She asked. I pointed at her, and she grabbed the lighter from me. “Life without you both should be easier, but it’s not. In fact, it’s harder. Dillon and I are here for each other, striving to do right. Last time we talked, I mentioned marrying Alexander and I know you’d be happy to see him as my husband,” she smiled and I could tell by the way Alex gripped her fingers that he felt the words deeply. *When Mara loved, she loved hard.* “And now, exactly a year later, I gave birth to the most beautiful boy. His name is Isaiah. Grandma, you always told me to give my first boy a biblical name, and I chose that one. Life’s hard without you two, and I miss you always. Wherever you two are, never forget that Dillon and I love you endlessly.”

I shared a soft glance with her and watched as she lit her lantern and let it float away. A smile crept up on her face, and I knew what it meant. They heard her. She felt it, and that made her peaceful. “Your turn, Dillon,” she said. I took the lighter from her and cleared my throat. I had so much to say to them, but there weren’t enough words.

“The day you both passed, I stopped loving. Nothing has been the same, but every achievement is in your honor. Pops, your wisdom guided my business growth, and I’ve upheld our family name. I still follow your advice and try to make every venture the best one yet. I miss and love you. I miss you both deeply, and if I could make one wish, it would be to bring you back to this world.”

We didn’t have to exchange any words, and so we packed up the stuff, said our final goodbyes, and went about our ways. Mara said she had a headache and just wanted to sleep, and my fate was the same.

It has been two days. Two days without her. Without knowing if she’s safe and without seeing her smile or hearing her voice. Between going through my grandparents’ death for the millionth time and her leaving me, I couldn’t deal. But did she leave me? Or did something happen? And, more importantly, where was left to look?

I skimmed the whole city and still got nothing. I’m sure she hadn’t left, but if I still got radio silence between tonight

and tomorrow, I'm calling up my Travel and Foreign Affairs favor. I needed to know if she left the country or state and then go to her.

*"I won over your grandma by groveling and patience. Women like her will drive you insane, son."* Those were the last words I heard from him. I phoned him to ask why grandma looked irritated, and it turned out he was the cause. They worked it out eventually, I hoped, and then he gave me the life story of how they fell in love. He made too many mistakes, but love does conquer all. No matter how long it takes.

My thoughts were interrupted by a text message from Lucio. "This better be good," I hissed, and to my surprise, it was.

LUCIO

We found her dad, and we got a lead on the ex. We currently have the dad held on the Malen property, and the ex was seen at the Statue of Liberty today, around five to eight hours ago.

I needed to let off some steam anyway. This was the best news I could've gotten.

ME

Who's with him at the warehouse? And good work, Lucio.

LUCIO

Ro, myself, and some of the other men.

ME

I'm five minutes away.

Five minutes turned into a lot less because I broke every stop-light until I got to where I needed to be. When Arnaldo encouraged me to invest in this property, I was a bit skeptical, but now it's proven to be a good decision. All my ungodly deeds are done here, and rightfully so.

Kicking the door open, I walked in and saw a sight. One definitely for sore eyes. Something wicked sparked in my soul.

“This him?” I asked Ronan.

“Yeah,” he said, “we found him in an off-closed lot. He had pictures of your girl and her mom all over his place. Such a creep.”

He wasn't a bad-looking guy, but his actions made him disgusting. I wanted to deal with him so badly, and I would, but death would be too easy; he needed to feel.

Kamadge, the cleaner, quickly ran over and brought the black box to me. This contained a set of knives and guns with specialized tips and ammunition.

Lucio flipped the light switch, and I got a closer look at him. “Really, guys?” I asked and rolled my eyes. They tied him up like this was a movie with duct tape and all. Next time, I'll send professionals to get this job done, not teenage boys who watch too many documentaries.

“Sorry,” Ronan said with a giggle. *A damn giggle?* There's no way Michael would take me seriously with this behavior.

I ripped the duct tape harshly from his face and shot him straight in the leg. No formal introductions were necessary. He just needed to know that I was here to torture him the way he tortured them.

He winced in pain, and a loud scream came from his lips. On a normal day, I'd feel some sort of sorrow hearing these sounds, but all he gave me was more motivation to do what I had to do. “Who the fuck are you?” The distinct look of pain was definitely present on his face, and the blood ran, pooling at his foot.

“That shouldn't be your concern, but what should be your concern is your child and how awfully you treated her,” I said,

circling around him, “you see, your daughter means very much to me, and when I found out what you did to her, I made it my mission to find you, and here you are, all weak and pathetic like the parasite you are.” I scoffed.

He didn’t give a response; he instead let out a loud groan. If he was wincing then, I couldn’t imagine how much it was going to hurt later. “How many times did you touch her?” It hurt me to ask him this, but luckily, the more it hurt me, the more it’s gonna hurt him.

“Too many times,” he said with a slight chuckle. What made me angrier was how he thought it was funny.

I grabbed the largest knife from the box and walked closer to him. Our faces were at kissing distance. “You think you’re funny, huh?” I asked as I dragged the knife along his chest, bringing it straight down his body. The line of blood seeped out, and that made me happy. I had never been happier to see red than I was in that moment. When I finally got to his crotch area, I plunged the knife in and left it there. He screamed out, and that was music to my ears.

“You left them serious scars, which pisses me the fuck off. This is what you deserve,” I shouted, “Kamadge and Louis, finish this, please,” I ordered.

“Do you want him dead?”

“No, make him wish he were dead. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

Ronan, Lucio, Arnaldo and I left the building and all the screams behind. I felt no remorse in there, just more power, and that was how it should have been.

“You’re ruthless,” Lucio remarked, “good work, man,” he congratulated.

“Yeah. Assholes like him need their dick chopped off. I’m so sorry he hurt Azzaria and her mom. Where is she, by the way?”

There it was. The one question I couldn’t answer. “We’re in a fight right now, so I don’t exactly know. I’ll know soon.” I hoped I would. I really did.

“Nina’s mad at me too because I got her the wrong flavor of ice cream,” he babbled.

“Women,” we all groaned and rolled our eyes.

“Will you be fine?” The boys asked. I could tell why they asked, and it was a good reason. I normally have a bit of a conscience after I torture a person. No matter how angry I got, there was always a down moment and some amount of spiraling for days. It wasn’t because I regretted it, it was because my grandmother wouldn’t have approved of this life. So I tend to punish myself the way I know she would’ve.  
*Withdrawal.*

“I’ll be good. He deserves everything that’s coming his way.”

“Since we have no women going home to as my wife’s in Italy,” Lucio said, “beers at our favourite friend’s bar?”

“I have a woman going home to,” Ronan pointed out.

Lucio laughed. “*Fratello*, she doesn’t like you.”

“True, but she still loves me.”

“Are you forgetting what you did?”

“Whatever, are we gonna get the beers or not?”

“Sure, but I don’t drink beer,” I reminded them. “I’ll have a scotch.”

“They’ll still let you into the billionaire club if they find out you drink beer, you know that, right?” Ronan said.

“Shut up.”

## CHAPTER 28

# *Azzaria*

IT HAS BEEN ABOUT THREE DAYS SINCE I'VE SEEN him, and it felt like I was ripping my own heart out. I've been missing from everything and everyone, even Abi, and that was only because she wasn't in New York.

All I've done for the past three days: Sleep, cry, and cry some more. It was so crazy to think that the person I spent all those years without entered my life, and then, I couldn't see myself without him. I couldn't even blame him because I ran. Times got tough, and someone told me one too many bad things, and I left without even looking back. I always fucked up the good things in my life.

He texted me every hour of every day, and my heart broke some more reading them. I knew for a fact that he needed me yesterday, and I wasn't there. I'm don't even know why I keep messing up the one thing in my life that was stable.

The only plus side of the past three days was that I got to see my mother. We've watched movies and baked together, but that's about it. I sort of told her about what happened with Dillon and me, leaving out all of the major details, and she didn't have much to say as expected. It was like me asking her what would happen if I mixed oil and water... nothing, they're immiscible.

The reality sucked, and I was going crazy without him. Glancing at my clock, I saw the time read 3:55 pm. *Good job, Azzaria! One more day of waking up when the day is done.*

“Azzaria Jane,” my mom screamed as she ascended the steps. I could hear the floorboards creak as well as the taps of her heel on the hard surface.

“Leann Angela,” I groaned and pulled the covers over my head. I didn’t want to be disturbed. I wanted Dillon, and I wanted to be left alone.

“You’ve been here for three days and avoided all human interaction even with me, and I live here,” she complained, “what happened?”

Do I tell her that my boyfriend’s father told me some very degrading things, and I flaked on him? Or do I just say I have a stomach ache? Both of those are true, but the first one caused the second one.

“Mom, I’m—”

Why was Ronan calling me? He wouldn’t ring my number unless something had happened to Dillon.

“I have to take this,” I said and jumped out of bed. “I’ll be out in a second.” She half-smiled at me and closed the door.

“Ronan, what’s up?”

“Your phone does work,” he sarcastically said, “where have you been?”

“I’ve been around,” I responded, “why did you call?”

“Because Dillon’s been tearing the city down looking for you. He fired all of the staff at your building and hired new ones because he thought they lost you. He tortured the fuck out of your father, had his people searching the hills for a Matthew guy, bawling his eyes out, he’s tapped out now. So whatever happened, I think...”

Everything he mentioned after my dad’s name was a blur. I suddenly couldn’t hear anything, and my heart stopped. “What did you just say?” I asked breathlessly.

“I said a lot of stuff, so you need to be specific.”

“About my father.”



“Dillon tortured him, on your behalf by the way. He’s not dead, though I’m sure he wishes he was, but he won’t be a problem to you and your mom anymore. Dillon made sure of that.” A pit of relief pooled up in my throat. I’ve spent all my life trying to get rid of him and trying to make him pay for all the crap he put us through, and Dillon took care of it in a day. I needed to leave. I needed to go be with him.

“Hello? Am I talking to a ghost?”

“Sorry,” I said, “I spaced out. Do you know where Dillon is by any chance?” It was worth a shot.

“Yes, I’m with him right now. Do you want me to get him?”

“No. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Just hurry up before he starts making us paint with him. I’m wearing hundred-thousand-dollar wrist tags,” he noted. Ronan was the most self-centered person I had ever spoken to, but yet, if he hadn’t called, I wouldn’t have gotten that motivation to do what I had to do next.

Life felt triumphant. Michael was gone. My entire life has been marred by all the pain he put me through. I spent years feeling like I deserved nothing at all or that no man would love me because my father didn’t.

“Mom, we don’t have to worry about dad anymore,” I said to her as I rushed out of the house. That was the fastest I’ve ever seen her jump in my life.

“Azzaria, what are you—”

“Mom, I can’t stay and talk details right now, but just know that we’re safe from him.” I used to think that the happiest times would be when he was out of sight, but no, the happiest time was knowing he couldn’t hurt us anymore.

“But how?” She asked in disbelief.

“My boyfriend. He took care of it,” I said and smiled.

“How could your boyfriend—”

Two words. One name but two words. “Dillon Xander, mom,” I shouted and ran through the door. That was all she needed to hear, and I knew that I’d get scolded for it one way or the other, but right now, I needed to go.

I stepped out, jumped in my car and there I was, on my way.

I could imagine how insane it was driving him, but yet, all I could think about was how he handled my father. I’ve gotten a lot of empty promises about getting justice, but this was the closest Justice has ever been to my door. It was finally and not because some striped-shirt cop or black-coated judge, but because of Dillon.

The protocol was always to take the back exit up to his place, but I didn’t have the key, so I’d have to change my way through the front. I ran to the elevator, but a receptionist stopped me.

“Where are you headed?”

“Xander penthouse,” I said. There was no time to waste, but she was definitely dragging this entire experience out. The receptionist asked for my name, I told her, and she sent me up.

Ronan might have been annoying, but he wasn’t an awful person. He was just different. I couldn’t put my hands on why, but he wasn’t like the rest of Dillon’s friends. I could see myself actually being friends with him and not just friends of my boyfriend.

I got to the door and rang his doorbell. It felt so awkward as it was my first time ever doing ringing his doorbell, and it was also my first time seeing him in three days, which might I add, felt like three whole years.

As I heard the footsteps come closer to the door, my heart rate sped up. I didn’t know what to expect. Would he be happy? Sad? Angry? Disgusted? All of the above? Or would he even care? I should’ve thought of that before I came here, but the longing to see him was too much.

“Who is... Azzaria,” he said and stared into my eyes. It was captivating how my name just rolled so sexily off his

tongue. There were hints of Latin in his voice, so it made everything more sensual than it should have been. His eyes told me everything I needed to know. I saw pain and sadness but most of all, I saw loss. He looked like he was hurting, and I knew it had to do with the fact that I went rogue for three whole days.

“Dillon. I’m sorry. There’s so much I have to say, and I don’t expect you to listen bu—”

He pulled me inside and wrapped his arms around me. I wasn’t sure what I expected, but it certainly wasn’t that. “I’m glad you’re okay. I’ve spent three days tearing this city searching for you, and I’m just glad you’re safe,” he muttered and released a sigh of relief.

I should’ve texted him back because he probably thought that Matthew had gotten to me. *How stupid was I?*

We walked inside to the living room, and I looked over his shoulder, seeing Ronan around a chess board, surrounding by a few bottles of scotch.

“This is what you had my boyfriend participating in? Damaging his liver?”

He looked at me, blankly. “It was either he drank or the set the city on fire, which would you prefer?”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re actually annoying.”

“No, I’m blunt. Anyway, what the hell happened?”

Though I was reluctant, I told him and he didn’t look shocked which shocked me.

“You didn’t have to run, he would’ve handled it if you told him, but I understand why you did.”

I sighed. “I know but it already happened, I can only try to fix it.”

“Are you good?”

“Why?”

“We’re basically friends.”

I laughed. "I'm fine but I need to see him."

Ronan nodded and I left to go find Dillon. He hadn't gotten back yet, so I walked inside his study, and he was just sitting there, writing in his journal. I've been told by many people that he's never gone anywhere without it.

"I think Ronan and I are friends," I said as a conversation starter, and he looked up from the book. "Thoughts?"

"Where were you? Don't give me any bullshit. I'm being very patient considering I could've reacted differently." His grip on the pen tightened, and the lump in my throat thickened. As much as I wanted to hide from this, I knew I couldn't. He deserved an explanation.

"I was at the gala, and I ran into your father. He basically told me that you're never getting over Annalise and that she's the only woman you and your family will ever love. He brought me through memories between you two, and as I looked up, I saw you and her hugging to take a picture. He called me a distraction and told me that the only reason you're not with Annalise right now is because you're distracted. I can work my way around women who want you or women who you've slept with, but not one you married. Not one who knows you or someone you almost had a life with. I couldn't go around that, and all I felt was sadness, so I left and went to stay with my mom for three days. You wouldn't find her house because it's not listed. It's basically a squatter settlement," I explained.

He looked at me with his dull eyes and sighed. I couldn't tell if it was a sad sigh, angry sigh, or a mixture of both. But it was definitely something.

"I'll handle my father, but you didn't have to run. You have no idea how worried sick I've been. To you, it was just running. But to me, it wasn't," he said strongly.

"What?"

"I searched every fucking building in this city. I had my men on the ground looking for you. I wondered if you'd be kidnapped or if I did something to make you run. I had people

looking for Matthew because I thought he had you, and that scared the fuck out of me.” He was flaring, and his words were strong, filled with passion. I didn’t think of it that way, but I should’ve.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

His eyes flared up, and now I could definitely tell he was angry, but what’s different about this was, it was directed to me. His expressions softened, but the fire in his eyes was still visible.

“I didn’t have to do that,” he repeated, scoffing. He moved a few paces around the desk and took a seat on the couch. “But yet I did. Because when you weren’t here with me, I wanted to burn this city to the ground, and even then, it wouldn’t be enough. Nothing is enough to remove the thought of you from my brain. Nothing is enough to remove you, and I wish you would think about that. I wish you would see that I’m not playing with you. I wish you could see how you’ve become a necessity in my life. How much I’ve changed my life to make sure you’re in it, I wish you could see it,” he said, raising his voice, “but I’m not letting you go, so I guess I have eternity to make your vision clearer.”

Every word, every thought, every flame stopped. There was just silence. And a perfect level of calmness in my soul. It felt like never before. I was calm, and I realized something. I wouldn’t admit it, but I realized it. I burn for him, but not something dangerous, something filled with passion.

“I don’t know what to say.” I was speech.

“Come here,” he whispered, and I ran straight into his arms. Nothing quite felt like this. Nothing felt like home this much. He was home, and he didn’t even know it yet. “Never do that again. Come to me whenever you need reassurance.”

“You were in an in—”

“I’ll stop the world from spinning if you want me to. I would do anything for you,” he whispered and rubbed his hands in my hair.

“Okay,” I said in a low but audible tone, “thank you for what you did. I appreciate it.”

He didn’t respond, but I was sure he knew what I was talking about. It was dangerous what he did, and traces could always be redone, but he was Dillon Xander; what couldn’t he do?

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“Are you two good?” Ronan asked, pouring me a glass of scotch.

I took the glass from him and placed it on the coffee table. “We will be,” I said with a smile. “So do you have a girlfriend?”

“Kind of, I’m trying to win her back.”

“How badly did you fuck up?”

“Really bad, but I’m trying to fix it.”

“What did you do?” He told me and I was shocked. These men really are crazy.

Dillon walked out, interrupting our talk. He was barely dressed, and where that sucked for Ronan’s eyes, my eyes were blessed. His hair was wet, with little droplets falling out, and he had some grey sweats that clung to his waist, high enough to cover his crotch but low enough to see his V-line, and as guessed, he was shirtless.

He grabbed my thigh, and I wasn’t sure if he was trying to get me to strip right here or get me on my knees, or both.

“What are you two doing?” Dillon asked.

“Introductions,” Ronan answered, “but, I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone. See you.”

Dillon just laughed and started rubbing his hands on my lower stomach. I got butterflies, which clouded my brain and barrels of fear, which filled my whole body. He was rubbing a spot that brought back severe memories. Shaking it off, I brought my head back to earth and regained focus.

“I haven’t seen you for three days, no fault of yours, but still. Let’s talk about you.” I felt like one of the reasons I was always running was because I feared that I didn’t know him at all, which wasn’t true, but I just wanted to know more. I’d love to know everything, but it all took time.

“What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you’re willing to tell me. I just want to listen to you talk.” I leaned over more, so my neck was resting on him, as we talked slowly.

“Yesterday, I went to my grandparents’ graveside. It was the anniversary of their death, and I miss them more than I let on. It brought me to tears when I read notes that grandma left, but Mara and I spent the day in a cemetery. It’s our tradition. My family, as expected, didn’t come. They’re very dysfunctional and they aren’t the good parents you think they are. At least not to Mara or me,” he said. His words spoke slowly but passionately. He just needed comfort.

I thought he was so closed off because no one had ever wanted to know him beneath it all before, so he thought it was just a ploy to plot against him. “Do you know why I have my charity and that gala?”

“Tell me.”

“Mara was sexually abused for years by my father’s live-in friend. He and mom knew it was happening and they did nothing to stop it. It happened for three years straight before I had the courage to tell my grandparents. They believed me and took it into their hands and got Mara all the help she needed. Ms. Lauren, also saved Mara from it for some months before my mom had told her to never enter Mara’s room after dark because she was getting complaints.” It burned him, heck, it burned me to hear this. How heartless could a mother of all people be? My hope in fathers crashed a long time ago but I never expected mothers to be like that.

“Who’s Ms. Lauren, and how’d she stop it?”

He told me about how she took care of them and was like a mother to them but after the death of their grandparents, she

was banished and never came back. I loved when he was vulnerable and open with me, but this was breaking my heart. They had no business going through all of this.

“She sounds so amazing. Have you ever tried looking for her?”

“Yes but no luck. Even recently and nothing. I don’t want to believe she died, but that’s the only possible reason why.”

“I’m so sorry about this. I’m glad Mara got all the help though, I know what it’s like, but on the bright side, she turned out so great.”

“You’re right, she did. As for me, I didn’t get sexually abused, but my dad was harsh to me. He abused me whether it was emotionally, mentally, or even physically. I hate no one more than I hate him, and I hate my mother for not trying to help either of us out of the bad situation. For years, Mara and I were scarred, and no one in our house cared enough.” He was calm, too calm. And that was when everyone should be on alert. His father had something wicked coming his way, and I wouldn’t talk him out of it. Whatever was deserved, was deserved.

“I’m here now. I believe you. We’re in this together, baby,” I said and interlocked our fingers. I meant it; he would never be alone anymore because I was there.

“You know what, precious?” he whispered to me.

“What?”

“You’re perfect.” And with that, his lips met mine in a passionate kiss.



## CHAPTER 29

### *Dillon*

WE RETURNED TO NORMALCY, MAKING A PROMISE NEVER TO get to bed angry and I, especially, made her promise to stop running.

Giving up the control I tried so hard to maintain became easier because the person I was giving it up for had me utterly captivated. *She had me whipped.*

Azzaria stepped into my office and said, “I was working on the real estate drawings. It’s my last few weeks here, so I need to get this project moving. What’s up?”

It was so attractive seeing her take this internship so seriously. I didn’t doubt that she would but it amazed me how work-oriented she was.

“Are you busy now?” I asked.

“I have a few things scheduled after lunch, but it’s lunchtime now, so not really. Why?” Perfect, and if she had commitments, I could clear her schedule. I was the boss after all.

I signaled for her to come over. We both needed a break. I rolled my chair back, patting my desk for her to join me.

She came over, stood in front of my desk, and I instructed her to have a seat and lie back. She silently complied, and to my surprise, she was naked under her dress. My enthusiasm surged; there was nothing I loved more than eating her out.

She remained silent as I unbuttoned her dress, exposing her entire body. I could hear her breathing, and her scent

seemed to hint at her arousal.

I stood between her splayed knees, savoring her beauty. She wore a skimpy black bra that contrasted with her fair skin. I unhooked it, revealing her lovely, firm breasts with small, pointy nipples.

I loved her full body. The breasts, the ass, the broad hips, the belly fat, everything. I loved all parts of her.

Taking them in my hands, her reaction was immediate. She arched her back and offered herself to me. I played with her breasts, causing her nipples to harden. My own desire intensified, painfully evident.

My tongue explored her wetness, and she quivered when I touched her moist flesh. As I continued to please her, she approached climax within minutes. Her taste was delightful, stoking my own arousal.

As I caressed her breasts, her nipples hardened and darkened. My cock did the same thing, tenting my pants.

I ran my hands down her body to her thighs, open in front of me. Her pussy was perfectly formed with nice full lips, just right for parting with my tongue and sucking into my mouth. And that's what I did.

I sat in my chair and pulled up close to her. She jumped a bit when my tongue touched her damp flesh. I ran my tongue up the valley between her lips to her clit, but eased up when I ran it back down and into her already wet vagina.

I began to work her with my lips and tongue, with my mouth buried between her legs. If anyone asked for my favorite meal, I'd tell them her name. I grasped the cheeks of her ass and pushed her thighs up and back.

Her knees bent and splayed outward and her feet settled on the desk, presenting her whole sex to me. I continued to lick and suck at her lips and clit.

I eased up with my tongue because I knew she would be very sensitive after her orgasm, but I still kept licking gently around her vaginal opening and sucking on her lips. All this time she was saying how good this felt and how she had

forgotten how wonderful it was to have her clit licked. As if I didn't make it my point of duty to do this daily.

It took a few minutes but I felt her clit swelling again, so I started using my fingers on her labia and inside her vagina, right behind her clit.

I eased up after her orgasm, knowing she would be sensitive. Still, I kept caressing her, making her tingle with pleasure. Her renewed arousal urged me on, and I used my fingers inside her. As she reached another climax.

"If you keep letting me orgasm multiple times every day, I won't be able to get anything done," she whispered.

She got off the desk, undressed, and knelt before me. I stood there, surrounded by the formality of a business office, while this beautiful, naked woman gave me an exquisite blowjob. I couldn't contain myself especially when her tongue was wrapped so slickly around my cock. She skillfully swallowed every drop of my cum and smiled up at me.

She gathered herself, sitting back on my desk, with a look of satisfaction written on her face.

"When was the last time you painted? I've seen you do everything except painting lately," she asked, switching the topic.

I sighed, rubbing my palm over my face. "I just haven't found artistic inspiration lately. I dabbled while you were sleeping, but it didn't fully come together. When I create my next piece, you'll be the first to know."

"I better be the first to see, also, are you thinking about who'll be your assistant after I leave?"

"Don't remind me about it," I pouted. Azzaria added quality to my work, eased my temperament, and helped me connect with clients. The thought of her leaving unsettled me.

"I'll still be in your life, just not at your office and also, there's a new property on the lineup," she pointed out.

"Yes, I know about the property, and no, I haven't found a new assistant. Have you ever thought about staying on board?"

I asked.

“What did you buy?” She asked, “I’ve thought about it, but I’m torn. I want us to work separately, but I love it here. I’m also moving out, and I wanted to talk to you about that.”

My mind raced as she addressed multiple topics. Azzaria was a whirlwind of thoughts, and I had to address them individually. “Let me answer these one by one,” I chuckled. “I’ll have Reyes draft a contract, and you can decide.” I already had Arnolando draft it, but that’s my way of staying ahead, she didn’t need to know that.

“Alright, sounds good.”

“Secondly, I bought the sandwich deli.”

“Wait!” She exclaimed, “What? Why? Are you going to turn it into something else?”

“No, I bought it because it’s your favorite place, a gift for you.”

Her smile was priceless, and her happiness was my greatest reward.

“You’re so romantic. Thank you. You rented the ice cream park for our pre-date. Then, you rented me that bookstore for a day, and we went book shopping last night. I don’t want you to think I’m after your money, though.”

“I’d spend all my billions to spoil you. Having you is worth it all,” I whispered in her ear. She moved to my lap, exchanging affection in her way.

“You’re going to make me cry,” she said. “Once I pay off my loans and debts, I’ll do something nice for you. I promise.”

“Having you here is equivalent to infinite. A number and symbol of wealth I’m yet to attain, don’t worry about buying me things. I have everything I’ve ever wanted and the one thing I never knew I needed.”

“What’s the one thing you need?”

“You, precious. You,” I whispered in her ear. “What did you want to ask me about the housing?”

“Um,” she stammered, “nevermind. I’ll figure it out. Anyway, we s—”

“Tell me,” I urged. I had an idea of what she was going to ask me, but I needed to hear her say it.

“Well, so... I have to move out really soon because my time at school is almost done, but I’m going to have to move. I was looking for affordable apartments in the city, and I wanted help since you’re a big real estate guy.”

“I can give you two options. Ready?” I asked, “You can move in with me, or I can just move you into one of my buildings across the city. Pick one.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and vexed her face. Here we go... “Those are the same, and moving in with you, are you sure?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You’re the type of guy who doesn’t like to be crowded. You work a lot, you’re always busy. You take random trips. You always have people over, and my anxiety doesn’t handle that well, and I can continue the list.”

“Is that what’s really bothering you? Or is it because you feel that you’ll lose your sense of independence?”

“A bit of both,” she admitted and I appreciated the honesty. “You’re one person, there’s no crowd. I do work a lot, I own half the world, but I’d drop everything to be at your feet. I’ve not taken a random trip in three months. You’re best friends with Ronan, Bryce doesn’t visit anymore, Lucio only comes when it’s important, Reyes is trustworthy, Mikkel is well himself, and you love my sister and as it relates to your independence, we’ll just have to meet each other in the middle.”

She laughed. “You have it all figured out, don’t you? I just don’t want us to move too fast and then ruin what we have going on,” she implored.

“All the times we’ve been separated have never been on my account, Azzaria. I can’t change my past, you can’t change yours, we just have to move forward, and if you keep doubting

that we won't work, then what's the point?" I could understand all the pain she felt in her past, and I knew she was getting help to get on with her life, but at some point, the past would have to stay in the past, or we won't have any progress.

"You're right." She sighed. "It's just scary because it's so good, and I don't normally get good things or people."

"Your first and last, precious." I kissed her cheek. "Your first and last. I'm yours, Azzaria. All yours."

"All mine," she whispered and smiled to herself. "We'll talk about that soon. I have a week left to make a decision. Speaking of houses, I have the plan for the renovation done. Wanna see it?"

I nodded, and she jumped up from my desk, grabbing my laptop. "What's the pa—"

"Precious."

"Yes? I was asking you what the password is."

"The password is precious, in all caps," I said flatly.

"That's so cute. We're like a high school couple," she said with hysterics.

"I find it revolting how you're comparing our relationship to that of high schoolers, but continue."

"Found it!" She exclaimed and opened a PowerPoint presentation. I looked at her with a puzzling expression. Where the hell did she get time to make a 50-slide presentation?

"You are something else," I said, and she giggled. "You made a PowerPoint."

"I made a PowerPoint!" She squealed.

*What am I gonna do with her?*

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### *Azzaria*

Today has been nothing short of extraordinary. My weekend was dedicated to working on a presentation and digital

drawings for a real estate project. Dillon entrusted me with this task, and I was determined to do it well. He had the resources, and I had the talent, a perfect partnership.

Things with Dillon were moving fast, yet it felt so slow, but I wasn't scared. I had tried my best to stay far from love since Matthew, but Dillon was different. He wanted to stay, and I couldn't understand why.

I had little time to get dressed, so I hurriedly put on black jeans and a cropped sweatshirt. He said we're going out and it was one of the surprise outings.

"You look great," he said, eyeing me up and down. "But something's different. It's the jeans, you normally wear dark blue, never black but you're still perfect either way." No one had ever noticed every little detail before, and one would think that it would be scary, but it wasn't. It was somewhat comforting to know that he cared so much, he noticed everything.

"Thank you and yes, I bought them yesterday."

"They're sexy. You're sexy."

"Thank you."

I released a strong breath and smiled at him. My heart and soul were infected with butterflies. I never thought I'd live to see the day where I was so swept by one person. A man at that. But here I am, breaking every single rule I fought so hard to keep in place for one man.

*A man who's worth it. Mine.*

As we arrived at our destination, I saw a group of women who turned out to be my favorite authors. Meeting them was a teenage dream come true, and I was overwhelmed with emotion.

*He was so getting laid.*

If he got any more romantic, I might have had to burst into a million pieces. I was just grateful for everything he had been doing. It got very much and overwhelming, but it just made life feel like it was worth it.

They gifted me with personalized boxes containing their books and signed copies. Tears of joy flowed down my cheeks. Dillon had a way of making my wildest dreams come true.

“Anyone ever told you that you’re the most precious man ever?” I asked, my hands wrapped around his neck.

“Not until now, no.” He pulled me closer to him, placing his hands on my ass.

“Thank you. It feels so damn surreal. I grew up reading these books and loving these women. I can’t thank you enough.”

“I told you I’d do anything to keep that smile on your face. You’re welcome,” he whispered in my ear and we just stood in the middle of a library as happiness seeped through our veins. I felt alive. It wasn’t just the books; it was everything he had done since we met.

