

ETERNALLY YOURS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KENYA WRIGHT

Eternally Yours by Kenya Wright © 2023

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This book is dedicated to the KW Patrons,

As I write this dedication, I am reminded of the timeless nature of our connection. Just like a time loop, our bond transcends the confines of a linear timeline.

Your unwavering support has provided me with the opportunity to revisit and improve my craft. You have given me the gift of time, allowing me to hone my skills, **experiment** with new ideas, and grow as an artist.

And I want to give a SPECIAL THANKS to my Diamond Divas:

L. Nichols N. Chatman T. Cleaver S. Cohen

C. Carbon A. Burgett A. Hush T. Paten



The **bad news** is
time flies.

The **good news** is
YOU'RE the pilot.

–Michael
Altshuler

Prologue

I Remember

I remembered the first time I was murdered,
and then the second,
and third,
and all the other times after those.
Over and over.
Again and again.
The blood spilling out of me.
The pain seeping into my bones.
The terror gripping my heart.
The unbearable agony drowning my soul.
The darkness swallowing me whole.
And then,
he changed everything.

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Chapter 1

The Invitation

A week before shit got crazy

Tick. Tock.

That damn clock!

Crawling on the floor, I couldn't help but be annoyed by the incessant ticking of the clock on the wall. It seemed as if every second was amplified, each tick-tock ringing in my ears and distracting me from finding my lost manuscript that had decided to hide somewhere in my office.

Tick. Tock.

I tried to focus on the task at hand, but the constant ticking of the clock made it difficult to concentrate.

Tick. Tock.

Instead of thinking about where the manuscript could be, I found myself crawling around and counting down the seconds, each tick-tock a reminder of the time slipping away.

There was never enough time to complete everything.

Tick. Tock.

I jumped up from the floor and did my best to forget about the damn clock.

Under the desk? No. Over by the shelf? No. I already checked there.

I rushed around my messy office, searching for the manuscript that I was supposed to finish revising weeks ago. "Come on. Where are you?"

Tick. Tock.

I stumbled over a pile of notebooks and banged my knee on the edge of my desk. "Goddamn it."

Silent, my new assistant, Shi adjusted her glasses and stayed near the doorway and out of my way. She was a beautiful Chinese woman with long, silky black hair and round, deep-set brown eyes that always sparkled with curiosity. Her delicate features were accentuated by her grace and poise, and since hiring her two weeks ago, she had always carried herself with quiet confidence.

Which was why I hated being an absolute crazy mess around her.

Tick. Tock.

“That’s it. I’m taking that damn clock off to wall!” I rubbed my knee and stumbled over to my back. “Enough. What sort of high-tech speaker is in this damn clock where it has to tick and tock so loud?”

Shi began to step into the office. “Maya, I can take the clock down for you—”

“No. No.” Determined, I hurried over. “It would be my pleasure. The only reason why I kept it up was because my mother gave it to me.”

Tick. Tock.

I glared at the clock. A portrait of a black Jesus Christ had been painted in the center. The clock’s black hands held mini bibles and loudly ticked away the seconds.

Sorry, Mom. But I just can’t...

Tick. Tock.

Shi spoke, “That’s nice that your mother bought you a clock.”

“Mom thought it would be a nice reminder of how Jesus will always be there for me.” I grabbed the sides and yanked the clock off the wall. “She forgets I write sexy romance for a living. Here I am on a typical day writing how a heroine is in a sex club witnessing a five person orgy scene with cum shooting all over the place and there goes Jesus right over my shoulder tick tocking. Now, I’m getting ashamed, cleaning up

some of the cum in the chapter, and taking away a few of the cocks so that the story is a bit more respectable in *His* eyes.”

Shi chuckled.

“I’m sorry, Jesus.” I kissed the front of the clock, headed over to Shi, and gave it to her. “Tell Helen to put this in storage and only bring it out when I let her know my mother is coming over. Then, Helen is to wipe the clock off and put it in my office, making it look like it has been there the whole time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Shi placed it in the hall against the wall.

Thankfully, I could hear the ticking less from there.

I rushed back over to finish the hunt for my manuscript and bumped the same knee on the other side of the desk.

“Shit.”

Shi adjusted her black glasses. “Are you okay, Maya?”

“Just fucking awesome.” I rubbed my injured knee and limped over to the bookshelf. “I’m sorry. Let’s get back to multi-tasking. Go ahead and continue with next month’s schedule.”

“Are you sure? Maybe, I can help you find the manuscript.”

“No worries. It’s here somewhere.”

Is it?

I’d never been known for my organizational skills. Shelves full of books, notepads, and paintings lined all four walls. Every corner of my desk displayed anything one could imagine a store sold in their stationary department—millions of pens, pencils, highlighters, erasers, post-its, washi tape, staplers, and a shit ton of empty notebooks.

I was a papyrophiliac.

In other words a stationery addict.

I couldn’t start writing a new book without buying three shiny new notebooks that I probably would never use. I

couldn't walk by an aisle of pens and not grab five, even though I had more than enough at home.

Therefore, my office was a wonderland of paper, stacked in towers and piles throughout the space.

"Alrighty. I'll continue." Shi turned the page of the calendar. "And on the 6th you have two book signings."

I don't have time for that shit. What about my zombies?

I let out a long sigh, lowered to my knees, and began looking under my desk. "What times are the book signings?"

"One is at 4:00 pm at the Story Keeper. The other is 8:00 pm at the Cozy Bookworm. However, you also have a meeting with your agent, Horace at 6:00 pm at Sunshine Cafe." Shi cleared her throat. "All of the locations are at least an hour's distance from each other. Do you want me to reschedule the meeting with your agent to a café closer to the Cozy Bookworm so you won't be late for the last book signing?"

"No. Just cancel the meeting with Horace."

"My understanding is that this will be your fourth time canceling."

Ass in the air and halfway under my desk, I pushed around crumpled balls of paper. "I need to start writing *Zombie Love*. I've been dying to finally get into it. Cancel the agent meeting. Horace will be fine."

To my shock, Horace's voice boomed in the room. "Actually, I will not be fine with another cancel."

"What?" I lifted up and hit my head against the desk's bottom. Pain bit at the top of my head. "Shit."

Horace continued, "And, Maya, I thought I had convinced you to not write, *Zombie Love*?"

I slid out from under my desk, sat on the floor, and rubbed my head.

Horace eyed me silently with that ridiculous knowing smirk on his face. He had dark brown skin and short-cut black hair. Today, he wore a designer blue suit with a pink shirt and

floral tie. His husband, Ryan used to be the city's top stylist and always made sure Horace was impeccably dressed before leaving the house.

In Horace's right hand, he held a brown leather briefcase.

In the left, he gripped several pages and a pen. That was the hand he used to gesture in the hallway. "Why is there a ticking image of Jesus out here?"

"It's a clock from my mother."

"But why is it in the hallway?"

"Because it's loud as hell and I'm having my maid put it up." I quirked my brows. "What are you doing here?"

"Good afternoon to you too, Maya." Horace went over to my desk, pushed a few notebooks to the side, and placed the pages he'd been holding on my desk. "You still haven't signed three audiobook contracts. When were you planning to get that done, during the zombie apocalypse?"

"I was getting to it." I took my time getting up from the floor. "I'm searching for *The Secret Garden of Love*."

Horace raised one hand in the air. "You haven't sent that manuscript to the publisher yet?"

"I was getting to it."

"Getting to what?"

"The revisions."

"Jesus!" He placed his hand on his forehead. "You haven't even revised it yet? No wonder the advance hasn't come in."

"I was really getting to it."

Shi gave me a sad smile. "Perhaps, I can rush off and print another copy of *The Secret Garden of Love*, and we can finish going over your schedule later today?"

"Thanks." I let out a long breath. "Shi, can you grab me some packs of paper too. I need some."

"Are you insane? You don't need any more paper." Horace gestured to the stacks of unopened copy paper in the back

corner. “And I thought you hired a fulltime maid?”

“I did. I just told you that she’s getting the clock out of the hallway.”

“Okay, but when is she going to clean the office?”

I headed over to Horace and hugged him. “Stop being judgmental, and where’s my coffee?”

He hugged me back. “I’m too busy for a coffee break with you. I have to get back to the office early today.”

I let go of him. “Anyway, the maid can’t come in here.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want things to get lost. It’s a mess, but for now, I know where everything is.”

“Yet, you can’t find a thick, printed-out manuscript.”

“Well, I’m missing a few things.”

“Unbelievable.” Horace extended his hand holding the pen and gestured to the contract. “Come on, Miss Bestseller. Time to make more money.”

“Things were less hectic when I was a broke and struggling writer.” I grabbed the pen and leaned over.

“I know you’re not complaining.”

Sighing, I began putting my initials on the designated areas of the first contract.

Horace watched me. “You want to go back to those days of cheese sandwiches and a roach-filled studio apartment with a homeless man named John Boy who would sleep outside your front window and pee into the street every morning?”

“Hell no.”

“Then, stop complaining.”

“Yes, sir.” I checked for more places to initial.

Horace gestured behind him. “How’s the new assistant doing?”

“I’m glad I hired her.”

“Me too.”

“She’s steadily getting my shit in order.”

“It’s about time you had someone helping you out.”

Horace flipped over the contract’s first page and pointed to the next place for me to initial. “If you try to fire her or the maid, then I will protest.”

“I bet you will.” I finished initialing there.

Horace went to the third page. “Back to the fact that you do not need to write *Zombie Love*.”

“Oh, here we go.” I let out a loud breath. “Stifling my artistry.”

“Zombies are absolutely not *in* anymore. No one reads or cares about them.”

“But, *I* love zombies.”

“It would be a complete waste of time to write a zombie romance.”

I went to the next contract. “But, it’s my passion project. I told you I’m going to start writing more things I’m passionate about this year, versus the books that I know will sell.”

“Writing books that sell are why you just moved in this huge three-bedroom house with a chef, maid, and now assistant.”

I rolled my eyes. “But—”

“Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Johnson. A package just came in for you.” Shi hurried into my office with a medium-sized black box in her hands. “I was just on my way out to print the manuscript when I bumped into two men in black suits delivering it.”

“Two guys in suits?” Horace quirked his brows. “The mailman didn’t bring it?”

“No, sir.” Shi set the box on the desk.

“Why do you have to go print the manuscript?” Horace pointed to my printer in the back. “Why not use that one over

there?”

Shi and I spoke in unison, “It’s broken.”

“That’s the fifth printer this year, Maya.” Horace chuckled. “What are you doing to these machines?”

“Stop judging me.” I set the pen down and put my attention on the box. “Shi, did the men say who it was from?”

“They didn’t.” Shi picked up scissors stuck between two books and handed them to me. “All they said was that I was supposed to give this box to Ms. Maya Johnson.”

I cut through the black box with the scissors. Once it was open, I moved the flaps to the side and looked inside.

A 3D wooden heart rested in the center. It must have been four inches high and eight inches wide. There were tiny wooden pieces cut into the top. Each piece had a different number. The numbers went from one to fifteen but were all out of order. The pieces looked like they could be moved around the heart, but I wasn’t sure.

I lifted the wooden heart out of the box. “What is this?”

“Honestly.” Horace leaned his head to the side. “It looks like some sort of 3D puzzle.”

“Why would someone send me a puzzle?” I raised the wooden heart high and felt something shaking within the wood. “I think there’s something inside of it.”

Horace studied the heart. “Hmmm. Maybe, press on those numbered pieces to open it.”

I placed the wooden heart on the desk. “Who would send me something like this?”

Horace grinned. “Do you have a secret admirer?”

“When do I have the time to talk to anybody, but you, Helen, and now Shi?” I touched the piece numbered one and tested it out, seeing if I could move it. The piece slid to the left, giving a tiny space for the other numbers to slip into a new position.

I blinked. “This *is* some sort of puzzle.”

“Maya, you know you really should take a break when you can.” Horace crossed his arms over his chest. “When’s the last time Claire and you had a girl’s night?”

“I’ve been busy this year.”

“No dating either?”

“Not one date.”

“How are you going to write romance when you’re not getting any romance?”

“I’m getting to it.”

“No sex is why you want to write about zombies. Your vagina is probably dead.”

“Wow. I’m going to ignore that.” I slipped the piece numbered three to the right and all the other numbers moved to the left. “What am I supposed to do with this damned heart? I don’t get it.”

“I think it is one of those sliding puzzles. I believe you should put the numbers in order.” Shi gestured to the top. “I love puzzles like this. In order to master one of these, you have to solve them in sections.”

I looked up at her. “Sections?”

“Yes. The trick is to solve one corner and then move on to the next.” She touched the number one and slid it back. Then, began moving other pieces around so that the number two was next to it. “Like this.”

I rolled my eyes and grabbed my pen. “I don’t have time for a puzzle today, and I absolutely have no idea who sent this.”

Shi chuckled. “I can solve it for you if you are okay with that?”

“No need. I’m done with it.” I returned to initialing parts on the new contract.

“But, you have to solve the heart puzzle, Maya.” Horace went next to Shi. “Whomever it is had two men deliver it. He could have lots of money.”

Sighing, I flipped to the contract's last page and signed at the bottom line. "Alright give me the last contract."

Horace frowned. "A secret admirer with money means a great financial opportunity."

"I'm a romance author, Horace. I believe in *love* being the reason you have a relationship with someone, not the size of their bank account."

"Yet, a big bank account never hurts, and some of the top-selling romances surround billionaires." Horace chuckled. "Don't get it twisted, Maya. Broke heroes usually don't top the charts."

Shi fiddled with the heart puzzle some more and placed the number three piece next to the one and two. "Oh yeah. I can totally solve this."

"Sure, and then after that, please go print off the manuscript." I handed Horace the contract and put my attention on the last one. "Anyway, *Zombie Love* could breathe life back into the paranormal romance genre—"

"That genre is a sinking ship, my dear." He shook his head. "You might as well write a western romance, if you truly want to waste your time and not make money."

"Paranormal romance isn't a sinking ship—"

"Contemporary romance is where it's at right now. And the richer and darker the better. I'm talking billionaires with secret BDSM rooms in their luxury condos. And don't forget the soft kidnappings—"

"Soft kidnappings?" I quirked my brows.

"You know what I'm talking about. No duct tape or handcuffs, but she's totally trapped on the yacht with the hot alpha."

"I can write a soft kidnapping after *Zombie Love*."

Horace touched his chest. "Maya, before me, were you selling books?"

I frowned. "No."

“Have I given you good advice?”

“At times.”

“At times? Give me a break.” He gestured around. “This house proves that my advice makes you money. This is why I get thousands of queries daily from writers trying to get me to read their new manuscript and sign them to my agency.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “This is true, but you’re not giving *Zombie Love* a chance. You never even asked what it is about.”

Horace rolled his eyes. “Zombie heroes aren’t selling. Honestly, I can’t think of a time when someone raved about a zombie hero.”

I turned to Shi. “Would you like to hear about *Zombie Love*?”

Smiling, Shi slid more pieces around on the heart. “I sure would.”

“Thank you, Shi.” I grinned. “Let me tell you all about it.”

“Oh, God.” Horace rolled his eyes again.

I dangled the pen in the air. “So a zombie outbreak occurs across the world—”

“Here we go.” Horace leaned on the edge of the desk. “Already, I can see both our bank accounts dwindling.”

“Whatever.” I turned back to Shi as she continued to mess with the heart puzzle. “There are barely any humans left in the world. And my heroine, Olivia is a hopeless romantic who must now navigate the dating scene of the undead—”

“Which is ridiculous.” Horace gathered up the contracts. “No one is thinking about dating during a zombie apocalypse. It makes no sense.”

“It makes sense when I write it. Anyway, Olivia is now mainly dating zombies.”

“Oh.” Shi blinked. “Because the zombies can speak?”

“They have more consciousness and control than your typical zombies.” I winked. “Anyway, she’s dating all types of now undead guys. From a gorgeous zombie who can’t remember his own name to the zombies who really crave brains instead of love. Eventually, she finds this special zombie hero in the zombie apocalypse who—”

“No one is buying that, and I mean that with so much love. No. One.” Horace glanced at the heart puzzle. “Now on to more interesting things. Are you almost done with that heart puzzle, Shi?”

“Yep. It was actually pretty simple.” Shi slipped the piece numbered fifteen next to the fourteen.

A click sounded.

The top of the heart opened.

All three of us leaned over and looked.

A red envelope lay inside.

My name was written in gold on top of it.

“Oh my. We have a romantic mystery happening in real-time.” Horace smiled. “This is getting interesting.”

I picked up the envelope, opened the back, and pulled out a thick, white card covered in gold letters. “This is exquisite stationary. Heavy and with the loveliest tactile feel—”

“Are you going to masturbate to the card? Or are you going to read it?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Come on. The suspense is killing me, Maya.” Horace held out his hands. “What does it say?”

I read the words out loud. “**You are cordially invited to attend *The Annual Vanderbilt Masquerade Gala*, hosted by Ethan Vanderbilt at Ravenswood Manor.**”

“Oh.” Horace leaned in closer. “And the plot thickens.”

I read more. “**Join us for an evening of elegance, delicious food, fine wine, and live entertainment.**”

Horace grinned. “Ethan Vanderbilt invited you to his Gala.”

I set the card down. “It’s next week, but I’m booked with interviews, signings, and—”

“You will cancel whatever you need to.” Horace wagged his finger. “This is a major opportunity that you must seize.”

“Oh really?”

“For one, Vanderbilt did *a lot* to invite you.” Horace touched his chest. “For Ryan and me, all he did was mail us an invitation. Meanwhile, two men delivered yours in a puzzle box, and a heart-shaped one at that.”

“Why would he do that for me?”

“He probably likes you.”

“But, I don’t even know him—”

“Yet, he clearly wants to get to know you.” Horace rubbed his hands together. “Oh, this is excellent. Money. Money. Money.”

“Calm down, Horace.”

“Don’t you want to eventually start your charity organization for underprivileged kids, HeArt—healing through art?”

“True.”

Shi pulled out her phone and began typing in it.

Horace tapped on the invitation. “This will be the key to getting money for your charity. Vanderbilt is a big philanthropist. He loves giving money to the downtrodden and needy. That’s the whole reason for this Gala. The wealthy come together at his manor for his famous silent auction full of extravagant things—luxury trips, yachts, and priceless art. He gets them to give out tons of money. Then, everyone gets absolutely blasted and dances the night away.”

I tapped my fingers on the desk. “I don’t know. I’m busy for the next few months. Summer’s coming soon and that means summer book sales and tons of promoting.”

“You’re going.” Horace pointed at me. “Think of HeArt.”

If Horace was ever going to convince me to do something that didn’t deal with writing, then that would be it.

My single mother had raised me in a low-income neighborhood. She worked two jobs—cleaning people’s houses during the day and being a part-time 911 dispatcher at night. She didn’t have much money, but every week no matter what, she brought a new book home and we would read it together.

From her, I learned that one could escape the horror of their surroundings with a good book.

Additionally, it was my English teacher, Mrs. Snell who was also dedicated to my educational growth and introduced me to the joys of writing.

If it weren’t for Mrs. Snell and my mother, only God knew where I would be.

Later, I went to college and worked as a librarian afterward. I never gave up my love for reading and writing.

Finally, at thirty, I wrote my first book and grabbed Horace as my agent. He sold it in a year to a big publisher. By then, I’d written another novel that he sold too.

Five years passed, and I had twenty books published, hit the bestseller’s lists for several publications, and earned many awards.

I even retired my mother from both jobs and bought her a little house in a nice part of town overlooking the ocean.

But, I still didn’t feel like I had truly reached the success I craved.

I wanted to give back to others, to use my financial power to help the people in my old neighborhood. Money could do a lot—improve living conditions and provide job opportunities. It could change the lives of many.

I just needed that one book that propelled me to the top, that got me a movie or TV deal and *real* royalty checks.

Or...Vanderbilt could help...

“You have to do it, Maya.” Horace rubbed his hands again. “Ethan Vanderbilt is *old* money, and there’s clearly a reason why he invited you.”

“Wow.” Shi showed me her phone. “This is him.”

I glanced at the picture.

Damn.

Ethan Vanderbilt’s handsomeness was undeniable. In this picture, he wore a fine-tailored black suit with a white shirt and lusty red tie. His face was clean-shaven. His chiseled features could have been cut from marble. His short brown hair was stylishly tousled back.

He looked to be a tall man. I guessed a little over six feet tall. His shoulders were broad, his jaw square, and his skin a tanned olive color. He was handsome in a way that told me he was definitely born to money and power, and due to that took excellent care of himself.

“Well,” I had to admit. “He is not bad to look at.”

Shi slid her finger across the screen.

Other pictures showed Ethan mingling with famous actors and celebrities. I even spotted a picture of him with the Prince of England.

And he sent this heart puzzle to me? Why? How the hell does he know me?

For some reason, this all made me nervous. I wasn’t accustomed to catching the attention of men, but definitely not one of his caliber.

I twisted my lips to the side. “I could go for a little bit and then get back to the house to write.”

“Or you could take the night off and have some fun.” Horace picked up the invitation. “It says you can bring someone. Very interesting. Is he wondering if you have someone to bring? Is it a test?”

I turned to Shi. “Do you want to go?”

Shock hit her face. “Me?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “It’s either you or my mother—”

“Please, not your mother.” Horace waved my comment away. “I love your mother, but she’ll spend the whole night talking about Jesus and really dampening the fabulous effects of expensive alcohol.”

I glanced at the invitation in his hand. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“You must.” Horace placed it back on the desk. “In fact, I’ll be your ride. I already rented a limousine to take Ryan and me. We had your bestie, Claire coming along with us. Her and her unnecessarily filthy rich husband.”

“When did Claire and you get close?”

“When you began putting your work before your friends, and ignoring us for the tip tapping of your keyboard.”

I groaned in annoyance.

“You’re coming.” He pointed at me. “It will be fun. Let’s make it an elegant group affair. I’ll call Claire up to let her know. And then you can bring Shi, so he will know for sure that you are not taken, but you’re a bit married to your work.”

“How does that show I’m married to my work?”

“Bringing your assistant as your date is a classic symbol of being a workaholic.”

“Oh well.” I gazed back down at the invitation. “I am what I am, and it is what it is.”

Horace clapped his hands. “And now back to business. I say hell no to *Zombie Love*, and yes to a new book with a billionaire softly kidnapping an unknowing woman who is in need of an escape. Give me 90,000 words of excellence, and lots of steam, and please don’t forget the happily ever after. During the epilogue, I want to cry tears of joy for the extremely fortunate couple.”

I let out a long breath. “Fine.”

“Yes!” Horace clapped and then leaned his head to the side. “Can you hear that, Maya?”

“Hear what?”

He held up his hands. “All that money coming in.”

I rolled my eyes. “Shi, I need some new notebooks for this soft kidnapping billionaire romance.”

“But, do you?” Horace chuckled. “I’m literally staring at ten blank notebooks you can use.”

“I still need more.”

She bobbed her head and headed away. “More notebooks, paper, and print out the manuscript. I’ve got it.”

I called after her, “And, don’t forget that you’re coming with me. You’re my plus one. You’ll need a dress...and a mask. I guess.”

“Yes, Ms. Johnson.” She left the office.

“Okay. I’m out.” Horace headed away. “Don’t forget, Maya. *Soft* kidnapping. Not hard. A little like the bodice rippers. Forced, but with a butler, yacht, and diamonds. That makes it different.”

I frowned. “And then after this *soft* kidnapping, I’m writing *Zombie Love*.”

“We’ll see. You may be drowning in so much money you may not be able to find your laptop to write it.”

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Chapter 2

The Night of the Party

The sun began to set.

My phone buzzed.

I checked the text.

Claire: We're coming around the corner.

I can't believe I'm doing this.

I placed my phone back in my purse and headed out of my house.

I had to admit that I felt a bit ridiculous in the expensive purple gown and matching mask. The gown was made of fine silk and soft to the touch. The neckline plunged into a V, cut low enough to show off my cleavage, but not too much. The skirt flared out at my hips and then spilled down my legs.

For an event like this, I should have picked black or white, but I loved this color so much.

Purple was a mixture of the calm stability of blue and the fierce energy of red. Due to that, in some ways purple represented transformation. And because of its historical association with ancient monarchs, purple definitely was the color of royalty.

And I wanted to feel royal tonight—like I belonged among rich folk, like I was meant to be there mingling.

Plus, something in my heart told me I had to wear it. I was big on trusting my heart when it came to things that made me nervous.

I'm really doing this.

The only accessory I wore was a purple mask that covered my forehead, around my eyes and even my nose. Brilliant, clear gems swirled and dipped along the purple and gold.

I put on minimal make-up because I barely knew my way around a powder brush and contour kit. It was better for me to keep it simple, than show up looking like an absolute clown.

My lips were painted a deep shade of wine.

A large limo turned into my driveway. It had a gleaming black finish and white tires.

I tightened my grip on my clutch. “Here we go.”

The limo stopped in front of me.

Fast, the driver jumped out and hurried over to my side. “Good evening, Ms. Johnson.”

“Good evening to you too.”

He opened the door.

Laughter instantly greeted me.

At least everyone is in a great mood. This will be fun.

I slowly entered the vehicle, making sure my purple gown didn't get too wrinkled.

The limo's interior was just as polished as the exterior—long white leather seats and sparkling chrome finishes.

The first person I spotted was Shi and headed in her direction. When she showed up to work as my assistant, she usually had on a simple white top with plain black pants, tonight she dazzled in a sparkling red dress. It beautifully clung to her petite frame. A red mask covered her entire face, but I could see her eyes shining in the dim lighting. “Hello, Ms. Johnson.”

I grinned. “I'm not your boss tonight. I'm your date. Call me, Maya.”

She chuckled. “Okay, Maya.”

I settled in and spotted my two friends and their spouses.

Elegant masks obscured their faces and almost made me feel like I was surrounded by strangers.

Holding a glass of champagne, my bestie Claire sat on the other side of the limo, right next to her husband, Bernard. She

wore a green gown that I knew was a design by Coco Chanel because Claire never wore any other designer. A mask made of shiny emeralds covered the upper half of her face. The green went perfectly with her dark brown skin. Tonight, her black hair was pulled up into a bun.

One would have thought that her husband Bernard would be matching with her this evening. Claire was usually very serious about how they looked together as a couple. Instead, Bernard wore a black suit with a bright orange tie and an orange mask that also covered the upper half of his face.

Chuckling, Claire watched me get in. “You look breathtaking, Maya.”

“Thank you.”

“Bubbles.” Claire elbowed her husband’s protruding belly. “Tell her how amazing she looks.”

“Oh.” Bernard bobbed his head. “Yes. Yes. Maya, you look good enough to eat.”

Claire parted her lips. “What?”

“Well.” His pale white face tinted red. “I mean beautiful.”

I took no offense. Bernard was the top food critic in the city and loved to call non-food related things yummy, tasty, and delicious. Anyone opening a restaurant and wanting notoriety always invited Bernard to come. When he blogged about a restaurant or put it on his food show, the spot ended up needing a waiting list by the next month due to being so crowded.

Claire let out a long breath. “What will I do with you, Bubbles?”

Bernard blinked. “I’m sorry, Maya.”

“No. No.” I sat in my seat. “That’s fine. By the way, you both look great.”

Further down the polished leather seat, Horace poured a glass of champagne. “You want some liquid courage, Maya?”

I crossed my legs. “No, I’m good.”

It was no shock that Horace wore a money-green suit with a gold and green mask.

Meanwhile, his husband Ryan had on a gray designer suit and black shoes that matched his black purse. A beaded black mask covered his entire face. His long blond hair was pulled up into a tight bun, and his black nails were long and perfectly manicured.

As usual, Ryan didn't speak to me or gaze in my direction. I never knew when or how I had offended him, but I must have done something. It just seemed like the man never liked me. And that was crazy being that the fifteen percent that Horace earned for all of my deals had kept them living the good life and allowed Ryan to eventually stop styling.

The driver closed the door.

Horace handed the glass of champagne to his husband. "Remember, honey. Take your time with the drinks this evening."

Ryan rolled his eyes, pulled the mask up enough for his lips to touch the glass, and took a long gulp.

Horace cleared his throat and gazed at me. "You do look amazing, Maya. I hope you dazzle Ethan Vanderbilt."

"What? Hold on, Maya. Am I missing something? I know you didn't leave anything out." Claire pouted. "What's this? *Dazzle* Ethan Vanderbilt?"

I waved Horace's comment away. "He's making a big thing out of nothing."

The limo began to move.

Horace poured another glass of champagne. "Maya didn't tell you, Claire?"

"Tell me what?"

"That Vanderbilt went to great lengths to invite her."

I held up one hand. "Hold up. It was just an invitation inside of a heart puzzle."

“What?” Claire frowned. “You never told me any of that. You just said that he sent an invitation—”

“Delivered by two men and in this elaborate wooden 3D heart with a puzzle on top.” Horace winked. “I’m just wondering what Ethan was trying to say to you, Maya.”

“I don’t think we should make a big deal out of this.”

Claire’s frown deepened. “Why would Ethan Vanderbilt send *Maya* a heart?”

Bernard shrugged. “I think the gesture was quite smashing.”

Claire gazed at Horace. “Does Ethan even know Maya?”

“I have no idea.” Horace poured another glass of champagne and set the bottle in a silver ice bucket placed within the door. “All I know is that I am going to make sure Ethan and Maya are very close this evening.”

Claire turned and scowled at me. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me that part.”

“Because it wasn’t a big deal.”

Claire touched her chest. “Vanderbilt just delivered our invitation in the mail.”

“It really isn’t a big deal.” I shrugged. “Horace is just blowing it all out of proportion.”

“Damn right I am.” Horace took a sip of his champagne. “My top and most important client has caught the interest of the city’s mega billionaire. All I can hear is cha-ching, cha-ching.”

“There is more to life than money.” Ryan took his mask fully off and finished the rest of his champagne in one long gulp.

I blinked.

Once done, Ryan handed the glass to Horace. “I would like some more.”

Horace gave him a tense smile. “You don’t need anymore.”

Ryan kept the glass in front of him. “Still. I want more. So...go ahead.”

Horace continued to smile, but his eyes said that he was getting annoyed.

Claire grabbed my attention. “But, Maya, have you ever met Ethan?”

“No.”

“Then, how would he even know about you?”

“Girl, I don’t know.”

Bernard shrugged. “Perhaps, he’s a fan of Maya’s romances.”

“Ethan Vanderbilt does not read romance.” Claire dismissed him with one flick of her hand. “It must be something else.”

“Horace, if you’re not going to pour my champagne then I will.” Ryan began to get up.

“Alright. Alright.” Horace grabbed the bottle. “Since it is *that* serious.”

“It is.” Ryan crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m just so confused.” Claire held out her hands. “I’ve sent Ethan tons of invitations to our yearly Christmas dinner, ski trips, Halloween galas, everything. And not one response. So rude.”

Bernard gave her a weak smile. “Darling, I’m sure Ethan is a busy man.”

Horace handed his husband a half-filled glass of champagne. “Here you go...*honey*.”

Ryan pointed at it. “Keep pouring...*honey*.”

Horace scowled. “Really? I think that is quite enough in the glass.”

“And I don’t think it is enough.” Ryan extended his hand. “Please pour, or you could just give me the bottle.”

Groaning in annoyance, Horace poured more.

“I mean he didn’t even respond to my invitation for the adult Easter egg hunt.” Claire shook her head. “Yet, Ethan goes completely out of his way to invite *Maya* to this Gala?”

“Well, honey, she is an up-and-coming celebrity in this city.” Bernard smiled.

Claire rolled her eyes. “Oh really?”

I sighed.

This was my best friend. I’d known her since college. We had our good times together, and we also had our bad times. When things went bad, it usually meant that she was not the center of attention.

At parties, Claire talked loudly, interrupted others that she guessed were more charming, and always told these outrageous exaggerated stories about herself. At times she would even overreact to a situation and create unnecessary drama to draw the spotlight to herself.

It could be exhausting to be around her.

At times, I would end our friendship, needing a break.

Soon, she would return with tears in her eyes, holding some gift in her hand to apologize. And, I would be reminded of her good qualities. She was fun, had a good heart, and more important, she had always been there for me when I needed her.

Claire lifted her hand and ran her fingers through her hair. “I just don’t get what’s going on with Ethan these days. Perhaps, he’s on drugs or something.”

Bernard chuckled. “You think Ethan must be on drugs to send Maya an invitation?”

Claire shrugged. “Something is going on with him.”

I leaned Shi’s way. “Sorry for having you sit in on the most uncomfortable and awkward ride in history.”

“Oh no. This is fine.” Shi grinned. “I’m pretty excited.”

“And entertained.” I kept my voice low. “Welcome to my dysfunctional friends.”

Shi chuckled. “Thank you for inviting me.”

Horace handed his husband a now full glass of champagne and tapped the divider to signal the driver. “Hey there. Can we get some music going?”

“Yes. Music.” Bernard nodded. “That sounds like a tasty idea.”

Claire let out a loud sigh. “Seriously, Bubbles.”

Suddenly, music blasted from the speakers. It was the Michael Jackson song called, *Remember the Time*?

We all began to sway with the beat.

Then, Michael Jackson began singing about a relationship that had ended.

“Yes. I love M.J.” Claire now in a better mood, gestured at me and pointed to her green purse. “I have a special something in here to relax us this evening. Just let me know at the Gala when you want to go out and have a *break*.”

Smirking, I shook my head.

Although a prissy designer princess, Claire loved marijuana and all things related to it. At any major event or gala, she would disappear outside behind a bush or building to get a few whiffs of a thick joint.

I waved my hand. “I am not smoking tonight. You know it makes me super paranoid.”

“You must.” Claire snapped her fingers to the song. “It will be so much fun. Just like the old days when we were in college —”

“And I was high and making a fool of myself.” I shook my head. “No way.”

“I agree.” Horace raised his voice over the music. “Maya must be an elegant and captivating lady this evening—”

“Horace, I’m only staying for an hour or so—”

“No. No, Maya.” Horace held up both hands. “At least give Ethan two hours. There’s the silent auction and dancing

—”

“Ah!” Somehow Ryan dropped the glass. Champagne stained the front of his gray pants. The glass tumbled along the floor.

Horace glared at him. “Are you serious right now?”

The chorus came in and M.J. asked if the other person remembered all the good times they had, when they were in love.

Bernard spread out his hands and raised his voice over the song. “Hey. I have a good joke. There’s a bunch of people on an airplane and it begins to have a bumpy ride—”

“Absolutely not!” Claire placed her hand on his stomach. “That is a racist joke, baby. You are not saying it.”

“I asked you to do one thing.” Horace lowered and grabbed the glass on the floor. “I begged you to keep it together this evening and you couldn’t even do that.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Ryan did a dramatic sweep of his hands. “I hope I’m not embarrassing you in front of your *friends*.”

Alrighty, God. Get me out of this limo.

Bernard frowned at Claire. “But how is the joke racist, sweetie?”

“You are literally saying racist derogatory terms in the joke.”