Back at Dillon’s place, I couldn’t help but spend most of my time with him. I was used to being alone, but now, all I wanted was to be with him. However, I couldn’t help but notice that he rarely slept at night due to his insomnia.

“Dillon,” I shouted, “what’s taking so— oh, hi handsome.”

“Yes, baby,” he said in a low tone and walked closer to me, “are you good?”

I nodded my head and went in to hug him. “I’m kind of hungry but I’ll survive.”

“Let’s get some food in here, you good with Indian?” He lifted me from the ground and I wrapped my legs around his torso for support.

“I am.”

“We’re getting Indian food and watching a movie.” He pulled us closer together, and kissed the side of my face.

“Tonight still feels like a dream,” I said, but it came out as more of a whisper. “Did we take up my boxes from the car?” Slight panic washed over me. Dillon reassured me it’s in the bedroom and my nerves calmed.



Dillon stared into my eyes and whispered, “O deliciae totius urbis lumina, non ut oculi tui fulgent.”

“You’re going to have to translate that Mr. Xander.” I patted his chest, giving him a very daring stare.

“Oh darling all of the city lights, never shine as bright as your eyes,” he spoke.

The tears started flowing, and they wouldn’t ever fucking stop. “I love you so much.” This wasn’t how I wanted to say it, but no timing felt more perfect.

“It’s not enough,” he remarked, “the word ‘love’ isn’t enough for what I feel for you. It’s dangerous, it’s fucking consuming. My entire soul has been ripped out wide and open for you. It’s always been for you even when I thought it wasn’t. There’s a hunger that’s insatiable in your presence. A passion that burns hotter than fire whenever you’re around me. I can’t say the words “I love you” because they don’t capture what I feel and I never sell myself short, especially not to you.”

There were no words there to understand how he made me feel.

“I love you, precious.” *This was real. As real as it gets.*

“I love you, too.”

We were in love, and I couldn’t have been happier. Nothing could take me from the high I was on.

## CHAPTER 30

# *Azzaria*

THE SCREAMS PULLED ME FROM MY SLEEP. MY HEART RACED, and for a moment, I didn't dare to move. The screams were primal, filled with despair and pain. I had never heard them from him before, but it was the most terrifying thing in my life, and I've been through some rough experiences.

It wasn't a nightmare; I would have known if it was. He was trapped in a night terror. With a tired murmur, I turned onto my back and extended my arm. The other side of the bed was empty, which was highly unusual, as I was certain I fell asleep with Dillon beside me.

The next screams from him were high-pitched and came to an abrupt stop. He was awake, and my body was in shock. No matter how hard I tried to move, I couldn't. I held my breath and listened. Dillon's night terrors were something I had never seen before, and I couldn't help but wonder why. *Was it because his grandparents died, or was it something else?* It had been gruesome, and he didn't deserve this.

The door opened, and cautious steps moved over the carpet. The bed bounced as Dillon slipped under the covers on his side. His rapid breaths filled the bedroom, and I felt nothing but heartbreak. Dillon calmed down beside me, and his light breaths had a soothing effect. He came to me for comfort, and that helped him get over his terrors. I waited until he was asleep, then I closed my eyes and drifted away to sleep.

Hours later, I woke up to unbearable heat, as if it were a scorching summer night. Dillon lay against my back, with one knee resting on my hip. His warm breath brushed over my

neck. Just as I was about to push him away and pull the sheets off, I felt it. He was unconscious and didn't know what he was doing. With a gentle thrust, Dillon pushed his hips against me and then pulled back.

"Dillon," I shouted, trying to get his attention. I jumped up from beside him and ran to switch on the light. Looking at the clock, it read 5:05 am. He didn't budge when I shouted, but his terrors grew more violent.

He gripped the sheets and started sweating profusely. "You won't hurt Mara again," he screamed and swung a punch. My mind quickly went back to when he told me about Mara's sexual abuse. He was reliving the fight he had with that guy, and my gosh, it was horrific.

"Dillon," I shouted at the top of my lungs and started shaking him. If he didn't wake from this, I'd have to throw a bucket of cold water on him. With one final shake, he jumped up and gasped for air, sweat trickling all over his body and the sheets with slight tears on them.

*My poor baby.*

"What happened? Are you hurt?" he asked, looking at me, utterly confused. Even when he's the one in danger, he checks to see if I'm okay first.

I brought a bottle of water and some sedatives over to him and sat in his lap. This was both to ensure he took the medication and to give him comfort. He wouldn't do anything physically harmful while I was next to him. I could feel the slight shakes in him, as well as how fast his heart was beating. There would be plenty of time to talk about it, but right now, I need him to be calm so he doesn't collapse before me.

I spent the next ten minutes in his lap, trying to soothe him with my voice. There wasn't much practice, but I always had a decent enough voice for singing. He smiled whenever our eyes met, and I got lost in his. There was nothing in this world prettier than Dillon's hazel eyes, and I would always stand by that.

“Are you feeling better?” I asked him while rubbing his back.

“Yeah, but what happened?”

“Let’s forget that,” I said and turned to straddle him, “Kiss me. Just kiss me, please,” I begged. I was torn between wanting to tell him and just wanting to make him feel better.

He sighed and leaned in to kiss me, but it felt distant. “I can’t kiss you the way I should be kissing you when I don’t know why we both look so fucking terrified.”

I took a deep breath and rubbed my eyes. “You were trapped in a night terror. You were screaming and acting violently, so I woke you up before it got out of hand.”

A look of disappointment washed over his face. This was obviously something that happened to him many times before, and I wanted to know why.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No, you wouldn’t hurt me. I’m fine. But are you fine? What were you dreaming about? You can talk to me. I’m here for you, baby.” There were times when he needed physical comfort, and this was one of them. There was a lot of unresolved pain in Dillon’s life, and it sucked that he wasn’t getting the help he needed.

“I don’t fully remember, but I just remember how violent it was. Like I was reliving a time where all I did was hurt people,” he spoke, his voice breaking. The worst thing in life was seeing him go through pain. Men like him deserved none.

“Let’s just get some rest and talk about it later, okay?” I suggested, and we went under the covers. It didn’t even make sense to switch off the lights, as I was sure it wouldn’t help him sleep better. “Is there anything you want me to do?”

“Don’t leave me, please,” he whispered and pressed a gentle kiss on the side of my face. “Don’t run again.”

“I won’t.” He didn’t understand how much I loved him, how much he made me want to do unspeakable things to

everyone who dared to cross him. It was a dangerous, but also special type of love. “I love you so much, handsome.”

“*Precious.*” He didn’t have to say the words, because I knew he meant it. I knew what he felt for me, and it was the greatest love I’ve ever felt.

If that was what a good relationship was supposed to feel like, I was happy I got to experience it with him. I looked around the bed and noticed he wasn’t there. Earlier that morning was a rough time for him, and I wanted him to get the help he needed. But persuading Dillon to go to therapy would have been a very difficult thing. Not only for my sake but for the sake of him having full control of his body, I needed him to get medication or get sessions just for him to get better.

Looking to my left, I saw a large bouquet of crimson roses with a card. Every day, he proved to me more and more that he was indeed the most romantic man on the planet.

The roses smelled as sweet as honey, and the card was handwritten. I needed an entire room dedicated to all the flowers he had given me in the last four months. I could open a flower shop at this rate.

*I had an early morning, and you were sleeping,  
so I didn't want to wake you.*

*Call me when you see this.*

*Your lover, DX*

I just knew he was written by a woman. There was no way any other men like mine existed. *I was consumed by him.* There wasn’t a bone in my body that wasn’t bent to love him, nor an artery that didn’t make the blood rush feel faster when I was with him. Yet, the love he gave was calm. It made me want to heal and become a better person. Something I didn’t ever know I was capable of until meeting him.

“Good morning,” I yawned. I called his cellphone, and as expected, he picked up on the first ring. “Thank you for my roses.”

He chuckled a bit and shut the door. I couldn't see what was going on because it was just an audio call, but my hearing worked well. "Hey precious, you're welcome. I'm sorry I left without seeing you first. I needed to get some things done."

"Don't apologize. I know you're busy, and it's good. Are you good? You feel better, my love?" Whenever I called him cute names, his cheeks got red, and I could imagine how flushed he looked. For a man like him who never showed much emotion for anyone, I think I either broke his shell, or he just broke it for me.

"Yes, I feel great. Are you coming in today?"

"No. I'm going to run errands, and I have stuff to figure out before graduation. I'm going to the student loan bureau and then checking on the real estate." I should have been having lunch with Ronan, drinks with Abigail, and then applying for a loan. Those debts were creeping up on me, and I needed to be approved for the graduation ceremony.

"Loan bureau? Why?"

"I have to get a loan to pay off college debt before I graduate this month."

"Okay, precious. Text me when you leave, when you get to the places, when you're leaving the places, and don't put your phone on silent. I have to know if you're safe."

A smile crept up on my face. He cared about me so much, and I just got consumed by it every time. "I will. Bye. I love you, okay, handsome?"

"I love you."

To get my day started, I walked around his penthouse to stretch my legs a bit and walking pebbles.

I texted Ronan to let him know that I was on my way to the meetup spot.

Half the day was already gone, so I might as well make the most of the other half. I texted Abigail to tell her we'd meet for drinks at the same place, but directly after Ronan and I met up. They aren't too fond of each other, and not because they

hate each other but because Ronan's like Dillon and Abigail can get a little intrusive at times.

12:30pm struck the clock, and I was out the door. The outfit for the day was black cargo pants, a tucked white t-shirt, and Dillon's sneakers. We didn't wear the same size, but I had his thick socks on, so it filled the space perfectly.

I got in my car and drove smoothly to the cafe. To my surprise, I saw Dillon and Ronan sitting at a table together waiting for me. I was excited to see him, don't get me wrong, but the things I'm compelled to do when I see him are inappropriate for the public, as well as the fact that we're trying to keep things under the radar. I don't think it's working but I haven't seen my name and/or my face on the internet yet, so I'd say it's all good.

"What are you doing here?" I asked when I got to the table and took my seat.

"One would think you'd be excited to see your boyfriend, but I guess not." He shot me a very confused look and rolled his eyes.

"I'm excited to see you, but we're in public and aren't we keeping our relationship private?"

"Fuck the public," he said aggressively, "come kiss me." He had a smirk present on his face, and I walked over toward him.

Fake gagging, Ronan said, "I'm right here." *Oops*. I forgot he was there for a second. I just tend to forget everyone else is in the room when I see Dillon.

"I have a meeting, so I'm leaving but goodbye, precious," he said and shot me a smirk. "Bye, Ro."

"Goodbye."

When Dillon left, the waitress came to take our order. I ordered a full house salad, and Ronan just ordered drinks and fries. That was unlike him, as he normally bought things like steak or something more filling.

"What's up?" I asked, concern in my voice.

He sighed and took a sip of his drink. A water look-alike, but I was sure it was nowhere near water. “I want to ask Nina to be my girlfriend, but I don’t think she will say yes.”

I could understand from her point of view. He really fucked it up.

“I could see why you think that, but what makes you so sure she won’t say yes?”

“I don’t know, but what if she doesn’t trust me to be a good boyfriend? I barely trust myself as it is.”

“You’re not worried about how confident she is; you’re worrying about if you’ll be able to be confident in the relationship.”

He pushed up his lips and rolled his eyes. When a man knew a woman was right, it was somehow offensive. “You’re maybe right,” he hummed, “but I want her to say yes. We’re not getting any younger.”

“Why do you want to be with her? You’ve had your chances so many times and fucked it up, why now?”

His expressions hardened, and he took more and more sips of his drink until he finished the rather large glass. The issue with Ronan was he always wanted to have things but didn’t know why he did.

“It just feels right,” he blurted.

“Pathetic answer, Romano. Getting an orgasm feels right; dig a little deeper,” I urged him.

“She makes me feel complete. I look at her and I see forever. I haven’t been home in years, but the closest I’ve been to home is being with her. When she’s there, I cherish every moment, and when she’s not, I miss her. A world with her is utterly beautiful, and when I imagine one without her, I want to burn it to the ground,” he expressed, and my gosh, I was captivated, and the words weren’t even to me.

“Now that’s a reason. Trust yourself. You’re a pretty decent human sometimes,” I said and shrugged.



“Geez, thanks, Zar,” he caustically muttered and kicked me under the table.

“I’m telling Dillon you kicked me.”

“He will shoot me again; do not tell him.” For a second, I actually saw some fear on his face.

“Why’d he shoot you before?” I asked, my eyebrow raised.

The waitress came with our orders, and so we broke our conversation until she left. The food looked good as always, and I couldn’t help but dig in.

“He shot me because I mixed up some important files. I made one mistake and got a shot in the arm.”

“That is very intense, but at least you’re fine,” I said and chuckled.

“Yeah, he shoots me, I fuck his cousin. Typical boy stuff.”

I scanned my eyes around the restaurant, and for a split second, I almost threw up on the spot. I could’ve sworn I saw Matthew standing in the corner, but then I looked up once more, and saw no one. My mind was definitely playing tricks on me. There’s no way he’d move that fast.

“Azzaria,” Ronan slightly shouted and frightened me out of thought. Thank God he did. “Are you okay? I’ve been calling you for like ten minutes.”

I took a large gulp of my water and said, “I’m okay. I just thought I saw someone. It’s fine,” I said, trying to convince him. If I told him what exactly I thought I saw, he would tell Dillon and disturb his important meeting for nothing.

“If you say so,” he mumbled, sounding highly unconvinced. “Abigail just walked in, so I’m going to go. I’ll call you later. Be safe, Zar.” He walked to my side of the table, gave me a hug and left.

“Of course and thanks for lunch!” I exclaimed and went to use the bathroom.

Seeing that has got to be a hallucination or just my mind tripping, but what if it’s actually him? All the tainted

memories came rushing at a million miles per hour, and I was as white as a ghost.

ABIGAIL-ANN

I'm here. Where are you?

I washed my face and walked out of the bathroom. *Cool. Calm. Collected and composed.* Those were what I needed to be right now.

“Cool, calm, collected, and composed,” I reiterated to myself while walking to meet her.

She stood at the entrance of the restaurant looking as gorgeous as ever. Our eyes made four, and she walked over to meet me. “Hey,” she shouted and flung her arms around me, pressing her glossy lips to the side of my face.

“Hey.” I feared my response was a bit too flat, but she didn't notice.

We walked over to the bar counter, and took two seats. I wasn't in the mood to drink anything, but she was all for it, as usual. She ordered two rounds of shots and a dirty martini, and I just ordered a sprite with cherries.

“You look out of place,” she stated, surveying my face. “Are you good, babe?”

“I'm fine. How are you? How's it going?” Shifting the topic to her was easier than us going back and forth about what's wrong with me.

A large smile crept up on her face. “It's going really good. I can't keep up though.”

“Keep up with what?”

“Life. New York and this town. It's a lot,” she whispered. I knew what she meant and sometimes, I felt the same way.

“It'll take time, but I know you'll adjust.”

“I hope.”

“Are you happy?”

She nodded. “I’m on the path to getting happy. I’ve even started the gym, which you seemed to have stopped doing.”

She’s right. “Ugh, I know. I’ve been so busy and lazy.”

She laughed. “I can see that. And you’re happy right?”

“For the first time in my life, I think I actually am.”

“I’m happy to see you happy. It’s different seeing you so into one person.” Yeah, it’s different for me too, but I’ve accepted it. I didn’t even have a choice but to accept it.

“I must ask though.” I stopped to take a sip of my sprite and eat one of my cherries, “Are you talking to someone?”

“What? No. Why’d you ask that?”

“Just curious.”

“How are you and Dillon? Any fighting? Anything new?”

“We’re good. No fights. I did ignore him for three days because I was losing my mind. We said our first ‘I love you’s’ but I told you that already. That’s pretty much it.” I pushed my shoulders back and shrugged. All the details I could share were said, but there are things she just didn’t need to know.

“The healthy start you needed. I’m so proud of you, and hey, we’re graduating soon. I got my request form today, and I sent in a request form for you too. I figured you were busy.” Thank God.

“I could kiss you right now,” I groaned in pleasure, “thank you. I was going to do it today, but I started my day too late.”

She blew a kiss over to me and smirked, “It’s my pleasure.”

A world without Abigail-Ann, is one I don’t want to ever live in.

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*Dillon*

Board meetings have become a chore, and I've been in this AGD meeting for a few hours. The worst part is sitting in a room right next to my father. I felt sorry for him and gave him a position, and he's still so ungrateful.

"If we add more stocks to the brand and revamp it, then our profit would increase," I added.

"Adding more stocks costs money," he said.

"Which I have plenty of. If you need reminding, I'll be glad to get accounts to show you just how many zeros my bank accounts have, Father," I countered.

He hissed his teeth and clenched his jaw in anger. I took great pleasure in seeing him like this. "So say we add more stocks, what's to show that we will get more profit?"

"Everything is to say. The people love designs. The— Excuse me," I said and got up from the meeting table. Azzaria was calling me, and I had to answer. I heard my father make his comments, but I couldn't answer him, not right now.

"Precious, what's up?" I was wondering if she butt-dialed me because I was waiting on the line for a good three minutes, and I hadn't heard her say anything. There was just rustling in the background.

I was about to hang up when I heard a male voice speak. "I've missed you," the person said. It wasn't a friendly tone. It was said with gruff. *With anger.*

I heard a few faint deep breaths and couldn't figure out what was going on. I kept her on the line because if I needed to track the cell, I'd need the call to be live.

Storming out of the meeting room, I saw Lucio and turned to him. "Where the fuck is my girlfriend?"

Lucio jumped up in his seat as shocked as ever. He looked just as confused as ever. "She's at the cafe with Abigail," he said quickly. I know Abigail's annoying voice, and that voice was not hers.

"Where are the men I told you to put in place to protect her?" I shouted. Can no one get anything right today?

Lucio checked his phone, and his eyes shot up to me. “Sir, we have a—”

“We have a what?”

“She’s in the alleyway behind the cafe, but she’s with Matthew. He found her.” Everything stopped, and all I saw was red.

Lucio dialed his men and put the phone on speaker. No one was saying what I needed to hear, and it was very annoying. “I don’t give a fuck who wasn’t on duty. If so much as a strand of her hair is missing, none of you have jobs, and I may just do something extensive to prove a point.”

Lucio and I left the building and headed to the cafe alley. “Sir, I know you’re mad, but you can’t just walk in there unprotected.” Lucio was on protocol, but if he didn’t stop talking right now, I would make him the next target on my list.

I grabbed my firearm, jumped out of the car, and made my way down to the alley. The closer I walked, the more I heard faint noises and whimpers. *Her whimpers*. I was no longer seeing red.

*All I saw was fucking black.*

I heard Matthew speaking to her and I approached her even closer. Forget the protocol. I walked in there myself.

“I’d be extra careful of the next words you say to her,” I shouted, my voice filled with anger.

“Dillon.” She sighed in relief, and tears ran free from her eyes. Nothing hurt more than seeing her in this position.

“This is the new guy you’re with,” he said, scoffing, “you always had a thing for rich men. As a gold di—” One press of the trigger, and he fell to the floor. I really hoped he wasn’t dead because death wasn’t in the plan I had for him. *Death was too good for him.*

Lucio and the other men came to grab him while he was down, but my sole priority was her. I dropped the gun on the spot and ran over to her.

When I wrapped my arms around her, and she let out the first loud sob, I lost it. I had no control. The greatest crime in my book was hurting her, and he did just that.

“Baby, you’re safe now,” I whispered, rubbing her back. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here.” There’s no way I could’ve been here or knew she was in danger, but I knew he was out there, and I shouldn’t have trusted her safety in anyone else’s hands but mine.

“I was so s-scared,” she stuttered, trembled, and just sobbed more. *Fuck*. I felt my heart was ripped out of my chest.

“Did he touch you today, baby?” He better pray. He better pray that all he did was talk.

“N-no,” she whispered.

“You’re not going to agree with the things I’m going to do to him, but I’m going to do it, baby, and I know I can live with it, but I hope you can live with knowing what I’m capable of.” It’s best to always warn people from earlier on. She didn’t answer me verbally; she just nodded and tightened her grip on me.

I looked over to the side, watching Matthew squirm on the floor and releasing words of pain and agony. I grabbed Azzaria in my arms, and she wrapped her foot around my body, holding on for dear life.

“What do we do?” Lucio asked.

“Take him to Malen. I’ll deal with him myself,” I spat out and took steps toward him. I used my free foot to violently kick him repeatedly until he was coughing blood. “As for you, you’re going to wish you never laid a hand on her.” I spat on the ground he lay and walked off.

As violent as I was right now, Azzaria didn’t need this. She didn’t need to see this. She needed comfort, and that’s exactly what I’d give her.

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We got back to the penthouse about an hour ago, and she’s been in bed ever since. I made sure to make a bath for her, but

after, she just wanted to sleep. Her words to me were minimal, but that was expected. Seeing the person who fucked up your life can never be easy.

Walking into my office, I saw Arnoldo, Ronan, Mikkel, Abigail, and Lucio seated. More people, great.

“Where is she?” Abigail jumped up and asked as I entered.

“She’s sleeping. Do not go to her,” I hissed and grabbed the bottle of scotch. Fuck the glass, I drank it from the bottle.

No one else spoke because they knew it was best to keep quiet until I was ready to speak. I’ve spent thousands of dollars paying secret security personnel to protect her, and this still happened.

They wouldn’t hear the end of this from me.

“Lucio,” I said, and he looked up, “I don’t blame you for what happened. I’ll commend you for finding and getting to her quickly, but I want every single detail we hired to be fired. And by tomorrow morning at 8, I need new ones. Profiles on my desk, and they better be the best.”

“Of course,” he said and went to make a few calls. Lucio knew what it was like to be completely caught up in love. He’s been married for a long while, and I remember just how many favors I’ve granted for the protection of his wife. It may have come out as rough, but he understood what it felt like to be in fear for the life of the one you love.

“I texted her mom to let her know what was happening,” Abigail said. I didn’t thank her, but I was grateful she did.

“Ronan,” I called out, “Did you get it set up for me?” I asked him for a favor, and I was hoping he would be granted given how little the time space was.

“I did. Here’s the key to the top.” He handed me a packet with the keys to the roof of the penthouse and got up from his seat. “I have a surgery to do in two hours, so I need to get back to the hospital. Send Azzaria my best, and Dillon, don’t beat up yourself, please. You do your best to try and protect her.”

“Mikkel, I’m sure you know your way out whenever you’re ready to leave. I have things to do.” I bid my farewell and left him and Abigail in my office. I could see how fearful she was for her best friend, and trust me, I felt twice as much of that fear being in the moment.

I grabbed my phone to send a quick message to the AGD members apologizing for my abrupt leave. They didn’t need details, but they understood that wherever urgency calls, I’ll be there. It’s bad to do that, but who cares? She’ll always come first.

If I came even one second later, I’m sure he would’ve hurt her, but even so, I apologize to no one for the person I’ll become. He’s going to wish he was dead, and I won’t stop until he’s dealt with the proper way.

To my surprise, and walking back into the room, I saw her wide awake. Her back was against the headboard, and she was fully naked. I locked the door and went to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Precious,” I whispered, “What’s going on?”

“I felt like I was burning up, so I took off my clothes,” she said flatly.

“Do you want the air conditioning? Or the fans?” I asked, trying to comfort her.

“I just want you, please,” she whispered and held her head down. I made my way up on the bed, and she curled up in my arms, pressing tightly against my body.

“Put on my T-shirt,” I said to her, “you don’t have to put on a bra if you don’t want to, but let’s go outside.”

“Dillon, I—”

I rubbed my hands over her hair. “Would I ever put you in danger?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Trust me.”



I led Azzaria to the rooftop of the penthouse, where I had a Ronan help me out with little surprise set up for her.

The space was beautifully decorated with an assortment of her favourite flowers, her favorite sandwiches from the local shop, a jug of her preferred juice, and a scattering of candles that cast a warm, intimate glow. I watched her eyes light up in surprise as she took it all in.

She turned to me, her eyes shimmering with curiosity. “Dillon, why are we up here? This is incredible.”

I smiled, my heart aching with love for this amazing woman. “I wanted to do something special for you, especially after what happened today.”

Tears began to pool in her eyes as she tightened her grip on my arm. “You’re the sweetest, Dillon. I don’t deserve you.”

I gently brushed a tear away from her cheek. “You deserve the world, Precious. Tonight, all the stars will be mostly visible, and I thought we could watch them together.”

Her eyes sparkled as she gazed at the night sky. “That sounds perfect.”

We settled down on the plush cushions I’d arranged, our fingers interlaced as we looked up at the stars beginning to twinkle in the darkening sky.

“Do you know the names of the constellations?”

I nodded. “I know a few like Aquarius, Leo, Andromeda too.”

Azzaria’s laughter filled the air as she nibbled on her favorite sandwiches, her delight contagious.

The rooftop was a world apart from the chaos of the day. We watched as the stars emerged one by one until the sky was dotted with their brilliance.

Azzaria’s smile never waned, her laughter was like a sweet melody, and for those moments, it felt like we were the only two people in the world.

As the night grew darker, Azzaria suddenly looked up at me, her expression shifting. “Dillon, I’m not feeling well.”

I frowned, concern washing over me. “What’s wrong, Precious? Do you want to go inside?”

She nodded, her smile fading. We carefully made our way back into the penthouse, leaving the rooftop and the stars behind.

She curled up on the bed, clutching her stomach in discomfort. I sat down beside her, my worry deepening.

“Are you okay? Should I call a doctor?”

She shook her head, her eyes filled with gratitude. “No, it’s not that. I just feel a bit off.”

I caressed her forehead gently, trying to soothe her. “It’s probably just the stress from today.”

She nodded, her eyes searching mine.

We nestled together, and I held her close, realizing that sometimes, the greatest gift of all was having the love of your life safe and sound in your arms.

“I love you so much, precious. I don’t say it as much as I should, and you know my reasoning why, but I love you. You’re safe now, and I’m not letting you out of my sight again.” I pressed a kiss to the side of her face and placed my palm over her stomach.

“I know, I love you too.”

She can’t ever catch a break. Life just has a way of throwing everything at her, and it’s as stressful for her as it is for me. I just need her to be at peace, and I’ll stop at nothing to get it.

“I need you,” she whispered, kissing my chin.

“I’m here with you.”

“Can we just—,” she paused. “Just touch me please.”

“Baby.” I sighed. “It’s too soon. You need to rest and—”

“I know what I need, and right now I just need you. I want to feel something other than disgust. I want to feel, so just give me that, please,” she said, almost pleading.

I gave her what she wanted, and when we were finished, she was a sobbing mess. I understood the feeling, but I just hugged her. She just needed me there, and so I was.

## CHAPTER 31

# *Azzaria*

IT'S BEEN ONE LONG WEEK SINCE MATTHEW APPEARED. THERE wasn't a place I went where Dillon wasn't there or sending someone to watch over me. I appreciated it, but it was coddling.

At this point, I wouldn't be surprised if our relationship got plastered all over the Daily Mail's front page. Abigail, Mom, and Ronan did the exact same thing, and I just needed to breathe, needed a little breathing space.

I couldn't believe I only had three weeks left until my graduation. The SLB representative reached out to me and said I can't be eligible for loans I don't owe. I was confused at first, but then I pieced it together. *What am I gonna do with him?*

Dillon took care of me and spoiled me a lot. I've opened about twelve different gift boxes this week, went on book and clothes shopping sprees, been to the beach, and had the best sex of my life. *I mean toe-curling and name-forgetting sex.* It's been a good week, but we need to go back to the real world, and I need to get started on packing up my apartment.

My mom has a flight to San Francisco today. She had a trip with one of her friends. Dillon made sure her flight and expenses were paid for.

I felt bad having him do it, but he didn't mind, and she didn't seem to mind it either. They haven't met in person as yet, but when she and I call, they exchange a few words. It's weird yet fulfilling.

Dillon has Matthew at one of his abandoned properties. It's scary to think about the torture going on there, but he deserves it, and I have no regret nor remorse for him. That day was terrifying.

I left Abigail in the restaurant and went about my business only to be backed up into a corner by him. The rest was a blur, but the minute I saw Dillon, he and I both knew Matthew was a dead man.

His words stayed present and relevant in my brain. "*I'm going to kill him.*" He must've thought that scared me, but all it did was give me security.

Maybe I'm messed up for thinking that, maybe I'm a bad person, but I didn't want the police or any of the feds to handle this. I needed him to feel the actual pain he caused me and so many others.

I shook these thoughts off my brain and put my sneakers on. Dillon was sitting in the kitchen eating his breakfast that I made earlier. I'm not the best cook in the world, but he gives me little daily lessons, and in return, I teach him how to bake.

So far I've learnt to cook pasta, chicken and fish and I've taught him to bake cakes, cupcakes and pies.

The more I stayed with him, the better I felt about the relationship and life we've got going on. I loved him, he loved me, but it wasn't a weak love. It was the kind of love that made our hearts beat, the one that would let a king leave his kingdom. The love that Aladdin had for Jasmine or the one that Flynn had for Rapunzel. That was the love we shared. It was powerful and consuming, the only way it needed to be.

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### *Dillon*

"I know what you did, Mr. Xander, and I don't know if I should slap you for not telling me, or kiss you because it helped me a lot," she said while we were cuddling on the sofa. It was either this woman purposely said things to trip me out, or she was being serious.

I shot my head up and gave her a confused look. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“So you didn’t pay off my entire school loans and every other loan I’ve owed?” She asked and folded her arms.

“Are you mad?” I knew how much she valued her independence, and I didn’t want her to ever feel as if I was trying to take that away from her.

“I’m not mad, but next time, talk to me about it first. You helped me out a lot because I was stressing about not being able to pay it before the deadline, but thank you so much. I really appreciate you.” The sincerity was clear in her voice, and behind her eyes, I could see happiness. Everyone’s dream is to graduate after stressful years at college. I wanted her to have that, and I’d pay any amount of money to get that.

I kissed her softly and said, “Nothing is off-limits when it comes to you and your happiness. I lo— Who the hell is that?” She shrugged and said she doesn’t know but walked to the door to check it. We weren’t expecting any visitors. Maybe it’s one of those delivery guys who sometimes come to the wrong address.

“Dillon, I—”

“Precious,” I called out, “who is it?” I got up from the couch and was shocked when I glanced at the door.

“You didn’t tell me you were expecting your family,” she whispered aggressively.

“I didn’t know they were coming.” There was nothing I hated more than spending quality time with all of them. One is enough to handle, but having all of them here was torture.

My mother made her way inside, and so everyone else entered behind her. I grabbed my phone to text Mara so she could get here. There was no way I was handling this by myself.

Azzarria was tripping out about them being here but I assured her it’ll all be fine and she just needed to calm down. I didn’t even know why she cared because whether they approved or not, I was still going to be with her.

“They don’t like me.”