“But the people in the joke are Black so they can say it if they’re Black—”

“Yet, *you* can’t say it.” Claire pointed at him. “I told you not to repeat that joke again. Do not tell it at this Gala this evening. That is probably the exact reason why Ethan has never responded to our invitations.”

I looked at Shi who was taking in the whole scene with parted lips. “Yeah... we’re getting a taxi or uber on the way back.”

She tilted my way. “I will make sure to get a nice and quiet driver too.”

I leaned back in my seat. “And this is why you will be getting a raise by the end of the month.”

Bernard and Claire continued to go back and forth on their debate of the airplane joke being racist or not. Horace and Ryan glared at each other having some silent heated argument.

And M.J. sang more to his past lover, hoping she remembered their good times.

When the limo pulled up to the Manor, I was the first one out of there. I couldn't be in that space with my crazy friends for another minute.

The driver didn't even have enough time to open the door.

I opened it for myself and stumbled away, stepping into a small puddle a foot from the limo.

Shit.

Thankfully, I'd only gotten one shoe wet.

This is already starting to be a crazy evening.

I shook the water off my shoe and turned to see the rest of the group starting to emerge from the limo.

Ryan, who was a little tipsy, was helped out by Shi. A huge circular stain covered the front of his gray pants like he had peed on himself.

Shi got to my side, while Ryan stomped past me.

Next, an annoyed expression covered Horace's face as he climbed out of the limo.

It may be time for couples counseling for these two.

Bernard left the limo and held his hand out for Claire. “I don't see why we can't say *that* word among our friends. They know I'm not racist.”

Claire jabbed her finger at his chest. “Enough. I said I don't like the joke and even if I did, the damn word is disgusting.”

“But—”

“No buts. Just go and get me something to drink, honey.” Claire marched away from him and stopped next to me. She kept her voice low as she asked, “Maya, why did I marry him again?”

I whispered, “Because he’s worth seven figures and absolutely worships every inch of you.”

“Still.” Claire pouted. “I wonder if the money was even worth it. Perhaps, I should have simply married for love.”

“What?” I quirked my brows and then laughed. “You?”

“I know.” She laughed with me. “I’m being silly.”

Poor Bernard walked on toward the Manor. “I’ll get that drink for you, sweetie.”

“Yes. Yes.” Claire waved him away.

I turned around to finally take the property all in. “Oh my.”

Claire smiled next to me. “Ravenswood Manor is beautiful, isn’t it?”

“More than beautiful.”

The mansion sat on a sprawling estate on the outskirts of the city. It was a grand, imposing structure of stone and marble, with towering columns and ornate architecture.

Excitement rode Shi’s voice. “Before getting dressed, I read all about Ravenswood Manor. There’re three gardens on the property and a large pool, but most amazing of all is the huge maze in the back.”

“Oh wow.” My mood brightened. “A maze? I have to sneak out the party and check the maze out.”

Claire chuckled. “Maya, you cannot just go strolling around Vanderbilt’s property on your own—”

“This is correct.” A deep male voice sounded behind us. “But, I would love to give you a tour of the maze.”

What?

I turned and gasped at the gorgeous man in front of me.

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Chapter 3

Ethan Vanderbilt

Ethan Vanderbilt towered over us, dressed in an impeccable tuxedo. The black and white hues caught in the moonlight, making him glow like some supernatural creature.

He could have easily starred in one of my old vampire romances.

I almost begged him to bite me, and that was just not my style. I tended to be super shy and quiet around hot guys like him.

For some odd reason, I loved that he didn't wear a mask at his own masquerade gala. That face should not be covered.

This is him? Wow.

I wanted to kick myself for my utter stupidity in not being prepared for how handsome he was.

Granted, those pictures had not done him any justice. In fact, no photo could capture his gorgeousness. This man had surpassed the very concept of good-looking. And, to describe him as handsome was to simply miss the entire point of God's divine work.

What word could sum Ethan Vanderbilt up?

Here I remained, stiff and drooling and I—an author—could not come up with one word to describe him. Perhaps there were no words in any language that could adequately define a man like him.

Too much sex and power radiated off of his lovely form. One would need many words and tons of sentences. This was the sort of gorgeous specimen that could inspire a sonnet or even an epic poem.

Here was a man who was as far beyond the definition of good-looking as the heavenly angels were beyond the stars.

Damn. Just...damn.

Ethan stood in front of me and I had nothing to say.

I was utterly speechless.

A smirk spread on his face as he studied me.

Surely a man like him knew the effect he had on women.

Did he know I couldn't find words in my head to describe him? Was that why he let me take my time?

If he did have a clue of what was going on in my head, then he knew how to read me better than anyone else ever had.

Claire broke the silence. "Ethan Vanderbilt, how nice it is to see you."

Ethan kept his gaze on me and nodded his head. "It is nice to see you too, Mrs. Porter."

My insides warmed when I heard his voice. Never had that happened before. My body literally ached.

Oh my God.

His voice was like a cellist strumming a harmonious tune. The deep soulful tones vibrated through my body.

He had to be breaking some sort of law. It couldn't be legal for a man this sexy to be walking around, wetting the panties of unsuspecting women.

"Oh no, Ethan." Claire held her hand up close to his face as if he were supposed to kiss her fingers. "You know that you can always call me, Claire. *Mrs. Porter* is just too formal."

"I understand, but I do love formalities." Ethan gave her another polite nod. "Would you mind, Mrs. Porter, if I take your lovely friend away?"

Sighing, Claire lowered her hand. "Of course. But, must you take Maya away? We just got here."

I blinked, suddenly realizing that *I* was the friend he was taking away.

Oh no. I can't be alone with him.

Too busy keeping my nose in books and my fingers tapping on my keyboard, I hadn't had sex in five years. I was

focused on paving my way to financial freedom.

And once I got there, I just...kept on paving because I was always so busy, always moving. Up early, writing and writing. Stayed up late writing some more.

My life had become a blur of deadlines, releases, interviews, and signings.

I had made no time for love, too crowded by book boyfriends—heroes that didn't need anything from me.

And now a man stood in front of me that could inspire the best romantic hero.

“Apparently, I must take Ms. Johnson on a tour of the maze.” Ethan’s smirk deepened. “I did hear correctly. Right? You want to see it?”

And I want to have sex with you too.

I widened my eyes.

What? Calm down.

But, I could never lie to myself.

Sighing, Claire turned to me. “Are you going to answer him or not?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes. I want to see it. The maze. Not...anything else.”

And I want to see you naked too.

I shuddered in embarrassment thankful he couldn't hear my thoughts.

“Perhaps, we can *all* see the maze.” Claire smiled. “Unlike Maya, I have been on this property so many times it is a crime that I have never gotten a personal tour.”

“Later.” Ethan held out his arm in front of me. “For now, I would like to take Ms. Johnson on a *private* tour.”

I'm supposed to touch him?

Shocked, I looked at his arm.

I can't touch him.

My reaction was absolutely shocking and incredibly insane. Never did I typically act this way. Also, I usually didn't find myself around extremely hot rich guys either.

“Shall we?” Ethan stared at me, patiently waiting.

“Oh. Okay.” I placed my arm around his, more awkward than I'd ever been in my life.

“Well, then you will find us by the bar, Maya.” Sighing, Claire headed off with Shi.

What is going on? Is this really happening?

Just like that I was whisked away and strolling off with a stunningly gorgeous man as he gave me a tour of his immaculate grounds.

We walked in silence, passing tons of elegantly dressed guests donning fabulous masks dotted with gems and feathers.

The moon cast a haunting glow on the property.

Finally, Ethan spoke, “Do you know much about Ravenswood Manor, Ms. Johnson?”

“You can call me Maya, and I actually do not know anything at all.”

“Maya,” Ethan said my name like he was tasting the word. Like he was planning to say it even more as he made love to me.

Or perhaps that was just my musings as a romance author, yearning for my own *happily ever after* to come...finally.

Stepping onto a cobblestoned path, Ethan guided me along the side of the massive manor. “The history of my family's property is shrouded in mystery and involves great tales of a powerful witch who once lived here centuries ago.”

“I love supernatural stories.”

“I know you do.” Ethan smirked. “You are quite the writer.”

I eyed him.

He winked at me. “I have read several of your romances.”

“No way.”

A sexy chuckle left him. “I have.”

“What books of mine have you read?”

“Can I be honest?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve read all twenty of them.”

I blinked. “Seriously?”

“I am very serious.”

“My own mother has only read three, and my bestie Claire...barely five.”

“Then, they are missing out on amazing storytelling.”

“How did you even find my books?”

He led us beyond the cobblestoned path. “I happened to be with a...female friend who was completely enraptured by your novel, *Whispers of Lust*. Unfortunately, it would be our last moment together. I respectfully told her so.”

“You broke up with her?”

“I would not call what we had an actual relationship, but yes...I ended our...situation.”

Of course, he is a playboy.

Ethan continued, “As you can probably guess, she was pretty upset and left in a rush. The next day, I spotted the book on the chair that she had been sitting in. I was about to tell my butler to grab it, but something in my mind...perhaps in my heart...said I should...read a page.”

“And you did?”

“I did.” He curved those perfect lips into a smile. “I got through a chapter and sat down to read more. My butler actually interrupted me hours later to my annoyance. Apparently, your book had made me miss an important meeting.”

I grinned. “Oh, I’m very sorry.”

“You’re not.”

I shrugged. “I’m not.”

“And so I kicked off my shoes and read more. By the next day, I had finished *Whispers of Lust* and ordered my butler to buy your entire catalog.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. I spent this past year reading everything you have written.”

Suddenly, someone stepped out of the shadows. He was a tall man in a gray suit. “Excuse me, sir, but we have a situation in the ballroom.”

Ethan frowned. “One that requires *my* attention?”

“Yes, sir. It is your mother.”

Ethan let out a long breath. “She’s arrived?”

“Yes, sir.”

I moved my arm from his.

Ethan snapped his view to me as if I had insulted him.

“I can,” I swallowed. “I can totally see the maze another time. Especially if you have a situation.”

“The tour of the maze must happen.” Ethan gestured to the man. “Jackson, please take Maya to my office and make sure the staff brings her champagne and hors d’oeuvres.”

“Yes, sir.” Jackson stepped closer to me.

Ethan gave me a sad smile. “I promise. I will be right back and we can continue our tour of the maze. It is truly a must-see sight.”

“O-kay.” I watched him hurry away.

Jackson nodded at me. “This way, Ms. Johnson.”

He even knows my last name. Okay then.

Tonight would prove to be full of surprises.

Chapter 4

Diamond Rose

Jackson and I entered the huge mansion from the side, at least that was what I assumed.

A cacophony of festivities played about all throughout the space.

We quickly navigated our way through the elegant chattering crowd and headed to Ethan's office.

The hallway was lined with the warm glow of hundreds of candles.

Off in the distance the clinking of glasses sounded, and the raucous laughter of the guests filled the air.

Following Jackson, my eyes adjusted to the light.

We passed a large room filled with tons of masked guests in the midst of deep fun-filled conversation.

Ten minutes later, Jackson stopped at a door and opened it. "After you, Ms. Johnson."

"Thank you."

"I will alert the staff to bring you everything you need."

"That sounds awesome." I stepped inside the large space. It was five times the size of my home office, exuded a refined richness, and smelled of leather and ink.

Floor to ceiling bookshelves lined almost every wall. Some of the bookcases had glass fronts highlighting intricate carvings and rare books.

Two leather couches—arranged to face each other in a sitting area in the center of the room—were next to a mahogany coffee table.

What looked to be an antique desk stood in the center, stacked with tons of files and books.

He's just as messy as me.

Far in the back, a large grandfather clock ticked to the steady beat of my heart.

For some reason, it lured me over.

Who made this?

I walked to the clock, interested in getting a closer look at the intricate designs carved into the wood. They seemed to dance in the light.

Fascinating.

I shouldn't have, but I slipped my hand along the side. The wood hummed and vibrated beneath my fingertips.

The clock's face twinkled and glowed with crescent moons, stars, and hourglasses, casting an otherworldly glow. The pendulum was like a sorcerer's staff coiled and bedecked with shards of luminescent crystal that dazzled and illuminated the room.

The hands of the clock seemed to be made of molten glass. They were two small hourglasses filled with tiny heart-shaped crystals.

I felt as if I'd been transported into some fantasy realm, surrounded by an ominous energy that threatened to consume me.

The door creaked opened behind me.

Slowly, I turned to see Ethan towering in the entrance, his broad frame blocking out the candlelight from the hallway.

This man really is delicious to look at.

Ethan strolled forward, carrying a long black box, no bigger than twenty-four inches long, three inches high, and three inches wide.

His deep voice rumbled through the room like erotic thunder, sending a wave of warmth through me. "Are you bored out of your mind?"

"Not at all."

He strolled over and stopped a foot in front of me.

While outside, his towering presence filled the space around me. Now on the inside, I swore heat radiated off of his body. My heartbeats echoed in my ears.

His proximity awoke a need deep between my thighs that I hadn't felt in too long. It was a desperate craving that had been dormant for years.

Ethan gazed down at me. A wicked grin spread across his face as if acknowledging my dirty, carnal desires.

Can he see the thoughts in my eyes?

He licked his lips. "I did my best to make sure you didn't have to wait too long."

"I've barely been in here for a few minutes." I swallowed and tried to regain my composure.

Alright. Let's calm down.

I stepped back and gestured to the grandfather clock. "This is quite impressive."

"That clock is older than the both of us."

"Interesting."

"It was made in the 17th century and came with this house."

I smirked at his use of the word *house*. This manor could have fit seven or eight houses inside of it.

I looked back at him. "17th century. That's how old this house is?"

"Yes." He placed the long black box close to me. "Please, take off the top of this box."

I put my view on it.

The black box glistened in the light.

I extended my hands and touched the smooth surface. "Will there be another puzzle inside?"

"Not this time."

Slowly, I pulled the top off the box and looked inside.

Beautiful.

A single diamond rose shimmered within the box. It was a dazzling combination of a rose's pure beauty and the sparkling brilliance of diamonds. A truly glittering and elegant floral display.

Ethan's voice slipped along my skin like a sensual caress. "Take it."

My breath caught in my throat.

"This is my way of thanking you for writing amazing romances."

I looked at him. "Are you serious?"

"I never believed in love before, but reading your books has shown me that it's not just possible, it is worth fighting for."

I had no idea what to say. I was never good with taking compliments, but with this gesture and the precious gift, he had truly taken my breath away.

I carefully grasped the rose and took it out of the box. The stem was made of an obsidian stone and warmed in my fingers.

I gazed down at the sparkling petals in utter amazement.

Ethan set the box on the shelf near the grandfather clock. "This artist took a real rose that had been preserved and then coated it with diamond dust."

"This is... amazing, breathtaking, and pretty much one of the best gifts I've ever received."

"In your novel, *Breathless in the Billionaire's Arms*—"

"Oh God." I raised the diamond rose over my face to hide my embarrassment.

"What?"

"That novel is not exactly one of my most...proudest writing moments."

"No?"

I blushed. “My agent had convinced me to write it after a few great releases.”

“And it did well?”

“Phenomenally well, yet...more formulaic than I would have liked.”

Ethan touched his chest. “I’ve been a billionaire for a long time, but it wasn’t until I read that particular book that I truly felt rich.”

I widened my eyes. “Would you stop? I am over here blushing under this mask.”

“I am shocked that you’re not good with taking praise for your work.”

“I’m working on it.” Twisting the rose in my hand, I walked over to the shelf on the other side of the grandfather clock.

I needed to get space between us. The gift, his words, and that alluring presence tempted my body, made me want to tear off my gown and succumb to the heated desires surging within my core.

Calm the hormones down. You know you would never have your heroine have sex with the hero in the chapter’s first meet.

He remained where he was and watched me with a sensual intensity. “Do you believe that you do not deserve praise?”

I looked down at my rose. “There’s a small part of me that loves it, yet...I’ve struggled with self-esteem most of my life, so it feels strange to receive compliments.”

Ethan’s voice was low, but firm. “Then, we will have to change that.”

His promise filled the air with a heavy weight that foretold his determination to see that mission through no matter what it took.

“Ethan, thank you for this captivating rose.”

“You’re welcome.”

The door creaked open.

Two waiters entered. One carried a tray of hors d'oeuvres. The other had a tray of champagne flutes.

But most interesting was their mysterious and elegant appearance, they seemed to belong to a hidden world within this masquerade party.

Long, hooded capes made of a satiny, deep black fabric were draped over their bodies and trailed behind them. A layer of sequins glittered along the edges, each one reflecting light like a tiny, glowing star.

The same glittering gold masks covered the waiters' faces, leaving only their eyes visible. Intricate designs decorated their masks, with curving lines and elaborate details. Crystals were placed along the edges of the masks' eye holes in an arc of diamonds.

The two waiters glided inside.

Ethan never glanced their way.

Instead, he watched me.

The waiter with the hors d'oeuvres came close to us and gently left the tray on the desk.

The other walked over and handed me a glass of champagne.

I kept my rose in one hand and held the champagne in the other.

This is going to be a fun night. I can't believe I didn't want to come.

Ethan nodded and took his own glass of champagne.

Then, the waiters left.

“Are you a lover of history, Maya?”

“I am.” I studied the bubbles in my flute glass. “I study history with joy. Mainly because history offers a wealth of inspiration and opportunities for my books and can add depth, richness, and authenticity to the stories and characters.”

“Which is why your books always transport me to a different time and place, making the story feel more immersive and evocative.”

I forced myself to not edge away and shriek in giddy embarrassment. It was clear that with him, I would need to truly get used to being lathered in praise.

I cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “That wasn’t a hard compliment to take. Was it?”

I chuckled. “No. It wasn’t.”

Ethan gestured to the diamond rose in my hand. “The practice of giving a woman a rose has a rich history that spans across cultures and centuries.”

I placed my attention on the rose.

“In ancient Greece and Rome, roses were associated with Venus, the goddess of love, and were often given as gifts to express romantic feelings.”

I directed my view to him. “I can believe that.”

“During the Victorian era, the language of flowers, or floriography, became popular, and roses were used as a way to express hidden feelings.” He walked over to me. “The color of the rose also held special meanings, with red roses symbolizing romantic love, white roses symbolizing purity and innocence, and yellow roses symbolizing friendship.”

“Hmmm.” I gazed back at my rose. “And what do you think a diamond rose would have symbolized, if a man gave it to a woman he barely knew?”

“I would say...many things.” Ethan stopped a few inches in front of me. Close enough that I could feel the erotic electric current radiating from his body. “A diamond rose would be a rare and luxurious gift, and the fact that it is a diamond, a precious and durable stone, it would probably symbolize the lasting and enduring nature of the love that he intended to have for her.”

I blinked.

“The rose, which is a traditional symbol of passion and desire, would represent his romantic feelings for her.” His gaze locked onto mine and my heart started pounding in my chest.

My lips parted in anticipation as I waited for him to speak because I was completely speechless.

He slowly raised his hand and touched the top of the rose with one perfectly manicured finger and slipped it along the diamond petals. Immediately, a delicious shiver ran through my body as if he were touching me.

Still toying with the diamond rose, his voice was a caress. “The diamonds on the petals...would add an extra layer of meaning, emphasizing the value and importance he places on her.”

Those words hung in the air, filling the room with heavy, tangible emotion.

My heart warmed.

He continued, “It would also suggest that the man is willing to spend *a lot of money* to express his intentions to her.”

I swallowed.

“At least...those are the reasons why I gave this to you.” He moved his finger away from the rose. “But what do you think, Ms. Romance Author?”

“I am...truly touched by your thoughtful gesture. The diamond rose is beautiful, and it sounds like this truly represents the depth of your feelings.” I tried to keep the silly smile off my face.

He made me feel like a young girl at the beginning of her first love. I wanted to dance and cheer at the sheer extravagance of it, but I somehow managed to keep my composure.

I cleared my throat. “I am flattered that you would express interest in beginning something with me, and I am excited to see where this might lead.”

“Trust me, Maya.” Ethan’s eyes shone brightly with a powerful intensity that filled me with a deep sense of longing. “This journey will be nothing short of magical.”

“I believe you.” I had just met him, but my mind was made up. I could not deny the emotion that surged through me.

I would follow him eagerly into the unknown.

With an unwavering gaze, he lifted his hand holding the glass of champagne. “Shall we toast to the new adventures and possibility of *us*.”

“Yes. I think we should.” Smiling, my eyes locked with his. Slowly, I lifted my glass up to my lips and took a sip.

Instantly, I felt a burning sensation in my throat.

What’s that?

An unexpected pain surged through my body. My limbs turned to stone, and I felt my grip on the glass and rose slipping away.

What?

I dropped them.

Ethan set his glass on the shelf. Concern laced his voice. “Maya?”

My tongue and throat burned while an inferno raged inside of my chest. I tried to scream but could barely move my flaming mouth and tongue.

“Maya, what’s wrong?” Ethan grabbed my arms.

My vision blurred.

Pain. So much pain.

I grasped at my throat with both hands and struggled to stay upright.

No. No.

“Jackson!” Ethan caught me as I fell back. “Somebody, help!”

I couldn’t breathe.

Blinding pain shot through my chest. My heart pounded wildly, and it felt like it would explode from my body.

The room spun around me.

Ethan's face blurred and then darkness swallowed me.

The last thing I heard was Ethan's voice. "Please, Maya. Don't die on me."

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Chapter 5

Do You Remember the Time

I jolted awake in the back of the limo. My hands gripped my throat. No pain moved through me. No burning or blurry vision. In fact, I felt brand new.

Wait. I'm not dead?

A feeling of numb disbelief washed over me.

But, I was in Ethan's arms...dying.

Michael Jackson's *Remember the Time*, blared out of the limo's speakers.

The air filled with those now hauntingly familiar notes.

What?

All around me, everyone appeared to be enjoying the song. Claire swayed with the rhythm. Bernard clapped. Horace bobbed his head. Ryan lifted his glass of champagne in the air and moved it to the beat.

Even Shi who sat next to me, snapped her fingers.

And I held my throat completely confused.

Was that some sort of...dream? But then...didn't this happen in the dream?

Shi turned my way and paused from swaying. "Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

"Your neck." She pointed at my hands gripping my throat. "Is there something wrong?"

I slowly moved my hands from my neck.

Shi tapped her purse and let out a nervous chuckle. "I have a whole pharmacy in here—Tylenol, Ibuprofen, anti-depressants—"

“No.” I scanned the space. “I’m fine. I...think. I had a bad dream?”

She tilted her head to the side. “Last night?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Just now in the limo. It was a crazy dream.”

Shi gave me an odd look. “But...you didn’t fall asleep in here.”

“No?”

“No.”

But, I had to be dreaming...

Worry filled Shi’s eyes. “Are you sure you don’t need anything?”

I blinked a few times. “I’m fine.”

Then, Michal Jackson began singing about a relationship that had ended, and this odd wave of *deja vu* swept over me like I had lived this moment before.

Hadn’t I?

Claire’s voice rose in the air. “Yes. I love M.J!”

She said that before. In my...dream. Didn’t she?

Claire gestured at me and pointed to her green purse. “I have a special something in here to relax you this evening. Just let me know at the Gala when you want to go out and have a *break*.”

I froze in horror.

She said that! Those words! Right?

Claire leaned her head to the side. “Are you okay, Maya? I know when my girl is shaken.”

I slowly shook my head. “I’m...fine. My head is just being...weird.”

Claire smirked. “Maybe, you need a quick hit now. Would anyone be opposed to our smoking in here—”

“Oh no!” I waved my hands. “The last thing I need right now is to smoke anything.”

“You must.” Claire snapped her fingers to the song. “It will be so much fun. Just like the old days when we were in college.”

She said that. I’m certain of it.

My heart pounded in my chest.

What is going on?

“No way.” Horace raised his voice over the music. “Maya must be an elegant and captivating lady this evening. Keep your eyes on the prize, Maya. Money. Money. Money.”

I widened my eyes and tried to make sense of everything.

Shi said I hadn’t fallen asleep, but I clearly had. What other reason could it be? I’d been in this limo before, hearing these same sentences.

But why?

“Ah!” Ryan dropped the glass. Champagne stained the front of his gray pants. The glass tumbled along the floor.

I gasped.

That happened in my dream.

Horace glared at him. “Are you serious right now?”

The chorus came in and M.J. began to ask if the other person remembered all the good times they had, when they were in love.

No. No. No. This is getting really...weird.

Bernard spread out his hands and raised his voice over the song. “Hey. I have a good joke. There’s a bunch of people on an airplane and it begins to have a bumpy ride—”

“Absolutely not!” Claire placed her hand on his stomach. “That is a racist joke, baby. You are not saying it.”

The racist joke.

I bobbed my head like an idiot and then turned to Horace knowing what would happen next.

“I asked you to do one thing.” Horace lowered and grabbed the glass on the floor. “I begged you to keep it together this evening and you couldn’t even do that.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” Ryan did a dramatic sweep of his hands. “I hope I’m not embarrassing you in front of your *friends*.”

This happened in my dream.

I snapped my view to Shi. “Are you sure that I didn’t fall asleep? I dreamt all of this.”

Shi leaned away as if nervous that I was super crazy. “But, we were just talking. When could you have fallen asleep?”

“We were talking?”

“Yes.”

“About what?”

“You apologized for us having to sit in the most uncomfortable and awkward ride in history.”

I blinked. “I remember saying that.”

“And then I told you that it was okay, and you said—”

“Welcome to my dysfunctional friends.”

Shi chuckled. “Yes. That’s what you said.”

Bernard’s voice rode the music. “But how is the joke racist, sweetie?”

Claire loudly sighed. “You are literally saying racist derogatory terms in the joke.”

Terrified, I turned back to them.

This happened. It really did.

Bernard held his hands out. “But the people in the joke are black so they can say it if they’re black—”

“Yet, *you* can’t say it.” She pointed at him. “I told you not to repeat that joke again. Do not tell it at this Gala this

evening. That is probably the exact reason why Ethan has never responded to our invitations.”

I looked at Shi and gestured to her. “Then, I tell you that we will get a taxi or uber.”

Shi blinked. “Is that what you want?”

“Huh?”

“You want me to get you a taxi or uber?”

“No. That’s what I tell you, and then you say that you will get a nice and quiet driver.”

Shi touched her chest. “That’s ...what you want me to say?”

“Forget about it.” I leaned back in my seat. “I’m losing it.”

Shi grabbed her purse. “I could get my phone and get you an uber—”

“No. Not yet.” I watched my friends.

Bernard and Claire continued to go back and forth on their debate of the airplane joke being racist or not. Horace and Ryan glared at each other having some silent heated argument.

And M.J. sang more to his past lover, hoping she remembered their good times.

This has to be some like...crazy deja vu situation.

But, what about Ethan? And what happened to my diamond rose? It was odd for me to think about yet, that moment, his words, and the precious gift had meant a whole lot to me. It had rocked my world.

To think that it all never happened or did or...would...

What the fuck is going on?

The limo pulled up to the Ravenswood Manor.

I gazed out of the window, noting that every detail of the place was exactly like in my dream or thought or whatever the hell it was.

Regardless of the name assigned to this situation, I had seen this place before.

The mansion sat on a sprawling estate on the outskirts of the city. It was that same grand, imposing structure of stone and marble, with towering columns and ornate architecture.

O-kay.

I looked at everyone else.

Something crazy is going on right now.

The driver opened the door.

“Thank you.” I slowly looked down and saw the small puddle that I had stepped in before. “I got my foot a little wet with that last time.”

The driver twisted his face in confusion. “Excuse me, ma’am?”

“Nothing.” I left the limo and made sure to avoid the puddle. “Nothing at all. I’m just losing my mind.”

The driver gave me a sweet smile. “Have a nice evening, Ms. Johnson.”

One thing I won't be doing is drinking champagne.

I touched my neck and turned to see the rest of the group, emerging from the limo.

Shi helped Ryan leave the limo. A huge circular stain covered the front of his gray pants like he had peed on himself.

This is really happening like I dreamed it or saw it. What the hell?

An annoyed expression covered Horace’s face as he climbed out of the limo.

Shi got to my side, while Ryan stomped past me.

Everything is happening the same way. I'm not fucking imagining this.

Bernard left the limo and held his hand out for Claire. “I don’t see why we can’t say *that* word among our friends. They know I’m not racist.”

That's what he said before.

Claire jabbed her finger at his chest. "Enough. I said I don't like the joke and even if I did, the damn word is disgusting."

"But—"

"No buts. Just get me something to drink, honey." Claire marched away from him and stopped next to me. She kept her voice low as she asked, "Why did I marry him again, Maya?"

I stared at her in shock.

She blinked. "Maya, are you okay?"

I dropped my hand from my neck. "Did I fall asleep in the limo?"

"No." she chuckled. "It was such a short ride."

"Are you sure?"

"If you fell asleep, I would have rudely woken you up."

"But, not just a little doze for a few minutes—"

"When could you have fallen asleep? I was asking you about Ethan the whole time."

I gazed over my shoulder.

Bernard walked on toward the Manor and called back. "I'll get that drink for you, sweetie."

"Yes. Yes." Claire waved him away.

I fully faced the property in a complete daze.

Ethan shows up next. If he does, then I'm stomping off to the limo and asking the driver to take me home.

Claire stepped next to me. "Ravenswood Manor is beautiful. Isn't it?"

I frowned, remembering that she had already said that before.

Excitement rode Shi's voice. "Before getting dressed, I read all about Ravenswood Manor. There're three gardens on

the property and a large pool, but most amazing of all is the huge maze in the back.”

Damn it. This is really happening again. Everything.

Then, I spotted Ethan strolling out of the front of the Manor and heading our way. Same chiseled handsome face. Same confidence oozing from him. Same designer suit.

Oh my God.

I trembled and stepped back. “This is...really...going down.”

Claire chuckled. “Maybe, we can sneak off to the maze and have a smoke.”

“I’m getting the hell out of here.” I rushed back to the limo, stepping into the puddle and splashing water on my gown. “Hey! Hey!”

“Maya?” Claire called back. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to go.” I hurried away in my heels. “Hell to the no. Hey! You! Driver!”

He was just getting back into the vehicle. “Ma’am, did you leave something?”

“Yes!” I hurried to the door. “I mean no. Just take me home.”

“Home?”

“Yes! Please! Now!” I opened the door myself and rushed with climbing in. Once my butt hit the seat, I slammed the door shut.

I’ll fix this situation and take my behind home. Hell no.

Ethan, Claire, and Shi quickly walked toward the limo.

“No. No. No.” I locked my door. “I’m out of here.”

The driver got into the front of the limo. “You want to go home, Ms. Johnson?”

“Yes! Please! Hurry!” I waved my hands in the air. “I’m not dying tonight!”

“O-kay, Ms. Johnson.” He started the limo.

Claire tapped at the window. “Maya, what are you doing?”

“Get back.” I gestured for her to edge away. “I’m out of here. And don’t drink the champagne! It will kill you!”

Ethan stood next to her with a curious expression on his face.

He must think I’m crazy now.

“Maya, stop this.” Claire let out a nervous chuckle and glanced at Ethan. “I swear she’s usually not like this. And I know the champagne is just fine.”

“Don’t drink it!” I shook my head.

Ethan opened his mouth, but no words came out.

There goes the journey we were going to have.

I turned back to the driver. “Come on. Let’s go. Please!”

“Yes, ma’am.” The driver slowly drove us away.

I gazed back at Ethan.

Now he wore a confused expression.

No diamond rose for me.

Claire had her mask off and phone against her ear.

My purse vibrated.

Nope. I’m not answering until I get home.

The driver slowly took us away.

I sighed in relief.

Thank you, God.

Clearly, the angels or something had delivered a vision to me, and I was not going to ignore it. If I was supposed to die by champagne in a mansion this evening, then I would go right home and only sip tea.

Hell no.

I leaned back in the seat.

My nerves slowly calmed.

“I’m alive.” I bobbed my head. “I’m alive and safe.”

The driver glanced at me from the rear-view mirror.

Stop talking out loud. He might take me to the mental hospital.

I gave him an awkward wave. “I’m okay back here. Don’t worry.”

He put his focus on the road and drove us along.

I spotted an elegant fountain, with a brass statue surrounded by water. Then, the sight shifted to an outstretched manicured lawn.

I let out a long breath and smiled.

What a great night to be alive.

Right as we hit large iron gates, announcing the beginning of the Vanderbilt’s estates, an overwhelming feeling of dizziness suddenly washed over me.

Okay. What’s that?

My stomach twisted, and my reality began to spin.

Wait. What’s happening?

I felt as if my body had abandoned me, and I was in a freefall.

The limo approached the gate.

No. No.

My body shook uncontrollably as I clung desperately to the leather seat, like a lone survivor adrift in an ocean of chaos. My stomach roiled and my thoughts flew apart like a raging storm, drenching me in fear and confusion. I felt my sanity slipping away, as reality shattered around me like broken glass, leaving me paralyzed in a hurricane of despair.

“No! Help!” I screamed and shut my eyes, scared of what would happen next.

Somehow...I’m dying this time too.

As I sat there, shaking with my eyes closed.

My heart did not stop.

My lungs continued to breathe.

And even more shocking, death never came.

Instead, Michael Jackson's *Remember the Time* played around me.

No...fucking...way. No. No. No.

I kept my eyes closed too terrified to open them and confirm the repeated situation that was surely happening in front of me.

“Yes. I love M.J!” Claire yelled over the music.

Again? This is happening again?

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Chapter 6

Weed and Panties

First, I died by some sort of poisonous champagne, and returned to riding in the limo with my friends.

Next, I didn't go in the party at all. Instead, I demanded the driver take me back home.

And once the limo began to ride through the gates...

I returned to the moment of riding in the limo with my friends.

For now, I had my eyes closed, unable to deal with this new reality.

Am I stuck in this moment? No. It can't be. But...

The haunting notes of Michael Jackson's *Remember the Time* filled the air like a noose around my neck, making it feel like it was squeezing the life out of me.

Where once this song gave me joy and evoked fond memories of my childhood, now I found it to be a source of terror, paralyzing my limbs with fear.

"Maya?" Claire yelled over the music. "Why are your eyes closed?"

I slowly opened them.

Claire leaned her head to the side. "Are you okay? You look off like something scared you."

I trembled and took everyone in.

Everything is the same. Everything.

Bernard and Horace swayed.

Ryan bobbed his head.

Shi snapped her fingers.

Did I actually die from the champagne? Is this heaven or hell?

“Earth to Maya.” Claire clapped her hands.

I snapped my view to her.

“Girl, you look terrified. Are you really that nervous to go to a social gathering? I know it’s been a while, but you’ll be fine.”

Maybe, it’s not exactly heaven or hell. This could be some sort of limbo situation.

I thought back to Plato. I’d been intrigued by his idea of life after death.

According to Plato, the soul was immortal and existed before and after physical death. He believed that the soul went through a process of reincarnation, where it was eventually judged based on its actions during life.

If it was judged positively, the soul moved on to a higher realm of existence. If judged negatively, it was sent back to earth to be reincarnated.