“I don’t care. I love you.”

I kissed her hard, and she went off to get properly dressed. I dragged on my T-shirt from the sofa, we had sex on earlier and walked into the kitchen where they were seated.

“Why are you all here?” I asked aggressively.

My mother looked at me with her bright green eyes. I assume this was to stir some emotion, but all it did was bring me hatred. The only emotion I associate with her.

“We missed you,” she said, “and we were in the area, so we stopped by.”

My father remained silent, and I couldn’t take it. That bastard came into my home but didn’t acknowledge me. Who does he think he is?

“I’d appreciate it if you came into my home; you would greet me and my girlfriend. She doesn’t like people, so text me the next time before you come. I would still say no and have security hold you off, but common decency has never hurt a soul.” I scoffed and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge.

“We apologize,” my father said. I know it must’ve taken so much for him to admit how wrong he is. “We’re truly here to see you, son, and this woman of yours.” As he spoke about this, I just remembered what Azzaria told me, and I wouldn’t bring it up now. I’d wait until everyone was here for me to embarrass him the way he needs to be.

They all engaged in their own chatter while I went to the bedroom to check on Azzaria. I planned to spend the whole Saturday making love to her, but now, they’re interrupting me. I don’t like being interrupted.

“Woah,” I gasped, “you look gorgeous. Where are you going?”

She smiled at me and we walked out and saw Mara standing in the living room.

“Mara,” I exclaimed, “how are you?”

She shared a smile. “I’m doing good. How are you? And hey Zar.”

Azzaria walked over to her and they hugged. I loved their bond. It’s the closest Mara ever got to having a sister, and nothing made me happier.

“If you two are done ignoring us,” my mom scolded, “food’s ready.”

I walked both Azzaria and Mara to the table, ensuring I was seated between the two of them. Azzaria didn’t even know how annoying and ruthless these people in front of her were, and Mara, on the other hand, knew it all too well.

“So,” my mom said, “how’s the company, Dillon?”

“Which one?” I smartly asked.

She tightened her fist and released a deep breath. Nothing my mother hated more than a smart-ass person, and that’s exactly who I’d be tonight.

“XTCL. How’s XTCL?”

“Good. But you already see Mara and my successes in the news. We’re good. You don’t need to worry about us,” I snarled, “we’re great.” With or without them, we were good. It’s been two decades without them giving a damn about us, and I’ll be damned if I let them in now.

The rest of the table was silent, and only the clatter of utensils could be heard. Azzaria just sat in confusion and shock. She didn’t know my full reasoning behind hating them, and she was uncomfortable.

“Nico, if you look at my girlfriend with that expression one more time. I’m gouging your eyes out,” I snapped. It’s bad enough that he’s here, but I don’t need him giving my girlfriend ‘seductive’ eyes.

Azzaria shot her eyes to me, and her cheeks flushed. “Are you okay, Precious?”

She nodded quickly, and I pressed my lips against hers.

“You’re such an asshole,” Nico whispered.



“Don’t call him that,” Azzaria said, looking him straight in the eye, “You can’t disrespect the person whose home you’re sitting in,” she stated and went back to eating. *That’s my girl.*

“He can speak for himself,” my dad spoke coldly, and I wasn’t going to stand for that. Especially not from him. The only person I hated more than my mother was my father, and that says a lot.

I brought the glass to my lips and released a low chuckle. “Now that we’re all here,” I said, clearing my throat, “Let’s be clear: Azzaria isn’t Annalise. I don’t want her compared to Annalise. Father, I heard what you told her, don’t repeat that mistake. I don’t want to know any of you. I wish we could go back to when you didn’t care, or do you care now because everything you have is thanks to me?”

He pushed his plate to the middle of the table and sat up. This was how you knew he was going to start with his nasty remarks, but I was prepared to take every one of them.

But before he could speak, my mother asked when she’d get grandchildren from me. Azzaria and I shot glances at each other, and she grabbed my thigh under the table.

“You’ll get grandchildren when he and I decide. Frankly, it’s not your business. You want grandchildren when you couldn’t even care for your own children properly? You’ve been poor parents to Dillon and Mara, which is why they’re distant. I’ve witnessed your disrespect towards them and their loved ones. Not to mention, no one’s asked about Mara, who just had a beautiful baby boy. Her postpartum? Not a word. I’m certain you secretly criticize her. My mother may not have your wealth, but she’s been a better parent than both of you.” Azzaria blurted out in Mara and my defense, and I couldn’t be prouder.

My jaw dropped. Of everything she could’ve said, I didn’t expect her to say this, but I’m glad she did, and from the way Mara was smiling, I could tell she was glad too.

Mom, usually so talkative, was unusually silent— you could hear a pin drop. Dad, on the contrary, looked ready to explode, fidgeting in his seat with murderous glares.

He released a low chuckle and drank some wine. “Speak when you are spoken to, child. Son, I’ve spoken to Ana and I think it’s time you—”

I stood up and smoothed my pants, “Don’t finish that sentence. Get out of my house,” I said, raising my voice and excusing myself from the table and went to my study.

These constant jabs at my trauma were taking a toll on my health. They’ve pushed it far enough with the children discussion, and my father just doesn’t understand that I want nothing to do with Annalise. I didn’t have to look at Azzaria to tell she was upset.

I could hear them arguing in the background with Mara, but right now, I needed to find my EVZIO. It’s been a while, but I had to have it, or I’d lose it.

I rumbled through my right-side drawers and couldn’t find it. *What else was planning on going wrong today?* The left-side drawers were empty, only consisting of stationary, and those weren’t useful to me. I made my way to the bedroom closet and went through my box of shoes.

It wasn’t something I’d leave lying around, especially because I knew Azzaria would freak out if she saw them.

“Where the fuck is it?” I groaned in frustration and threw a pair of shoes at the wall. The feeling running through my bones right now is fury. Between them at the table and me not being able to find this, I’m just irritated.

*This is pointless.* I got up from the ground and made my way to my bedroom. If it wasn’t in my nightstand drawer, then I didn’t know where I put it.

*Thank God.* As I opened the top one, there it was. EVZIO, otherwise known as what got me through the last few years of my life.

“Baby, what’s that?”

I put the device between my thighs and cleared my throat. “Are they gone?”

“Don’t ignore my question and no, they’re talking to Mara. What are you hiding?” Her eyes grew dark and she looked unsettled.

“It’s just medication for when I get flustered,” I answered, “No big deal,” I added, trying to convince her. Unfortunately, she wasn’t buying what I was selling.

Her arms folded and she leaned against the bedroom door frame. “I’ve never seen you take that medication once. Let me see it,” she pressed on. Her arms unfolded, and she started walking closer to me.

“Azzaria, it’s no big deal.”

“Then show me. If it’s not a big deal, you can show me the bottle.” She had a point in what she said and fuck it, I took it from between my crotch and handed it to her.

As her eyes landed on the name, both shock and fear ran through her body, and I knew why. EVZIO was the drug her father constantly took, and it’s the one that started tripping him out.

I read it when I had that file on him. The only difference was I didn’t take them every day, and I wasn’t an addict. He was a full-on addict and psychopath. That’s why I murdered him, and felt no guilt.

“How long have you been taking this?”

“I’ve had it since I was younger,” I confessed, “I take it when I have night terrors or when I get flustered.”

She let out a whimper, and a single tear fell from her eyes. “I know that you know what this medication can do to a person.” This entire Saturday was messed up, and I wanted it to end. If those people didn’t come to my house, I wouldn’t have been in this mess in the first place.

“I’ve been taking it since I was about ten. Initially, it was prescribed, but when it became excessive, my granddad attempted to wean me off the medication. However, it was beneficial for me, so he had me closely monitored. Despite our wealth, my childhood was still challenging. After what happened with Annalise, I nearly overdosed on them, which

upset Mara, especially. I'm not addicted; I use it because it helps."

"We'll get through it, together." Her words were laced with comfort, and I was glad for it. I had expected a different reaction, but she made me feel comfortable, she made me feel safe. She made me feel like I was home.

"I love you," I whispered and nestled my head against her chest.

"I love you too," she responded.

"Wanna make out?" I asked with a smirk on my face.

She placed her hands on my cheek, and I smashed our lips together. When she and I kissed, it wasn't soft or gentle. It was raw, sloppy, and filled with passion. I loved how passionate she was with me, and for the minutes we were caught up in this, I felt myself forgetting everything. We forgot all our troubles when we were together.

## CHAPTER 32

# *Dillon*

IF YOU HAD ASKED ME ABOUT THERAPY A YEAR AGO, I would've called it foolish. However, I've recently found myself doing things I never thought I would do. One example is going to therapy. Azzaria is undeniably having an influence on me, and I'm not certain if it's for the better or worse.

*The night was dark, except for the dim glow of a few distant streetlights that cast eerie shadows across the empty parking lot. I sat on the hood of my car, a bag of cold, half-eaten fries in my hand, Taylor Swift's 1989 album in the background and my mind as cluttered as the world around us.*

*She, with her wide, thoughtful eyes, sat beside me, peering at me as she nibbled on a fry and singing her heart out. The silence between us was comfortable. But then she broke the quiet, her voice barely above a whisper, "Dill, what do you think of therapy?"*

*I paused, taking a deep breath as I considered her question. Therapy? It's not something I had ever seriously considered. I've seen how awful therapists can be, and it wasn't something I actively saw myself doing.*

*"Honestly," I began, my gaze fixed on the dark horizon, "it's not my cup of tea."*

*Her fingers brushed against mine, warm and comforting. "I understand, but I think it might be good for you. For us."*

*I turned my head to look at her, her soft features illuminated by the pale moonlight. "You think so?"*

*She nodded gently, her eyes never leaving mine. “Yeah. Sometimes it’s helpful to talk to someone, you know? A professional who can guide you through whatever is bothering you. And quite a lot bothers you, and there’s a lot of trauma you haven’t healed from.”*

*I shifted on the cold metal beneath me, my thoughts racing. She was right, partially. “I’m just not sure if I want to go that route.”*

*Her fingers tightened around mine, and she leaned in closer. “It would make me really happy if you considered it. We could even do it together if that makes you more comfortable.”*

*I looked into her eyes, searching for any signs of hesitation or insincerity. But there was only genuine concern and love. The thought of making her happy, of taking this step together, tugged at my heart.*

*“I’ll think about it,” I finally said, my voice quieter than before. A small smile danced on her lips, and she squeezed my hand gently.*

*“Okay.”*

*As we sat there in the deserted parking lot, under the watchful gaze of the moon and stars, the weight of my thoughts began to lift. The idea of therapy was no longer something I’d dismissed outright. For her, for us, I was willing to consider it, to take that step, hand in hand.*

Doctor Michelle Green. I haven’t seen her since she was treating Mara, and I must say she worked wonders in helping my sister through her trauma. But here I was today, in the place of Mara, sitting in her office. *Oh how times change.*

Our couples session wasn’t too long. I was pretty good at control, so I wasn’t lacking in that area and she just wanted our relationship to be by the books. I just mainly needed help with my night terrors and my anger. Everything else was already contained, and I knew cause and effect as it related to those areas.

“You seemed very opposed to therapy when I treated your sister,” she pointed out, and she’s right. I’m not big on the psychiatric community.

I chuckled. “I am, but my girl wants me to do it because it will make her happy.” She said it would make her happy if I did it, and so I did.

“She’s your Achilles’ heel. I see it as clear as day.” And I nodded in agreement because she was right. My biggest vulnerability was Azzaria. “Keep her safe from your enemies. I know the games you play and how dirty your tricks are.”

I chuckled and sipped some of my sparkling water. “That’s what I like about you; you’re very much in the know,” I commended, “and you’re not afraid of a little blood either.”

“My husband is who he is. I got used to it. You’ve stopped playing rolling heads now?” Ah, Daniel Green.

“I still roll heads, but only when they deserve it.”

“Good. I’ll tell Daniel I saw you; he’ll be delighted,” she stated. Daniel is a good friend of mine. But we’re friends of convenience. We help each other out with favors and that kind of business. A very dangerous man, but he’s so soft and good-looking in appearance that you’d never ever know.

“Appreciated. What would you prescribe for night terrors?”

“Explain the terrors to me, and then we’ll work our way up from there.”

“I have episodes where I violently scream, fight, or cry in my sleep. There was a very bad one when Azzaria and I were in bed. It doesn’t happen as often as it did back then, but whenever my nervous system is overloaded, it tends to happen,” I explained. My first encounter with a night terror was on the night of my first kill, which was Mara’s rapist. He deserved what he got, and I had no regrets, but my emotions overwhelmed me. After facing so much emotion, trauma, and pain, these nightmares haunted me daily.

“I’ll prescribe some Klonopin for you. Take it twice a day, once as you wake up, once before you go to bed. It increases

stamina, so you'll find yourself being more sexual than normal as well as having to eat whenever you take it." She wrote the prescription and passed it on to me. I'll get it at the pharmacy before we leave the plaza.

"Thank you, will those take them away?"

"No," she remarked, "nothing truly stops night terrors. It helps you to control yourself so others or yourself aren't hurt in the process," she explained.

"Thank you, Michelle." I got up from my seat, grabbing my belongings and Azzaria's hair tie. "I look forward to seeing you again."

"You too." Then I left to go outside.

To my dismay, I walked to the vehicle and saw Lucio sitting down playing games on his phone. "Where's she?"

"Supermarket, she'll be back soon."

"Thanks, Lucio. After you take us back, the rest of the day is yours, and send my love to Marina." Marina's his wife. They've been married since they were nineteen, and now he's thirty-five. If anyone knows anything about love, it's definitely Lucio Romano.

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"You're so grumpy," Azzaria said as I was watching her ice the cupcakes. "Smile more."

I'm not grumpy; she's purposely icing the cupcakes slowly, and that pisses me off.

"Whatever," I said and went back to chopping the vegetables.

She decided to make us chocolate chip cupcakes with hazelnut icing. She said it reminds her of my eyes and trust me, I fall in love with her more and more every day.

"That smells great, babe." She had a very bright smile on her face and leaned in to kiss me. "Can't wait to eat," she squealed. She's the biggest foodie and rightfully so, I loved seeing my girl happy.



I grabbed one of her cupcakes and took a bite of it. “Dillon!” She shouted and smacked my arm, “I said to wait till dinner was done.”

“I can’t wait,” I said, my mouth full of chocolate cupcakes, “come taste them.” She rolled her eyes and became closer. I put a bit of cupcake in her mouth, and she laughed. Her baking was really good, to the point I thought she could open a bakery but she told me no and then told me if I bought her one she’d cut my dick off.

I went to dinner and I heard her phone camera going crazy. I’m pretty sure she has a folder on her phone with “Dillon” on it, but I don’t mind; there’s one on mine, and it has about four thousand pictures. I may have a slight obsession, but it’s not hurting anyone.

“You know how many people get paid to take my photos, Ms. Willis?”

“I do,” she giggled, “but you’re mine, so I get it for free, Mr Xander.” She’s right. I’m irrevocably hers.

Tonight’s menu featured Caesar salad, baked potatoes, garlic shrimp, and the cupcakes for dessert.

She sat at the dinner table with a beaming smile, her hands on her chin. I couldn’t resist capturing this priceless moment in a picture.

“Did you feed Pebbles?”

“I did,” she responded, “I fed her, and now she’s sleeping. She’s due for a visit to the vet next week, but I can take her.” Soon enough, definitely rather than later, I’m going to ask for her hand in marriage, and I have to make sure she’ll say yes. We have tons of ground to cover, but I’ve not been more sure of anything in my life. I can’t see myself without seeing her.

As I set the last dish on the table, she eagerly dug in. Azzaria wasted no time savoring her food, and that’s what I cherished about her. She never hesitated to be her true self around me. In a world where most people pretend, her authenticity was a breath of fresh air. It was in those moments when she let her guard down that I fell in love with Azzaria

Willis. It wasn't a facade, and I'll forever appreciate that genuine connection.

"What?" She looked up from her plate and asked me. My eyes furrowed because I was clueless.

"You're watching me eat, why?"

"I'm fascinated by everything you do, precious," I responded and leaned over to kiss her. "You're a pretty eater."

She rolled her eyes and laughed until she almost choked. I gave her the bottle of water and rubbed her back. "Thank you, but I eat like a baby," she giggled. I don't think I've met another woman who ignites and excites me as much as she does.

"An adorable baby," I countered and took my first bite. She watched me in delight, but soon a wave of sadness washed over her face. "What's wrong?"

"I'm almost done, and you just started. Why do you always do that?"

"I have to make sure you're enjoying it." Her eyes watered, and she quickly wiped them.

Day one of my life started when I accepted her as my intern; the rest of the days before were just trial runs with vivid memories.

*I've never lived as much as I am now.*

"What if I didn't like it?"

"Then I'd redo it until you do. Even if it takes us all night," I responded. "But you like everything I make, so we wouldn't have that problem."

The kitchen was getting rather hot, so I removed my shirt and tossed it over to the living room.

"When did you get that?" She said and pointed to my chest. "I've seen every inch of your body, and never once did I see that tattoo."

"I got it two days ago." One of my meetings finished early, and I felt it was only right to let my second tattoo be just as

meaningful as the first. “Do you like it?”

“What is it? You’re turning me on,” she groaned and crossed her legs.

“Keep those legs open, baby, I’ll be having my second dessert in short order.” Her eyes opened wide, and she cleared her throat. I loved making her speechless.

“My God,” she whispered, and I was about to make a sexual comment, but I didn’t want her choking. *Not yet.*

“It’s the word ‘precious’ in Latin.” It was a necessary addition, and if everyone hasn’t noticed, I’m fully taken over by this woman.

“You’re so in love with me, and I love it,” she squealed, “I posted you on my bookstagram, well not all of you but just a little bit. Go look.”

“Bookstagram?”

“It’s where I do my book reviews, just for fun.”

I snatched my phone from her pocket and opened the app. I followed no one on the app, not even Mara, but as soon as I found her page, I clicked that follow button as fast as I could. I’m tired of hiding her now.

The photo on her story was one of me cooking with the words “he’s a chef everyone.”

“He *is* a chef,” I repeated, “Your chef to be exact.”

Her smile was wide. She was going to burst if she smiled anymore, but I couldn’t find myself being able to look away. If there were a thousand smiles in the world gathered in one place, I’d only notice hers.

“You make me lose my senses.” She released a long breath and pushed her hair back, “I didn’t expect to fall in love with you. But I’m glad I did. You make me happy,” she expressed.

“*Precious*,” I purred, “Not much makes me happy, but you are number one on that list. As long as you’re here and we’re together, my heart will forever beat the way it needs to. And I mean it.” She looked up at me pressing her lips against mine

until we started making out. A sloppy make-out session with her was everything and more.

“A friend of yours stopped me today. Did you fuck her, or is she just another obsessed woman?”

*Oh, fuck.*

“She’s not a friend, and Lucio told me he saw her approach you. She’s a journalist. No, I didn’t fuck her. I brought her to bed, seduced her, then left.” I wasn’t proud of it, but my mind changed really quickly.

She looked at me with her jaw dropped and then started laughing. “That’s why she’s so bitter. She told me you’re a bad person and you just ruin people. I told her to fuck off, and then I walked away.”

“She wanted to take advantage of my body while I was going through a highly volatile time, and she used me for insiders on my sister’s marriage. I made her pay the only way I knew I could, and so she did. Right as she was about to orgasm, I removed my fingers, fixed my tie, and left the room.” It sounded cruel when I repeated it, but that was in the past. I have no interest in that sort of lifestyle anymore.

“Oh, I’d be hurt too, but anyway, I don’t want to hear about you and other women, it makes me feel uncomfortable,” she said, shaking the disgust off her body.

“Let’s go somewhere.” I got up from the sofa and pulled her up with me. Her boobs slipped out through the side of her tank top, and I lowered my head and licked her nipple in one fast motion, then pinched it.

She moaned slightly, bit her lip, and then groaned when I stopped. We’ll continue the fun later; there’s something I needed her to see.

“That’s not cool,” she hissed, “Now my nipples are hard. I hope you’re ready to finish this later,” she exclaimed. I didn’t even bother responding. When am I never ready to finish her?

We walked to the third door on the left. I opened it and switched the lights on. Her eyes lit up when she saw all the

canvases. I had the moving company bring all my paintings to the penthouse.

“You did all of these?” she asked in amazement.

“Yes, I’ve got practice over the years.” She took her time examining each piece and told me her thoughts on them. She couldn’t believe I was secretly an artist, which wasn’t really a secret because I told her this before.

Her eyes sparkled as her gaze met the most recent painting I did. The only thing I painted on the day I realized I felt something for her. My conversation with Mara quickly came back to mind.

*“Don’t be hasty, Dillon,” she said, “explain this to me. A piece of this magnitude must have some special meaning to it.”*

*“Honestly,” I said and paused, “I didn’t think about this one. I just started painting.”*

*“But looking at it now, what does it mean to you?” There Mara goes, always asking the right questions but at the most difficult times.*

*“You look in the center of the canvas and you see a black heart, but in the middle of the gear, there’s a golden sparkle.” I chuckled.*

*“Is that like to represent light in darkness?”*

*“Not quite. The darkness represents fear and loneliness, but the light is giving a way out. The problem is that there’s too many layers of darkness, so the light gets easily buried. Looking to the left now we see streaks of heat colors, and to the right, it’s water colors, that just shows the different personalities and how much it’s affecting the heart,” I explained.*

*“But hold on,” she said, scanning the portrait, “what about the hand that holds it together and the veins?”*

*“Those are to show how much people want to break the barriers but how much of them can’t.”*

*“I love this piece, but I don’t think it came from nowhere.”*

*I gave her a puzzled look, and she sighed. There Mara goes, always trying to make something out of nothing.*

*“It’s obviously about you and someone. Not sure who yet. Maybe it’s you—”*

*“We’re not doing this today.” I rolled my eyes. “Let’s go eat,” I said, hurrying us both out of the room.*

*That painting was anything but something lacking thought and concentration. A true artist paints what they feel, and all I could feel was darkness and want.*

“Tell me about this,” Azzaria said, as she ran her hands along the details.

“I painted this four months ago when you just started at the internship. You’re all I could think about, even when I didn’t want to. I didn’t know the meaning at first but as we progressed, I tied each element to a specific meaning. The golden sparkle in the middle of the heart is you. You’re my golden sparkle, the light in my world of darkness.”

She tiptoed and pressed our foreheads together, using her hands to hug the side of my face. “I love you,” she whispered, “so much.”

“*Precious*,” I whispered and closed my eyes. I couldn’t describe what she made me feel, but it was a feeling greater than love. And I never want to get rid of it.

*Not for now. Not ever.*

## CHAPTER 33

# *Azzaria*

I CAN'T BELIEVE THIS.

Dillon's leaving me for not one, not two, but for seven whole days. *An entire week.*

He has a city summit convention in England, and he has to go without me because only officially employed persons of a company can attend, and I was just an intern.

I was dreading the next seven days because who the hell am I to talk to when he's gone? *Everyone's busy.*

My graduation got pushed back because of some people's missing grades and late payments, which I'd hope they got the help to sort it out because everyone's dream is to walk across that stage, especially after the long and tiring years of college.

"Is this the part where I start crying because you're leaving me for seven days?"

He kissed my temple. "I'd take you with me, but your travel pass isn't ready yet." I hated the European immigration system. "The next time I'm leaving the country, we're leaving it together."

"I'm going to miss you." I wrapped my arms around his body, and I didn't want to let go. "Call me everyday."

He held my face with his arms and brought our lips together.

The kiss was electrifying and full of raw passion. I was going to miss his lips for seven days and mine were definitely going to miss him.

“I’ll be back before you know it. I love you.” He kissed me one final time and boarded the plane. Arnaldo, and Bryce were accompanying him on the flight. Lucio was staying because he’s not a fan of England, Mikkel had to go to the south to see his family, and Ronan got called to do surgeries in the Middle East. I watched as he walked into the plane, and a final tear slipped from my eyelids. I wiped it quickly and went back into the car with Lucio. The sound of camera shutters and loud noises blessed my eardrums as we drove off. God is on my side. If I stayed a minute later, my face and Dillon’s would be all over the internet, and that’s something I’m not prepared for.

We drove back to the city, and I went to the living residence; I needed to start getting the boxes packed up for clearing, as well as throwing out a lot of stuff. There wasn’t much to move, as everything was practically still at Dillon’s penthouse, but I did have a few pictures and gifts that I needed to sort out, box up, and pack.

DILLON XANDER

The plane’s taking off in ten minutes. What are you doing?

ME

I’m at my apartment, packing up boxes and sorting out documents. Have a safe flight.

DILLON XANDER

My flight should land in 5 or so hours, but I’ll call you as soon as I land.

ME

Have a good flight. I love you.



DILLON XANDER

Te amo, pulchra creatura.

I hearted the message and went back to my chores.

The first box I started sorting through was one with pictures. I was gifted a film print camera from my godmother before she died; hence, the majority of printed pictures I had were of everyone. Even some with those I'd never want to see in my life again.

---

Seven missed calls and fifteen messages. That's what I woke up to.

The last thing I remember before falling asleep was sorting through boxes, and that was around 11 am. It's 9 pm now, and I'm just waking up. Dillon's flight had already landed, and I'm sure he's sleeping now. I pulled my burner cell and saw messages from Dillon. *Someone missed me.*

DILLON XANDER

I just landed. I miss you.

one attachment\* sunset's as pretty as you are, darling.

I went to sleep and woke up. You still haven't responded; are you okay?

ME

I slept from 11:30 and just woke up. It's like nine here. I miss you too. That sunset is gorgeous, and yeah, I'm fine. How was your flight?

DILLON XANDER

I got worried, especially because Lucio said he didn't see you. My flight was good; it would've been better with you.

ME:

Seven days need to run by fast. I have nothing but work to do, and that's not even half of my day. Are you jet-lagged?

DILLON XANDER

I am, but I have a late day tomorrow. I'll be crashing anytime soon, but I couldn't sleep without speaking to you.

ME

I love you.

DILLON XANDER

I love you too.

ME

I'm going to shower. Night night baby.

DILLON XANDER

Go and eat as well, good night, precious.

I placed the phone on the charger, grabbed my other phone to listen to some music while I showered.

The need for me to have two phones was stupid, but instead of asking for my number like a normal person, Dillon bought me a brand new iPhone just so I could text him. I'd say he hated the thought of sharing my time with other people, but maybe I was wrong.

Stepping into the steaming hot water, my "lover girl" Spotify playlist was on shuffle. The first song was Dillon and mine, "Paradise" by Bazzi. It represented our love too much. It was fun, intoxicating, and playful. I danced and sang my heart out in the shower to that song.

---

The morning sun streamed in through my office curtain window, and I reached for my phone to give Dillon a call. I dialed his number and waited for him to answer.

"Hey," Dillon's voice came through the phone, slightly groggy.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"I am, what's up?"

"I totally thought you were still in the country until I drove to the office and remembered," I said with a chuckle.

Dillon yawned. "I miss you too, babe. Day 1 here is good, just tiring."

"That's great to hear. I've been keeping up with the tabloids." I really have. He did a radio interview this morning, and I listened to it while getting ready. Who knew that it'd be interesting to hear him talk about finances for an hour straight? "There's something I want to tell you," he said, his voice a bit tense. "Camilla's here."

The line fell silent. But then again, I should've known. Europe is her territory after all.

I sighed. "Thanks for telling me, but that's her problem. As long as she keeps her paws to herself, then we won't have a problem."

Dillon agreed, "Figured, I just wanted to tell you. Any plans for today?"

“I’m currently at the office, but I’m gonna be doing some plans for the house, get lunch, and hang out with Mara after work. We’re going shopping.”

“My Amex is in my office. Top drawer.”

*Oh.* His Amex. That black card that holds more money than I can even imagine. *His Centurion Black Card.*

“Oh, but I don’t wa—”

He shushed me. “Just use it.”

“I don’t want to spend all your money.”

He laughed. Heavily. “Baby, you won’t even begin to scratch the surface. Plus, that’s just one of them.”

I gulped. I must have the best luck in the world to land a billionaire. “One of them?”

“The other four are with me. Anyway, I’m due to be outside in three minutes. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

We ended the conversation, and I went into his office to get the card. It was beautiful, and I felt like this was a crime. *How does he have his Amex just lying around?*

Slipping it into my pocket and shaking that thought, I started my productive day. A few weeks back I showed him a PowerPoint on what I think would be vital changes to the house, and he approved. So now, I’m going to be sitting with the architects to do the blueprint. It all seemed so easy, but I wanted it to be perfect. After all, we’re gonna be living there someday.

I began by reviewing blueprints and sketches for an upcoming project. The house design was unique, featuring a blend of modern and traditional elements, and it required precise attention to detail. I made sure to include everything he told me to plus there’s no budget, so I can get as crazy as I’d like. But everything will be meaningful, and I can’t wait for it to be done.

As the hours passed, I discussed design elements with the project team. We debated color schemes, materials, and the best ways to optimize. It was a busy day, but I loved every moment of it. This was my passion, and I really appreciated the fact that he gave me the chance to explore it.

By noon, I had finalized the plans for the new house and sent them off to the contractor. Feeling a sense of accomplishment, I decided it was time for a lunch break and headed to the sandwich shop nearby. I was still in shock that he bought it.

The place hadn't changed much since my last visit, and the warm, familiar atmosphere made me feel right at home.

"Azzaria," the security at the door called out, "we haven't seen you in a minute. How are you?"

I smiled. "I've been okay, but I'm back."

He smiled at me and wished me a good day. I was familiar with everyone here, and they all knew me by name and order. It felt refreshing.

The only thing that changed, however, was the menu. What the fuck is a "precious" meal? Whoever he has managing this needs to be let go immediately.

"What's in the 'Precious Meal'?"

The attendant's smile brightened. "It's a chicken and turkey club sandwich with freshly baked Italian herb bread, drizzled with our sweet and spicy sauce, and a variety of veggies. It also comes with an iced coffee and an extra cookie."

"That sounds amazing. Who came up with that name?" I asked with curiosity. That was exactly my order.

"Not sure," The attendant chuckled, "but we heard it's was named by the new boss. He did it for his girl."

"Wow."

"Can you imagine being loved like that?"

I just laughed and gave her a knowing look. I could imagine, especially because I was the girl.

A warm feeling filled my heart, and I couldn't help but smile. I'm running out of ways to thank him.

I sent Dillon a text message, "My nickname is now a meal. I love you."

Dillon replied almost instantly, "You've always been my favorite dish, sweetheart. I love you too."

With a satisfied smile, I got my meal and returned to my work. My day continued with groundwork and ended with me meeting up with Mara at the mall.

As I arrived at the mall to meet Mara and her four-month-old son, Isaiah, I spotted her near the entrance and a sense of excitement washed over me as I approached.

"Hey, Mara!" I called out with a smile, bending down to coo at baby Isaiah. "Look at this little cutie!"

"Hey, Zar." Mara grinned, her tired eyes lighting up at the sight of her son. "He's growing so fast," she said. "It's crazy."

"How are you? You look great. There's no way you just had a baby."

She blushed. "Thank you. I'm doing okay, and yeah, my body just went back to normal."

"How's postpartum treating you?"

She sighed for a bit and then smiled. "It's treating me well enough. Nothing too bad, just the regular pains here and there." We walked around for a bit, window shopping at first, and then she spoke up. She told me about her consistent arguments with Alex because he's committing to things and then letting her know after instead of consulting with her. I didn't have much to say but I just told her to let him know her feelings on it even if it hurt his.

She smiled. "I will, now, which store first? Today's my treat."

I laughed. “Actually, it’s mine.” I took the Amex out of my purse. “Your brother left this with me.”

“What a good day to be the favorite women of Dillon Xander.”

*And to that she’s right.*

We went into the majority of the stores in the mall and came out with something from each store. I even bought myself a rather expensive handbag. When luxury comes my way, I take it.

We rummaged through dresses, tops, and accessories. Mara insisted I’d look fabulous in almost everything. If it was up to her, I’d max his entire card. I even considered a cute summer dress she picked out, but eventually decided to put it back because Dillon got me the red version of it last week.

“Today was fun,” she said, visibly happy.

I plopped down on the nearest bench, putting Isaiah in my lap. “It was.”

“How much do you think we spent today?”

We looked at each other and started bursting with laughter. “I have no idea.”

We sat around for a bit, talking and enjoying the scenery, until we both left.

I sent Dillon a text telling him that I got home, but I’m pretty sure he’s already fast asleep.

Today was really fun, and I had no idea how calming retail therapy was. I’d definitely need to do this more often.

## CHAPTER 34

### *Dillon*

“YOU ARE SOMETHING ELSE,” I CHUCKLED. “YOU HAD A FIELD day yesterday.”

Bank of America called me to approve over \$500,000.00 worth of purchases yesterday. I don’t even want to know what she got, as long as she was happy.

She smiled. Her hair was messy and spread all over her face. She was sitting up in one of my T-shirts, and she looked as beautiful as ever.

“It was great. I really got to explore. Abigail’s supposed to be coming over today.”

I smiled. There’s a part of me that just twists with joy every time I see her happy. And right now, in this moment, she was.

I checked the clock and realized that while it’s 5 am for me which means it’s 12 am for her.

“You’re up late,” I observed, the faint rustling of papers in the background. *What was she doing?*

“Just couldn’t sleep,” she admitted, her fingers toying with the edge of the blanket. We were on FaceTime. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” I confessed. “I thought I’d call the most beautiful woman I know.”

I could see her cheeks flush. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”



“Good, because I have a feeling I might need it,” I said with a hint of mischief.

She began, “I can’t wait to see you...”

“Me either. I just wanna show you the best time. *Again. And again. And again.*”

“You love sex.”

A mischievous chuckle escaped my lips. “I love having sex with you.” She doesn’t even know what she does to me or how quickly my blood rushes at the mention of her name.

“I want you to watch me get myself off. Right now, on camera,” she said, a knowing grin coming over her face. “But I have one condition.”

“What’s that?” I asked. The blood was rushing to my face. “I want you to tell me what to do,” she said in a low, throaty voice. Her eyes sparkled. We’ve done some very crazy stuff in our bedroom, but this wasn’t one thing I’ve ever thought we’d do. I’m just happy she trusts me enough to do these things.

“You want me to guide you?”

“Yes.” *Call me a genie because her wish is ultimately my command.*

“Close your eyes, take two fingers on your right hand, and slowly slide them into your mouth. Then, I want you to lick and suck them like you would my cock.” Smiling a wicked smile, she closed her eyes. She did as I instructed, opening her mouth, putting two perfectly manicured fingers into her mouth, then locking her lips around them both, slowly pulling them out, a moan escaping her involuntarily.

She repeated this again and again, mixing it up with her tongue licking up underneath. She began to slurp on them noisily, covering them in her saliva, moaning more and more. I was about to orgasm just watching her. How can one woman be so fine?

“Stop,” I said.

“Why?”

“I want you to reach down, and slowly slide those fingers up the outside of your pussy, and then I want to see you suck your juices off them.”

The camera was still on her face as her hand disappeared out of view, but I could tell the moment her fingers came in contact with her wet pussy. Her eyes closed again, and her mouth opened slightly, another moan escaping. I love my girlfriend.

“Mmm baby...I’m so wet.” She opened her eyes again, and this time I was looking into blue pools of raw lust, as she brought her fingers back to her mouth, slowly sucking her juices off, all the while never breaking eye contact.

“Fuck, that’s so hot.” I breathed. I can’t wait to be home.

*All of that is mine. How lucky am I?*

“I wish it was your fingers,” she moaned. *I wish it was my fingers too.*

“Take it off,” I said, and knowing exactly what I meant, she put the phone down on the bed. I heard a rustling and then the phone was back above her smiling face, as she lay back on the bed.

“Pull the phone back. I wanna see your tits.” She pulled the phone back, her boobs slowly coming into frame. Her breasts were perfection. Everything about her was perfection.

“Pinch your nipples,” I said mesmerized.

“Mmmmmmm...” she moaned again, her eyes closing, as she rolled her nipples around, and pinching first one, then the other. “I wish you were sucking on them,” she said as she continued to play with herself.

“Suck on it,” I said, and so she did, slowly bringing one up to her mouth, her tongue first darting out to lick the hard little nub, her lips then closing over it, sucking on it

“I can’t wait any longer. I need to see you fuck yourself,” I said. “Flip the camera around, move the phone down to your pussy, and I wanna see you fuck yourself with your fingers.”

The picture flipped around and moved down to her pussy, which was glistening in the low light of her bedroom. She kept it completely bare, and she didn't hesitate to push her fingers in and then pull them out over and over and over.

“Mmmm...fuck this feels good,” she moaned

“Just like that,” I commented. “You're such a good girl.”

“This feels so good. I wish it was your cock...” she trailed off.

I could hear her breathing getting more ragged. She had two fingers inside and a third flicking her clit as best she could.

“Keep going baby, I wanna see you cum,” I said, my eyes glued to the screen as he removed my underpants, letting my erection spring free. I took my hard cock in my hand and started stroking it up and down.

“Fuck,” she moaned louder, “I'm gonna cum ....” I saw her legs clamp together, her hand buried inside herself as her orgasm washed over her body. It took a minute as she started to come down from the heights she reached just moments before.

“Look at what you've done to me.” I flipped the camera on my phone around, my thick hard cock at full attention.

“I want to put it in my mouth so badly,” she groaned, her tone and eyes filled with want.

“When I get back, but for now...” I trailed off, unable to finish my sentence as I stroked myself, finding it unable to focus on anything except her. I moaned a deep moan, the kind that never failed to get her heart racing.

She flipped her phone back onto the selfie camera. Her eyes glued to the screen, she started to pinch a nipple with one hand while the other found her slippery clit again.

“Fuck, I don't think I'm going to last long,” I said, and I was right, I didn't.

Our sex life is everything but boring.

---

*Azzaria*

I went straight to bed after that steamy phone call with Dillon. It was incredible, and he has no idea how perfect he looked while unraveling. I loved watching him lose control to me.

Saturday morning greeted me in a daze. I spent the entire day packing and sorting through my belongings. Nightfall had descended, and now I'm lounging on my couch.

Just as I began to unwind and get lost in my thoughts, the familiar ping of a notification on my phone breaks my thoughts. I reach for it and it's a message from Dillon, and my heart skips a beat when I read his name. His messages always manage to brighten my day.

DILLON XANDER

Missing you right now.

A soft smile graces my face as I craft my response.

ME

Miss you too. My day was hectic, but it's better now.

As I send the message, a rush of warmth washes over me, knowing he's thinking about me even from miles away. As I set my phone aside, another notification pops up. This one is a Google alert. I had set different notification tones.

I tap it and nearly gasp. This can't be happening. The headline reads:

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**Just In: NEW LOVERS ALERT. CEO Playboy Dillon Xander finds love in mystery woman. Read page 12 for more.**

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This was the last thing I needed right now.

Being the person I am, I decide to read the article, and my jaw dropped.

I thought I might be crying or feeling worse, but all I really wanted was to be with him. The more I scrolled through the media, the more I saw my face headlining every blog and gossip site.

There I sat in the living room, reading tabloids about myself. The details of these shots were too specific. Someone had to have been watching us. The only two images that could have been our fault were the ones taken at the airfield yesterday and the one taken on Sunday during therapy. But everything else felt like a setup, even moments like our pre-date ice cream and the confrontation in the abandoned room at his gala.

ABIGAIL-ANN

Is this real, or am I dreaming? What the fuck? I'm coming over right now.

I didn't have the strength to respond. I just wanted Dillon. I needed him to hold me and tell me that everything will be okay, that this media frenzy will blow over, because losing him was not an option. I've seen how the media ruins relationships, and I don't want that for us.

The comments were flooded with people denying or confirming allegations, and some are just plain rude, criticizing my appearance. I groaned in frustration and grabbed my robe.

As I strode out, robe in hand, there was a knock at the front door. The more I ignored it, the more incessant it became.

"Abigail Ann," I shouted, "I'm coming! Geez."

I swing the door open, and my heart nearly drops out of my chest. This can't be real. I must be dreaming.

"What the hell are you doing at my door?" I muttered, utterly stunned.

"I saw the news, and I know you don't like..."

“Azzy,” Abigail said, rushing toward me, “Are you okay? I’m so sorry. I would have come sooner, but I stopped to get your favorite chocolate, wine, and food because... What are you doing here?”

Abigail didn’t initially notice the person standing before us, but as her gaze followed mine, confusion filled the room.

“Halley, what are you doing here?” Abigail asked, her tone less than welcoming, and I couldn’t blame her. My silence was well-deserved. I was too stunned to speak.

It’s been four months since Halley reached out to me.

Four months since she even called to check if I was drinking or water.

Four long months. And now, she conveniently appears on my doorstep right when all the men in my life, including hers, have left. It reeks of insincerity.

“I saw the news, and I came to see Azzaria,” she answered, glaring at me.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I said plainly and walked inside. I heard her footsteps following me as I took a seat on the couch. “I’m fine. I don’t know why you’re here.”

She looked at me, at a loss for words. And that’s probably for the best because there’s nothing she could say. We’ve gone beyond excuses and apologies. I spent months mourning our friendship, and I’m over it now. She can’t waltz in here and act like she’s been by my side these past months. *She’s four months too late.*

She sat on the corner of my sofa, tears forming in her eyes. I blocked her out and shifted my focus to more important matters.

“I’m fine, Abi,” I reassured her and started eating the food she brought. “I just didn’t want our relationship to be public, but it’s out there, and there’s not much I can do about it.” I shrug and return to eating.

The worst is yet to come, and I’ll face it once I’m not hungry.

## CHAPTER 35

### *Dillon*

SEVEN NIGHTS WITHOUT MY GIRLFRIEND WERE THE ONLY THING I couldn't see myself doing. As soon as my presence was no longer needed here, I was planning on flying back home.

I have an early morning interview with Jasmine. It's a follow-up we do every year after the gala, but because my girl ran off me for three days, I couldn't so much as breathe properly, let alone do an interview.

The whole point of being in England was to re-establish my different companies and brand in the city summit. It's an excellent marketing strategy, as well as it's always good to network, no matter how successful you are. Azzaria had written my speech for me, and it's very different from what I usually say. It's more playfully toned and easier to read. There were no unnecessarily big words or communication barriers.

There was a loud banging on my door, and it pissed me off. "Who is it?" I shouted.

"Open up, Xander," Reyes shouted back at me, his banging on the door getting louder.

"I don't want to be disturbed unless Azzaria is in danger. I'm busy," I snarled.

He scoffed. "Well, it's a good thing her face is on every news headline," he said, and I jumped up.

I ran to open the door, and Reyes came inside. He handed me the iPad, and I was shocked. If these were unsettling to me, I could only imagine what the hell was happening to her. I've never wanted to be back in the city this quick.

“We’re already working on getting it down, but it’s going to cost—”

“Spend any amount you have to. Get it down now, Reyes. Get the jet back to England. I’m going home,” I ordered.

Arnoldo looked at me disapprovingly, but he didn’t understand, especially because he didn’t have a clue what burning for someone meant. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. There’s—”

“Arnoldo Reyes, I appreciate you, but if you don’t shut up and do as you’re getting paid to do, I will kill you!” I shouted.

“The jet will be here in a few minutes, and our people are on it. Anything else you need?”

“I just need the jet to be here.”

The jet arrived, and sitting down, a million thoughts rushed through my brain. I’m not upset about people finding out because I’ve been wanting to show her off from day one, but I know how she is. And I know how much this is affecting her.

“Dillon, don’t forget you have that Zoom interview scheduled with Jasmine later today,” Arnoldo said, his voice slightly strained. “It’s pretty important.”

I sighed. “Arnoldo, I don’t know if I can do this interview right now. Where’s Azzaria?”

“She’s at home, but you need to do the interview.”

“Arn—”

Arnoldo leaned forward, looking at me with a seriousness that only he could muster. “Dillon, I understand how crucial this is, but the interview with Jasmine is also significant. She’s a big media influencer, and it could help us maintain your positive image. I can’t just cancel it.”

“Okay, here’s what we’ll do. Tell Jasmine that I’m willing to do the interview, but it has to be in person. We can also use this to discuss this picture situation, too.”

Arnoldo nodded, seemingly relieved by the compromise. “That sounds like a good plan, Dillon. I’ll contact Jasmine’s



team right away and arrange the in-person interview. And if it makes you feel any better, the picture situation isn't that serious."

"It's that not serious?"

"You wanted the public to know. Being in the public eye doesn't bother you; you've been in it for years. So—"

I cut him off. "I'm used to it. She's not. It's not about the pictures being out; I couldn't care less. It's about how it's affecting her. You don't know how much negativity affects her, and I'm yet to read a positive comment under any of these."

"I get it, sorry. The interview is scheduled. As soon as we land, we're getting there."

---

### *Azzaria*

"Azzaria," I heard Abigail shout, waking me up from my sleep.

"What is it?"

"Come and watch the TV." She woke me up at 7 am to show me a TV? I'm debating the levels of patience I have with everyone this week.

Rushing out of my bedroom, the TV was showing the local news. They woke me up to watch Good Morning America with Jasmine's hour long gossip take? *This can't be serious.*

"What's going on?" Before she could answer, I heard the news reporter speak, and this shocked the hell out of me.

"Joining us on set this morning, is a man who needs no introductions, Mr. Dillon Xander." She spoke smoothly, and I saw him walk on stage. His suit fit him perfectly, and oh god, his hair was so perfect. *He's so perfect.*

*I'm confused. Wasn't he supposed to be in England?* This entire morning is a blur to me, but I needed to know what was going on.

He walked across to a seat and crossed his legs at his knee. I knew that position all too well; he was about to do something serious, and my anxiety killed me not knowing what was going on.

“Thank you, Jasmine.” He flashed his million-dollar smile. “It’s good to be here.”

“Let’s get right into it, shall we?” she said while gathering her folder. “The gala this year was amazing. It was bigger and definitely better. What are your thoughts on that?”

“I am very proud of that initiative. It’s something I’ve been doing for a long time, and I have to thank our sponsors and everyone who helped put it together. I couldn’t do it alone.” He continued speaking about the process of getting sponsors and how someone can end up being a donor or volunteering at a shelter.

“That’s exceptional. Most men with your status do things like that.” *Was she flirting with him?*

“That’s true, but I’ve never been like many men.” He’s so right.

*He’s so much different.*

*So much better.*

“Speaking of the gala, you had a date. Was that just a decoy date, or are you...” She stopped talking. *Here we go.*

He sat upright. “Am I what? Dating her?”

“Are you involved with her? Are there rumors and camera speculations true? Or is it nothing serious?”

A smirk came up on his face, and that sparkle in his eyes when he thought about me came out. I got some amount of security from it. As he sat up in the chair, he said five simple but effective words, “As true as life gets.”

Oh.

“The provocative Dillon Xander is finally settled?”

“I don’t like labels, but I am settled,” he said and dropped his shoulders, “but yes, she’s my girlfriend and so much

more,” he added.

“So much more?” Jasmine asked.

“She’s the first woman I’ve ever truly loved, as I’ve learned that it’s not a crime to love what you cannot explain. And trust me, she’s the most unexplainable person in my life, but one I never want to let go of.”

“Sources say you left for England yesterday, but you’re in NYC today. Why is that?” Finally, she’s asking the right questions. I wanted to know that too.

He took a sip of the coffee and clenched his jaw. “I thought we were here to talk about my gala?” He’s such a smartass. “I was in England, but the articles circulated, and I just had to be here. The media can be a very intrusive thing.”

“It was inevitable; you’re a very public man. Shouldn’t that have been expected?”

“You’re right, I am a public man, but I have a very private life. The media sees and knows only what I allow them to. My relationship nor anything in my private life is the media’s business,” he icily and blatantly declared, “whether it’s expected or not, she has the right to her feelings, and I won’t let a single soul devalue that.” Was it possible to love him more than I already did?

I looked over at Abigail and saw her texting him. I couldn’t see the full messages, but the first line said, “she’s watching it now,” and when I glanced at the TV, I saw him texting too.

“The people want to know how this woman came into your life.” I know it from my point of view, but I’ve never heard it from him, and this interested me deeply.

“She was the intern at my office. I met her, and it was very challenging. If I said yes, she’d say no. If I gave a directive, she’d question it, and it drove me crazy. I wasn’t used to being challenged by anyone, and she challenged me. She’s very stubborn and set in her ways. You can’t easily sway her mind, and that’s one of my favorite things about her. From that day on, I found myself trying to get closer to her. It was very hard

because I've never been rejected in my life, until her, of course." I laughed at this. It wasn't a rejection; I was just trying not to fall in love. "And the rest is history."

"Right. Let's get back to the gala; how many sponsors in total..." She started talking about the actual reason he was there for the interview. And I sat there, listening to every single word.

There's nothing he could've done that'd make me stop loving him. Even when I think he's not thinking of me, he proves me wrong every time. I can't ever find another like him, and I wouldn't be looking. The day I lose this man would be the day I lose every goddamn good thing in my life.

"Thank you for coming today."

"Thank you for having me," he said and got up, fixing his tie. Jasmine closed the set, and Dillon left. I was completely speechless, and all I knew was that I needed to see him. The public knows, and there's nothing I can do about that right now.

I'd just have to brace myself for the negativity, and once he's with me, I'd do just that.

Some minutes passed, and then there was a knock on the door, and all our eyes shot over. I was almost 100% sure it was Dillon, so I ran. I ran to the door like my life depended on it, and when I saw his beautiful face, I couldn't help but get lost in him. This man right here was my forever, and I'd never, ever give him up. I jumped into his arms, and he took me to my bedroom. We needed the privacy to talk as well as engage in other important things.

"Jasmine likes you." I had to point out. It would be very out of character for me to see something like that and let it go unnoticed.

"I know, but I'm not attracted to her," he responded flatly.

"I don't know what I expected, but I never expected you to fly back to the city."

"I'd never leave you to deal with anything alone, especially this," he whispered and rubbed my side. "I burn for

you, indefinitely and irrevocably.” Enthusiasm and passion laced his words.

“I melt for you.” Nothing’s truer than that. There’s not a man in this world who can hold a candle to Dillon. Even if they tried, it wouldn’t work, it wouldn’t even make sense.

“You better.” His breath on my ear made me shiver. His lips brushed along my cheek by accident, but strayed to my lips on purpose.

Dillon had very soft, full lips, and he kissed me gently, at least at first. I was glad he was taking his time, because the first touch of his lips on mine had sent a jolt through my body that made me almost afraid. *Afraid of this feeling to end.*

Our lips moved slowly, languidly. His hand traveled down my arm and back up, making every tiny hair stand on end. Slowly his hand traveled across my shoulder, his fingertips brushing my neck. My lips parted, not from pressure from his tongue, but from shock at the overwhelming sensations in my body. His tongue eagerly accepted my invitation and slid into my mouth.

We kissed for a long time. Our tongues moved together, swirling and probing, and he pulled me closer as we explored each other’s mouths. He tasted like scotch and cinnamon. His mouth was very wet, even a little too much so, but I was digging on his enthusiasm, his blatant hunger to taste me. I sucked his tongue into my mouth and savored it. His fingers dug into the flesh of my arms and back. I suddenly realized I was squeezing my thighs together in rhythm, my sopping pussy pulsing.

“I missed your lips.” He murmured against them. “Both of them.”

There’s not much response to that, but what a good day to be Dillon Xander’s girlfriend. The worst was yet to come, and you know what? Let it.

---

We were back at Dillon’s penthouse now. After Abigail noticed I was doing better, she left to go and meet her mom.

Halley had left earlier, but she sent me a few messages to “check up on me.” I don’t buy whatever act she’s selling, especially because it’s a few months too late, but Dillon says to just let her be and focus on more important things.

He had the rest of the week off because of the England debacle, so I decided to book a trip. Dillon’s been around the world a million times over, and I’ve been down the street and back. One of the things on my vision board was traveling the world with the love of my life, and he happens to fit both categories.

While he was in a meeting, I searched the web to find us a good vacation spot for the next three days. There was the Maldives, Spain, Bora Bora, or literally anywhere in Europe, but I wanted something different. Somewhere private with lots of fun activities. Ronan and Arnoldo helped me out because I didn’t know the first thing about planning, and the whole goal was to not involve Dillon.

Arnoldo sorted out the flight details, and Ronan was helping me pick a place. We narrowed it down to Sorrento, Italy. Based on the reading and research I did, the Sorrento Coast looked like the perfect place for a less overcrowded experience of the Italian South, and that’s what we needed. Something fun and low-key. The two of us have had a rough couple of months, so this was needed.

Ronan created a group chat with everyone, excluding Dillon, so it was easier for us to communicate without me getting confused, but I still opted to text everyone individually; it was better for me that way.

ME

I picked a place! Sorrento Coast, Italy!

ARNOLDO REYES

Noted. What are the flight plan details?

ME

We're going for three days, and I'm hoping we can leave tomorrow? If that's not too much to ask.

ARNOLDO REYES

Not at all. I'll get it sorted and have the details ready for you.

Ronan and Lucio hailed from Italy, so it was easy to get everything set up with their help, as well as they got us a tour guide for the days. His name was Alessandro, and he seemed nice when we spoke. I couldn't quite understand him because he had an extremely strong Italian accent, but Ronan and Lucio simultaneously translated for me.

Sorrento was the perfect town for a day trip, and I paid for us to get fully guided tours. There were things I wanted to do with him alone, like a simple stroll down the narrow lanes in the old town, sip an espresso while watching the world go by in the bustling main Piazza Tasso, and pause to see the stunning views from the panoramic cliffside overlook in the public Villa Comunale gardens. I got all these attractions from Google, and they looked so damn pretty.

I'd, of course, ask him if we could go shopping at the tiny boutiques and artisan shops lining the streets of the historic center, plus there are so many places we could pop into. The landmark historic churches like the Cathedral and Basilica di Sant'Antonino, admire palaces dating from the Middle Ages, and take in the ancient city walls that were built to protect the center from marauders.

I was so stoked for this trip, and we leave tomorrow. It was planned in a hurry, but with the right amount of support and money, it all worked out.

A message came in from Arnolde, telling me that our flight leaves at 4 p.m. tomorrow, and Mikkell will be here at two-thirty to pick us up. The problem was now getting Dillon

to leave the house at the time and board the jet. He and I had commitments to fulfill before we left, but Lucio gladly handled that part.

I had our passports checked plus my traveling pass and visa finally came through thanks to Ronan. He talked to his guys down at the embassy, and they smoothed the process for me. It's a good thing to have friends in high places sometimes, as much as it is a bad thing.

The weather app showed that there would be sunny days and cloudy skies, but the temperatures were quite cool, so I packed us a bit heavily. It was hard packing for Dillon because he had a lot of clothes, but I called Mara and Nina to help. Dillon was stuck in a board meeting, so I had a few hours, maybe two, four if I was lucky, to spare before he came out and wanted my undivided attention.

"Am I packing enough?" I asked sarcastically. I was sure the girls forgot we were leaving for only three days.

"Azzaria," Nina said while rubbing her palms together, "You're going to sweat easily because it's so warm over there sometimes, and you'll be in different places, but looking your best is always good. I have a swimsuit store, so I brought you some sexy swimsuits, eh?" Her Italian accent was so strong, and I found it cute. Apparently her father's Latin, like Dillon's, and her mom's straight Italian. That was one interesting mix.

Meanwhile, Nina and I debated on my suitcase, Mara packed Dillon's with ease.

"He won't need anything else, and if he does, he's a billionaire, and there are plenty of stores there."

"You need lots of dresses, preferably bright colors, the swimsuits are a complete yes, take out the jeans, the shorts can work, and you don't need pajamas, just bring your robe."

"Mara, Mia cugina, what's she gonna sleep in?"

"Nudo," she replied and started rearranging the suitcase. I was losing my mind watching these two bicker, but hey, as long as my suitcase got packed, I was fine.



The next half-hour passed, and the bags were finally packed. Dillon had one suitcase plus his backpack for his laptop, journal, toiletries, and any other items he needed, and I have one suitcase, a travel bag with my shoes and makeup, and a small bag for toiletries.

“Take lots of pictures for memories,” Mara said, reminding me. “Have fun, enjoy yourself, and I’m taking pebbles with me tonight. If Dillon asks why, just say it’s because I wanted to; he’ll get it.” Everything on my checklist was now complete. It’s time for fun!

I assumed we were being too loud when I heard Dillon’s office door shut. That was both good and bad. Bad because he hated being disturbed in his meetings, but good because I got a chance to move our luggage from the penthouse all the way downstairs using the front exit, hiding and sneaking around wasn’t necessary anymore. We were public, and I had one less thing to worry about.

Nina and Mara left shortly after because their duties called. Isaiah woke up missing his mom, so Mara had to leave, and Nina had a meeting with an old friend.

I was too excited for the trip tomorrow and hoped Dillon would be happy. He deserved the break, and I’d make sure we had fun. *Sorrento Coast, here we come.*

Being the terrible cook I was, I warmed up leftovers from the fridge and plated them for our dinner. Night fell rather quickly, and Dillon was still stuck in that board meeting. I peeped in there every five minutes, and he knew I was getting antsy.

I covered the food with plastic wrap and walked into his meeting. He muted the microphone, but I could still hear the other men on the line sharing their concerns in a very vulgar manner. His kind of work wasn’t for the faint of heart at all.

“Dinner’s ready, but I’ll just eat by myself since you’re not done.” I was sad, and he knew it. He’s been sitting at this spot since we got home, and it’s now nine, heading to 10 pm. We never even eat this late.

“I’ll be with you soon,” he called out after me, “I love you.”

I sighed, hating the idea of him working so late. “I love you too.”

## CHAPTER 36

# *Azzaria*

IT WASN'T THAT BAD BEING IN A PUBLIC RELATIONSHIP, BUT the pictures were annoying. Dillon and I left the penthouse, and about a million camera shutters went off. I just smiled and moved along with the day.

The headlines for the media outlets still remained the same, even adding more pictures and snippets from Dillon's interview. I know he's quite important, but I never expected so many people to be fascinated by his romantic life.

"I've never seen people get so excited to take my picture," I whispered to him while we sat in the back seat of the car.

"You're a beautiful woman," Dillon said, "I can understand the fascination. I experience it at least once a day."

I purred and leaned into his arms. "Just once? I thought you think of me more," I teased and let out a long, exaggerated sigh.

"I do," he said dryly and went back to his tablet. *That's weird.*

"Anyway," I said, changing the topic, "I have to go to school today, not for classes, but I have to pick up my leaving package. I don't know what's in it, but I have to do it. They said to get there by 8:30," I groaned. I didn't want to wake up early today, but my college doesn't seem to care about that. "We're going out at 3 today, for a drive to the south." There was no drive to the south, but dictating to him was the only way I'd get him in the car with me.

He didn't look up from the tablet, and I felt ignored. All I got was silence for five whole minutes. "Dillon," I shouted and slapped him on the thigh, "You're not listening to me." I pouted and pulled away from his side. Work, work, work, work... that's all he does recently.

"I did hear what you said. You have school at 8:30 to get documents, and we're going out of town to the south at 3. I don't know what you wanted me to say to all of that."

"Oh, sorry," I snarled and moved to the other side of the car.

He released a big sigh and shut off the iPad. "Precious," he whispered and moved over to me, "I'm sorry. I'm just trying to get documents done."

"Whatever," I said in response and rolled my eyes at him. He could've told me that he's finishing something, so he's not focused, and I would've shut up, but that aggressive tone he kept wasn't fine, and I'd be damned before I let him think it was.

"Lucio," I called out to get his attention, "I think I'm good here. My school's like five minutes away, and I can walk." He nodded at me, and I gathered my bags.

"Romano," Dillon growled, "Do not let her out of the damn car."

"Lucio, if you don't let me out, I'll jump out."

A mask of panic was on his face; he didn't want to disobey orders from his boss, but he also valued my statements a lot. He pulled to a stop at the upcoming curb.

"Thank you, Lucio. Have a good day now," I said, addressing only him, and opened the car door to leave.

Dillon grabbed onto my wrist, but I yanked it away and jumped out of the car, making my way to school.

As expected, I got to school in a good five minutes, exactly at 8:30 am. The place was crawling with students, and the space was too crowded. My day started off awful, and the school being crowded made it worse. The whispers about me

and my relationship were all I could hear. Some were saying they loved the chemistry, others called me a gold-digging whore, and the rest wondered what he saw in me. I assume this is the downside of being involved with men of power.

I rolled my eyes and made my way to the seats. Abigail was nowhere to be found, and trust me, I texted her a couple of times. She's either still asleep or asked for her package to be delivered to her—typical Abigail fashion.

My phone pinged with messages from Dillon, but I just put it on silent. I needed to get out of here as fast as I got in. Our principal went up to make a speech, and it took forever. She was just speaking about how proud she is of her students, the protocol for graduation, and we were only allowed to bring six additional people. My six were my mom, Mara, Nina, Ronan, Lucio, Mikkel, and Dillon, even if he's an asshole right now, and Abigail is also graduating, so I'll see her there.

My phone pinged, and Abigail's name came up in the notification bar.

ABIGAIL-ANN

School? For what? Also, Good morning!

ME

To pick up your envelope and good morning.

ABIGAIL-ANN

Oh, I asked someone to get that for me because I was lazy. I thought you were gonna send Dillon to do it for you.

ME

No. God gave me hands and legs for a reason.

ABIGAIL-ANN

You all packed for your trip?? Take lots of pictures!

ME

Yes, and I'll try.

ABIGAIL-ANN

Good. I love you.

ME

I love you too.

“Good morning,” I said pleasantly.