Therefore, Plato theorized that the soul never truly experienced a state of limbo, as it was always progressing towards a final state of either reward or punishment.

But, what would Plato say about this situation?

Horace continued to jam to Michael Jackson.

Claire chuckled. “Maya?”

I blinked. “What?”

She pointed to her green purse. “I have a special something in here to—”

“Let’s smoke that joint.” I rose and ducked my head. It was hard to maintain balance since the limo was moving forward, but I held on as much as I could.

“What are you doing?!” Claire widened her eyes. “And how did you know I had a joint in my purse?”

“Pull it out and light it up.” I wobbled over to her.

“But—”

“Now, Claire. Tonight is just...too much.” I sat down next to her.

“O-kay.” Claire dug into her purse.

Bernard put his hand in his pocket. “I have your lighter, honey.”

“What?” Horace raised his voice over the music. “Maya and Claire, you two can’t just smoke in here. And I do not want to be smelling like weed right before I hob nob with the elite.”

“Why not?” Claire pulled out the joint. “Half of them will be high off pills or cocaine anyway.”

“I have been around Maya when she is high.” Horace pressed the button to roll the window down two inches. “It is a lot. I want her on her best behavior for Ethan—”

“Ah!” Ryan dropped his glass. Champagne stained the front of his gray pants. The glass tumbled along the floor.

Horace glared at him. “Are you serious right now?”

“Just wow.” Claire muttered and placed the joint between her lips.

It’s all...the same...everything...once again...

M.J. sang out the chorus.

“Here you go, honey.” Bernard raised the light to the tip of the joint and triggered the flame. “Hey. I have a good joke. There’s tons of people on an airplane and it begins to be a rocky flight. The pilot jumps on the microphone and—”

“Absolutely not!” Claire blew smoke in his face and handed the joint to me. “That is a racist joke.”

“Yeah. Leave it alone, Bernard.” I took the joint from her. “It’s just going to get you in trouble the rest of the night.”

“Damn right.” Claire chuckled.

I inhaled some of the joint.

If I’m in limbo, should I be smoking at all?

In some branches of Christianity and even Islam, there was a temporary state of limbo after death. There, souls were supposed to be purged of their sins before entering heaven or hell.

I took another hit of the joint.

This can't be a place of purification. It wouldn't have weed here.

“I asked you to do one thing.” Horace lowered and grabbed the glass on the floor. “I begged you to keep it together this evening and you couldn't even do that.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry.” Ryan did a dramatic sweep of his hands. “I hope I'm not embarrassing you in front of your *friends*.”

I handed the joint to Claire. “Thanks.”

“I can't believe you would even smoke with me now.”

Bernard frowned at Claire. “But how is the joke—”

“Leave it alone.” I gave him a sad smile. “You want her to be pissed with you for the rest of the night?”

“Exactly.” Claire chuckled. “Maya knows me well.”

Bernard pursed his lips together.

I checked Shi.

I couldn't tell her expression due to the mask, but her eyes were wide open and focused on me.

She probably wasn't expecting to be hot boxed with ganja in a limo this evening.

Already, I was starting to feel the effects of the joint. I was getting light-headed like I was floating on a cloud.

I gazed at my hands. “What is happening to me?”

Claire chuckled. “It's the good cannabis, honey.”

“No. I'm talking about the fact that I've already died at the party once.” I shook my head. “I keep living this limo ride over and over. What would you do if that happened to you?”

“What?” Claire leaned away.

Horace pointed at me. “You see what I mean? Maya should not be smoking.”

“But, what would you do?” I held out my hands. “What if you kept reliving the same moment over and over?”

“You police *my* drinking.” Ryan pointed at Horace and then gestured to me. “But let your *lover* smoke all she wants?”

“Lover?” I quirked my brows.

Shock covered Horace’s face. “What did you say?”

Ryan’s eyes watered as he glared at Horace. “You heard me.”

“Lover?” I touched my chest. “Are you talking about me or Claire?”

Claire let out a nervous giggle. “He is not talking about me. That is impossible!”

I reached for the joint.

“Absolutely not.” Claire gave it to Bernard. “Put this out. We’ve all had enough champagne and marijuana—”

“You’re fucking her!” Ryan spat the words out.

Everyone snapped their views to him.

Horace spoke through clenched teeth, “Lower your voice and calm down so we can have this conversation later—”

“Later?” Ryan dug his hand into his purse and yanked out green panties. “I want a divorce!”

What the fuck?

“And here you go, slut!” Ryan threw the panties at me.

They hit my chest.

“Ewww.” I picked them up with two fingers and slung them on the floor. “These aren’t mine. They’re too big in the back like the woman has a nice butt. This can’t be me. I swear.”

Ryan glared at me. “Next time you fuck my husband in my home, take your panties with you—”

“I have no ass at all. Like none! That person has a booty. Look at the size. I shop in the teen section for underwear.”

Claire touched her forehead. “That is too much information.”

“Not only are those not my panties!” I held out my hands. “But, I haven’t had sex in five years!”

“Liar!”

I shook my head. “I wish my vagina could tell you.”

Horace held his hand at his forehead. “I am not having sex with Maya, Ryan. Is that what you’ve been thinking?”

“Seriously!” I shook my head. “I would never mess with a married man, and I thought Horace didn’t like women.”

Tears left Ryan’s eyes. “All year, I find panties throughout our house. What else would I think? And, Maya is always calling you in the middle of the night to have you leave the house and do all types of emergencies for her—”

“What the hell?” I blinked. “I have never called Horace at night for an emergency.”

Is he lying on my name? Come on.

“Okay.” Horace waved his hands. “Ryan, this is Defcon level behavior right now. Enough. We will talk about this later ___”

“I want a divorce!” Ryan dug in his purse and yanked out at least six pairs of panties. Some white or black, but most were red.

Wow.

“I don’t know who it is!” One by one, Ryan slung a pair of panties at Shi. “But, I am not stupid!”

“Hey, leave Shi alone.” I frowned.

“Stop it!” Horace yelled.

Ryan slung panties at Bernard. “I’m not stupid.”

“I said stop it!” Horace yanked the rest of the panties out of Ryan’s hands. “You’re going home.”

So he’s been carrying panties around in his purse this whole time. What is really going on?

Meanwhile, M.J. sang his heart out as the limo pulled up to the Manor.

“Fine!” Ryan began sobbing. “I don’t want to go in this party and live a lie!”

Tension thickened the air.

Wow. Well...this is definitely not an exact repeat.

But then, I wasn’t the same me in this do-over. Somehow, I had triggered this new reality by smoking this time.

Is that an important rule or clue to getting out of this constant repeating? Should I do something different every time? Or does nothing matter at all?

In this moment, Claire hurried out of the limo before me. The driver didn’t even have a chance to open the door.

Next, Bernard tossed the panties to the floor, jumped up, and headed away.

I followed, wanting to escape Ryan and Horace’s deteriorating marriage too.

“Oh no.” Claire shrieked outside.

Bernard left the limo. “What’s wrong, honey?”

I got out after him.

“I stepped in a puddle.” She groaned and lifted her wet shoe. “My poor baby.”

Bernard frowned. “Do you want me to run back to the house and get a new pair?”

“Please, honey.”

Bernard nodded and obediently waited by the door. “As soon as everyone leaves, I’ll have the limo take me back.”

Ryan cried. “I’m going home! I can’t do this tonight!”

I inched away from the limo.

Next, Shi left.

I glanced at her. “Sorry. I know the ride got a bit ghetto with the weed and panties.”

“It is okay.” Shi shrugged. “It was...interesting.”

Horace climbed out of the limo and stomped away.

O-kay.

Bernard cleared his throat. “I guess I will...ride back with Ryan to get the shoes, honey.”

Have fun with that.

Bernard got back into the limo and shut the door.

Claire glanced back down at her wet shoes. “I am going to the bathroom. This night is turning into a disaster.”

You have no idea.

She looked at Shi and me. “Let’s go—”

“No.” I shook my head. “You and Shi should head off.”

“What are you going to do?” Claire blinked. “You’ve never been here. How will you socially navigate—”

“I’m good.” I spotted Ethan leaving the massive mansion. “Go ahead without me.”

Claire shook her foot again as if that would dry it faster. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I raised one finger. “And don’t drink the champagne.”

Claire gave me an odd look and headed off.

Shi nodded. “I will see you later.”

“I hope so.”

There, I waited.

At least there is one good part about this evening.

My gaze locked with Ethan's, and every nerve in my body tingled with anticipation.

He didn't stroll my way. He prowled, looking irresistible in that impeccable tuxedo.

He likes me.

The image of the diamond rose hit my mind.

So romantic. I couldn't have written a better hero.

For some reason, hope sparked within me as if...maybe I could somehow turn this around, and perhaps he was the key to make that happen.

Or was that just the joint talking?

Ethan stopped in front of me.

He really is so irresistible. Maybe, reliving this moment isn't that bad at all.

A smirk spread on his face as he studied me. "Good evening, Ms. Johnson."

I smiled. "Good evening, Mr. Vanderbilt."

"Please, call me Ethan."

"And you may call me Maya." I held out my arm. "I would love if you showed me around your estate. A private tour."

He blinked. "You...took the words right out of my mouth, *Maya.*"

The first time I heard him speak my name, I thought it was lusty and full of sensual promise. This time I *knew* for a fact that I was right.

Ethan licked those full lips. "Then, let us begin."

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Chapter 7

A Labyrinth of Love

The moon rose in the dark sky, casting a haunting glow on the property.

Arm-in-arm, we strolled away, passing tons of elegantly dressed guests donning fabulous masks dotted with gems and feathers.

I wondered what was going on in his mind. I already knew his plan was to give me the diamond rose and confess his desires for me.

And here I had offered for him to show me around.

Ethan led us down a cobblestoned path. “Do you know much about Ravenswood Manor, Maya?”

“I know a little bit.” I considered what he’d told me before. “Wasn’t there a legend about a witch that used to live here?”

“You’ve done your research.” Shock hit his voice. “Very good.”

I grinned. “I also read that there was a maze.”

“There is.”

“I really want to see it.”

He blinked. “Then, let us go. Immediately.”

Instead of keeping us on the cobblestone path, he had us walk on the grass. “This is a short cut.”

“Perfect.” I remained close to him as we walked, enjoying the powerful heat radiating from his muscular frame. “So...tell me about this witch.”

“It is said that she possessed the ability to control time.”

I stopped us from walking. “What?”

He smirked. “I figured you would love that, since you are amazing at spinning paranormal tales of love and magic.”

I tensed. “Umm...yes. Thanks, but...the witch. She could control time?”

“Yes.” He led us forward. “She had many followers who would come to her for guidance and protection. However, her powers also drew the attention of fanatics who feared and hated her for that very power. She always had assassins coming after her.”

I looked at him. “When you said that she could control time, what do you mean?”

“Stop time. Start time. There are some stories that claimed she could rewind time too.” Ethan chuckled. “Of course this is all legend and folklore.”

“But, what if she really could control time?”

“Then, that would have been amazing.” Ethan pointed in front of him. “And here we have Aria’s maze.”

“Aria?”

“That was the witch’s name.”

I turned my view and gasped.

This was something that I could have never dreamed of. It was massive. Green trimmed high hedges formed the elaborate pathways, and the foliage was meticulously sculpted and trimmed to create a massive living labyrinth.

Ethan smiled. “They say Aria grew the hedges with magic.”

“Really?”

“When I was a boy, I would run through the paths and touch as many leaves as I could, thinking I would be magical too.” He guided us to what I assumed was the beginning of the maze.

“I can’t imagine being a kid and growing up in such a grand place.”

“It was definitely fun. Granted, a few times I got lost in this maze and would scare my parents and the staff.”

I chuckled. “So, you were a naughty kid.”

“Very naughty.” He gazed at me. “In fact, many would say that I am still naughty.”

My skin warmed.

He stopped us at the entrance. “Would you like to enter?”

“Do you know the way out *now*?”

“I do.”

“Then, let the adventure begin.”

We headed inside. The hedges towered over me. Shadows lingered throughout the path. It seemed like endless leafy walls.

Ethan spoke, “I spent years as a kid trying to solve this maze.”

I attempted to imagine a kid playing around in this huge puzzle of nature.

The walls of the maze already towered over me, blocking out the moon and any sense of direction. It must have been gigantic for a kid.

Even though I was with Ethan and he clearly knew the way, I still had a small sense of unease, as though someone was watching us from the shadows and hiding in the maze.

However, despite the disorienting atmosphere, the thrill of the challenge and the desire to reach the center of the maze surged through me.

Plus, it helped that I was having this alone time with him.

*No glass of poisonous champagne will kill me out here.
Maybe...the night won't reset.*

We hit a fork in the road where one path would lead to the left and another went to the right.

Ethan looked at me. “Which way do *you* think we should go?”

“Right.”

“That’s a dead end.”

“Oh. Then, left it is.”

We headed that way.

I looked at him. “So, why did you spend so much time in the maze?”

“My nanny told me that whoever solved the maze would be granted unlimited wealth and power.”

“And that’s what you wanted as a kid?”

“Most definitely.”

I chuckled. “I can appreciate that.”

We rounded a twisting, winding path.

“Unfortunately, when I finally did solve the maze, no great magical power came.”

“Some would say you were already born with wealth and power.”

“It is true. I had a privileged upbringing and one day I will inherit more wealth when my father passes.” He nodded.

“However, I was never content to simply live off of my father’s money and success. I wanted to earn my own.”

“And I’m guessing you succeeded.”

“I did. I found a passion for investment banking, worked hard in college, then did grad school. Eventually, I worked with a firm under a fake last name.”

I quirked my brows. “You didn’t want them to know you were a Vanderbilt?”

“Exactly. I wanted to...prove to my father and the world that I was my own person.”

“And you did that?”

“I did. I worked double hours, earned several promotions, saved money, and later started my own firm.”

“All by yourself.”

“Once again you are correct.” He beamed.

“But why?”

A bench stood several feet away. He led us in that direction instead of guiding us around another winding path.

“You ask *why*.” He pursed his lips together. “No one has ever asked that question. Hard work doesn’t impress the people in my world. Why did you ask?”

“I am a writer. We are extremally nosy people.”

“You are an *excellent* writer.”

Warmth hit my heart. “Thank you, but back to *my* question. Why did it mean so much to gain success on your own?”

“My father respects people with their own wealth. While he was always willing to give me his...I felt like that would never be good enough in his eyes.” Ethan sighed. “Perhaps, I worried that I would never be *enough* to him.”

We stopped at the bench.

He gestured to it. “You’re wearing heels. I figured you would want to rest your feet before we finished.”

“That sounds awesome.” I lowered onto the beach and crossed my legs. “So, tell me this.”

He sat down and smirked. “Maya, I will tell you anything you want to know.”

I grinned. “The moment when you reached that success that you had worked so hard to get with your own name, and you presented it to your father...how did it make you feel?”

Ethan let out a long breath. “That is a moment that...I replay over and over in my mind, during the darkest times.”

“That good?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me about it.”

His eyes lit up with joy. “I gave my father a tour of my new firm and when we stopped in my office, I showed him the first month’s financial reports.”

“What did he say?”

“My father is a very stiff individual. He is not one to show much emotion. But that day.” Ethan gazed off in the distance. “That day...my father’s eyes watered and he pulled me into a hug.”

“He was really proud.”

“I would say that he has only hugged me three or four times in my life, but that hug...it is the one that lovingly sits in my mind.”

I looked at Ethan, truly seeing him more than before.

Last time we talked in his office, he gave me some romantic lines that made my body hum.

But now...I felt like he was opening himself to me.

This time, my *heart* hummed.

I smiled. “This may not mean much, but I’m proud of you too.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to me. Especially, since it is coming from you.”

“Why?”

“I know your story, Maya. You did not have the privilege I had from being a wealthy white man. Still, you rose to success from the power of your imagination.” He boldly took my hand. “Do you know why I invited you tonight?”

“To woo me.”

He blinked. “That is a very good guess.”

“And I absolutely want to be wooed by you.”

“I plan to, Maya. I have many things, many surprises in store.”

I swooned like a love-obsessed idiot, ready for everything he had planned and more.

“I have read all of your romances. I am particularly drawn to the way you write about love and its complexities.”

I leaned his way, wanting him to get the talking part over with and have him simply kiss me.

I swore a low groan left him.

He cleared his throat. “I found myself deeply moved by your books.”

That’s good. Now kiss me.

Unable to maintain my patience, I lifted my mouth up to him and leaned in closer.

His gaze fell on my lips. “Somehow your fictional stories helped me believe in the possibility of love in real life.”

My heart nearly burst out of my chest as he leaned in closer.

“Maya...”

“Yes?”

Lust blazed in his eyes. “I saw this evening going differently. As I said, I have plans, true romance but...”

“Kiss me.”

He closed the last bit of distance between us and pressed his lips against mine. A shiver ran through me, igniting a fire deep within my core.

He’s so perfect.

Ethan deepened the kiss, and it was a spark to tinder, igniting a blaze of longing and desire and consuming me in a dizzying inferno. I felt this sensual power surge through me as I drew him in closer.

Both hungry for the other, our bodies collided in a fiery embrace. His strength overwhelmed me. My breath quickened as my heart raced like a drumbeat. My nipples tightened and I melted into his arms, lost in a maelstrom of passion.

A soft moan left me, and he grunted.

I kissed him back deeply, eagerly, relishing in the heat of his lips and the sweet taste of his tongue.

Plus, he smelled of expensive cologne and I wanted to buy a bottle of it, swim in the liquid, and be immersed with in the scent.

He broke the kiss and looked into my eyes. His breathing was quick and ragged. “You are quite a surprise, Maya.”