“Hey,” she said, “here you go.” She handed me the envelope, and I walked straight through the door. I'd open it later when I was of a peaceful mind, but as far as I know, I'm one step closer to being done with school.

ME

I'm back. Went to get an envelope.

ABIGAIL-ANN

Ok! Have you talked to Halley?

The funny part of this is if I heard her name being called a few months ago, I would've felt despair and sadness. But hearing it now sounds like I'm talking about any other stranger. It's emotionless.

ME

No. Why?

ABIGAIL-ANN

I was just shocked to see her there, but I think you should do what makes you happy in this. If being friends with her again makes you happy, then do it.

That's where Abigail and Halley were different. If the roles were reversed, Halley would've told me to never speak to Abigail again because nothing mattered to her more than being a person's number one. While all Abigail ever cared about was my happiness.

ME

What will make me happy is never seeing her again. I don't want her in my life, and I'm done talking about this topic.

---

The weather to be expected when we landed was normal temperatures, so I kept my dressing to a minimum, and so did he. This was my very first time seeing Dillon dressed in shorts and a casual, slow-button-down shirt. He paired it with his black Hermes glasses and his sandals. Just looking at him sent several jolts to my vagina, and I had to squeeze my thighs to calm down.

*My gosh, Azzaria, get a grip.*

I wore a yellow ruched sundress which showed a moderate amount of cleavage, and I paired it with my black purse and sandals. There wasn't much to what I wore, especially because it would've tipped off Dillon that I'm overdressing, and he questions everything.

“Are you ready?” I asked. He was busy looking at himself in the mirror. Dillon’s confidence shone right through, and I’m glad it did. One of us had to be strong.

“Yes,” he walked towards me. “You look absolutely gorgeous. I’m buying a dozen of these dresses. They look great on you,” he gushed. “Are you still upset from today?”

“I’m not. I just didn’t like how you were ignoring me, but then I understood that you were busy, and I should’ve respected that.” I was also promised an apology which I’d definitely want later.

He smiled at me, and we shared a soft kiss and went down the elevator. Checking the time, it was 1:30 pm, and we had two hours before we needed to get to the airfield.

Lucio was driving behind us but using a different route. I had him bring Dillon’s laptop, earpiece, and skincare routine items. He’d go crazy if he left his moisturizer at home. And rightfully so, I stan a man with excellent hygiene.

Dillon looked over at me when I started shifting my seat. My stomach growled, and I felt a sudden sharp pain. That happens pretty regularly with me, especially on days like this when I forget to eat.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said playfully, “I’m good.” His expressions showed me that he wasn’t buying it, and he stared at me for a long while. Dillon does that whenever he wants to get the truth out of me.

“Tell me what’s wrong, precious,” he said in a low tone and scooted closer to me.

“I’m just hungry, but it’s fine. It can wait till we get to the south,” I shrugged and started fidgeting with my fingers.

He tossed the phone from his lap and dragged me onto his lap. Every day I thank the Lord that Dillon’s vehicles are very spacious with high ceilings. He’s always feisty in the backseat.

“Did you eat today, precious?”

“No.”



“Mikkel,” he called out, “Where’s the nearest restaurant?” I tried to stop him from asking because I would be fine, but I also should’ve known better than thinking he would let it slide. There are many things I get away with, but when it comes to my safety and health, he’s not the nicest person...

Mikkel checked his GPS system and said, “McDonald’s is five minutes away, and everything else is about 45 minutes out.”

“We’re stopping at the McDonald’s,” Dillon ordered, and Mikkel nodded in agreement. I just shrunk in his lap.

“We’re going to take you to a nutritionist when we’re both free. You keep fucking up your digestive system, and I’m not going to let you,” he warned.

I didn’t have much to say, so I just agreed. If Dillon had his mind made up on something, there’s no way he’s changing it. We made it to the drive-thru, and there were like two cars in front of us. Inside was empty, and I didn’t feel like going out there, and if Dillon went, he’d cause a scene. People literally lose their brain cells when they see him.

“What are you ordering?”

“Fries,” I answered and shrugged.

He took a deep breath and mumbled something in Latin. I was definitely pissing him off, even though I wasn’t trying to. “I’m not in the mood for your—” he quickly took another breath and restarted his sentence. “Precious, what is your order? It’s our turn, and unless you’re ordering ten servings of fries, I’m not ordering for you. That’s not a meal,” he lectured.

“Big Mac Combo Meal with Sprite, add bacon please and a strawberry shake. Can I get dessert?”

“You can get anything you want, my love.”

“I want cookies too. What are you getting?”

“A chicken sandwich and fries with orange juice.” As plain as orders get, that was his. He doesn’t drink soda nor does he eat unhealthy stuff much.

Mikkel placed our orders, and we got our food, and I was happy. Contrary to popular belief, food makes me very happy.

“Are you good over there?” He asked.

“Yes, but I’m eating too much. Does it bother you?”

“No. I love seeing you eat. It makes *me* happy.” He placed emphasis on the “me” and smacked a kiss on my cheek. “I took pictures of you earlier and posted them on my story. You’re really pretty.”

My cheeks reddened, and I let out a hearty laugh. I loved him so much. The saying is right, the days ahead will always be better than the last. Dillon’s living proof of that.

We pulled up at the airfield, and Dillon was confused. He didn’t say anything, but I could tell by the way he wrinkled his face and furrowed his eyebrows. I exited the car, and with assistance, I popped the trunk, and the attendants came for our luggage.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re going to the Sorrento Coast in Italy for about three days. Let’s go,” I squealed and grabbed his arm, pulling him into the jet with me. “I have everything packed for you. Your clothes, shoes, laptop, skincare stuff, chargers, and all those things. You just needed to show up, and don’t worry about the cost either. I took care of it.” It felt refreshing to finally be the one spending money on him for a change.

He scooped me into his arms, twirled us around, then carried us into the jet. I’ve never been in one before, and holy fucking shit. It was amazing. I’ve only seen these things in movies, but when you’re dating your own real-life morally grey prince, you tend to experience plenty out-of-this-world moments.

“You’re incredible,” he happily said as we nestled into the seats. The pilot told us earlier that we would be taking off in about three minutes, “and what do you mean by you took care of the cost?”

“Uh, well,” I stuttered, “my last two salaries have been very generous, and I had some savings I was going to use to

pay for my college debts, but you paid those off. So I pooled the money together and booked a trip for us,” I explained, but he was not amused.

He sighed. “I appreciate all of this so much, and I’m glad we’re getting a chance to enjoy the world, but I don’t want you spending your savings on me. Keep it for all the things you want to accomplish.”

“I’m not just spending it on you, I’m spending it on us. Just because I’m not as rich as you doesn’t—”

“Babe,” he interjected, “it has nothing to do with who is richer. This trip isn’t cheap. You should’ve at least paid half, then charged the other half to my card, but let’s not argue. We’re going for a romantic getaway, and I appreciate you doing this.”

*Translation: I’m going to wire the money to your account and give you a bonus because I appreciate you.*

I just rolled my eyes and snuggled against him. It made no sense to prolong that argument because I wouldn’t win. He’d find a million and one ways to prove me wrong.

“Anything for you, sir?” The flight attendant asked. Maybe I’m overthinking it, but I don’t appreciate how she saw the two of us, but she only acknowledged him, and that smile she has on her face isn’t going to work with me.

“Yes, actually,” he said and removed his shades, “Turn the A/C down, Mrs. Xander here doesn’t like the cold, and keep that door separating closed.”

She nodded and made her way out of the section. “You plan on proposing, Xander?”

“Sooner rather than later, precious,” he smirked. “Sooner rather than later.”

---

### ***Dillon***

*Did I have to refer to her as my wife? No.*

*Did I have fun matching her with my last name? Yes.*

*And would I do it again? Absolutely.*

We were finally taking the vacation we deserved. The past four to five months we've been together haven't been easy, but here we are, and it feels like a whole year.

She got everything worked out, and we were headed south to the Sorrento Coast. She said we had three full days of activities, but really all I could think about was the memories we'd make and the smiles she'd have plastered on her face.

I couldn't help but giggle a little as I watched her though. She was sitting on my lap, fidgeting, not sitting still, and checking her purse every five seconds. She's not as big on air travel as she is on car travel.

"Relax," I tell her. "Everything's going to be fine, precious." It was her first time flying for more than two hours, and she wasn't excited about it. The trip excited her, but I guess she hadn't anticipated we'd have to be in the air for at least eight hours to get there.

The stewardess got on the speaker system and did her little speech on plane safety and no smoking, fastening seatbelts, and so on. I completely tuned her out, but Azzaria was hanging on her every word.

The next thing she said that scared her was how big the jet was. I didn't ask why, but apparently the spaciousness with a lack of people freaked her out. I took her hand in mine, and she relaxed a little, but not much. The plane pulled away and headed for the runway, and she was freaking out.

"Dillon, I'm gonna throw up," she said, squeezing my hand. I put my hand on her thigh and rubbed back and forth. She looked at my hand, then back at me, and I just winked at her, then looked forward.

Just as the plane started speeding up for takeoff, I started rubbing her gently. She was completely astounded I would do this now out in the open, but the look on her face said she loved it. Plus, I know what turns her on and what keeps her going.

“You’re already so soaked for me, baby,” I whispered, and she released a breathy moan.

Her eyes were closed, and she just sat down, enjoying what I was doing. As soon as the plane leveled out, I stopped and started reading a magazine like nothing had happened. It was protocol for the attendants to do checks after takeoff. As Azzaria was unaware of this, she just stared at me in dismay. I grinned into my magazine, loving that I was able to shock her like that but also preparing for the words she’d spar with me.

The flight was a little bumpy, but every time she started getting scared, I rubbed her again. After a while, I figured out that she was pretending to be scared so I’d touch her, but I didn’t care. I loved feeling her wet, and I loved making her feel good. All of a sudden she looked at me and just said two words: “follow me.” She got up and went to the back of the jet. That area was where I’d go if my colleagues on board were pissing me off.

I followed, wanting to see why she moved, but she pulled me into the space with her and kissed me with so much passion. We made out for what seemed like forever, and belts were coming undone, and shirts were hitting the floor.

“You’re scared of heights, but you want me to fuck you against the door in a jet?” I asked, breathlessly.

“Yes, please.”

I plunged into her tight, wet area, and she was pressed into my neck. She was trying so hard to be quiet, but all her attempts failed when I quickly found her G-spot.

“You’re so wet,” I whispered in her ear and quickly went back to kissing her. I bit my lip trying to get her to quiet down. Azzaria’s moans could wake up an entire village.

“Not so fast.” I stopped her and flipped around so she was against the door, and I went to unravel her, kissing and biting her neck and chest and whatever flesh my mouth came in contact with while my hands were busy pleasuring her into oblivion.

I fingered her while using my thumb to rub her clit. She wasn't holding back at all, moaning and egging me on.

“What do you want me to do to you?”

“I want that apology you promised me.”

She didn't have to tell me twice. I dropped to my knees and started feasting on her. I took her clit in my mouth, sucking like my life depended on it. A great amount of pleasure came from hearing the whimpers she made and just knowing the amount of power she got from seeing me on my knees.

My mouth then moved to her hot lips, sucking on them, savoring the soft yet firm feel of their sensuality inside my mouth. My tongue licked them on the outer edges and then between them, sliding up and down her aroused outer lips.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned. And that drove me crazy. I ran my hands up her waist and to her tits, fondling them, squeezing them, pinching the nipples.

I swallowed from the excitement of being where I was, feeling, smelling, tasting this delightful sexual dish. Up and down her hot slit went my tongue, and then I stiffened it and pushed it against the entrance to her hot vagina.

“Oh my fucking god,” she screamed, “don't stop, please,” she panted and brought her hands to my hair.

Azzaria reacted automatically, lifting her hips, shoving her pussy against my face, a low moan of sexual pleasure escaping her lips. She moved against my face as I plunged my tongue in and out of her greedy pussy, enjoying the feel of my tongue inside her, alive, forceful, eager.

Her body arched, and she moaned with pleasure at the sexual release my mouth and tongue created. I kept up licking and sucking at her, slowly, more slowly, more gently until her body stopped trembling from the power of her orgasm.

She caressed my cheeks with her thigh and ran her hands through my hair and scalp, saying, “You make me feel so good.” I ran my hands over her body, loving the feel of her

taut youthful skin. I kissed and licked her body, still consumed with so much desire. *Her pussy was made for me.*

We just stood there a moment, trying to catch our breath. After getting our clothes back on and situated, I opened the door, and we walked back to our seats.

“I want to do something fun,” She said. She had her seductive look, so I’d initially love the outcome of this either way. Something about hearing her speak with such allure made my heart race. I got up from the jet seats and bolted the exits of both doors.

“I love you,” I whispered and grabbed a handful of her hair. She unbuttoned my jeans, and I eased out of the seat a bit, giving her better access to my crotch.

She pulled the front of my underpants down and reached in to take out my cock. My hips flinched as her hand grasped my manhood. She was teasing, and I don’t like teasing. She touched her tongue to the tip of my shaft, and I moaned softly.

“I love that,” I groaned.

She took it into her mouth and gave it a light suck. “Precious, stop teasing,” I warned.

She sucked harder, and a loud moan escaped my mouth as I pushed my hips towards her deeply and vigorously.

She pulled my shorts and briefs down some more, freeing my testicles. My hands took permanent residency in her hair. She’s gonna kill me for messing up her new hair. I go so crazy when she plays with them.

She took my member in her mouth while she rubbed my balls firmly and moaned louder as my member grew fast in her mouth. With my shaft in her hand, she began kissing and licking the fleshy tip of my cock, sucking it lightly as she worked my lips around it.

“I love seeing you with my cock in your mouth,” I groaned. I took the back of her head in my hand and pushed her to me, uttering, “Enough teasing, put it back in your mouth now, baby.”

She took me into her mouth and sucked harder, and ran her tongue back and forth quickly and roughly along the underside of my tip. I let out a quiet grunt and whispered, “You suck me off so good.”

Azzaria took me in deeper, as deep as she could, and continued pleasuring me with her tongue. She pumped my shaft with one hand and cupped my balls firmly in the other. I put both my hands around her head and leaned heavily on her, letting out quiet grunts as I watched her.

My hips began pumping towards her, so she moved her hands to my shaft and let me push into her skilled mouth. I moaned and watched as she let me enjoy her mouth. I gradually increased my speed and tightened my hold on her head. I grunted softly with each thrust, my movements grew more intense.

She put her hand on my pelvis and began taking me in and out of her mouth as she pleased me intensely. “You’re making me lose it, baby,” I groaned. She did it in a way that left me in a daze. I couldn’t think straight after she’s done with me. It happens every time.

She felt my hips quiver and my body tense, and gave my testicles a firm squeeze as she pleased me. With a louder grunt, I quickly pulled away from her, and grabbed my shaft to finish myself off on some napkins that were around us. She was too gorgeous today for me to finish in her mouth.

“You’re so amazing.” I helped her up from her knees and pulled her onto my lap, kissing her senseless.

“I’m tired now, but when I get up, we’ll talk more.” She yawned and fell asleep in my lap.

*Wow, what a woman I have.*



## CHAPTER 37

# *Azzaria*

ITALY IS EVERYTHING I COULD HAVE EVER IMAGINED, BUT A million times better. We haven't even started touring yet, but I was in awe of the entire place.

The jet ride here was nerve-wracking at first, but Dillon helped me calm down. Then, we fell asleep until the attendants woke us up and now here we are, in the most beautiful city I've ever been to.

I checked the time, and it was just 2p.m. here. Initially, I didn't count the day we'd land as part of the three days, so I made the decision that we'd just stay in the hotel and chill today.

"We're now on the Sorrento Coast," the driver said, his Italian accent excessively strong.

"Do you speak Italian, babe?"

"Non lo so, lo faccio? Sei piuttosto bella in quel vestito giallo, amore mio," he said, and I giggled. I had no idea what it meant, but the smile on his face told me that he was complimenting me.

"I'll take that as a yes. You're such a show off." I fake gagged and rolled my eyes at him.

He grabbed my jaw with his hand, pulling me closer to his face, and said, "Mi piace di più quando ti strozzi veramente. Non sei d'accordo?" There was something dangerously sexy about the tone he kept with me, and it sent jolts through my body.

“Translate, please?” I asked with annoyance strong in my voice. He does this all the time back home when he just spews Latin words, and now he’s spewing Italian words.

He leaned into my ear and whispered, “I like it better when you really gag. Don’t you agree?” I pressed my thighs together and swallowed hard. *He’s definitely going to be the death of me.*

There was a lot of greenery around us, and I found nothing more peaceful. The driver had told us that at one point, it was called “La Gente” because of its mild climate, elegant streets and gardens, and friendly residents. I squealed like a child getting their favorite candy; this would be the best trip of my life.

Within the next ten minutes, we arrived at the hotel, and I was in awe. It’s even prettier in person than it is on the screen. The driver unloaded our luggage and handed me a card with his number to call him whenever we needed to leave the hotel or if we needed any drivers.

“You booked a room at my hotel, baby,” Dillon said, and my jaw dropped.

“Tell me you’re lying right n—”

“Signor Xander,” a petite woman exclaimed as she saw him, “You didn’t tell us you were coming, or we would’ve arranged the suite for you.” Oh, he wasn’t joking.

Dillon greeted the lady with a mild hug, and they conversed. “Who is this bellezza? Is she your love? Sei così bella! No blonde?” She exclaimed and kissed my hand as a greeting. If one more person mentions the word “blonde” around me, I’m going to scream.

“Yes, Marianna, she is my love, and no, she’s not a blonde,” he responded and pulled me closer to him, “What room did you make the reservation under, baby?”

“It’s just under my name, but we can change it if you want to,” I shrugged. I was getting really annoyed and uncomfortable now.

He noticed the expression on my face and softened his. “No, no. We’re going to the room you picked. Her name is Azzaria Willis.”

They found our room and sent our bags up on the luggage carts. Dillon hadn’t really spoken to anyone except the lady we met earlier, and my feet were getting tired from all the walking we’ve been doing.

“Here’s your key. I’m not so good with English,” she explained, and I understood. She spoke perfectly fine to me, but I understood that she could only say sentences at a time.

I took the keys from her, and we made our way up to the top floor in the elevator. “I saw how you looked down there, why?”

“It sucks living in your shadow,” I admitted, and painfully so.

“You don’t live in my shadow.”

“Dillon, I do. It’s not your fault, so don’t feel bad, but you do overshadow me. I was talking downstairs, and the woman cut me right off to speak to you. Even if you’re her boss. When we went to immigration, and I wanted us to join the line like everyone else, you got us in the express line because of your status. So I am living in your shadow, and it sucks, but it’s also no fault of yours,” I expressed.

The elevator dinged as he was about to say something, and I just walked out. There was a teddy bear at the door waiting for us. I ordered one for Dillon because I don’t really like stuffed animals.

“What’s that for?”

“I bought it for you in the package deal I made for this hotel room. It has our initials on the belly part. You can take it if you want or leave it; I don’t know.”

He grabbed my hand, pulling me close to him, but I refused to look in his eyes. “Look at me, precious,” he mumbled. “Look at me.”

I turned my head up for a bit, and we just stood in the middle of the room looking at each other. “Thank you for the teddy bear, and of course, I’ll keep it. Why wouldn’t I?”

“It’s not exactly your expensive taste, so I don’t know.” I pulled away from the hug and went to the bathroom to clean up. Dillon walked up behind me, wrapping his hands around my body and kissing my neck. I knew what he wanted, but I wasn’t in the mood for getting or giving anything right now.

“Not now,” I said.

“What’s wrong, precious?” That’s a question I didn’t know how to answer. I just hated how powerless everyone made me seem all the time, and talking about it wouldn’t change that.

“I’m not in the mood for sex right now, and nothing’s wrong with me. Our days don’t start until tomorrow, so you can go hang with your friends or check in with staff. Ronan mentioned you have a few here.”

He released a heavy breath and clenched his jaw. “Why would I come on a romantic getaway with my girl just to hang out with other people? You’re not making any sense at all,” he spat, “Tell me what’s wrong, and I’ll fix it.”

“I said nothing is wrong. I just want to rest, and I’ll be up later for dinner. My head hurts, and if I stay up any longer, I’m going to fucking break down.” I stormed out of the bathroom and started taking my clothes off.

Dillon left the bathroom, but he just sat on the edge of the bed in silence. I didn’t want him to feel like he did anything wrong because he didn’t, but I’m just fighting a personal battle. He may have been a trigger, but it’s not his fault why he’s where he is on the social ladder, and it’s definitely not his fault why I am where I am on the ladder. I’ve just spent my life being overshadowed, and now everywhere I go and everything I do, it’s being critiqued, and I can’t handle that.

He moved up in the bed and cuddled up next to me. As much as I was acting like I didn’t want him around, he’s the only person I wanted to see. I thought that if we left New York, then we’d be two random people. Just two people no

one knows. He wouldn't be the rich mogul, and I wouldn't be the girlfriend of said mogul. We'd just be Azzaria and Dillon, two adults who are in love. But I was wrong, and I should've known better.

"I don't know what's going on with you, but whatever it is, I'm sorry that it's affecting you. I love you." I know that my mood would drastically affect him, and I feel terrible for always doing that, but it sucks to feel powerless.

It sucks to feel like you're never going to be enough, and Dillon has no idea how it feels to never be enough. He's always what everyone wants. I read in the comments, and I don't know why it's affecting me more now than it was. Tears flowed freely, and I became a sobbing mess.

"I'm just tired of never feeling like I'm enough," I wept.

Dillon comforted me, running his hand through my hair and holding me as if I were a baby. "Not enough for who? Who's making you feel this way?"

I completely broke down telling him everything and I felt sick to my stomach that I was letting the negativity bother me.

He remained silent until my crying subsided, and I whimpered. "Look into my eyes," he commanded. I lifted my head from its slumped position and met his gaze.

He gently cupped my face with his hands, his thumbs wiping away my tears. "I love you. I love all of you. I love your curly hair and your brown skin. You're more than enough for me. There isn't a day I spend with you that my heart doesn't race. You're far more remarkable than you can imagine. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes, and if you did, you'd never doubt yourself again. I remind you every day of your beauty. Having some extra weight is perfectly normal, and it's not a flaw. You are my precious Azzaria. Don't forget that." He brought our lips together, and this time, my tears were those of happiness. He filled me with immense joy, a feeling I needed to hold onto.

"We'll head to bed now, and when you wake up, we'll run a nice warm bath for you and figure out the day, alright?"

I nodded, and he cuddled me until we drifted off to sleep. His gentle and caring demeanor was something I treasured, especially when I doubted myself.

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Sometimes, a good cry and vent session was the best way to fall asleep. Dillon was still cuddled on top of me, and his hand was resting on my breast.

“Feeling better?” Dillon asked in his deep, rich voice. His sleepy voice was one of my favorite sounds, aside from his moans.

“I am, thank you,” I replied with a yawn. “What’s that smirk for?”

“Come here,” he said, patting his lap. I climbed over to him and sat in a straddling position. “You’re the only woman who can go to sleep and wake up looking like an angel,” he complimented and kissed me.

Every day, I found myself melting in his arms. “We have dinner, and then we’re going to a club,” I told him.

“Get ready, but I’ll be driving because I don’t like the way the driver looks at you,” he warned.

Rolling my eyes at him, I walked into the bathroom to take a shower and tend to my hair and makeup. I had the perfect outfit in mind, and I was grateful that Mara had convinced me to buy it.

I put my hair in a high ponytail, ensuring that the curls stayed wet and bouncy by spritzing with conditioner-infused water.

We had two bathrooms, so Dillon took the other one to get ready. He went through his skincare routine, gelled his hair, and pampered himself just as I did. My toiletries took up most of the counter space, so he had to shift to the other side.

Stepping into the shower, the Italian water felt distinct, richer and purer. I have to admit, this hotel was truly impressive. The amenities and prices were perfect, but then

again, my man owns it. I stepped out of the bath, donned my robe, and made my way to the vanity to do my makeup.

I had initially intended for a lighter touch with makeup, but no matter how hard I tried, I always ended up with a full face.

“You look gorgeous,” Dillon said, walking into the room while still naked, his towering presence filling the space.

“Go get dressed,” I said to him as I applied my lashes.

“I’m going,” he replied, “I just came in here to get an extra towel. By the way, you look incredibly hot,” he whistled and playfully slapped my ass. I tossed my blush brush at him, and we laughed together.

After another hour spent on blending, baking, and beating, I was finally ready.

Before leaving the bathroom, I applied a matte red lip and grabbed my clutch purse, which Dillon would be holding all night.

“I’m ready!” I announced as I walked out of the bathroom.

Dillon’s reaction was as expected; his jaw dropped, and he couldn’t take his eyes off me. “Alright, let—Holy Shit. You look gorgeous, baby!” he gushed, his excitement evident.

“Thank you, thank you. I feel gorgeous,” I replied, savoring this rare moment of self-confidence.

“I just hope men keep their hands to themselves tonight,” Dillon grumbled.

“And if they don’t?” I challenged.

“I know how to make a murder look like an accident. Let’s go.” We interlocked our hands, locked the hotel door, and went into the town for dinner.

Following the itinerary I had prepared, we had dinner at Bagni Delfino. Dillon knew the way, so he drove us there. The first thing that caught my eye was the romantic and evocative atmosphere, along with the warm and inviting environment.

The bilingual receptionist seated us, and I took pictures of everything, saving the memories but not yet posting anything.

I wanted to enjoy the moment first. The best part about this restaurant was its location directly on the water, offering a breathtaking view of the blue waters of the Gulf of Sorrento.

“The view is beautiful,” I said to Dillon, who was busy taking countless pictures of me.

“Not as beautiful as mine, I can assure you of that,” he replied, making my smile even wider. I felt blissful right here, where the air was pure and serene, and no one was intruding to take photos or question Dillon. The atmosphere was filled with couples seeking the same thing as us: a great night out.

The waiter introduced himself, and I recognized him as an old classmate. He had moved away following his mother’s death, and I hadn’t heard from him since.

“Azzaria,” he exclaimed in disbelief, “Is that really you?” Dillon raised an eyebrow, and I gently kicked him under the table as a warning to remain composed.

“Andrew!” I replied with excitement, “How have you been?”

“I’ve been doing well. My life took a turn after my second year of college, and I received a scholarship to attend culinary school here in Italy. I completed the program and now, I’m a senior staff member here.”

It was heartwarming to hear that he had found a good life for himself. He deserved it.

“That’s wonderful to hear. Are you enjoying Italy?”

“I am enjoying my stay here,” I replied, and Andrew complimented me, “you look great. It’s nice to see you again after all these years. How have you been?”

“She’s doing great,” Dillon intervened, answering for me. “Aren’t you, baby?”

I stared at him with subtle shock. “Yes, my love,” I replied, “I am.”

“That’s great to hear. I hope to see you around soon, and if you ever need a tour guide, you know where to find me.”



Andrew winked and placed the menus on the table for us to peruse.

Andrew excused himself to get water and bread, and Dillon looked at me with an irritated expression. "I'm a very territorial man, precious," he hissed, "You can't possibly tell me he wasn't flirting with you."

"He was definitely flirting, but that doesn't matter because I wasn't flirting with him."

"I'm not mad, I'm just saying."

I rolled my eyes at him and went on to enjoy the rest of the night.

"Did you enjoy dinner, precious?" Dillon asked, opening the car door for me.

"Yes," I replied, emphasizing the "s," "I did. It was really, really great, babe, and I took lots of pictures, even some selfies. Did you get any pictures of me?"

"Enough to last a lifetime," he responded, content and appreciative. "You are breathtaking."

Our last stop for the night was a nightclub. Dillon was initially hesitant, but I really wanted to experience it, so he didn't oppose the idea. He did, however, make it clear that he would be watching me closely, as he warned that Italian men were known for being quite touchy.

The night was young, and we had a great time.

*Italy day 1 was a complete success.*

## CHAPTER 38

# *Azzaria*

THIS COUNTRY FELT LIKE A DREAM COME TRUE.

We woke up early, against my better judgment, determined to make the most of every hour in Italy before heading back to NYC. I called Abigail earlier to check up on her and my mom.

We had breakfast on our private balcony, where I was naked and pancakes weren't the only thing he was eating.

"You look so handsome. Come kiss me," I said, and he walked over to me. He pulled our lips together and slipped in hand into my shirt, groping my breast. "No more sex until we get back. We have to go," I said sternly and dragged my shoes on.

The weather was just right for my outfit: baggy shorts and a blush pink floral lace bodysuit. It was cute and comfy.

Alessandro arrived and drove us to La Masseria Farm on the Sorrento Peninsula, just 15 minutes from the hotel. The sight of houses built into the hillsides, something I'd seen in movies but never dreamed I'd experience in person, was mesmerizing. As we walked through a narrow path, the farm came into view.

It was my first time on a real farm, and the excitement bubbled within me. Eugenio, the farm's owner, greeted us and gave us an introduction.

He shared the farm's history, explaining that it had been in his family for four generations. He studied accounting and economics at Naples University but chose to help his family run the farm and started hosting farm tours for visitors in

2010. Despite his humble apology for his English, Dillon and I reassured him that he was doing just fine.

We moved on to the animal holdings, where I couldn't contain my joy. I'd seen animals in movies and real life but had never experienced interacting with them. The animals on this farm included pigs, chickens, ducks, goats, horses, and more. They were friendly and approachable, and we even had the chance to feed piglets with milk from bottles. It was an extraordinary experience.

Moving away from the animals, he led us to the 100-year-old olive grove, where I was in awe of the large, juicy olives. This was a heavenly sight, and the quality of these olives surpassed any I'd ever seen. I was happy when we entered a shed and learned how they extracted oil from the olives.

Dillon and I actively participated, wearing the gloves, and even got a chance to smash the provided olives with pestles.

This city is really the most magical place in the world.

The next step involved cleaning the olives in salt water to remove dirt and pesticides. Afterward, we moved to the pressing machine, where the raw oil extraction would take place. We got to keep our own bottles of olive oil. This felt surreal, and I couldn't believe we'd made our own olive oil.

We then moved on to the lemon grove, which I was especially excited about. Dillon and I both loved lemons, and this part of the tour was tailor-made for us. We learned about the twist, tilt, and snap method of lemon picking, and although it seemed easy, it took me a few tries to get it right. Dillon, on the other hand, did it effortlessly.

*He does everything effortlessly.*

"Can't wait to get my hands on some of your lemon baked goodies," Dillon said. I smiled at him and climbed down from the ladder.

I had a basket full of big, juicy yellow lemons, and they'd be put to good use in our kitchen.

Eugenio took our baskets and explained that they would wash and package the lemons for us. Then, we headed to the

pergolas, larger than gazebos, used for climbing plants like vines. Along the way, Eugenio pointed out the wild chestnut forest, even though we couldn't visit due to the presence of bees.