A twig or stick snapped off in the distance.

It startled us both.

We turned in that direction.

What?

Far off on the other end of the path, a waiter stood, wearing that mysterious and elegant costume. Just like in the past memory, dream, or whatever, the waiter had on the same long, hooded cape made of a satiny, deep black fabric. It draped over his body and hid part of him in the shadows of the maze.

The same glittering gold mask covered his face.

My heart hammered in my chest.

This intense fear coursed through me.

Not now. Please.

“Yes?” Ethan leaned his head to the side and called out to him. “I didn’t ask for anyone to bring anything out here.”

Saying nothing, the waiter slowly raised his hand.

What’s in his hand? Oh no!

A gun gleamed in the moonlight.

Not again.

My heart plummeted.

What is going on?

“No! What are you doing?!” Ethan rose and jumped in front of me, making sure to block any harm directed my way.

Fast, the waiter lowered the gun and raced away.

Oh my God!

Ethan's voice grew shaky. "I don't know who the hell that is, but I will get him."

Shivering, I stood. "He's trying to kill *me*."

"What?"

"Yes." My hands shook at my side. "I don't know what I did, but this isn't the first time—"

"Not the first time?"

"No."

"Well, no one is taking you from me. This ends tonight." Ethan ran off. "Stay there!"

"What? Wait!" I held my hands out. "But! Shit. Be careful!"

Like a maniac, Ethan sped off, rounded the corner, and disappeared.

God, no.

I didn't think Ethan should have done that. Of course he was a gentleman for trying to protect me. However, the waiter had a gun. Ethan had nothing.

Can he fight?

Another twig cracked. I quickly looked around, but saw nothing.

Fuck. I can't stay here, but where do I go? Back inside?

Suddenly, the waiter appeared at the end of the path again.

No. How?

Did he hide in the shadows and let Ethan speed by? Or was this some sort of magical being sent to constantly kill me and keep me down?

I screamed, "What did I do to you?!"

Fast, he raised the gun.

Then, shots ripped through the air.

No!

I dove for the ground, but it was too late. A bullet hit me in the arm, splintering bone. A shockwave of pain exploded. Another got me in the neck.

Slowly, I choked on blood as my vision darkened.

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Chapter 8

No Ass At All

The first thing I heard was the melodic beginning of *Remember the Time*.

I'm not dead.

I fluttered my eyes opened and gasped.

Everyone jammed to the beat.

But...am I cursed?

“Yes. I love M.J.” Claire clapped her hands.

So...I'm okay...like before. And in this moment...like before.

I touched my neck and arm. No marks or scars. Not only was time rewound to the beginning, but my healthy body returned too, just like before.

I'm cursed.

M.J. began singing.

I considered the killer in the maze. He had to be the same person who gave me champagne in the other moment. I guessed that it held poison, but...I didn't realize the poison had been intended only for me to drink.

This crazy person wanted me dead, not Ethan. I was the target, but why?

Still clapping, Claire chuckled. “Maya?”

I looked up.

She pointed to her green purse. “I have a special something in here to relax you this evening. Just let me know at the Gala when you want to go out and have a *break*.”

“I kind of want it now, but...” I glanced at Ryan.

Ryan rolled his eyes at me.

I pointed at him. “I am not having sex with your husband, so get it out of your mind.”

“Eh!” Horace raised his hands. “Where the hell did that come from?!”

“Ryan has tons of panties in his purse, thinking they are mine.” I shook my head. “They are not.”

Ryan glared and gripped the champagne glass until his knuckles turned pale white. “If the panties aren’t yours, then how do you know they are in there?”

“Because last time you slung them all over the place.”

Ryan eyed me. “Last time?!”

“Hey, guys!” Horace waved his hands. “What are we doing? What is this?”

“Those panties are yours!” Ryan slung the glass to the floor and dug into his purse. “You have shitty taste and these show it!”

“Oh, here we go.” I shook my head.

Ryan yanked all the panties out and began slinging them at me. “You ruined my marriage!”

Shocked, Horace held the sides of his head. “Ryan!”

“You know what?” I picked up the green pair and began to put them on under my purple gown. “I’ll show you.”

“Maya, no.” Claire widened her eyes in horror.

“I bet they don’t even fit.” I climbed into them. “Then, maybe you will see it isn’t me.”

“How did this happen?” Horace touched his chest like he was having a heart attack. “We were just...laughing and...”

I yanked the panties up, under my gown, and bent over, almost bumping into Shi.

Then, I lifted the bottom of my dress up. “See. They’re hanging in the back because I have no ass! No ass at all!!”

Shi’s mask went sideways. Perhaps because her mouth had dropped open.

Claire gasped.

Bernard turned the other way.

Horace began hyperventilating.

But, at least Ryan leaned his head to the side. “They don’t fit.”

“I told you.” I dropped the dress, slid my hands under the fabric, and yanked the panties off. “I have no ass at all, so sometimes I still get panties in the teen section.”

Ryan blinked. “They’re...not yours...”

I slung the panties at him. “Told you. I am not fucking your husband, so keep sleuthing!”

Claire touched her forehead. “Maya, this was so unnecessary on so many levels.”

I glared at her. “I have now died twice and repeated this fucking moment three times so excuse me if I don’t practice decorum.”

Claire widened her eyes. “What?”

“For all I know, I can do whatever the hell I want and some guy will just show up and kill me, and I’ll return. And none of what I did before will even matter. None of it! The diamond rose will disappear.” I touched my lips. “The kiss...”

Bernard shook his head. “I have so many questions.”

“Me too, Bernard.” I leaned back in my seat. “Me too.”

Tears spilled from Ryan’s eyes.

Breathing in and out fast, Horace tore off his mask. “I... feel...like I’m...having a...heart attack.”

M.J. sang, filling the air with vibrant lyrics that no one probably was listening to.

Shi glanced my way a few times, but overall everyone kept their gazes off me. By now she had fixed the mask on her face.

There was a minute where I spotted Bernard whispering something to Claire, and her patting his lap.

Who is killing me? And what did I do to deserve it?

When the limo pulled up to the Manor, I was the first one out of there.

Fuck all of them! Fuck this limo! Fuck this party!

I stepped out, avoided the puddle, and stomped off.

No one rushed after me.

Surely, they were just as done with me as I was with them.

I didn't even glance over my shoulder to see if Ryan had decided to go to the party this time or not.

Who the hell is trying to kill me? I doubt I know anyone at this party, so is it one of them? My so-called friends?

How could I not think one of my friends were the ones behind it. That made way more sense than some crazy person deciding that I was the one he wanted to kill.

Even more, the person kept wearing a mask and huge black cloak. Each time it happened, I didn't really spend time trying to assess the height.

For all I knew, it could have been a woman instead of a man. That meant that *all* of my friends would be suspects.

I climbed the grand steps leading to the mansion's entrance.

I need to figure out who keeps trying to kill me. If I do... then maybe this moment will stop repeating itself.

That thought calmed me. Whereas once I assumed I was cursed, now I guessed that I was being given some divine blessing.

Does God want me to figure this out? Perhaps, he saw all of this as unfair and was like...nah...let me give her a chance to solve it.

Then, everything should be fine.

Right?

In the end, I couldn't think of any other option. If I discovered who killed me and stopped them, then I should be

able to continue the night and see the next day.

I would see tomorrow.

For these past several years, I had been in a rush, meeting deadlines and trying to quickly get things done.

Back then, the idea of *tomorrow* loomed with unknown fears and more mounting responsibilities. Dread always filled me. Tomorrow was a dark shadow hanging overhead. It kept creeping closer and closer with each passing minute, reminding me of my immortality and how fast time went by.

And I wasn't just talking about work. The clock had been ticking on getting married and having children. The clock had been ticking on my mother's gradual aging, having more grays in her hair than black.

In the depths of many nights, I found myself dreading tomorrow's light. Many moments, I lay in bed with the weight of tomorrow's worries pressing heavy on my heart and tearing me apart.

And now...all I yearned for was tomorrow.

Because now, tomorrow was something else. It was a blank canvas, waiting to be painted with colors of new hope and dreams. It was a new day, with new opportunities to create, explore, and play in this huge world that I could no longer access.

Now I understood that tomorrow was a gift, not to be dreaded but opened.

Not to be feared, but hoped for.

I got to the top of the stairs with a newfound confidence filling my chest.

If I solve my own murder mystery, then I will see tomorrow.

The door opened.

Ethan stepped out and almost bumped into me. "Ms. Johnson? You're here?"

How did he know it was me? I'm wearing a mask.

Before it made sense for him to recognize me by the limo. The Manor's staff would know who was coming on and off of the property. Surely, somehow it was announced when our limo appeared.

But he spotted me with the mask on as I was by the door.

Did he know what I was going to wear?

Regardless of how Ethan knew who I was, I gazed at him, wanting to finish our kiss, but knowing that it would make no sense for him now. My body burned for his touch, but I would have to wait for him to get comfortable.

Was he the sort of guy that didn't want a super forward woman?

Because honestly, I didn't want to talk anymore. I just wanted to rise on the tip of my toes and stuff my tongue in his mouth.

Ethan gazed at me. Hunger filled his eyes. "You look breathtaking this evening."

"Thank you."

"I..." He cleared his throat. "I planned to meet you by your limo and give you a private tour."

"I would like that." I hooked my arm around his.

Ethan glanced down at my arm. A stunned expression hit him, yet he recovered quickly.

I slowly turned us around and guided us inside the mansion. "However, I would really like to know more about the inside of this manor and even the innerworkings of this party."

"O-kay. What did you have in mind?" He took the lead, had us enter, and steered us toward a massive ballroom.

I gasped.

The ballroom was a fantasy of white roses, shimmering gold décor, and crystal chandeliers.

At least five chandeliers hung from the high ceilings, which had been painted a sky-blue. The space could have been the setting for a King and Queen's marriage, or a movie about a Cinderella-like heroine dashing off to a ball.

Hundreds of elegantly dressed dancers filled the ballroom with laughter and glittering jewelry. Expensive perfume and cologne added to the frivolity of the evening.

I widened my eyes. "This is magical."

"Before I take you on the tour, would you like something to drink?"

"Oh no." I shook my head. "I'm fine."

He gave me a curious look.

That was when I spotted all of the different waiters strolling by.

My anxiety soared.

There must have been over twenty of them, carrying trays of champagne flutes and hors d'oeuvres.

They all wore the same long, hooded satin capes with layers of sequins glittered along the edges. And the same glittering gold masks covered all of their faces, leaving only their eyes visible.

Terrified, I inched closer to Ethan.

He looked down at me. "What questions did you have about the innerworkings of the party?"

"I have a question about the waiters' costumes."

"Okay."

"Where are they kept? Can anyone just put one on? Or is it a particular room where they are stored?"

"Actually, there is a storage room where the costumes are kept. Anything can happen at a party—accidental spills, rips, and tears. During the party, I always want the staff to look their best."

“So, if a waiter happens to rip or stain a cape, they go to the back and get a new one?”

“Correct.”

Was my killer an actual waiter with a chip for me on his shoulder?

Or was it someone I knew who snuck into the storage room to change and then come back out to kill me?

Wouldn't that take planning?

The person had to know that I was actually coming to the party. Then, they had to know that the waiters were wearing costumes and where to get one.

The first time the person killed me, it was with poison to my champagne.

The second time they found me in the maze and shot me with a gun.

What the hell did I do to this person?

I gazed up at Ethan.

To my shock, he was glancing my way as he guided us through the party.

I blinked. “Um...”

“I am happy to finally have you near me.”

I blushed.

With each re-meeting of Ethan, I fell for him more and more.

“I...have a question.” I cleared my throat. “Who would know where to get the costumes?”

“Only the staff.”

“What about people outside of the staff?”

“It is not the pentagon. However, I like to keep things like the décor and costumes secret. Only people who work for me would know.”

Did my killer work for him?

Instead of taking us toward the bar, he led us to a massive doorway going to the hallway.

“It’s noisy in here.” Ethan smiled at me. “Can I take you to my office for a private conversation?”

“I would like that.”

Especially since someone is trying to get rid of me out here.

Ten feet away, a waiter walked toward us.

Oh no.

The long black cape seemed to float in the air.

Scared, I got closer to Ethan.

He snapped his view to me. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yes.” I kept my view on the waiter that looked to be heading our way.

Shit.

When ten feet lay between us and the waiter, he pulled something huge out of his cape.

I shrieked and jumped behind Ethan.

A couple of guests turned our way.

“What’s wrong, Maya?” Ethan gently held my arms. “How can I help?”

My bottom lip quivered. I peeked around him.

The waiter stopped right next to us.

Fuck!

I tried to rush off.

Ethan held my arms tighter. “Maya?”

Then, the waiter took out a long black box.

Wait.

I recognized it immediately. “Oh. It’s the diamond rose.”

Ethan blinked. “What? How did you know that?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I waved his comment away. “Just ignore me.”

Ethan took the box from the waiter. “Only three people knew about the diamond rose—my jeweler, my new assistant Jackson, and me. That’s it.”

The waiter left us.

I scanned the place searching for other waiters.

“Maya?”

I turned back to him. “Yes.”

“Which one of them told you?”

“None.”

“Are you protecting them?” He frowned. “I really wanted this to be a surprise, not for you to already—”

“No one told me.” I let out a long breath. “I guess I can just tell you now. It won’t matter anyway. This whole moment will probably repeat itself once again if I get killed.”

“Killed? Did I hear you correctly?”

“Yes. That’s another long story.”

“I don’t quite understand, but no one will hurt you tonight.” He tenderly took my hand and led me away. This time his pace was faster than before. “We’ll go to my office where I know you’ll be safe.”

I snorted.

He frowned. “What?”

“Just make sure none of your waiters come in.”

“I will.”

“No champagne or anything. In fact, we should lock the doors.”

“Whatever will make you feel comfortable.”

Goodness.

He should have thought I was crazy, not try to protect me. For all he knew, there was no threat to my life at all. Instead, he chose to believe me and try to protect me.

My heart warmed.

God...please don't let me die anymore...I want to love him...and feel his love all over me.

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Chapter 9

A New Strategy

Ethan could help me find this killer. It was his property and waiters. Surely, he had access to any security footage on the property.

The main problem was how could I convince him that there was a real threat against me, when the waiter hadn't tried to kill me yet? Even more...how much could I tell him?

Shit.

It doesn't matter. That's what I truly had to understand. What happened in this moment could be tweaked or changed in the repeat. I didn't know how many times I would keep reliving this night, but it made sense to just...try the ridiculous and have faith that Ethan would possibly believe it.

Alright. Let's see.

When we made it to his door, I stopped him. "Hold on."

Ethan leaned his head to the side. "Yes?"

"So..." I let out a long breath. "What I am going to tell you will be unbelievable and I will completely understand if you want to kick me out of your home afterwards—"

"That will never happen."

"We'll see." I swallowed. "So...I've been in your office before. Does that make sense?"

"It does not." He quirked his brows. "How could you have been in there without my knowing?"

"You were in there with me."

He blinked. "*That* I would have remembered."

"Okay. Let me just give this to you in small doses." I pointed to the door. "Inside of your office, you have two couches and a table in the middle. The walls are stacked with tons of book shelves. Umm...what else? Oh! Your desk is

messy like mine always is—lots of papers and pens scattered all over the place.”

Instead of backing up in horror, he curved his sexy lips into a smile. “This is a very intriguing trick.”

“And I can’t forget the grandfather clock. It’s a work of art—crescent moons, stars, hourglasses. Even the pendulum looks like a sorcerer’s—”

“Staff.” He nodded. “This is interesting because my having this clock is another secret.”

“It is.” I parted my lips. “Why?”

“It was found in the basement when I was a child. My father believed that since it was an ancient artifact, it would be a valuable historical item. One that museums and historical institutions would bother us about. Perhaps even consider taking legal action to get it.”

“But...why is the grandfather’s clock historical?”

“It was made by the witch that lived on this property.”

I tensed. “Aria—the witch who could control time?”

“You know of her?”

“No. You told me about her.”

He chuckled.

Surely, I showed no humor on my face.

He stopped chuckling. “I’m sorry, Maya, but again I would have surely remembered having a conversation with you.”

“I know, but that’s why everything I am going to tell you will sound crazy.”

Far off at the end of the candle lit hallway, a waiter strolled forward, carrying a tray of champagne.

“Oh hell no.” I hurried with turning the door knob. Once it opened, I rushed in. “Come on!”

Not even questioning me, he followed me in fast, shut the door for me, and locked it.

My heart hammered in my chest. “We may not have much time.”

“O-kay.”

I glanced over at the other end of the office. “Can we close the curtains on that window?”

“The window?”

“Yes.” I hurried over there. Only darkness served as the window’s view. It was a perfect place for my killer to stand outside of it with a gun, point, and shoot me.

“If that will make you feel comfortable, Maya, then go ahead.”

I sighed, gripped the end of the thick beige curtains, and slid them over. “Perfect.”

My hands shook at my sides. “So...let’s see if this will work.”

Eyeing me, Ethan strolled over. “See if *what* will work?”

“I’m going to tell you everything, no matter how crazy it is and you’re going to...decide I guess.” I held my hands out. “And maybe your waiter won’t kill me during that time.”

He touched his chest. “My waiter?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “Perhaps, the person is not truly working for you. It could be a guest or some person who just wants me gone. Whoever it is, they always come dressed in the gold mask and wearing the robe. Then, they kill me.”

“Let me get this clear.” Ethan placed the box on his desk and then leaned against it. “One of my waiters has been trying to kill you?”

“Not trying. They have succeeded in killing me. Twice.”