As our walking tour neared its end, Eugenio mentioned that there were still three more stops to make. We arrived at a gorgeous wooden structure, the ancient family winery, where we learned about their wine-making process and meat curing. "That's actually interesting," Dillon said as he walked around examining the place. The expression on his face told me that he was planning his next business venture idea as if owning half of the world isn't good enough.

I smacked him gently on the arm to pull his attention from this thoughts. "No thinking about work while we're on our vacation," I scolded.

"Sorry," he mumbled and held my hand.

*I know him all too well.*

We concluded our visit to the La Masseria Farm with a tasting in the designated room. We sampled a delightful array of fresh farm products, including homemade lemonade, sliced lemons with sugar, fresh-pressed olive oils on homemade bread, citrus marmalades, local cheese, and honey. Everything was delicious, but the homemade bread was my personal favorite, while Dillon couldn't get enough of the marmalades.

Lunch followed, and we dined with Eugenio's family. His mother, despite her limited English, was a wonderful cook. Her seasoning skills were impeccable, and I couldn't help but admire her. The traditional meal featured seasonal products and a lemon dessert, accompanied by Limoncello, which was an otherworldly experience. I had about four glasses before mama told me to watch out or I'd get drunk. This place is definitely laced with something and this was a 100 out of 10 experience.

*Checklist of the day*

✓ *La Masseria Farm Experience*

*Rating: 100/10*

*Duration: 9 am to 12:45 pm!*

*Notes: Would love to be back <3*

Dillon collected our goodies, and after a chat with Eugenio, mostly in Italian, we said our goodbyes, taking photos with the welcoming family members. This truly felt like a dream come true, and I eagerly anticipated our next adventure.

Our next tour started in central Sorrento, where we met our second guide, Maricella. She introduced us to the city's culinary scene, and I couldn't help but marvel at the beauty of Italy.

Our stop at "Mario's" was a highlight, where we enjoyed sfogliatelle (shell-shaped pasta), hot-pressed sandwiches, pali'e riso (rice balls), creamy buffalo mozzarella, and cured meats. The process of meat curing was a bit off-putting, but the flavor made it all worthwhile and the food tour ended with samples of Italian gelato at a local gelateria.

✓ *Sorrento Food Tours*

*Rating: 9.82/10*

*Duration: 1:30 to 2:53 p.m*

*Notes: I loved it here, but it would've been better if we got to drive around on bikes... my feet got tired. The experience was great and I LOVEEEEE food, so I enjoyed it!*

"What you doing there?" Dillon asked as we were making our way back to the city.

"Travel note journals of everywhere we go." I showed him the different notes I've made and he smiled at me.

“Are you getting tired? You look a bit flushed, baby.”

“I’m fine,” I persuaded, “I’m just hot and a bit sleepy but I’m doing good,” I reassured him. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, but I think we should take a little break to rest. It’s three now, so we can continue the tour at 3:30 so you can rest.”

I nodded and we pulled over the nearest sitting area.

“We’ve been dating for a while,” I noted, “it feels like forever.”

“That’s what being in love does to someone, precious.”

“Why me?”

He lifted his head from the phone and furrowed his eyebrows. “Huh?”

“Why did you pick me? We come from two different worlds.”

He laughed and then sighed. “I’ve always loved the thought of impossible and I’ve never felt more alive with anyone else but you. I think you underestimate your value in my life too much.”

I’m so in-love with him that it drives me insane and I just never want to stop loving him.

“How long did you know Annalise before you agreed to marry her?”

“About two years, why?”

“Nothing, I was just curious.” I shrugged and sipped my water.

He fixed his position in the chair and gently held my hand. “For what it’s worth, I won’t take that long to marry you. I’d have done it already but I want you to be more situated first. I know I’m going to marry you and put some gorgeous babies in you but your life just started.”

“How many babies?”

“Three or maybe four but I’ll take what I can get and you?”

“I never thought I’d ever have children if we’re being honest and that’s because I never thought I’d fall in love with anyone but, I’m good with two. I want a girl and a little boy, to be just like his daddy.”

I’m getting too carried away with this topic but the more I talked about it, the more beautiful my little daydreams became. “I want a little precious who’s as strong and golden as her mommy is.”

The only thought left in my head was that I hoped I’d be able to give him this when the time eventually came around.

## CHAPTER 39

# *Azzaria*

“BENVENUTI A BORDO!” THE BOAT’S CAPTAIN GREETED US, which translated to ‘Welcome aboard.’ “This tour usually takes about four hours, taking us past Sorrento, Province of Naples, Campania, and then back here. Siete pronti?”

Dillon tightened his grip on my hand, and we made our way to our seats and the captain set sail. He looked a bit flushed and pale as soon as the boat started moving.

“Are you okay?”

He glanced at me for a moment before responding, waiting until everyone moved away from our area of the boat. “I’m just not a big fan of sea travel.”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t realize it would affect—”

He silenced me with a kiss and pulled me close. “I’ll be fine. I had to get over it someday, and today’s that day.”

“I love you.”

“Precious,” he whispered, and we returned our attention to the surroundings. I took my phone out to capture videos and photos of this breathtaking scenery.

“You’re so perfect.” He groaned in appreciation. “Let me take some pictures of you.” He quickly grabbed his phone and captured photos of me.

We sailed along the Sorrento coast, admiring the main attractions like the natural waterfall in Marciano, Cala di Mitigliano, and Punta Campanella. Each attraction offered a



fifteen-minute stop, but due to excessive wind, we couldn't stay for long.

My favorite part was visiting the waterfall. I took off my shoes and dived into the water, swimming over to the falls. I couldn't pass up the opportunity. Clothes can dry, but memories last forever.

"Azzaria, are you okay?" Concern was etched all over his face, as if he wanted to drain every sea in the world, fearing I might be hurt.

"I'm fine, but I'll need a towel," I giggled and swam around for a bit. The waterfall was cold and refreshing. I took the time to carve our names, "Azzaria and Dillon," onto a nearby stone when I noticed an inscription spot.

"Ah," the captain said when he saw me carving. "It is said that when you write the names of you and your lover, it brings blessings and health." *How fitting? That's exactly what we needed in our relationship.*

As it was time to return to the boat, Dillon met me at the steps with a towel and helped me on board.

"If you had told me we were going on a boat ride, I would've brought a swimsuit in my bag for you. But no, you keep this trip a secret."

"It's fun seeing your reactions, and a little boob slip in the water was a minor price to pay," I admitted.

His expression hardened, revealing pure ice. "Did anyone see my girls?" He looked down at my breasts.

"No."

"Good. If they did, I'd have to gauge their eyes out," he flatly stated, beginning to dry my hair with the towel. I looked at him in disbelief, but it didn't entirely surprise me. "I'm serious. If I could erase the memory of every man who's seen you naked before me, I would."

"I'd do the same for every woman you've been with," I countered.

“That would solve all our problems, baby. I don’t mind.” I laughed, albeit nervously. His intensity was alluring, but he would eventually have to let go of his murderous thoughts.

Our next stop was White Grotta on Capri Island, Italy. We were about to get a tour of the island, so we let Alessandro exit the boat first. Dillon lifted me out, even though he got his clothes wet. I got a free ride out of it, which was a win-win.

“Welcome to Capri Island. We’ll briefly explore its key areas. The ancient Greek ‘Teleboi’ first settled here, shaping its rich culture. Capri has 12 churches, 7 museums, and many monuments, though appointments are needed for church entry.”

“Is it fact or fiction that Capri is primarily composed of limestone and sandstone?” Dillon asked.

“Fact,” Alessandro clarified, “It’s absolutely true. Due to the island’s location in water, it erodes easily, but the limestone’s rapid regeneration compensates for that.” Dillon expressed his approval and continued walking.

When it comes to beauty, this was the epitome. Nothing could surpass the tranquility and serenity I was experiencing. I felt like I could be swallowed by the ground, and I’d still be content. There was a vendor on the roadside with a stall and he was selling souvenirs. From snow globes, to pens, to keychains and trust me, I wanted it all. Dillon must’ve seen me ogling the stand when he insisted that we walk over there.

“Pick whatever you want,” he said, taking a phone call, “I need to take this.”

I gripped his arm and shot him an annoyed look. “We’re on vacation; can’t it wait until we return in less than two days? Who’s calling you anyway?”

“It’s Reyes, and I have no idea why he’s calling, but he’s my lawyer, so I have to see what’s up,” Dillon explained as he stepped away to answer the call privately.

There wasn’t much I wanted, but I picked up a key ring for myself, a tiny map to hang up in the living room and then some other small items for our friends back home.

“Foto?” The vendor asked, looking above my head. When I turned around, our gaze met Dillon as he returned to the stand. “Sì, vogliamo una foto. Possiamo farla incorniciare? Se sì, due per favore,” Dillon said.

The vendor nodded at Dillon and retrieved his camera. “Baciala! Rendilo romantico!” he exclaimed. I couldn’t quite process that, but Dillon swiftly and passionately kissed me, capturing the most beautiful kiss we had shared. There was an abundance of happiness flowing between us, and what made it even more special was that he captured it on camera.

We pulled away from the kiss, and Dillon asked if we could view the photo before printing and framing it. The image was a work of art, and I would undoubtedly hang it in my room.

“Dillon, ask if we can have it on my phone, digitally,” I said. Dillon translated and asked, “Possiamo ottenere una versione digitale dell’immagine?” The vendor responded, and Dillon handed my phone to him. It was the best picture I had ever seen on my screen. I fell in love with Capri all over again.

Time was running out, and we needed to return to the boat. Dillon paid and left a tip, and we departed with our newfound treasures.

“I’ll post that picture when we get back to the hotel. It’s almost as beautiful as you, but it captures something much more,” Dillon said in a deep, alluring voice, captivating me like the first day we met.

I nodded in agreement as we returned to the boat, our last stop being the Natural Arch, Grotta di Matermania Pizzolungo. Alessandro described it as a 12-meter wide, almost 20-meter high Paleolithic rock formation with a unique arch shape formed by natural forces over the years. I might not have understood all the geological intricacies, but it was undeniably a beautiful sight.

✓ *Boat Excursion to Capri Island*

*Rating: 10/10*

*Duration: 4:00 pm to 7:30 p.m.*

*Note: This country just keeps getting better. I'm officially in-love with Italy. Aside from the starting where Dillon wasn't feeling it due to totally understandable reasons, everything went perfectly.*

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Night fell and we got back to the hotel. Dillon looked a bit annoyed and I'm not sure if it had to do with the trip or the phone call he had earlier.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing," he uttered flatly and walked into the main bathroom. I quickly stripped off my soaking wet clothes and joined him.

"Don't lie to me. Just tell me what's going on with you."

"I'm actually fine; I just have a headache from all the music and being in the sun all day. I promise."

"Why did your lawyer call you?"

He sighed. "Business stuff."

I walked over closer to him. "Like what?"

"He wanted to know if he could sign off on a bill on my behalf and I told him yes."

"You really trust him, huh?"

Dillon nodded. "Those men have been in my life forever, we're not just colleagues, we're bestfriends." I smiled.

We entered the bathtub together, naked, and nothing was more serene than ending a day full of fun and traveling with a warm bath in the company of your partner. These innocent moments with Dillon were the ones I cherished, the parts of him that no one else saw, reserved just for me.

Nobody knew him like I did, and I was content with that imbalance.

“Mmm, you feel good,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around my waist and holding me close.

“You feel good too,” I whispered back, leaning my head on his shoulder. He ran his hands across my stomach, tickling me lightly, then leaned forward to kiss my neck with gentle nibbles. He sucked on my earlobe and ran his tongue over it. I squirmed slightly against him and felt him growing hard.

I turned my head and met his lips with mine, sharing a soft, passionate kiss. He was completely vulnerable, all mine. I slipped my tongue into his mouth, moaning softly, and reached up to cup his face while deepening the kiss, opening my mouth wider and stroking my tongue against his.

I felt one of his hands glide down my stomach and brush between my legs. A moan escaped my mouth, breaking our kiss slightly.

“Do me a favour?” I whispered against his lips.

“Of course. You know I’d do anything for you,” he said, licking my lower lip with his tongue. “What do you want me to do?”

He moaned as he felt me guiding his hand down between my thighs. I spread my legs wider and positioned his fingers at my entrance. His other hand slid up to cup my breast, his fingers gently teasing my hardening nipple.

“Make love to me,” I whispered, my lips touching his briefly as I spoke.

“Baby, you don’t even have to ask.” He moaned and kissed me hard on the mouth, pushing his tongue against mine.

I sighed and melted against him, kissing him back, tangling my tongue with his while holding his hands to me. I felt his fingers stroke inside my lips and I moaned into his mouth.

He ran two fingers inside my pussy lips, and pulled at my nipple gently with his other hand. He took his mouth from

mine and began kissing my neck, and licking down to my shoulder. I rose up, letting his fingers slide lower, deeper inside. My head fell back against his shoulder and moaned as I felt his fingers stroke against me.

“Please.” I turned my head and moaned into his ear, arching my back and my breasts thrust out of the water.

His eyes darkened as he saw my nipples, hard and wet, glistening in the candlelight. He slowly stroked my inner lips, dragging them up to my clitoris and circling it gently with a finger around and around. With his other hand he stroked my breast, and pulled gently at my nipple.

I moaned and pushed his hand downward, guiding his fingers to my opening. He gently inserted one finger, slowly sliding it inside me. I clenched around his finger and gasped.

“More.” She panted. “Please Dillon, more.” I lifted up my hips and felt him pull out his finger and slide two inside me. He leaned his head down and kissed my neck and began sliding his fingers in and out of me, in a gentle rhythm, over and over.

He listened to me pant and moan, and wanting to hear more, he placed his thumb over my clitoris and began massaging it slowly in time with his fingers sliding in and out of me.

“Dillon!” I cried out, thrusting my hips upward.

“I know, baby.” He whispered in my ear. “Let go for me.” He urged me on, murmuring into my ear.

He stroked me more fervently, feeling me clamp down around his fingers. My hands lay on top of his, no longer guiding, just following his. He watched me bite my lip and moan. He massaged my breast and began thrusting his fingers in faster.

“Come on baby. Cum for me.” He groaned.

“Oh God.” I panted. I arched my back, my body stiffened, my lips parted as I cried out. I collapsed against him, quivering all over. I rolled my head, kissed his neck, licking it with my

tongue. I rose up and slid back down, feeling his cock against my back. I wickedly smiled against his neck.

He turned his head and kissed me hard on the mouth, sliding both hands up and cupped both breasts in his hands and groaned. I pulled away from his mouth and rolled over so that I lay on top of him. I slid up and felt his cock against my stomach. I smiled at him and ran my fingers over his lips.

Spreading my legs over his, I slid upward; laying my hands on either side of his face, kissing him gently on the lips.

“Your turn.” I whispered against his lips.

I rose up and straddled his thighs and reached down and let the back of my fingers glide over the head of his very hard cock. I took his cock in my hand and guided it to my pussy opening, looking into his eyes the whole time, biting down on my lower lip.

“Let me do that.” He whispered and wrapped his hand around my neck and kissed me, sucking my lower lip into his mouth. I was still sore from the crazy fucking we did last night, but this was still something I was willing do. *I wanted him. Needed him.*

I moaned and slid the head of his cock into my opening, slick and hot from my orgasm. I slid down and took him all inside me at once. I placed my hands on his neck and leaned my forehead against his, gasping into his mouth. I rose upward and let him slide almost all the way out of me and slid back down, listening to him moan. I smiled against his mouth and repeated the movement over and over, whimpering as I rode him and clenched his cock inside me.

He ran his hands over my breasts, licking and kissing my lips over and over. He slid his hands lower to my hips, and urged me to go faster. He felt my hands on his shoulders, bracing myself as I rode him faster and faster. I was so tight, hot, and wet inside, and I knew this was driving him crazy. Being inside me felt like heaven to him.

He looked up at me, my eyes closed and my teeth holding my lower lip. I whimpered, and he knew I was close to

cumming again. He pulled my head down and kissed me hard, tangling his tongue with mine, stroking it into my mouth in time with me riding him. I was so hot around him; he wasn't going to make it much longer.

“Baby, I'm not gonna last.” He whispered against my mouth.

“Me either.” I cried out against his mouth and pumped faster, up and down over him, clenching him tight inside me. I wrapped my arms around him and moaned. I reached over and grabbed the side of the tub and cried out as I started to cum around him. “Fuck.” He moaned and pushed his hips upward. Water splashed everywhere, hitting the floor as he grabbed onto the sides of the tub and thrust himself up into me. He groaned into my mouth and pumped into me hard and came inside me. I moaned and wrapped my arms around him, holding onto him. He fell back against the tub and cradled me against him, panting into my ear. I moaned and laid my head on his shoulder. He stroked my back and we lay there for several moments, calming each other and enjoying the feel of each other. “That was fun.” I giggled.

“Luckily we didn't flood the place.” He laughed, kissed me gently on the ear and hugged me tightly.

“I can cross bathtub sex off my bucket list now.” I joked, yawning in between my statements.

We got up from the tub, dried ourselves and fell right back to sleep. The days just kept on getting better.



## CHAPTER 40

### *Azzaria*

IT WAS OUR LAST DAY IN ITALY, AND THE THOUGHT OF THE impending flight back already had me feeling down. We had one more tour scheduled for today, and Dillon had promised to take me bike riding. I'd heard so many people talk about the refreshing experience of cycling down the streets of Sorrento at sunset, and I couldn't wait to experience it.

After having brunch at the hotel restaurant, we headed to the Skip The Line Pompeii Guided Tour & Mt. Vesuvius from Sorrento. These were two of the country's most sought-after attractions. Dillon had been insisting that it made no sense to come to Italy and not visit a museum, so we decided to swap our planned beach day for a museum visit instead.

We arrived at the UNESCO World Heritage Site located in Pompeii, an ancient Roman town. Alessandro, our guide, had joined us at the venue, as per Dillon's request.

He explained that the World Heritage property has three archaeological areas: Pompeii, Herculaneum, and the Villas of the Mysteries and Papyri. There are also the Villa of Poppaea and Villa of Lucius Crassius Tertius in Torre Annunziata."

"Unfortunately," Alessandro explained, "a thick layer of volcanic ash and lapilli largely buried Pompeii, and Herculaneum disappeared under pyroclastic surges and flows." I had read about this in my history class before; there was a massive eruption that wiped out a significant portion of the landmarks and population.

We entered through Porta Marina Superiore, one of the ancient city's seven gates, and strolled along the main streets, eventually reaching the Forum, the heart of the city and the center of public life. Alessandro pointed out that we could see Mount Vesuvius overlooking the city from where we were standing. I eagerly snapped pictures and videos of this sight.

Along the way, we saw many interesting places like the basilica, thermal baths, temples, a bakery, and the Great Theater of Pompeii.

Dillon, with a genuine interest, asked, "Why is this place so famous? I've read books about it but never really got the archaeological facts."

"Pompeii became famous after Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE, burying the city under 19 feet of volcanic ash. Its ruins were uncovered in the late 16th century. While some believed the eruption was divine punishment for the city's sins, this is largely a myth without strong evidence," Alessandro explained. We had a chance to see plaster casts of those who were in the city at the time of the eruption, and it sent a shiver down my spine. It was eerie, and I clung to Dillon for most of that part.

We also viewed well-preserved artworks, mosaics, and frescoes that transported us nearly 2,000 years back in time.

This was Dillon's favorite part. Art had always been close to his heart, and watching him so captivated by the paintings was heartwarming. I loved watching him be passionate about things.

"Now, we've reached our final stop in the museum, which is the Lupanar Brothel. A brothel is essentially a—"

"A whorehouse," Dillon interjected.

I raised an eyebrow and asked, "Confident answer, huh?"

"I've been to a brothel before," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder as if to reassure me. "Now, let the guide continue."

"The brothel gets its name from 'lupa,' a Latin word meaning 'prostitute.' The prostitutes working in the brothel

were mostly Greek and Oriental slaves who were paid between two and eight Asses. A glass of wine cost one Ass. The brothel was their workplace,” the guide explained.

I found it unexpectedly interesting to learn about prostitution and didn't quite like how interested Dillon seemed in the topic.

“You seem a bit too interested in this,” I whispered sharply.

“Precious,” he sighed audibly. “It's just part of our lesson. Relax and focus,” he whispered back.

“The building has two floors: one for the owner and slaves, and another with five rooms featuring built-in beds, separated by curtains. A latrine is at the end of the corridor under the staircase. Erotic paintings on the corridor walls provide a preview of what happened in the Lupanare.”

Alessandro then told us that we were free for the rest of the day.

We spotted a little café on the side that served light lunches. It wasn't the typical American comfort food, but the aroma was tantalizing.

“Are you ready for some food, babe?” Dillon asked. “I'm always ready to eat,” I replied with a smile.

We sat in the outdoor seating area, which was truly beautiful. Tiny green umbrellas provided shade on the tables, and the chairs were made of brown glass. It was unlike anything I had seen before, but then again, I was in Italy, a place that felt like pure magic.

The server came to take our orders. I ordered shrimp pasta with lemonade and Dillon ordered risotto, pizza, and a bottle of water.

“Why did you order two meals?” I asked.

“Because you'll eat yours, have some of mine, and then probably get hungry again. I can't have my girl starving in this beautiful city,” he replied.

Before I could answer, he started speaking again. “But the real question is, why are you starving yourself? I’ve watched you eat for the past three days we’ve been here, and it’s not what you’d normally eat. Why?”

I sighed and said, “Well, I do eat, but I’ve been feeling like I’ve gained some weight recently. I don’t hate my body, but I don’t love it right now.”

Leaning across the table, he gently caressed my cheek and said, “I don’t know what it’s like inside your mind, but trust me, it’s all in your head. The only thing wrong with your body is that you don’t show it off enough, precious. We’ll work on that confidence together, whatever it takes,” he reassured me.

“Whatever it takes,” I echoed.

I loved him. Not every man in the world would be as patient as Dillon was with me. But not every man in the world was Dillon.

*To the world, he was a narcissistic, playboy monster, but to me, he was the world, and I doubted that would ever change.*

## CHAPTER 41

# *Dillon*

ITALY WAS GREAT, BUT WE HAD TO RETURN TO THE CITY. I HAD urgent business to attend to, and Azzaria's graduation was approaching. I'd say this was the best vacation I've been on, and I'll certainly take Azzaria on many more. She was nearly frantic because we left the lemons at the hotel, so I walked for thirty minutes to get them while she waited at the airport.

We landed about three hours ago, and she had cried herself to sleep. She didn't want to leave, but we didn't have much choice. Sometimes, I had no idea how to handle her emotions, but I always found a way. *How was I supposed to know she'd start crying about returning home from a three-day trip that she planned?*

My favorite part, however, was the museum. I have a special connection with all forms of art, especially painting. I loved the detailed Italian art, and I may have purchased a few pieces to hang in my penthouse. Each piece was around \$70,000, but who cares? I could afford it, and if I want something, I'm getting it without a doubt.

We sat in my office, Cuddles and I. Cuddles is the teddy bear Azzaria bought me with our initials on it. She kept me company because Precious and Pebbles were busy, and she's much better than my friends because she doesn't talk.

I had to alternate between cooking dinner for us and doing work because as soon as she's awake, she'll be pestering me for either food or undivided attention. I couldn't offer undivided attention right now because I'm in a work slump, but I could offer food.

The latest project I'm working on is innovative design. We've been trying to get this bill passed for months, but every time we submit a draft, it's marked as faulty. Melissa was in charge of that, but I put her back at the reception and hired some specialists to get the ball rolling. I needed this bill passed, and I needed it right now.

Kamadge stopped by today to give me in-person updates on Matthew. He's suffering as he should, but they needed me to finish the job today. I don't usually keep people at Malen for more than three days, and it's been about two weeks now.

The cleanup team was sent to search his apartment for any trace of other victims. He was staying at the Millings property in the west under the name of "Sandra Lemar-Cooper." By the looks of it, they had a sexual relationship, and suddenly she went missing. My guess is that he killed her. He's a menace and he needs to be put away.

I sensed her. I didn't have to lift my head to know that she was standing at the door or somewhere close to my office. It's almost like my brain had receptors that only work when she's around. "You're awake, how was your sleep?"

"It was good," she yawned between statements, walking over to sit in my lap. I lifted my head to look at her, and she kissed me deeply. "I like the smell of the dinner, but I hope you cooked enough."

"I think so, why?"

"My mom just texted me to ask if the three of us could have dinner sometime and I told her she could come tonight."

"Meeting your mother sounds fun. Do I have to get dressed for that?"

"Be yourself," she said calmly, "my mother can sniff out a fake persona from a mile away. This is what I'm wearing to dinner, so just put on pants and you should be fine."

"Okay, precious."

We sat there for a while until she went to set the table.

Her mom had texted her that she was coming in about five minutes, so Azzaria's head was spinning all over the place.

My disposition remained the same as always—unbothered. There's no reason to work myself up over meeting Azzaria's mother. If I had the pleasure of winning over the stubborn daughter's heart, I'd be fine with her mother. But I was concerned about not knowing what to expect or the questions I'd be asked.

I didn't care if my parents liked Azzaria because they don't have a say in my life. But I cared about Azzaria's mother liking me since she's one of the top influences in Azzaria's life. There's no rea—oh, the doorbell rang. *She's here.*

I saw Azzaria storming towards the door, but I quickly caught up to her. "Go have a seat. I will let your mom in."

"Don't call her Mrs. Willis because she hates my father, so just say Leann, or just don't say a name, and she's a hugger." We quickly kissed, and I made my way towards the door.

It was easy to see where Azzaria got her beauty and sharp cheekbones from. Ms. Leann was definitely a head-turner. She had long, gracious curly black hair and was the older version of her daughter, face-wise. I'm sure as far as mother-daughter replicas go, Leann and Azzaria were on point.

"Good evening," I said coolly, "You look lovely."

I moved out of the way to allow her to pass, and she took a step inside, quickly scanning my body and then my living space. She paced herself around before opening her mouth to say anything. Azzaria's nervousness could be sensed, but I shot her a warm glance which made her smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dillon," she said, leaning in for a hug. Hugging was something very hands-off for me, but if Azzaria wanted me to hug her mother a thousand times, then I would. "You are even more handsome in person," she complimented and walked over to Azzaria.

"Sweetheart," she exclaimed as she saw her child, "You look very comfortable. The dinner smells great."

“Thanks, Mom, and yes, I’m wearing Dillon’s clothes. He cooked, by the way, because, as you know, I’m a baker and not a chef.”

I couldn’t help but stare at them in astonishment. Through my years of interacting with my mother, it’s never been so pure and innocent.

There’s always been a motive where my mother was concerned, but with Leann, it was different for her and Azzaria. She just wanted to be with her child, she wanted to love her child, and that’s why she was having a hard time passing on the news to Azzaria.

We were all gathered at the table now, eating, drinking, and engaging in very heavy conversation.

“This meal is amazing. I don’t normally know of men cooking, but this is great Dillon,” she said with a warm smile as she ate more of the food.

“My grandmother taught me everything I know about culinary arts. Thank you, I appreciate it.”

“Beautiful,” she remarked and turned her attention to Azzaria. “Did you two have fun on your trip?”

“Yes, Mom, we did. Dillon and I did everything, and I met people, and guess what, Mom?”

She was different around her mom. She was freer. There was no tension or worries. Azzaria was Azzaria, and it was beautiful to watch.

“What, baby?”

“No social anxiety,” she exclaimed, “I talked to people, and I didn’t have any anxiety. I had a breakdown when we got there, but Dillon talked me through it, and I got better.” She blushed at her mention of my name, and I blushed at the fact that she blushed.

Her mother was happy. It didn’t take rocket science to see the good bond they have, and after everything Azzaria’s faced, I’m glad she has a rocking bond with her mother.



“I’m so proud of you, honey.” She leaned over the table to place a kiss on Azzaria’s cheek and turned to face me. “I must say, Dillon.” She cleared her throat. “When I first heard about my daughter’s relationship with you, I was skeptical because the media paints you in such a terrible way. But getting to see how hard she smiles and how big her laugh is around you has cleared all that anxiety away. I truly want her to be happy. I want her to experience the best love in the world. Thank you for giving her that. Not a day goes by when she doesn’t text me to talk about how happy you make her. I was even shocked to find out that you started going to therapy because she suggested it. Not many men would do that. You’re a good person, despite whatever reality you may feel is right. I can feel it in my whole body.”

I’ve never felt sentimental at the words of many women, but when I tell you that my heart was overflowing with joy at her words, I wasn’t lying. There’s something so pure and angelic about her soul, which I couldn’t pinpoint, but it was there. Her words replayed in my brain, and I couldn’t think of anything else for the rest of the evening.

“She’s everything I didn’t know that I needed, and I promise, she’ll always be safe and loved with me.”

Leann’s main worry was Azzaria’s happiness, and now that she’d seen it for herself firsthand, she had a smile brighter than the stars.

“Good. You two are a beautiful couple. I even hear Azzaria telling me she’s planning on giving you a house full of babies in the future,” she exclaimed.

Azzaria had a look of panic when her mother mentioned children, and she probably thought it would throw my mood off. But if anything, it made the evening even more lovely. I gave her a nod of assurance that I was fine, and her expression changed for the better.

“We’ve spoken about it briefly, but a house full of babies is very new to me.” Azzaria’s cheeks grew red. I don’t think she expected her mother to say that, but I don’t mind. I’d let her

give me a house full of babies, a mansion even, if that's what she wanted.

"She has it so bad for you," Leann mentioned, but Azzaria cut her off before she could say anything else.

"Anyway, Mom and baby, I ordered ice cream, so I'm going to get it downstairs." I would've stopped her and asked her to let someone else get it up for her, but I wanted to speak with her mom, alone.

Azzaria went to put on more outside-appropriate clothes and made her way to get the ice cream.

"How are you?" I asked.

The tone I used with her hinted that I was aware of her sickness, but she played it off innocently, as expected.

"I'm good. I have—"

"I know you're sick, Ms. Leann. How are you, actually?" Her face turned pale as if she'd just seen a ghost.

"Does she know?" She swallowed hard. "How do you know?"

"Azzaria doesn't know, and I know because who do you think has covered all the treatment bills? But why haven't you told her?"

She expressed gratitude but also confusion. "I appreciate that, but why would you do that?"

"I know what it's like to lose a person you've loved your whole life. It's a very heartbreaking feeling, and you're her only parent. If she loses you, she'll crumble, so paying for the treatment is the least I could do. Your doctor, Mr. Romano, is my best friend, so he shared the concern. It has nothing to do with leaking confidentiality, but the auditors would've stopped your treatments if he didn't find a source aside from himself to pay for it," I explained.

A single tear fell from her eyes, but she quickly wiped it. "I haven't told her because it's hard. I'm all she's had all these years, and I don't want her to worry about me. I've lived a long life, and she's just starting to live. With all the pain she's

endured with her father and then Matthew, it's too much for her, and this would break her. She's never been as happy as she is with you and I don't want to take it away from her."

It triggered a normally dormant and emotive side of me hearing her speak. She was simply a mother who loved her child so much that she'd take any fall for her.

She'd lie to keep her happy. She'd deceive just to make her keep the smile on her face, and that's how she and I were alike because, though I wasn't a parent or anywhere close to being as important as her mother, I'd do the same things for Azzaria that she would do.

"I'm so sorry that you're sick, but your secret is safe with me. Sooner or later, you're going to have to tell her. She's not a dumb person, and she observes you more than you think." I gave her a heads-up, and she smiled.

"Thank you for everything, Dillon. But when I'm gone, keep her safe. I know you will, but do that for me. Keep her safe and happy. She's going to push you away; she's going to get very hurtful with her words; she'll become unresponsive and push you to insanity, but don't give up on her."

She was in a very emotional state right now, which affected me deeply. My heart truly felt it, and I couldn't believe it. The love she had for Azzaria was one beyond understanding.

"She can never push me far enough for me to leave," I replied, and she laughed.

Cancer was such an awful disease, and I hated how it always came to take a toll on those of us who truly didn't deserve it. A woman like Leann deserved to know no pain, and it's awful how it's wreaking havoc on her life.

"Okay, everyone," she rushed in shouting, looking very upset, I might add, "I'm finally back."

"Are you okay, precious?" I asked, walking to meet her at the door.

She had tubs of ice cream in her hands plus gummy bears, so she needed extra help.

“No, I’m so upset,” she said and dropped the ice cream on the table.

“Why are you upset?”

“This man wouldn’t leave me alone. He followed me from across the street straight into the lobby, and security had to ward him off,” she explained using hand motions.

I took the phone from my pocket and dialed the lobby downstairs. “Send me the footage of the man who was antagonizing my girlfriend a few minutes ago. I want it now, or everyone’s fired,” I said and went to comfort her.

“Don’t worry, baby,” I said, “I’ll take care of it. Next time, drive my car or send someone to do it.”

“I also dropped the money you gave me too, so now I lost a hundred dollars,” she whined.

“Azzaria, the money is the least, I don’t care about the hundred dollar bill, as long as you’re okay.”

She stood there wrapped in my arms silently. Her irritation really bothered me, but he’d be taken care of. I sent the video of him to Daniel, and he told me he’d be taking care of it. No further questions were needed to be asked.

The greatest crime in my book was messing with Azzaria, whether it’s intentional or unintentional.

I totally forgot her mom was sitting there, but at least she got to witness the level of care and love I had for her daughter. It was one out of this world, and hell would freeze over before I let someone or something provoke her.

“You’re in great hands, baby,” she said to Azzaria. “I have a show to catch, so I’ll be going now. It was lovely to be here, and you lovebirds, take care.”

Lucio was downstairs waiting to take her mom home to ensure she got there safe and sound. The last thing I needed was for one of those reckless taxi drivers I despise to harm her in any way.

Azzaria hugged her mother tightly, leaving a soft kiss on her cheek. “I love you, Mama. Text me tonight when you’re

home.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. I will. Thank you both for dinner.” The mother and daughter pulled apart from the hug, and Azzaria went inside to calm down. It seems I’d either have to print a “Do not touch” shirt for her or have her walk with guards everywhere she went.

*When will people learn not to touch what’s mine? Or the basic decency of leaving women alone?*

After cleaning up the kitchen, I went inside the bedroom to change my shirt.

“Finally,” she said, “you’re coming to bed.” *Not exactly...*

“I’m not, but I came to tell you that I’m stepping out for a few.” I’ve seen many emotions on Azzaria, but this level of anger was not one of them.

“Where are you going at 11 in the night?”

“Business. I have things to take care of, which I really can’t put off, and no, it can’t wait until tomorrow.”

It wasn’t the easiest task to leave her at night, but I couldn’t bring her to the Malen property. There’d be a different side of me present, and I never wanted her to see me in that state, even if I was doing the necessary work for her sake.

I walked over to kiss her, but she obviously wasn’t in the mood. “Are you okay?” This was a stupid question, I know, but I had nothing else to say, and I didn’t want to just leave her like that.

“I’m great! It’s every girl’s dream to have their boyfriend leave at 11 in the night after not coming to bed for hours,” she said sarcastically and rolled her eyes.

*I deserved that.*

“Do you trust me?” I asked, my palm holding her cheek.

“You know I do. More than anyone else.”

“Good. I love you, precious.” I placed one last kiss on her lips, and she curled up in the bed.

Grabbing my coat, I walked out of the apartment and made my way to the property. I needed this done once and for all. She needed to be free, and I needed her to thrive with her freedom.

---

“How long has he been out ?” I wondered to myself but I didn’t fucking care. His lips were parched and hunger growled in his stomach. He cracked open his eyes to better perceive how deep in shit he was but he caused this on himself.

Blackness continued to engulf him. A tremor of panic vibrated in his core. He was blind, sightless, motionless, restrained. He was as good as dead, a lamb awaiting slaughter. Poultry breathing its last lungful before the bloodied knife would steal it forever more. That slight tremor increased in intensity until he physically shook in time with it.

“He’s in pretty bad shape,” Kamadge said with a smile streaked across his face. This man lived to torture and that’s why he’s always the right man for these kinds of jobs.

“That’s how I wanted him.”

He tried to wrench his arms free and felt narrow straps dig into his flesh. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” I called out to him. I was not sane at this moment.

He screamed in agony and relentlessly thrashed against the restraints with his forearms. They cut deeper, drawing blood, yet he remained oblivious to the pain. Every instinct compelled him to battle this invisible adversary, break free from these bonds, and regain his long-lost freedom.

He jerked his head backward, the impact leaving him momentarily disoriented. Repeatedly, he collided with the unyielding metal table, attempting to break free from his restraints. His cries reverberated, a blend of fury and panic, but I remained unfazed. The oppressive air invaded his mouth, inducing a gag reflex. The metallic tang of blood commingled with the putrid odor of waste, like tendrils of decay clawing their way down his throat and lodging in his heart. He was on

the brink of death, yet I wasn't prepared for his demise just yet.

“Who are you?” He managed to cough up, but I didn't answer. I had no words to waste on him. Just a final line of pain to deliver right at his feet.

He tried to cry for help, but his throat was raw from shouting and his lips were long-deprived of liquid; a gasp bubbled from his lips instead. The distinct sound of swishing cloth reached his ears. It was coming closer.

He listened for an excruciating moment. Kam had told me that they had left him to rot, to die in the darkness. His tortured throat let out a pathetic cry as he attacked his bonds with the remainder of his strength.

He let his aching body collapse onto the metallic surface, breathing heavily.

My voice was crisp and cool, all warmth drained by a lack of compassion. “He looks battered. And he's one of the...”

The implications of this request hadn't the time to register in his mind before a hard fist, mine, wrenched the rough bag from his head, ripping out some of his hair in the process. He cried out as bright illumination wormed its way through his eyes and into his brain, eating away at his nerves, biting them raw.

Blistering scabs were ripped open inside his head as the parasitic rays of light feasted upon his flesh, flaying him bloody from the inside. Through the haze of agony, he heard the two voices conferring above his prone form.

“—ugliest motherfucker I've seen in a while.”

He wasn't ugly because of his looks but all the actions he's done.

“Why are you doing this?”

“You fucked with the wrong girl years ago and I'm not over it. It cost her many years of pain and agony and I wouldn't be a good boyfriend if I didn't make you feel how she felt all these years,” I answered icily.

He gasped and groaned, eyes rolled back into his head. He tried to close his eyes, but Kam was keeping them open with his large fingers, covered in pepper spray. Froth danced on his lips, and his whole form shivered in faint spasms, all the fight gone from him.

“This is for thinking it’s okay to go about and abuse women,” I said after giving him a punch in the face with my right hand. “And this,” I spoke, pulling the gun from the table, “is for messing with a woman named Azzaria Willis.”

As I pulled the trigger to his forehead, sweet oblivion slowly accepted him into its grim grasp; his body went limp and blood platted all over the place.

“Dispose of the body,” I ordered and the men got to work. I went around the sink to clean up and a feeling of accomplishment washed over me. He’s dead, Michael’s dead. Two of the world’s most disgusting men are finally being put down and I couldn’t be happier.

Kamadage walked close, handing me a folder as thick as the novels I see Azzaria read on a daily basis. “We found this at his place, it’s everything he has on your girl. He’s been stalking her for months, plotting her death too, and there’s a tape. Luckily we beat him too it.”

A tape? “What kind of tape?”

“A sex tape.”

“Did any—”

“No,” he said, and relief washed me. “I opened to check what it was but as soon as he walked into the frame and called her name, I shut it off.”

“Burn it,” I ordered, “Azzaria can’t see this and I don’t want to either. So burn it. Dispose of the body, clean up and your payments will be transferred within the hour,” I noted.

He smiled wide. Extra wide. “Always nice doing business with you. Until next time,” Daniel Green said. “Until next time.”

---



I got back to the penthouse a little after two in the morning and there was complete silence. Azzaria would've obviously fallen asleep by now, and I just wanted to cuddle her. She'd be pissed at me tomorrow but for tonight, I needed rest.

I cautiously entered the bedroom, trying not to make a sound, but it was futile—she was awake.

“You're home, and very late,” she observed.

“Hello, my love,” I greeted her, approaching and enveloping her in my arms. “You're up late.”

“I couldn't sleep; I was worried. You didn't answer my texts or calls, and none of your friends saw or heard from you. So, I was worried,” her tone was low and calm. This wouldn't end well for me. “Why is there red on your shirt?” I cursed inwardly; of all things, I had forgotten to change my bloodstained shirt.

“My phone was on silent, I'm sorry. I told you I went on business, babe. Can we drop it, please? I just need to sleep. It's been a long day,” I confessed, utterly exhausted. Between jet lag from Italy and non-stop work, my body had reached its limits.

She switched on the lights and got up from the bed, clutching her pillow. “I'm going to sleep on the couch because I won't be sharing a bed with someone who can't answer simple questions.”

To hell she was. I went to the bedroom door, bolted it, and gently pushed her back onto the bed. “Baby, we'll talk—”

“You know how insecure I get, how my confidence wanes, and how I overthink. I don't ask for much, just answers, or I'll start making up my own,” she warned.

“Fine,” I agreed, taking a seat beside her. “I went to the Malen property.” I didn't need to say much more; I'm sure she understood what I was implying. Her arms clung to me tightly, and tears streamed from her eyes, leaving stains on my shirt.

“Thank you so much,” she whispered. Sometimes I wanted to be furious with her, but I couldn't. “Is he—?”

“Dead?”

She nodded.

“Yes, and I don’t regret it. He didn’t deserve to live.”

She remained silent. Justice had been served in the way I knew best. Torture and murder.

“Did you know there was a sex tape?”

She looked up at me and nodded. “Yeah, but it wasn’t voluntarily made.”

My heart sank. How much worse could Mathew possibly get? “It’s gone now, and so is he.”

I had never felt such a surge of power from taking someone’s life, but he deserved it. You can’t go around hurting, degrading, and sleeping with women without consent and expect everything to be okay. He didn’t get a happy ending, and I made damn sure of that.

## CHAPTER 42

# *Azzaria*

MY GRADUATION IS THIS SUNDAY, AND I'VE NEVER BEEN MORE excited. There's a sorrowful yet refreshing feeling in moving from one level to the next. It's sorrowful because I've made so many memories and accomplished so much in one place, but it's refreshing because all my hard work will pay off. If it weren't for the school's internship program, I wouldn't have met the love of my life.

Dillon left for his weekly board meetings a few hours ago. They usually last four to six hours, with him surrounded by all his investors discussing ways to get more of the city and, to a larger extent, the world. I've only attended one, and I decided I'll never go back.

There were only two things on my to-do list for today: grocery shopping and baking. Lucio picked me up about ten minutes ago, and we're almost at the store. We needed to use up the lemons we got from Italy, so I'm planning to make everything lemon-flavored, and Dillon's going to love it.

It's also my last day at the internship. I was still wrapping up a housing project for him, but it was my last day. I couldn't spend it at the office, but Dillon hosted a going-away party for me.

There were whispers about bias because we're in a relationship, but who cares? It was a great party. All our friends were there, along with the few tolerable coworkers I've met.

“Ms. Willis,” Lucio said. I’ve always asked him to call me Azzaria, but he insists it’s disrespectful during work hours. He probably thinks Dillon would overreact about it. “Mr. Xander wanted to know if you’re alright. He’s been trying to reach you on your cell.”

“I’m good. I left the other phone at home on the charger, so I didn’t get the message,” I replied as he started texting Dillon. Sometimes it’s annoying to carry two phones everywhere.

We arrived at the supermarket, and I got out of the car. The main purpose of this trip was to buy the salsa Dillon likes and to get baking supplies. I needed pans, tins, whisks, and all the necessary items to get my lemon-baking adventure started.

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I accidentally bumped my cart into someone.

“It’s fine,” the person responded and looked at me. Her expression hardened upon seeing me, and she spoke, “I don’t think we’ve met in person.”

Dillon has exes crawling all over the city, and I’ve dealt with most one of them except for her—Annalise Brielle Woods, my boyfriend’s ex-wife.

“I don’t think we need to meet,” I replied, beginning to walk away, but she started following me. She even left her grocery cart behind.

“Dillon’s so—”

“Look, Annalise. I don’t care about what you’re saying, and I don’t care about what you have to say. You hurt him deeply and caused him so much pain. If you truly love him the way you claim you do, you’d leave him alone. Let him be happy, even if it’s not with you,” I spoke firmly and walked away.

I could only imagine how sour her expression must have looked, but that was none of my business. I needed to be free from the “other women drama.”

While I could understand the obsession when it came to Dillon *because trust me, I’m head over heels for him*, they

make their obsession weird. I would never try to ruin another person's relationship if I saw them happy with someone else. Especially Annalise, who's trying to play the victim when all she did was lie, cheat, and cause pain.

Shaking off those thoughts and moving on from that situation, I finally found myself in the baking aisle. There are so many products and materials I didn't know I needed until now. The piping bags and the cookie cutters... I think I'm in baking heaven, to say the least. *What a good thing Dillon gave me his AmEx!*

The shelf had about a hundred different items, and I put every single one of them in the cart.

"Are you sure you need all of these, Ms. Willis?" I jumped in fear but soon calmed when I realized it was only Lucio. "Mr. Xander insisted I accompany you inside."

"You don't have to listen to him; you're a grown man, Lucio," I pointed out.

"I am, but we're also best friends, and he's sort of my boss." We wrapped up the supermarket shopping, paid, and left. I intentionally didn't mention the incident with Annalise to Lucio or Dillon. It would have only prolonged the matter. The more attention everyone gave her, the longer she'd stay. I've learned that it's best not to feed the attention seekers. They'll eventually fade away, with time and some luck.

ME

Just left the grocery store. On my way back to the penthouse. I love you!

I had Dillon's phone number memorized, so I used my other phone to send him a quick message. He wouldn't see it now because he doesn't use his phone during board meetings, but I was sure he'd check it during their ten-minute interval break.

While walking, an unknown private number called me multiple times. I usually didn't answer such calls, but the

repeated rings made it seem important.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Good evening,” the woman on the other line said, “Is this Ms. Azzaria Willis?”

“Yes,” I replied, “Who is this?”

“My name is Dr. Sharma Lee McIntyre from Wellness General Hospital.” That was the hospital Ronan owned, the one he often complained about. He’s a cancer specialist. “I’m calling about your mother, Leann.”

My heart sank, and the sounds from the bustling street outside seemed to fade away. This couldn’t be real.

“Yes, is everything okay?” Panic and fear surged through me.

“She passed away some minutes ago, and we need you to come down here as soon as possible,” she said.

I abruptly hung up the call. Without a second thought, I turned to Lucio and said, “Lucio, take me to your brother’s hospital. Something happened to my mom.” My voice was emotionless, my face devoid of expression. All I felt was fear. Losing her was not an option.

The hospital room was filled with swirling particles of dust in the sunlight as I sat in the uncomfortable plastic chair. It was my first time at this hospital, and it wasn’t under good circumstances.

Wrapping my ankles around the cold metal connecting the chairs, I held my mother’s hand tightly, staring at her lifeless face. The IV in her wrist pumped medications into her veins, puncturing her smooth skin. I didn’t want to cry, but my throat tightened as I gazed at her.

I wanted to hug her, cherishing every last moment. Just as I was about to pull away, Ronan walked in and said, “Azzaria, you have to leave the room now. They have to transfer her to the department for autopsy reports.” Seeing my tear-filled eyes and my swollen cheeks, he added, “But I’ll be here with you, and Dillon is on his way.”

I nodded and stepped out to the waiting area. My mother was dead. She wasn't ready, and I hadn't seen her live. It was way too soon.

Minutes later, Ronan exited the room. Seeing my frustration, he looked at me with his blue eyes and jet-black hair. He said, "Azzaria, we need to talk, but not here."

I complied. Slowly, my eyes glued to the floor, I followed him out of the room and into an empty lab. I stared out the window and checked the clock from time to time to calm my anxieties. I was truly scared at that moment.

"Your mom has been sick for months, Azzaria," Ronan began. "When she first came here, I didn't know she was your mom. It was only when Dillon requested protection orders for you, her, and Abigail that I connected the dots."

"You knew," I said, my voice hoarse from tears.

"I did, but—"

"Ronan, you knew my mother was sick. *My only parent*. You knew she was dying for months and didn't tell me?" My mind was reeling, and my heart was shattering. This couldn't be happening.

"We weren't close back then, and I was just doing my job. I was trying to he—"

"After that, we became close, and you still didn't think to mention that my mother was on her deathbed," I shouted, a vein standing out on my forehead.

He sighed, pacing around the room. "Dillon and I came to an agreement that—"

There was no way. "Dillon knew?"

"Dillon knew what?" I turned to see him walking towards me, fear on his face. "What's going on, babe?"

"Did you know my mom was sick?"

"Baby, I—"

"I didn't ask you that. Yes or no? Did you know?"

He looked down at his feet, confirming what I had already deduced. Everyone had been lying to me for months.

“You heard me talking about how sick she looked for weeks, and you didn’t tell me. You knew everything was happening and didn’t fucking tell me.” I was overwhelmed, unsure of which hurt more or what I was feeling at that moment. Betrayal because my best friend and boyfriend had failed to tell me about my mom’s sickness. Or hurt because she kept it a secret too. My mind was a blur, and I was numb. After all, she was dead now, and nothing mattered anymore.

“Baby, I’m s—”

“Get out,” I shouted, “both of you.” They looked at each other and sighed in sadness.

“Precious, let’s just—”

“Get out. I don’t want to see any of you right now.”

“I can’t leave you here,” Dillon protested, his fury building. “Not when you’re—”

“If you love me as much as you say you do, you’ll get the hell out of here.” That was the lowest blow I could deliver, but at that moment, it felt necessary. I knew that his love for me was the most important thing in his life.

I could understand why they hadn’t told me. They might have been afraid of my reaction, but I still had the right to know. Dillon had heard me express concern about how sick she looked and how worried I was about her, yet he let me believe everything was fine when, in reality, she was dying. And now, she was gone, and I couldn’t do anything about it.



## CHAPTER 43

### *Azzaria*

I ALWAYS DREADED HEARING ABOUT ANYONE'S DEATH. However, when it happened to me when my mother passed away, I began to understand the pain that others felt when they lost someone they loved.

There might be no adequate words to describe this pain, an excruciating agony that tears you apart, a heavy burden on your heart, and an unceasing stream of tears for the dear one who is no longer with you. Time seemed to drag on, and this anguish, no matter what others claim, refused to pass quickly.

Every morning for the past week, I would wake up with the belief that she was still in her room, sipping her tea and waiting for my calls. Then, the harsh reality would crash down upon me, and I'd realize it was just a lingering dream. A cold despair would wash over me, leaving me feeling utterly empty inside. My mother's death was an incredibly sobering experience, the most devastating event in my life.

The memory of my mother will follow me wherever I go, no matter how far I roam. My dreams will always carry the gentle scent of her perfume and the echo of her laughter. She was there to show me how much she cared, there when I took my first steps, teaching me to smile and laugh. My mother listened patiently to all my fears and nightmares. She shielded my heart and soul with her nurturing love. Her eyes were tender, filled with understanding, when she looked at others. Through all my struggles, she was the one constant in my life, and now that she's gone, life doesn't seem worth living.

Every day, I woke up in tears, as if it were that painful and unexpected Thursday evening. I desperately tried to forget, living in denial of what had happened. I refused to talk about it, even ghosting those who asked about my feelings. It felt as though a part of me had died with her. Losing my mom meant losing my life, and the person I wanted to live for had hurt me deeply by not revealing what I deserved to know.

After her passing, something changed in me, and darkness filled the void where love once resided. I had always known, deep down, that one day she would be gone, but I never expected it to be so soon. I couldn't come to terms with her death. I was left with countless questions, wondering if I could have spent more time with her, be a better daughter, and understand her struggles more. I felt anger building up over even the smallest of things. I wondered how I would survive without her presence, and if I had one wish, it would be for a few more hours with her.

My grief led to melancholy, bottles of vodka, and dozens of painkillers, turning nights into endless days. I isolated myself from friends because I felt so cold and pushed everyone away because they weren't my mother and, in my eyes, they had betrayed me. If only death could be reversed, but it's inevitable. My mother's passing became a haunting presence in my life, and my restless nights were filled with her image.

I missed my graduation, hadn't talked to my best friends, and hadn't spoken to Dillon. He visited my door daily, bringing crimson flowers and food, but I never once opened it to see him. Nothing was the same, and I felt numb all around. I didn't get to say goodbye or tell my mother how much I loved her. She didn't get to live, and I blamed myself for not noticing things sooner.

There was an emptiness in my soul, but a significant part of it was because I missed Dillon. I needed him more than I cared to admit, and the fact that he had kept something as significant as my mother's sickness from me hurt deeply. I could understand Ronan's place because he's doing what's

best for his patient but I couldn't get Dillon's place. I couldn't understand why he wouldn't tell me.

Doctor Green had called, but I couldn't bring myself to answer. There was no one I could talk to that would make me feel better. The only person I felt I could turn to was Dillon, but my trust was shaken. *What else was he keeping from me?* But fuck it, I needed him, *desperately*.

"H-Hello," I said on the phone.

"Azzaria," he exclaimed, "Baby, I've been so worried about you. I can't apologize en—" His pain was palpable, breaking my heart even further.

"I can't talk over the phone; come to me." The grief spoke through me, and my soul longed for him. I wanted to talk to him, to have him help me through this. No one knew me as he did, no one loved me like he did. Despite everything, I needed him by my side.

When I hung up the phone and stood up from the couch, I heard a knock at the door. His penthouse was at least thirty minutes away; there was no way he could have arrived so quickly. I rushed to the door, peered through the peephole, and there he was, with all the gifts he had sent. My trembling hands opened the door, and I nearly fell at the sight of him. He embraced me, and I finally felt safe, even though I knew I was far from okay.

"Baby, I'm so sorry for everything. I'm sorry for her passing and for keeping it from you," he said, apologizing and holding me tighter.

"How did you get here so fast?" I asked.

"When I realized you weren't responding, I moved into the room next door and checked on you every single day." For the first time in days, the tears I shed weren't of sadness.

I wondered how many tears were actually falling on my face. Tears made me feel powerless and weak, and I had spent so much time concealing them that they had become a part of me. I couldn't think of what to say, but what managed to escape my lips was, "I love you."

As I gazed at Dillon, my attention shifted to the box he had given me. “This is for you,” he said, handing it over. “But before you open it, I want to say something. I understand the betrayal you must feel, but it wasn’t my intention. When Ronan told me, you had been ghosting me for three days. He was devastated, especially since he had lost everyone he loved to cancer. His mom, his younger sister, and his grandparents were all taken by this disease. She needed treatment options too, and I paid for them. When your mother came for dinner, I confronted her about it, and she begged me not to tell you. She was afraid of your reaction and asked me not to tell you because she wanted to when she was ready. I shouldn’t have kept it from you, but I did, and for that, I’m sorry. The box contains my journal, or rather, copies of it. It’s filled with every entry I’ve made since I started keeping the journal, along with a recording of my conversation with your mother. We’ll figure things out together. I’ll help with funeral arrangements, but take your time with the box, and I’ll be here whenever you need me.” He placed a kiss on my forehead and headed to the bedroom.

For the next three hours, I immersed myself in Dillon’s journal. My heart shattered with every page. I had never been so heartbroken in my life. To witness the depth of his suffering, to read his words of love and pain, was almost unbearable.

The lines he wrote about me, his initial reluctance to fall in love, and the painstaking observations of my quirks and behaviors filled the pages with beauty. I was grateful for the privilege of reading his innermost thoughts.

I put on the headphones and listened to the tape he had given me. I didn’t know what to expect, but I was prepared for more tears.

*“How are you?” I heard him say. His voice was always strong, but it must have been a terrifying moment for my mother.*

*“I’m good. I have...” Hearing her voice again was like a wound being reopened.*

*“I know you’re sick, Ms. Leann. How are you really?”*

*“Does she know? How do you know?” I could hear her sigh, her voice heavy with emotion.*

*“Azzaria doesn’t know, but I do. Who do you think has been covering the cost of your treatments? But why haven’t you told her?”*

*“I appreciate your help, but why would you do that?”*

*“I know the pain of losing someone you’ve loved your whole life. It’s a harsh feeling, and you’re the only parent Azzaria has. If she loses you, she’ll crumble. So paying for your treatments was the least I could do. Your doctor, Dr. Romano, is my best friend, and he shared his concern. It had nothing to do with breaching confidentiality, but the auditors would have cut off your treatment if he couldn’t find another source of payment.”*

My thoughts went to Ronan, and I knew I needed to talk to him. Our last interaction had been left unresolved, and I wanted to fix things.

*She began to cry, her voice trembling. “I haven’t told her because it’s difficult. I’ve been her entire world for all these years, and I don’t want her to worry about me. I’ve lived a long life, and she’s only just started living. With all the pain she’s endured, losing her father and then Matthew, this would be too much. She’s never been as happy as she is with you and I don’t want to take it away from her.”*

*“I’m so sorry that you’re sick, but your secret is safe with me. Sooner or later, you’ll have to tell her. She’s not oblivious, and she observes you more than you realize.”*

*“Thank you for everything, Dillon. But when I’m gone, please keep her safe. I know you will, but promise me you’ll keep her safe and happy. She’ll push you away, become hurtful with her words, go unresponsive, and drive you to the brink of insanity, but don’t give up on her.”*

The recording of my mother’s words was heartbreaking. This was what he meant at the hospital when he said he had no other choice. She made him promise.

*“She can never push me far enough for me to leave.”*

There wasn't much I knew at this moment, but all I knew was I needed to be in his arms. I don't know when I got up from the couch, but I found myself sitting on the bed. He looked at me with clear shock and sorrow.

*He was hurting for me.*

*Grieving with me this whole time.*

I couldn't say much, but the one thing I managed to say was, “I love you.”

## CHAPTER 44

# *Azzaria*

### **TWO WEEKS LATER**

The day I had dreaded all month was fast approaching my mother's funeral. I knew nothing would ever fully prepare me for this day, but with all the support I had, I believed I would eventually find the strength to cope.

The night I read the journal entries and listened to the tape, Dillon and I had a long conversation. There weren't many words needed; he simply took care of everything and shouldered all the expenses. There were days when I couldn't even bring myself to get out of bed, but he made sure I ate, helped me shower, and took care of me when I couldn't care for myself.

*Days after my mom's passing, I found myself back at Dillon's penthouse, my world clouded in sorrow. This morning was particularly rough. I couldn't eat; all I could do was cry. The weight of grief and loss bore down on me like a relentless storm.*

*Dillon, seeing my pain, decided to cancel his day and stay with me. I felt bad because I knew he'd been missing a lot of days and deadlines to be with me, but he told me it was fine and everything was under control.*

*I couldn't bring myself to get out of bed; my feet felt weak as if they couldn't bear the weight of the world. He came to me, his voice soft and full of concern. "Precious, can I get you anything? Do you need anything?"*

*My voice trembled as I replied, "I don't know." Tears welled up in my eyes once more, and I buried my face in the pillow, my sobs shaking my body.*

*He didn't hesitate. In an instant, he rushed to the closer and returned with a fluffy blanket. He wrapped it around us as we lay in bed, his powerful arms offering me warmth and comfort. I cried into his chest, his heartbeat a soothing rhythm against my ear.*

*For a while, we simply held each other, and my cries slowly ebbed. He tenderly wiped away my tears and whispered sweet, soothing words.*

*"Shh, baby, I'm here. You're not alone," he whispered, and I nodded weakly.*

*I told him I wanted to shower, and he helped me to my feet. With gentle care, he guided me to the bathroom. The hot water of the shower felt like a lifeline, washing away the tears and the aching sorrow. He stood by my side, letting the water run over us, and he tenderly washed my hair and my body. His presence was a silent promise that he'd be there through it all.*

*After the shower, he wrapped me in a fluffy towel and led me to the kitchen. The scent of my favorite meal wafted through the air, reminding me of happier times. He'd prepared it just for me.*

*As we sat down to eat, he was silent and read sweet poems to me between bites.*

*His soft words and sweet gestures were a lifeline, pulling me back from the depths of despair. I felt like I was drifting back to the land of the living.*

*With dinner behind us, he led me to the living room. As I lay on my stomach, he gave me a soothing massage, his skilled hands working away from the knots of sorrow in my body. It felt like a balm for my aching heart.*

*"I want ice cream," I blurted, my voice still fragile.*

*Dillon smiled softly, brushing a strand of hair from my face. "Of course, my love. What flavor would you like?"*



*I told him the one that brought me the most comfort. He nodded and left the room, returning with a tub of ice cream. We shared it, one spoonful at a time, in the dim light of the evening.*

*As we lay together, I realized just how much he was willing to do for me, how he'd canceled his day to be my anchor. I couldn't help but feel grateful for the love he showered me with.*

*In his arms, surrounded by his warmth and care, I knew that even in the midst of the storm of sorrow, there was a glimmer of hope and love that would carry me through these darkest days.*

*"Baby, you're my everything," Dillon whispered, holding me close. "And I'll be here for you, always."*

Dillon would always be the love and my life and I'll be damned if I ever let him go.

My friends understood my absence, and I managed to reconcile with Ronan. We had a heartfelt conversation, and it warmed my heart to know how much effort he had put into making my mother happy. I found notes from her, expressing her adoration for him and seeing him as a son. Reading those words brought tears to my eyes, and I felt incredibly fortunate to have Roman Romano as my best friend.

Returning to the present day, Dillon and I stood in the middle of the cemetery, paying a visit to his grandparents' graves. I leaned back against his chest, his arms wrapped around me.

"Do you think I'll be okay?" I asked, looking up at him.

"I know you'll be okay, but I also know you'll miss her. She'll always hold a special place in your heart. Some days will be harder than others, while some will be easier. But whatever the day, I'm here for you. I love you, precious."