“O-kay.”

“Yes.”

“But, didn’t you *just* arrive here?”

“Good question.” I placed one hand in front of me. “However...okay. This is when things get crazy. Are you

ready?”

“Try me.”

“Have you ever seen the movie Groundhog Day?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” I bobbed my head. “That’s what is going on with me.”

“You’re stuck in a...time loop?”

“Yes.” I bobbed my head again. “This night keeps repeating over and over. I am now living this for the fourth time.”

His skeptical expression hit me. “You are saying that you keep reliving my party over and over?”

“Basically. This is the fourth time. And, I’ve never got to enjoy this party because one of your waiters keeps killing me.”

“Three times?”

“No.” I shook my head. “Only twice. There was one time where I tried to drive away from the property and the moment started back over again.”

“So, for some reason you must stay on this property?”

“Yes.” I studied him. “You...believe me?”

“I wouldn’t say that I believe you. I would more say that I am thoroughly intrigued by this conversation.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “I imagined this night going many ways, but this has all been a surprise twist.”

“Oh.” I grinned. “That’s perfect.”

“What’s perfect?”

“I can tell you what you were going to do. You did it the first time I came into your office.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes.”

A wicked smirk covered his face. “Tell me.”

“You gave me the diamond rose.” I pointed to the box.
“That was of course after you had to leave because your mother had arrived—”

“Oh no. That couldn’t have happened. She hates when I have these charity events and has never come.”

“Well, the first time Jackson interrupted us walking to the maze to tell you she arrived—”

“You know my new assistant, Jackson?”

“I met him in one moment—”

Someone knocked at the door.

I tensed. “D-don’t let them in.”

“I won’t.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Yes?!”

A deep male voice sounded on the other side of the door.
“Excuse me, sir.”

“Yes, Jackson?”

“We have a situation in the ball room.”

I pointed at the door and whispered, “That’s your mom. I bet you a million dollars.”

Ethan gave me an odd look and then raised his voice.
“Jackson, what is the problem in the ball room?!”

“Your mother has arrived. She is in there...causing...some would say...a disturbance.”

“See.” I sighed.

“Jackson, I will deal with my mother at another time. At this moment, I am busy.”

“Yes, sir.”

I chuckled. “I’m pretty intrigued with what’s going on with your mother in the ball room.”

“My father has recently left her for another woman—a very young woman.”

“How young?”

“Too young for even me.” Ethan frowned. “I believe my new soon-to-be step mother just turned nineteen.”

“Wow. That is young, especially for his age.”

“Yes.” His frown deepened. “Regardless, my mother has been taking it hard and drinking more than normal. I imagine she is either insulting several people, wildly dancing on a table, or spilling champagne all over herself.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

He studied me. “How did you know that she would be here, when I didn’t?”

“Time loop.” I smirked. “Guess what else.”

“Okay.”

“The diamond rose has an obsidian stoned stem. It’s breathtaking. You told me that the artist took a real rose that had been preserved and then coated it with diamond dust.”

He widened his eyes in shock.

“Then, you started talking about how you love my novels. You mentioned, *Breathless in the Billionaire’s Arms* and that you had been a billionaire for a long time, but it wasn’t until you read that book that you truly felt rich.”

“I...” He blinked. “I had practiced that line in the mirror tonight. So nervous, I wanted to...sound like one of your heroes. Was it too cheesy?”

“No. I loved it. In fact, I was ready to...”

He quirked his brows. “Yes?”

“I wanted to kiss, make out, and maybe even have you make love to me right on that desk.”

“Understand this. I am definitely here to serve, Maya.”

A silly smile hit me. “Okay. Hold on. I’m still trying to convince you that I am not crazy.”

“Alright. Sorry. Please continue.”

“You brought up history and the meaning of roses.” I began to slowly pace. “It was once again brilliant and

romantic.”

“I worked on that for a long time too. I really was nervous to meet you.”

I stopped pacing. “Why?”

“Because I’m not only a fan of your work, but I have been utterly obsessed with you. You can ask anyone in my staff. While reading your books I would rave about your stories and the genius of your mind to anyone who would listen. So...I saw this one night as my only moment to make the best impression. I imagine many men must approach you—”

“I don’t know about that.” I snorted. “Anyway, you were perfect you did awesome.”

“I’m glad.”

“Then, two waiters came in with hors d’oeuvres and champagne.” I shook my head. “Once I drank my champagne, boom, I’m dead in your arms.”

He froze in horror. “W-what?”

“Then, the next time was when I arrived and tried to leave ___”

“But you couldn’t because apparently one rule of this time loop is that you must remain on the property.”

“Exactly. Rules. I like that.” I started pacing again. “Next, I arrive. We meet again and together, we head out to the maze which was amazing because I got to learn so much about you. The deeper side.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Like what?”

I paused from pacing again and faced him. “You talked about how as a kid you would run around the maze trying to solve the puzzle.”

He blinked.

“Then, you told me about how you worked really hard in investment banking and used a different last name so that you could make it on your own. And that you had this amazing

moment that you replay in your mind of when you brought your father to your firm—”

“I...never have told that to anyone.”

“You told me.” I pointed to the window. “Right out in the maze. And! You said that his eyes watered and he pulled you into a hug.”

“I...can’t believe I told you that.”

“I’m glad that you did. That story warmed my heart more than the lines about the rose.” I held my hand up. “Granted, I loved both moments.”

He unfolded his arms. “Maya, either I am going crazy or...”

“I’m telling the truth.” I shrugged. “Trust me. If you don’t believe me, it will be fine. I’ll just leave your office, get killed, and see you again to say it a better way.”

He held up one hand. “You are not dying tonight.”

“I hope not.”

“After I told you that in the maze, then what happened?”

“We kissed and it was amazing. Your tongue is very talented.”

For the first time since being with him, he actually blushed.

“Very talented.” I smirked. “Then, a waiter appeared at the end of the maze. You went after him. He somehow avoided you. Then, boom, he reappeared, pulled out a gun, and shot me.”

Ethan frowned.

“I always return in the limo heading to this party which is horrible because my friends are insane and there are secrets looming around them.”

Ethan stood, walked over, and stopped a foot in front of me. “I don’t want to believe you.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “I understand.”

“But you have provided clear evidence. A small list of people have been in my office and saw this clock. Even less knew about the diamond rose. Meanwhile,” He touched his chest. “Only I knew what I was going to say to you tonight.”

I relaxed a little.

“And...” He slowly shook his head. “I’ve never told anyone about that moment with my father. I must have felt extremely comfortable with you when I told you that memory in the maze.”

I trembled. “You...believe me?”

“What else could I do, but at least...try to believe you?”

“I will take that.” I embraced him, wrapping my arms around his waist and leaning my head against his chest. “I’ve felt so alone dealing with this. Even if this starts over and you don’t remember anything. I’m happy that I had this moment.”

He hugged me back, gathering me in those strong arms. “How do you think this time loop started?”

“I don’t know. Maybe God is either blessing me or...”

“Or?”

“He’s cursing me.”

“No. This is something else. You can’t leave this property so it must have something to do with the manor or even the maze.”

“Yes.” I leaned away and looked up at him. “It would make sense that it was the maze, but I went there the third time. Not the first.”

“And the first time was my office?”

“Yes.” I let go of him and scanned the space. “I came in here while you went off to deal with your mother.”

“And what did you do?”

“I was being nosey and looking around. Oh.” I turned to the clock. “I was so captivated with this. I...touched the sides.”

“Interesting.”

Shivering, I got closer to the clock. “But...I don’t know.”

He went over to it with me. “How did you touch the clock?”

I stared at the large grandfather clock, ticking to the steady beat of my heart.

When I first saw the clock, I felt like...it had lured me over.

“Maya?”

I swallowed. “I walked to the clock, interested in getting a closer look.”

This time, I studied the intricate designs carved into the wood.

“What did you do, Maya?”

I showed him, raising my hands to the clock and slipping them along the side. Like before, the wood hummed and vibrated beneath my fingertips.

But this time, the clock stopped ticking.

Shit.

Ethan leaned closer. “The hands are not moving.”

I put my view on the clock face twinkling and glowing with crescent moons, stars, and hourglasses. Just like Ethan said, the pendulum and hands remained still, and the clock stayed silent.

“This sounds crazy but,” Ethan touched the sides, slipping his hands along the clock. “But...this could be what triggered it.”

“You said this belonged to the witch?”

“That is what my father believed.”

A creak sounded behind us.

Suddenly, the bookshelf on the other side of the room swung open like a door.

How?

“What?” Ethan jumped in front of me. “Who is using my secret passageway?”

A waiter rushed out, pointing a gun. Same gold mask. Same long flowing cape.

Damn it!

The scene unfolded before me like a nightmare. Shots fired through the air, hitting Ethan.

Terror and sadness tore through me. “No!”

He fell forward.

Then, the waiter pointed my way.

I had no chance of survival. I knew I would die. But this time, I did my best to get some details.

He's short!

And then my chest exploded in agonizing pain as bullets pierced my chest.

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Chapter 10

A Bumpy Ride

This time, I waited for M.J.'s song to fill my ears.

Once it did, I gazed around.

They all danced to *Do You Remember the Time* like every other moment before.

And I just sat there, stunned and heartbroken. Finally, I had gotten someone to believe me. Of course it would be Ethan. He was proving to be an amazing guy. If I ever got out of this time loop, I would fucking give my all to make him mine.

I would surely put in time.

But, would I ever get out of this?

My stomach twisted.

And who's trying to kill me?

“Yes. I love M.J.” Claire gestured at me and then pointed to her green purse. “I have a special something in here to relax you this evening. Just let me know at the Gala when you want to go out and have a *break*.”

The waiter was short. That meant that it didn't have to be a man. It could have been a woman.

“We are going to have so much fun, Maya.” Claire snapped her fingers to the song. “Just like the old days when we were in college, having an absolute blast.”

But, whoever it was—man or woman—they knew a lot about Ethan's Manor.

Did they work there? Or...maybe they used to work there?

“No. No.” Horace raised his voice over the music. “Maya must be an elegant and captivating lady this evening. I want her to blow Ethan's mind away, so that he will open up those pockets. Money. Money. Money.”

The killer knew where to get the waiter's costumes. Also, this person was aware of the ins and outs of the maze. We had walked in decently deep, before sitting on the bench.

Or maybe the killer just followed our voices as we talked.

Horace spoke, "And, Ethan will not be like the hero's in your billionaire romances. So, let me give you some tips on wooing Ethan."

The killer also knew about the secret passageway into Ethan's office. It must have been behind the bookshelf wall. Was it some sort of tunnel and where did it start?

If Ethan was tight-lipped about the grandfather's clock and even the waiters' costumes, there was no way he allowed his secret passageway to be common knowledge.

"This is my advice, Maya." Horace held up both hands. "Be confident and self-assured. Billionaires are often used to dealing with people who are trying to impress them or win their favor. Showing confidence and being self-assured can help you stand out."

Claire rolled her eyes. "Ethan is not interested in Maya. He has super models and actresses throwing themselves at him."

Horace shrugged. "But are they being authentic? Men like *real* women."

"Oh, really?" Claire frowned at him. "Is that what men like?"

"Ah!" Ryan dropped the glass. Champagne stained the front of his gray pants. The glass tumbled along the floor.

Horace glared at him. "Are you serious right now?"

The chorus came in for the song, and I tried to block it out as much as possible.

"I need a drink." I rose, duck walked over to Claire, and sat down next to her.

Horace glared at Ryan. "Honestly, Maya, I don't think anyone needs to be drinking right now."

I held out my hand. "Please, pass me the bottle, Bernard."

Smiling, he leaned over, took it out of the ice bucket attached to the door, and gave it to me.

I yanked off the top and chugged champagne right from the bottle.

“Maya!” Claire shrieked. “We have glasses.”

I lowered the bottle and licked my lips. “I’m not sharing this.”

Shi giggled from our seat.

I smiled at her. “Are you having a good night?”

She nodded.

“Hey, everybody.” Bernard spread out his hands and raised his voice over the song. “I have a good joke. There’s a bunch of people on an airplane and it begins to have a bumpy ride—”

“Absolutely not!” Claire placed her hand on his stomach. “That is a racist joke, baby. You are not saying it.”

“No. No. No.” I waved my hand holding the bottle and almost spilling champagne on her. “Enough is enough. You keep telling him that he can’t say it, and at this moment, I’m beyond curious.”

Claire eyed me. “What do you mean I keep telling him —?”

“Say it, Bernard.” I pointed at him. “I want to hear the joke.”

Bernard looked around. “It really is funny.”

Claire scowled at him. “It is not.”

“Ignore her.” I leaned forward and stared at him. “Let’s go.”

Meanwhile, Horace and Ryan shot each other daggers with their eyes.

Fine. I would rather hear a racist joke than get some woman’s dirty panties thrown at me.

“Okay.” Bernard’s expression beamed. “There’s a bunch of people on an airplane and it begins to have a bumpy ride.”

Sighing, Claire dug into her bag. “You really are going to do this?”

“Shh.” I placed the champagne bottle to my lips and gulped some more down.

Bernard rubs his hands together. “The flight is really bumpy, so the pilot gets on the speaker and says in a deep voice, ‘I apologize, but we are having difficulty because the weight is too heavy. Therefore, we must throw off all your luggage.’”

I quirked my brows. “O-kay.”

“Passengers see all of their suitcases being flung from the plane. Still, the flight continues to be bumpy. Nothing has been improved.”

I drank some more champagne.

“Next, the pilot gets on the speaker and says, ‘Sorry, but the weight is still too heavy. Even if we try to land, we may risk crashing. Unfortunately, we will now have to start throwing people off the plane.’”

“What?” I placed the bottom of the bottle on my lap. “That’s odd.”

By now, Claire had her joint out, found some matches in her purse, and was lighting it.

Bernard cleared his throat. “The pilot explains, ‘Do not worry. We have enough parachutes for everyone and the stewardesses will be showing you how to use them so you can land safely.’”

I shook my head. “This is crazy.”

Bernard smirked. “It gets better, Maya.”

“But, does it?” Claire smoked her joint.

Ignoring her, Bernard kept his focus on me. “Next, the pilots says on the speaker, ‘We will begin having some people put on the parachutes and dive off the plane, but we want to be fair because all of our passengers are equal.’”

Groaning in annoyance, Claire blew out smoke.

“The pilots continues, ‘We will go in alphabetical order to make sure all our passengers are treated fairly.’”

I eyed him.

“We will begin with the A’s.” Bernard chuckled. “Can all the *African Americans* please go to the door and prepare to jump off the plane?”

I widened my eyes. “Oh shit.”

Claire turned to me. “I told you.”

“None of the passengers get up. Everyone remains seated.” Bernard chuckled some more, completely overjoyed with himself. “They wait and wait and wait some more.”

Horace and Ryan turned to Bernard, probably done with their silent argument, and possibly just as curious to where this joke was going too.

“So, the pilot says, ‘Okay. Then, we will go to B. Can all of the Blacks, please go to the door, and jump off the plane.’”

“Oh my God.” I leaned back in the chair. “What have I done?”

“I tried to tell you.” Claire blew out smoke and handed the joint to me. “But no...you wanted to hear it.”

I took the joint.

Bernard winked at me. “No one gets up. They wait and wait and wait. The pilot gets back on the speaker and clears his throat, ‘Alright. We are now on C. Can all of the Coloreds please go to the door and jump off the plane.’”

I took a hit of the joint.

“As you probably assume, Maya.” Bernard bobbed his head. “No one gets up again. Not a passenger rises.”

Claire held her hand out.

I gave her the joint back.

She took it and rolled her eyes. “And here we go.”

Bernard raised his hands in the air. “Off in the back of the plane, there is an African American mother and her child.”

Claire groaned again.

“And this child nudges his mother and says, ‘Mama, why aren’t *we* going up? Aren’t we African American? Aren’t we Black? Mama...aren’t we even Colored?’”

Horace twisted his face in pure rage.

Uh oh.

Bernard grinned. “The mother leaned over and whispered in her child’s ear, ‘No, baby. We’re *Niggers* today.’”

Oh shit...

I froze in horror.

That is definitely racist.

Horace glared at him. “What did you say?”

Bernard laughed. “We’re niggers today. Get it? It starts with a N, so in the alphabet it would put them later in jumping —”

“I should punch you in your fucking face!” Horace began taking off his jacket. “In fact—”

“No. No.” Claire held out her hands. “He didn’t mean it!”

Horace tried to lunge toward Bernard.

Ryan and Claire got between them, blocking Horace’s path.

Bernard just sat there in shock.

Meanwhile, Horace, Ryan, and Claire clashed in a chaotic jumble of twisting elegantly dressed bodies.

M.J. sang more to his past lover, hoping she remembered their good times.

“Oh no.” Bernard shook his head. “But...a Black person told me this joke—”

Somehow Horace slammed his fist into Bernard’s cheek.

Claire screamed. “Horace! How could you?”

“I am tired of him disrespecting you!” Horace tried to hit Bernard again.

What does that mean?

“No, baby.” Ryan struggled with gripping Horace’s shoulders to hold him back.

Bernard touched his face. “H-he hit me?”

And, the limo pulled up to the Manor.

I pointed to Shi. “Hurry. Let’s get of here.”

No fool, she scooted fast, opened the door before the driver could run around, and got out.

I quickly followed.

Meanwhile, the poor driver almost bumped into me as he got into the limo to stop the fighting.

Yeah. Note to self, Bernard shouldn’t tell that joke.

I climbed out of the limo, making sure I didn’t step in the puddle.

But I did anyway...because of the sight in front of me.

Right when I was trying to step around, I looked up and saw Ethan *already* standing right there with an expression of shock on his face.