His words were reassuring, and I knew he meant every one. I felt an overwhelming sense of comfort and warmth, especially because he was with me. It was reassuring to have that one person who made me their priority.

“I love you more.” I turned to face him, and we shared a tender kiss. There was nothing I loved more than gazing into his bright hazel eyes and kissing his soft lips. He was my dream come true, and I didn’t want to wake up.

“You’re a strong girl, and just know your mother is incredibly proud of you. You’ve overcome so much, whether on your own or with help.”

*And you know what? He was right. I had conquered my fears.*

Matthew and my dad were no longer in the picture, thanks to Dillon.

My anxiety and depression were improving, thanks to therapy.

I was in good health, thanks to God, and I had fallen in love with a man who couldn’t get enough of me.

I won, even though I had lost the best parental figure in the world. Everything I did from this point forward was for her. I loved her deeply, and I would miss her terribly, but I was sure she would be watching over me, and that thought brought me comfort.

“Want to go home?” I asked.

“I am home. Home is wherever you are.” For a man who claimed to lack experience in the romance department, he was the biggest romantic.

“You’re such a softie,” I giggled and wiped away a few tears.

“Just for you, but if you tell anyone, I might have to kill them,” he playfully replied, kissing the side of my face. I loved this man deeply, and when I was with him, I felt like I could conquer anything.

“Let’s go,” I said, pulling his arm. I cherished the moment, but it was getting dark, and we were standing in the middle of a cemetery. I wasn’t a believer in ghosts, but I had been through so much already that I couldn’t risk any more bad

luck. “Let’s head home. I just want to sleep and get through tomorrow so we can move forward.”

“Are you hungry?”

I scrunched my face and rolled my eyes at him. “No, I’m full. What I do want is to cuddle with you, get some kisses, and fall asleep. So, can we do that, please?”

“Let’s go then. But I have two calls to make and a plan to submit before I can join you in bed.” Dating a billionaire was no walk in the park. They always, *and I mean always*, had things to do.

“I understand,” I sighed. “I’ve had your undivided attention for a while, and while I appreciate it, I know you have responsibilities. This is what I signed up for, right?”

“I promise we’ll read together on Sunday. I’ve cleared my schedule, and I cleared it for tomorrow and the rest of the week, just so I can be there for you,” he reassured me.

Chuckling, I asked, “How far would you go to keep me happy?” I already knew the answer, but I loved hearing him say it.

“How far wouldn’t I go?” he replied.

That was all I needed to hear to feel safe and happy. Once he and I had each other, we could face anything. I couldn’t believe how far I had come. Just six months ago, I was a girl who didn’t care about love, and now, I was deeply in love with a man I never thought would look at me, a man who had stirred up a complex mix of emotions in me. *A man that was mine.*

## CHAPTER 45

# *Azzaria*

DILLON AND I LEFT FROM THE PENTHOUSE AT 10:30 ON Thursday, September 15th. Despite it being an unusual choice for his typical work attire, he wore blue jeans and a sweater as we headed to my mother's funeral.

As we walked among the burnt orange leaves, neither of us spoke. Dillon understood that silence was the best way to support me. He unlocked his sleek black Aston Martin with a double tap. Once I settled and fastened my seatbelt, he started to say something but reconsidered. There was no need for words; I just wanted to get through this.

Leann Lawrence, my mother, was the most angelic person I'd ever known. She knew me better than anyone in the world. Growing up, it was just her and me, through all our trauma and struggles. I'd had her from day one, and losing her had shattered my heart in ways I'd never experienced.

As Dillon struggled to hold back his tears, a wave of numbness overcame me. It was like witnessing a horrific car wreck that was too terrible to look away from. I stared at Dillon. It was unlike him to cry, and to hear him sob made everything feel unreal. But he felt her loss deeply, especially because he knew how much it hurt me. After what felt like an eternity of staring, I returned to reality.

*She was gone.*

Our dreams of traveling together were shattered. The graduation photo I wanted with her would never be taken. She wouldn't tease me about my eating habits or share my

embarrassing childhood stories with Dillon. She was gone, and it hit me like a tidal wave. I broke down, and I couldn't remember ever crying this hard in my twenty-three years of life. I grabbed my skirt and curled into a ball on the passenger side of the car.

When the storm of emotion finally released me from my tight ball, my blouse was soaked with the torrent of anger and sorrow that had poured from my eyes. I could have screamed. I'd seen people like Matthew or even Michael live long lives unscathed, except for the troubles they'd brought into my life. But my mother didn't deserve this. Cervical cancer had claimed her, taken control of her body, and snatched her away in one fatal swoop.

These were the worst few minutes of my life, and it was my first experience with genuine grief.

I'd never been afraid of death until the day she passed away. I trudged through the leaves and climbed the two sets of stairs to the place she had requested to be churched before her burial.

I never even knew my mom wrote a mock will.

Tossing my bag onto an antique couch in the open space, I rushed up the stairs to find an empty room and broke down. Dillon and our friends accompanied me for solace, but all I truly wanted was my mother back.

The worst part of grief is the period between receiving the news and the funeral. No closure, no celebration, just overwhelming sadness. *Nothing felt right.*

I stood there, pain-stricken, struggling to understand why she was gone. Tentatively, I entered the church, fear in my eyes as I approached the casket. My mom, dressed in white linens and lace, lay at peace, undisturbed, in a white casket.

As I walked slowly down the shaggy tan carpet, passing rows of people, I looked at my mom for one last time.

My lips remained sealed, gripped by the antipathy of realizing this would be my last encounter with my mom for the rest of my life. My Tory Burch shoes carried me back across

the old carpet, and I quickly took my seat next to my boyfriend, who had been a pillar of support. He had stayed with me, enduring my mood swings, wild accusations, and my uncanny ability to crave affection at the worst moments.

My best friends, Ronan and Abigail, had also been through a lot. Ronan had been there for my mother, which initially angered me, but I couldn't help but love him for ensuring her comfort. I found letters from her, describing how he had shown her preferential treatment, let her bend the rules, played bingo with her, and more. She saw him as a son, and he felt like nothing less than a brother to me. Abigail sat beside Mikkell, Nina, Mara, Alexander, Lucio, and Marina, along with other family members and friends. I tried to keep the gathering intimate, as it was the least I could do for her.

I felt frigid, numb, and cold to the touch. It was as if I had died, and my stomach dropped as grief would consume me for the next three and a half hours.

While funerals provide closure to loved ones, they are the most uncomfortably painful yet healing aspect of the grieving process. Looking at my mom for the last time felt like saying goodbye to a part of myself.

I tried to avoid looking at her. I didn't want to accept that she was gone. Death, with all its night terrors and illusions of her presence, had taken hold of me. As the pastor called on me to speak, Dillon stood by my side.

“We gather here today to remember my mother, Leann, celebrating the joy her life brought to us and acknowledging the pain of her loss. She passed away unexpectedly in New York City on August 16th, at the age of forty-six. It's incredibly difficult to say goodbye, to wish we had more time and had spent it more together. We wish her illness hadn't dominated her life, and that things could have been different for her and for us. Despite her struggles, she found pride in her love for me. Her one last wish was for me to find happiness in myself and someone else. I'm grateful she was alive to see me achieve that, but I wish she could have been there to witness the rest and see me make her proud. She drew strength from me, as her only child. Even when she was weak, she remained

strong for me. She left behind a legacy of love and perseverance, a legacy to be cherished. This was the wonderful example she set for us all, reminding us to focus on what truly matters, especially in challenging times. In her memory, let's hold on to these precious moments and keep the memories alive by sharing them with each other. We'll conclude with the 23rd Psalm, 'The Lord is my shepherd.' On behalf of my family and myself, I thank you all for being here today." I managed to contain my tears during the speech, but one final tear fell as I finished. *This was the end.*

For most of the funeral, I felt like I was in a daze. I hadn't cried much, which was unexpected. The expectation with grief is to cry, scream, and let the pain out in one burst, as we see in movies.

This is what I had anticipated for myself. I never knew that I could feel so cold, numb, and heartless. The last memory I had of that day was lowering her casket into the burial plot. As painful as it was to witness, it brought an incredible sense of closure. I realized I might not have her back, but her presence would accompany me with every step I took.

In the words of my mom, "In death, only the body dies; the spirit remains with us always as we embark on fresh adventures. Each day, the spirits of our ancestors watch over us, guiding us through life."

I would forever miss her, but I would spend the rest of my life trying to make her proud.

## CHAPTER 46

# *Azzaria*

IN THE EARLY MORNING, I WOKE TO THE GENTLE TOUCH OF Dillon's fingertips tracing the curves of my body. Our bare skin was pressed together, and my face was nestled in the crook of his neck.

His scent enveloped me, offering solace in the wake of my mom's passing. Our connection might have seemed unlikely to some, but it was a powerful and passionate one. We were both intrigued by the unknown territory of each other.

Dillon had been drawn to me from the moment he first saw me, an irresistible pull that neither of us could resist. I mumbled, barely awake, "It's too early. Why are you up?"

Dillon glanced at the time. "It's almost eight, precious. I'll make us some breakfast."

As he moved to get up, I reached out and grasped his wrist, pulling him back into bed. "Stay, just a few more minutes."

He chuckled, and before I knew it, he'd rolled me on top of him. Straddling him, I could feel the growing intensity between us. His fingertips teased the swell of my breasts, igniting a moan from my lips.

Our lips met in a careful kiss, a kiss that soon urged me to roll my hips against his, feeling his hardening cock pressing against my naked cunt. Like a symphony written in the bliss of the waking day, Dillon coaxed one moan after another out of me, fingers tweaking my nipples, jerking his hips upwards, "I want to ride you, can I please?"



No matter how many times we had been tangled in the sheets before, we'd always explore something new with one another. Even though it had taken Dillon a while to give up his control, to lay back while I was pushing myself over the edge with his cock buried inside of me, he now found himself excited whenever I rode him, "Go on, precious."

My movements were clumsy in my groggy state, but my body was eager to engage with his. His appreciative gaze followed my every move, deepening my desire for him.

He muttered, "Your skin feels so perfect against mine."

His low growls filled the air as our bodies came together like a symphony playing the most enchanting tune. Dillon and I communicated without words, knowing each other's desires and needs intimately.

His deep growls made my cunt flutter in excitement, hips raised for me to push his boxers down his legs. With my eyes admiring his cock, I let my hands dance down his upper body, teasing his abs for a moment or two, knowing that he was growing more impatient with every passing touch.

Wordlessly, we understood one another, every signal our bodies were sending out, like boats needing a lighthouse to guide them home.

Pearls of pre-cum beaded his red tip, begging for me to taste him, to wrap my lips around him. His veins shone through the thin skin, veins I'd trace with my tongue whenever I sucked him off, wanting to taste him, to coax his deep growls out of him.

My eyes found his as I tilted my head down, tongue running over his tip, moaning as his taste burst through my system. Our moans got tangled in the morning air, dancing along our limbs like stars exploding in the galaxy, reborn by heaps of dark matter. Bodies crashing together like two poles, not daring to let go of one another.

Dillon's hand found my head, nuzzling me off his cock, wanting to cum inside of me, not up for wasting an orgasm

like this. Our lips met again and again, sharing sweet nothings as I placed my hands on his chest to stabilize myself.

“You look beautiful, precious.” It took us a moment to grow adjusted, already short of breath, losing our sanity as the feeling got more intense.

Dillon’s cock filled every inch, twitching inside my tightness. My features were pleasure-drunken, making his heart race, reminding him once again that only he could make me feel like this.

“I’ll move now,” my raspy voice made goosebumps rise on his skin, clearly projecting his excitement. With his hands placed on my behind, Dillon supported my movements, helping me move up and down his cock, the pace becoming faster with every moan that left my mouth.

No matter how young the morning was, this moment felt too intense for it to be a new sensation. Our bodies moved on instinct, knowing how to please one another.

My legs trembled, aching from the position I was seated in, but I couldn’t complain, couldn’t find my words, lost in my pleasure. Every thrust filled me, and made me shake from the intense feeling chasing my high.

“I wish every morning could start like this.”

My confession made a smirk pull on his lips. Dillon lifted his upper body off the mattress, and our lips met, sharing a sweet kiss in a heated moment.

“You’re doing so well for me.” I loved his praises, wanting to satisfy Dillon’s every need.

The feeling of his hands on my body only pushed me closer to the edge, my pace faltering, no longer able to move as fast as before. He seemed to understand my struggles, flipping them around without pulling out of me once. Our skin met, intimately getting lost in their rising highs.

Dillon’s thrusts were more forceful than mine, letting loose to hear the sweetest sounds roll off her tongue. I broke free, not able to hold back whatever wanted to roll off my tongue, arms wrapped around his neck, to keep him as close as

possible. The second his tip grazed my sweet spot, I cried out his name, squeezing my eyes shut, wordlessly begging him to hit the spot again.

*And he did. Over and over again,* watching me rub my clit with my teeth pierced into my lower lip. My walls clenched his twitching cock. The coil inside me would snap all too soon, not able to prolong the moment. Dillon fell out of rhythm as I kept clenching and unclenching my walls, knowing exactly what it was doing to him.

“Cum with me.” It was a simple command he spoke into the morning air, tightening his grasp on the sheets I was lying on. He needed two more thrusts. Tumbling over the edge with me, fucking me through my orgasm. My moans freely bleed from my lips, making Dillon smile in victory—even as his own high rocked through him.

A few more lazy thrusts later, he rolled off me with a satisfied sigh, leaving him. Our eyes met, excitedly kissing one another, very well knowing that a second round would soon follow, bodies mending together as water would cascade down our backs, pulling them closer.

*A perfect way to start a morning like this.*

After our intimate morning, the rain began to fall heavily outside. I couldn't help but feel playful and adventurous. I turned to Dillon and whispered, “Baby, can we go play in the rain?” It was a romantic idea I'd always wanted to try.

Dillon, though a bit annoyed by the sudden request, agreed, saying, “Whatever you want.”

We ran outside, allowing the raindrops to wash over us. As we laughed and ran through the downpour, I realized how fortunate I was to be sharing this moment with Dillon. We were two individuals who had experienced heartbreak and trauma, but we had found love and strength in each other.

“Is there anything we don't know about each other?” I asked as we danced in the rain. We'd shared our deepest pains, struggles, and joys, forming a deep connection that was uniquely ours.

Dillon gazed at me, his soaked shirt clinging to his sculpted frame, his eyes filled with warmth. “You know all my secrets, precious. Do I know yours?”

I giggled and admitted, “All of them.” In that moment, as we stood together under the pouring rain, I realized that our love was not conventional or perfect, but it was uniquely ours. We had faced our demons, both individually and together, and we had come through stronger and more in love with each passing day.

“Our two things each day paid off,” he said with a soft giggle, and I smiled. *He was right, it did.*

We were living our truth, embracing the darkness and the light, and looking forward to what the future held for us. Our love was undeniable, and it was the Azzaria and Dillon way—a journey we would continue to navigate, hand in hand, no matter what lay ahead.

*What a good thing I fell in love with my boss.*

# *Epilogue*

AZZARIA

## **6 MONTHS LATER.**

I sat in Dillon and I's living room, my thoughts still all over the place. In the days that followed her funeral, my and friends had been a constant source of support, helping me through the grief. It wasn't easy going through any of this, but I had the best friends and the best boyfriend by my side, so I knew I'd be alright.

Though the pain of losing my mother never truly faded, I was learning to cope. I had read all the letters she left for me, written letters back to her, and visited her grave. These actions brought me some comfort, and they reminded me to keep living. Dillon was my rock, my source of strength, and with him by my side, I knew I would be okay.

We had finally moved into our new home, a beautiful house filled with everything we needed for our life together. It was a place of peace and love, just like I had envisioned. He wasn't only my partner but my family, and I was grateful for every day we spent together.

I was having a quiet evening when Dillon walked in with a secretive smile on his face.

"Hey, put on something nice," he said, leaning down to kiss my forehead and handed me a shopping bag. In the bag was a beautiful white dress and a brand-new pair of crimson heels. "We're going out for a bit."

“You spoil me too much.” I looked up at him, curiosity piqued. “Where are we going?”

He just grinned and said, “You’ll see when we get there. Trust me.”

Despite my initial hesitation, I agreed. I got dressed and we left. The car ride was filled with anticipation, and my mind raced with all the possibilities of where he could be taking me. As we arrived at a beautifully red decorated garden, I couldn’t help but gasp in surprise.

*What is he up to? And it’s not even my birthday.*

A stage, a podium, and a backdrop bearing my school’s name stood in front of us. My confusion grew as I turned to Dillon. “What’s all this, Dillon?”

Dillon took a step forward, his eyes filled with pride. “We’re here today for the untimely graduation ceremony for Ms. Azzaria Willis.”

My heart pounded with a mix of emotions. “But I missed my graduation, Dill.”

With a smile that reached his eyes, he continued, “Not today. Today, we celebrate your achievements. You’ve successfully received your BAAS degree in Architecture along with a minor in Psychology.”

Tears welled up in my eyes as Dillon handed me my diploma and awards. I was overwhelmed with disbelief and gratitude. I turned to him, my voice trembling. “How did you manage to do this?”

Dillon chuckled softly. “After you missed your graduation, I went to collect them from the school.”

Abigail approached with the graduation cap and gown and smiled at me. “Time to complete the look, Azzaria. I didn’t get to graduate with my best friend, but I always wanted to watch you get everything you deserve.”

As the cap rested on my head and the gown draped over my shoulders, I couldn’t hold back the tears of joy. My friends,

the people I loved, were there to celebrate with me, and it was more than I could have ever imagined.

Dillon, Nina, Mara, Ronan, Lucio, and Abigail all handed me flowers and graduation gifts. The congratulatory chorus surrounded me, making me feel like the luckiest person on earth. “Congratulations, Zar,” Mara said and gave me the biggest hug ever. I was feeling the love.

Tears of gratitude streamed down my face as I looked at Dillon. “I can’t believe you did this for me, baby.”

Dillon’s smile was tender as he met my eyes. “You deserve all the recognition, my love.”

But it wasn’t just the ceremony that left me in awe. Dillon, with a heartfelt expression, stepped onto the stage. “I want to take a moment to express something that has been burning in my heart.”

I looked at him, my heart swelling with anticipation. He took a deep breath and continued, “Azzaria, this past time has been an incredible journey. It’s been a short journey but it also feels like a lifetime. You’ve not only achieved academic excellence but have shown unwavering strength in the face of adversity. But what leaves me in awe every day is your boundless kindness, your incredible heart, and the love you’ve filled my life with. I’ve never been the one to want to love anyone. I thought I gave upon it but then I met you, I met you and you changed my whole world. You spun it upside down and you made your mark. I used to think I couldn’t love you any more than I already do but that changed everyday. My heart grows as big for you every day as the first day I met you.”

I was moved beyond words. Dillon’s love confession in front of our friends and family was nothing short of a dream. He took my hand and said, “Azzaria Willis, from the moment I met you, my life transformed. I love you, truly and deeply, and I want to spend the rest of my life cherishing every moment with you.”

Tears of joy streamed down my face. “I love you, Dillon.”

Amidst the applause and cheers from our friends, Dillon pulled out a small box from his pocket, revealing a stunning engagement ring with a rather large diamond.

“You’re fucking joking.” *There’s no way he’s serious.* I turned to look at my friends. “He’s not serious.”

“I’m very serious.” He gently grabbed my hands. “I love you. Will you marry me?”

“Of course.”

As he slipped it onto my finger, I knew this day would forever be etched in our hearts.

“I love you, Dillon, and I can’t wait to marry you.”

He kissed me, senselessly. “I can’t wait to marry you either.”

*Our love was like the color crimson— deep, passionate, and fiery.*

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## ***Dillon***

### **10 months later**

The sun had set, casting a warm, amber glow over our home. My day at the office had been an endless whirlwind of meetings, negotiations, and a constant stream of calls. Yet, despite the hustle and bustle, my thoughts were consumed by one thing—Azzaria, my future wife.

The memory of the proposal remained etched in my heart. I had spent weeks planning every detail, my nerves almost getting the best of me. She deserved nothing but the best, and so, I had called in a favor from a dear friend who could acquire the rarest of gems.

The 25-carat Graff diamond, with a price tag of \$6.4 million, was a symbol of my unwavering love and commitment. There was no price too high for the happiness of the woman who had captured my heart.

Every aspect of our new home was a testament to Azzaria’s remarkable architectural talent. She had carefully



designed the layout, making it a reflection of our shared dreams. As I opened the door and stepped inside, I was overcome with gratitude for having her by my side.

In the living room, she sat deep in thought. Her presence alone was enough to make the world stand still. I approached her and tenderly planted a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Hey, beautiful,” I whispered, my voice filled with affection. Her eyes met mine, sparkling with an unspoken connection. We began to share the details of our respective days, and I found myself engrossed in her stories. Azzaria had a way of making even the most mundane events seem fascinating. I listened

intently, savoring every word.

As we transitioned to discussing our future, every conversation felt like an intimate connection between our souls. We talked about our dreams, fears, and aspirations. She had a unique ability to make me feel understood and cherished.

When it was time for dinner, I decided to take the reins in the kitchen. I’ve always loved cooking, even more so now that I have someone to cook for. As I moved around the kitchen, a sense of warmth and fulfillment settled in.

She entered the kitchen, a twinkle in her eyes. “I love a man who can cook,” she remarked, her smile reflecting the love that we shared. She leaned in, our lips meeting in a tender kiss, a silent promise of our forever.

The scent of dinner filled the room, intensifying the feeling of togetherness. We sat down to eat, our laughter and sweet words providing the background melody to the evening.

“I have a gift for you.” My interest was officially peaked.

I stared at her, my heart racing with anticipation. She pulled a box from the dining room table and handed it to me.

As I opened it, my eyes widened in astonishment. Inside were three pregnancy tests, each with different dates, and a picture of an ultrasound. What took my breath away was the sight of not one but two little beings on that ultrasound.

“You’re pregnant,” I said, my eyes glistening with tears. “*We’re pregnant.*”

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I looked at her with sheer disbelief. “Twins?” I managed to utter, my voice filled with emotion.

She nodded, her excitement radiating. “Yes.”

I held her close, my heart swelling with an overwhelming sense of love and joy. “We’re having two. Twins.”

Azzaria went on to explain how she had kept this beautiful secret from me, unsure of the pregnancy at first. Her recounting was filled with details of her journey to confirm the news, and every word she shared deepened the wellspring of happiness within me. We were about to embark on the most incredible adventure together—*parenthood*.

I kissed her softly, feeling like the luckiest man on earth to have her as my partner and to be on the verge of starting a family. Our journey into parenthood was set to be remarkable, with her by my side.

“You’re erasing every bit of damage I’ve ever felt. Every pain caused. Everything bad that went wrong my past is leaving because of you. You are the love of my life,” I placed a kiss on her lips. “The reason I get to have the best family in the world. The reason my heart beats. The reason I’ve been a better person. And I can’t fucking wait to parent our children with you. I can’t wait to marry you and to be with you through it all. I love you and we both know that isn’t enough to express my thoughts, but it’s a good start.”

*She started crying. And I joined her. We were absolutely happy.*

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Our living room was alive with the warmth of friendship and the sound of laughter. We normally did the bi-weekly game and hang-out nights at each other’s houses and tonight’s game was at our house.

I've always loved to be alone and in my own space but ever since I've met my beautiful wife-to-be, I've appreciated the love and company of other people around me.

"This is really good," Abigail said, taking a bite of the chicken wrap. "Where'd you buy these?"

"I have a fiancé who can cook," Azzarria said.

Abigail rolled her eyes. "Dillon made these? Was I the only person who didn't know he could cook?"

Everyone said in unison, "yes."

She grabbed her glass of scotch and gulped it. "Wow." Passing the glass to Azzaria, she asked, "Here, want some?" Azzaria glanced at the amber liquid, her eyes reflecting the hesitation within her. Then she shook her head, her gaze locking onto Abigail's. "I can't drink."

Silence settled over the room for a moment. Arnoldo, sharp as ever, overheard Azzaria and couldn't help but question, "Why can't you drink?"

I jumped into her defense. "She doesn't want to drink tonight."

Simultaneously, the room filled with an electric atmosphere, and the collective gaze of our friends turned toward us. Lucio's eyes danced between Mikkel and me, trying to figure out what was happening.

Despite the unspoken understanding, Arnoldo pressed on, his curiosity evident. "No, no, no, she didn't say she doesn't want a drink, that would be different, she said she can't drink."

She rolled her eyes and groaned. "Is it ever that serious guys?"

"No way," Lucio chimed in, his voice filled with amazement as he looked at Mikkel.

Mikkel nodded with a hearty laugh. "Woah." Arnoldo raised an eyebrow. "What are they hiding?"

Lucio shared a knowing look with Ronan, who couldn't help but add, "Not possible."

Mara, my very unfiltered and loud sister stared with excitement and shock. She burst out, “You two are pregnant! You’re pregnant?”

I couldn’t contain my own excitement, my heart swelling with happiness. Our friends burst into exclamations, surprise and joy evident in their expressions.

Azzaria and I shared a loving look and nodded in unison. “Yes, we’re pregnant.”

“My best friend is pregnant,” Abigail said, tears streaming down her face. “I’m so happy for you two.” She clung her hands around Azzaria and they enveloped in a gentle hug.

“Just as I thought I was about to get out of being a Xander lawyer, there’s one more coming into the family,” Arnoldo said.

He’s such an asshole. But I knew he meant well.

I spoke up. “There’s two more coming in my family.”

Everyone looked up in shock. “You’re having twins?”

“We’re having twins.”

“I better start drafting the contract for the island he’s going to buy you as a push present.” Everyone started laughing but I wasn’t taking this for a joke. *That could actually be a good idea.*

I was happy and this, being here, was all we needed. I love our life and I love doing and going through life with her.

I’ve spent years upon years shying away from love. I’ve spent years telling myself it would be stupid of me to ever find love and I’ve spent half the time ignoring my feelings for her and the other half trying to control myself around her. And in the end, all those efforts failed and I’m so glad it did.

This was where I was meant to be with her. All the pain of my past and all the grief I felt were washed away the very second she entered my life.

My grandmother was definitely right: “*Pridie melius quam ultimo*” otherwise known as *the day ahead will always be*

*better than the last.*

# *Thank you*

*Dear Readers,*

*I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you for embarking on this literary journey with me. Writing this book has been a labor of love, my true passion project, and my book baby. Your support and enthusiasm mean the world to me.*

*I sincerely hope that you enjoyed reading my book as much as I enjoyed writing it. Your interest in my work is what fuels my creativity and inspires me to continue sharing stories from the depths of my heart.*

*If you have a moment, I would greatly appreciate your feedback. Sharing your thoughts and feelings about the book on platforms like Goodreads and the site where you purchased it can make a significant difference in reaching more readers.*

*For those who want to stay connected and receive updates about future projects, you can visit my website and sign up for the newsletter. It's the perfect way to ensure you're among the first to know about upcoming books, exclusive content, and more.*

*Once again, thank you for being a part of this incredible journey. Your support is the wind beneath my wings, and I can't wait to share more stories with you in the future.*

*With immense gratitude, Jada.*

# *Acknowledgment*

*In embarking on this journey of writing and bringing this book to life, there are several people who deserve my heartfelt gratitude and recognition. Their unwavering support and belief in me played a pivotal role in making this book a reality.*

*First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to the Almighty. It is through His grace that I found the strength, wisdom, and understanding to persevere in moments when I felt like giving up. His guiding hand has been ever-present, and I am profoundly thankful.*

*I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to my cousin, Jashawn, who has been my constant pillar of support throughout the writing of this book. He may not be aware of the story's contents, but he has always been there to listen to my passionate ramblings, share in my joys and sorrows, and encourage me to persevere when I felt like giving up. His unwavering faith and love have been one of the driving forces behind this journey, and I am immensely grateful for his presence in my life. I love you, Sa, Sa, more than words can convey.*

*To my beloved grandmother, Joy, and my cherished mother,*

*Jay-Ann, your unwavering belief in me has been my greatest source of motivation. When I first shared my aspiration to write, your encouragement and relentless push forward were the sparks that ignited my creative flame. Your belief in me has carried me through the toughest of times, and your love has been the foundation upon which I built this book. I am forever indebted to you for your immeasurable love and support.*

*A special mention goes to my sister and best friend, Reggina. From day one, you stood by my side, pushing me to pursue this dream. Even when I wavered and contemplated discarding the entire idea, you were there with unwavering support and*

*endless encouragement. Your belief in my abilities has been a guiding light, and I am grateful to have you as my sister and confidante.*

*I must also express my gratitude to the talented cover artist and interior book designer who brought my vision to life. Your belief in my work and your artistry resulted in the most amazing cover and interior formatting. Working with you was a genuine pleasure, and I am thrilled with the result.*

*To my dedicated beta readers, I am deeply appreciative of the time and effort you invested in reading and providing invaluable feedback. Your insights have been instrumental in shaping this book and improving the narrative. I thank you for your contribution.*

*A heartfelt thanks also goes to my book editor, Mera. Your meticulous attention to detail and expert guidance in refining the manuscript have been indispensable in making this book the best version of itself.*

*To all those who have supported me in this journey, whether mentioned here or not, I am eternally thankful for your belief in my work. Your presence in my life has made this achievement possible.*

*With immense gratitude, Jada.*



## *About the author*



Introducing the remarkable Jada West, a 19-year-old Jamaican author with a passion for psychology, literary arts, and culinary delights. Jada's writing is a delightful blend of humor and heart, promising a literary journey that will have you grinning from ear to ear. Get ready to be enchanted by her unique storytelling, where laughter and love intertwine, all orchestrated by the talented Jada West.

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# *Coming soon*

Timeless Love Series Book 2

## **Before Dawn - Abigail & Mikkel**

In the bustling city, Abigail-Ann Fearon's life takes an unexpected turn as she grapples with the complexities of her long-standing relationship with Joshua, her high school sweetheart. Returning to the urban jungle with her best friend, Azzaria, Abigail struggles to find her footing in a world where nothing is as it seems.

Haunted by a past filled with betrayal and hidden agendas, Abigail's world is shaken to its core when she crosses paths with Mikkel Suarez, the tall and enigmatic Hispanic gentleman who happens to be the driver and confidant of the city's most mysterious figure, Dillon Xander.

Mikkel, a man with a seemingly uncomplicated life and no time for commitment, spots Abigail in a crowded club one fateful night. Their brief encounter leaves an indelible mark on him, and fate conspires to bring them together again at the airport. As he endeavors to get closer to her, Mikkel discovers her true identity – she is the best friend of his boss's girlfriend and she has a boyfriend. But that should stop him? Right.

'Before Dawn' is an enchanting love story that unfolds as Abigail and Mikkel find themselves at the intersection of destiny and desire. Together, they navigate a world of unexpected connections, hidden passions, and undeniable chemistry, realizing that sometimes, love happens when you least expect it. But nothing is ever as easy as it seems.