He’s here early. Why?

That was when I stepped in the puddle.

He rushed over, caught my arm, and pulled me to him. “Dear God. I thought you were dead.”

My breasts smoothed against his chest.

I blinked. “W-what did you say?”

“I’m alive. You’re alive.” Ethan crashed his lips against mine, devouring me with an intense passion that made our kiss in the maze seem like child’s play.

My only thought was...*He’s stuck in the time loop too?*

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Chapter 11

Stuck Together

We stood by the limo kissing. Ethan kept his arms around me, sealing me into a deep passionate embrace. His sweet-smelling cologne wrapped around me. His soft lips tasted like wine. His tongue felt like velvet.

And, our lips danced in the rhythm of desire as if nothing else existed.

I swore it lasted forever.

It was so raw, yet so tender.

Utterly intense, but so true.

With our lips—intertwining and caressing—we spoke a language beyond words. It was one of passion and new love. It was a promise of forever. A seal of our fates.

In that moment, time stood still and the world melted away. Life paused like a movie. It all stopped. The clicking of clocks. The passing of minutes. It was all irrelevant.

The rest of the world shifted to ghosts, spectators fading into the background.

Then, Claire screamed, “Maya!”

Shocked, I pulled back from Ethan, thinking that perhaps Horace had killed Bernard or something.

I had to admit my head was dizzy with Ethan as I turned around.

Instead of a bloodied Bernard lying dead on the concrete, all of my friends stood outside of the limo and stared at us in shock. I couldn't see the expression on Shi's face due to her mask being on.

Still masked, Ryan shook his head, probably thinking I was the biggest slut in the world. In this repeated moment, he still believed I was sleeping with his husband.

Meanwhile, everyone else wore shocked expressions.

Oh yeah. In this moment, they don't know that Ethan and I have already met each other.

Claire had her mask off and her eyebrows raised. “Did I miss something, Maya?”

Bernard had his mask off too. Blood dripped from his nose.

I shook my head. “I’ll catch you up later, Claire. For now you should help your husband out.”

She scowled. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah, Claire. Go fix your *husband*.” Horace’s jacket was torn and his tie undone. Still, his face brightened with excitement as he hurried over to us. “Well, this is quite a surprise.”

I frowned.

“Already, love is in the air.” Horace gave us a wild grin. “Maybe, we should all go to the bar and get a drink. Together, you two could change the world for everyone. Ethan, has Maya told you about the organization that she wants to start? It’s called HeARt.”

“No.” Ethan turned to me. “She has not.”

I cleared my throat. “We haven’t had the time to talk about that.”

Claire strolled over, still gazing at me in shock. “But, you had the time to kiss?”

I let out a long breath.

“First, you were nervous about coming to the party and acting like you didn’t even know Ethan.” Claire held her hands out. “Next, you step out of the limo and kiss him—an absolute stranger to you.”

Ethan grinned. “*I* actually kissed her, so I am the one to blame for the odd behavior.”

Claire turned to him. “But, you don’t even know Maya or ___”

“We don’t have time to explain.” I grabbed Ethan’s hand and guided him away. “We can all meet up at the bar in a few minutes. Right now, Ethan and I need to talk.”

Horace bobbed his head. “Yes. Yes. Have a good conversation. I’ll be at the bar—”

“What do you mean you both need to talk?” Claire called back. “Maya, we need to talk too—”

“Later.” I waved her away.

Ethan took control and rushed us toward the manor. “I have a plan.”

I blinked. “O-kay.”

Now that the kiss had ended, I had time to dissect this new reality.

Somehow Ethan landed in the time loop with me!

Before, I’d felt all alone. I was a soul lost in emptiness, wandering through confused thoughts and mounting fears.

I was helpless.

Despair had almost drowned me.

Granted, I had been able to talk to him in each repeated moment. That helped, but I also knew he wouldn’t remember our exchanges in the next repeats.

And now...he is with me.

“So...” I glanced at him. “You remember the moment when we were both shot?”

“I remember everything.” Ethan shook his head in disbelief. “And now *my* night has repeated. In one instance, I was shot and dying next to you. Next, I opened my eyes and I was standing in the kitchen doing a last check of the hors d’oeuvres with the chef.”

“Oh my God.”

“If not for your telling me about this earlier, I might have gone crazy in front of my chef.”

“I’m still shocked you’re calm.”

“I’m steady on the outside. On the inside, I am rattled and losing my mind.” He rubbed the side of my hand with his thumb. “But...you, Maya. Your being here. Your presence...it is anchoring me.”

“So...what did you do?”

“I remembered what happened. I knew that when I was in the kitchen, minutes later, Jackson would come and tell me that your limo had arrived and I would rush away from the chef, hoping to greet you.”

We made it to his manor and walked through.

Right when I thought he was going to take me to the ballroom or hallway, he led us to the right.

A set of stairs greeted me.

Approaching those steps, I looked at him. “Where are we going?”

He tightened his grip on my hand. “We need to figure out who killed us last time.”

“True.” I began to climb up the long set of wooden stairs with him. “What do you suggest?”

“I have cameras everywhere.” The wood creaked under our weight. “I’m thinking we should go into my security room and see who enters the costume storage area.”

“Yes. Perfect.”

“Just like you said, it was either one of my waiters or someone dressed as them.”

“I think the person works for you?”

“Okay.” A worried expression covered his face. “Why?”

“This killer knows about getting costumes from the storage area. I think that was planned.”

“Go ahead.”

“Next, they seemed to know a good bit about the maze.”

“Interesting. However, anyone who has been to my party before, may already have known about my costume space and the maze.”

“Correct, but what about your secret passageway to your office?”

He frowned. “That does point to an employee—a very close one.”

We made it to the steps.

My heart hammered in my chest.

He led us down the hallway. “Not many know about the secret tunnel to my office.”

“Where does it begin?”

“There are three ways to get into the tunnel.”

“Okay.”

“One is a door inside of the back of my closet. Sometimes, I use it when I’m being lazy in the morning and want to get quick hours in.”

“What about the second?”

“It is at the end of the maze and involves one going into an underground tunnel, but that entrance is sealed right now due to construction happening near the maze.”

“And the third?”

“The third is inside of the library which long ago had been used as Aria’s lab.”

“Wait.” I stopped us and turned to him. “The secret passageways were around when the witch lived here?”

“Yes. The tunnel is another remnant from her time. I imagine this secret access served a different purpose for Aria.”

“Do you have any idea why she used it?”

“None, besides the fact that one of the pathways led to her lab—”

“And another to the maze.” I began walking.

He moved at my pace. “I’m still...”

“What?” I eyed him.

The muscles in his face twitched. “I’m still trying to comprehend that...*this* is really happening.”

“Oh yes.” I gave him a sad smile. “This being trapped in time is new for you.”

A dark chuckle left him. “I would say so.”

“How do you think this happened? What triggered you to now be in this loop with me?” I ran through the moments in my mind. “The office? The clock? Or...was it just me?”

“I think it is the clock.”

“Have you ever touched it before?”

“Many times and for many years.”

“Then, why now...for repeating time?”

“Perhaps because this last moment was the first time I died. I touched the clock and then died.”

Shit.

I looked at him. “You think the dying part was important to triggering the time loop?”

He stopped us in front of the door. “Long ago, the library had tons of Aria’s old grimoires. In my search of magic and power as a kid, I spent much too much time browsing through them.”

I widened my eyes.

“Half of the stuff, I never really understood. There were things like...binding spells, blood contracts, time shifting, and even blood summoning.”

“Oh my God.”

“Spells like those always required the witch’s blood or someone else’s, and other spells...”

“What?”

“They required the death of someone.”

A cold shiver ran through me.

Ethan continued, “This death just had to be near the magic user—in the same room.”

“So...maybe the clock has some sort of spell and someone had to die to use it.”

“Legend claims that the witch somehow controlled time, but I never knew how. Perhaps, she had that in place.”

Scared, I stepped closer to him. “Okay...so, if I am her and I know people are freaked out by my magic, then maybe I would have an emergency plan in place where if anyone ever kills me in my room, then I can rewind time.”

He nodded. “That is a good theory indeed.”

“So while she was alive, your library was her lab?”

“Yes.”

“So, then what was your office to her?”

“I believe it was her bedroom.”

“And your bedroom now?”

“Do you know what she used that for?”

“I believe it was a nursery for her triplets.”

“She had kids?”

His frown deepened. “Yes. She did.”

I let out a long breath. “I keep thinking that Aria is connected to all of this somehow.”

“If she is not the reason for this time loop, then she could be the solution.”

“I hope so.”

“Until then, it’s time to figure out our potential suspects.” He grabbed the knob, turned it, and opened the door.

A massive space greeted my eyes.

The security room hummed with the sound of monitors. The line of screens showed the inside and outside of the house in different views. Six men and one woman sat at desks, wearing headsets. Each monitored five cameras on their desk.

One man spotted Ethan and immediately rose. “How can I help you, sir?”

“Christopher, I need all footage on the costume room pulled and full monitoring of it.”

“No problem.” Christopher quirked his brows. “Anything we should be looking for, sir?”

“I want to make sure no person besides my employees go inside. Additionally, I want images of anyone that has been in and out of there today.”

Christopher blinked. “Done, sir. However...I personally watched that camera and today alone, over seventy people have gone in and out of there.”

Ethan scowled. “What?”

“The party planner has six assistants. Many of the decorators carried the boxes of masks and capes in there. This morning.”

“How many?”

“Close to twenty.”

My heart sank.

The man continued, “Several maids have entered along with security to simply do their daily rounds. Your assistant, Jackson. All thirty waiters.”

Fuck. Thirty waiters?

Christopher shrugged. “I believe you even entered as a final assessment.”

“I did.” Ethan nodded. “What about party guests?”

“No, sir. If a guest entered, it would have been noted as odd behavior and security would have been notified.”

I stepped forward. “So, if a guest snuck into the room and took a mask and cape—”

“Guards would be following that person around to figure out what sort of mischief they could be up to.” Christopher gestured to people wildly dancing on one monitor. “Some guests get pretty drunk at these masquerades and we are here to make sure nothing too...extravagant occurs.”

“Still, be on the look out for a guest sneaking into the room. I want the person stopped by several guards, and me contacted immediately.” Ethan let go of my hand and touched his chin. “What else can we look for?”

I swallowed. “My friends...”

Ethan turned to me. “Your friends?”

“I’m nervous...that...” I let out a long breath. “It could be one of my friends. I don’t know why one of them would want to kill me, but it makes the most sense.”

“Why?”

“Because, none of your employees know of me?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Ethan crossed his arms over his shoulder. “For several months, I’ve raved about you to many that worked with me. Surely, most were exhausted with my discussions of your plotlines. One night I stood in the kitchen talking to my chef for hours about your books. She reads you too.”

I blinked. “Really?”

“Yes. I would say that I have bought your books for all the females on my staff.”

Hope rose within me. “Then, maybe one of them are trying to kill me?”

“You sound happy about that.”

“Better your staff than my friends.”

“Still, we should have your friends watched.” Ethan turned to the man who still stood by us. Surely, he was confused with

our conversation about someone trying to kill me. “I need cameras on four specific guests.”

The man bobbed his head and headed back over to his desk. “Do you know what they are wearing?”

“I do.” I followed him over.

“I have a software program that can find specific people through gender, color of clothing and hair, as well as other details.” Christopher lowered to his seat. “This search tool is always helpful during major events.”

Ethan came over to my side. “I want someone watching the costume room, and others monitoring Maya’s friends.”

“We can do that, sir.” Christopher looked at me. “Can you begin describing?”

Instantly, I told him what Ryan was wearing. If I had a list of suspects, he would be the number one person that might want to kill me. He assumed I was sleeping with Horace.

But, didn't he stay in the limo and leave when I was shot in the maze?

And even the last time when I was shot in Ethan’s office, he stayed in the limo again.

Or was that what he wanted me to believe?

Regardless, it barely took a minute for Christopher to find Ryan.

There Ryan goes. This time, he is at the party.

Still clad in all gray, Ryan stood by the bar, swallowing down shot after shot and appearing depressed. His purse remained close to his hip, surely stuffed with tons of dirty panties.

Hmmm. Why isn't Horace with him?

I began describing my agent to Christopher. Thankfully for us, Horace was the only man wearing a money green suit.

“Here we go.” Christopher typed something in and the screen zoomed in to Horace in the hallway wildly moving his

hands around and talking to Claire.

Ethan leaned over. “They look like they’re arguing.”

“Horace punched Claire’s husband in the face due to a racist joke.”

Ethan snapped his view to me. “What?”

“Yeah. It was a lot. Bernard said the joke in the limo.”

Ethan put his view back on them.

A door opened by them, and a woman strolled out in a silver feathered mask and gown.

Horace and Claire went quiet. They were both the type to keep up appearances. Both could have been ready to murder each other, but if a stranger walked by, they would instantly go silent and show off the biggest smiles.

Christopher tapped the edge of the desk. “They’re by the bathroom near the ballroom.”

Ethan turned to him. “Eastern or Western hallway?”

“Eastern.”

Jesus. How big is this place?

Horace and Claire watched the woman stroll away. Once she rounded the corner, Horace grabbed Claire’s arm, yanked her into the bathroom, and shut the door.

What the fuck?

Ethan frowned. “Can we get a view and audio in the bathroom?”

“Yes, sir.” Christopher tapped away.

Oh shit. We can.

Next thing I knew, Horace and Claire appeared in front of us.

Horace shoved Claire away. “You think you can black mail me?!”

I tensed.

Claire snatched off her mask. “I didn’t say that. I am just saying that if you tell Ryan about us, then I will tell Maya—”

“How fucking dare you?!” He stormed her way.

Us?

She staggered back. “You ruin my life, and I will ruin yours.”

“You fucking bitch!”

I raised my hands in the air. “What the hell is going on?”

Claire backed up into the wall and trembled. “K-keep your mouth closed and I will—”

“What?” Horace got in front of her and sneered. “I would kill you before you tried.”

Claire’s bottom lip quivered. “Just...listen.”

Horace bared his teeth. Never had I seen him so mad.

Claire slowly raised her hands and placed them on his chest. “There’s no need to tell Ryan about us.”

Again. Us?! What the hell?

Horace shook his head. “He will want to know why I’m leaving him, and I have to—”

“You don’t have to ruin my life—”

“We talked about being together. Now is the time—”

“You love dick just as much as pussy, Horace.” She rolled her eyes. “I’m not settling down with you. It’s just something fun we say when we’re making love.”

Horace shook his head and backed up. “I meant everything I said.”

“And how would I know to believe you?”

“I’m honest.”

“Oh really?” Claire leaned her head to the side. “You’ve been lying to Maya for years.”

I murmured. “About what?”

Horace spoke through clenched teeth, “Keep your mouth fucking shut.”

“It’s only a matter of time before she finds out—”

“Shut up!” Horace closed the small distance between them.

“When she finds out.” Claire frowned. “She’ll ruin you.”

“She won’t find out.” Horace scowled. “I have a plan.”

Then, then all of the monitors in the security room went black.

“No.” I shivered. “What’s going on?”

Ethan glared. “Christopher?”

All of the men began quickly typing onto their keyboards.

“Someone has hacked into our system, sir.”

Ethan turned to me. “That’s how the person has been able to sneak around.”

Shit.

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Chapter 12

Better Safe, Than Sorry

The security room shifted to chaos. Christopher gave out orders as everyone frantically scrambled around each other, trying to fix the problem with the cameras.

A few typed on their keyboards in a blur. The woman shouted into a phone at somebody.

Ethan took my hand and guided us to the back of the room.

When we got there, he turned to me. “So, this killer...he knows how to turn off my security footage.”

Chills ran through me. “This is a lot of planning to get rid of me.”

“A hell of a lot.”

“Goddamn it. What did I do to his person?”

Ethan held up one finger. “They knew you were coming to my party.”

“Definitely. How many people knew that among your employees?”

“Many.” He frowned. “I was excited like a teenaged girl. The chef thought it was adorable.”

I blushed, then paused. “Wait. Maybe...someone else on your staff didn’t think your obsession of me was cute at all.”

Ethan blinked. “The killer’s motive is jealousy?”

“Could be. I can’t think of what I could have done to make someone want to kill me. I just sit in my office at home and write for days. I have little social life to speak of. No dating.”

“We are definitely going to change that.”

I blushed again. “Let’s...get back to...breaking this down.”

“Yes.” Ethan winked. “Why would the killer pick my party? Why not break into your home and kill you there?”

“Yikes.”

“Sorry.”

“No. That’s a good point.” My heart boomed in my ears. “I’m just freaked out by that. I’m getting better security.”

“You should. I had men sitting across your house for weeks, watching. No one noticed.”

I widened my eyes. “You had men watching my house. Why?”

“I couldn’t find any information on a boyfriend or lover.”

“O-kay.”

“I apologize if that was a bit too much.”

“Hey...my hero would have done it in a book, yet...in reality, it’s a little weird.”

“A tiny bit off-putting?”

“I would say so.”

“The hired guys were ordered to take any pictures of men going in and out of your house and find out information on them.”

“That was an easy job for them.”

“It was. They only saw Horace going once. No other men visited.”

“Then, most likely no guy was creeping around my property?”

“Exactly.”

I hugged myself. “I hate this.”

“We will find the person, Maya.”

“I know.” I cleared my throat. “What’s next? Let’s get back to the fact that the person wanted me to die at the party.”

“Perhaps, because they wanted *me* to see you die.”

What sort of sick individual is this?

I hugged myself tighter. “If that’s true, then they wanted you to pay for your obsession?”

Ethan shook his head. “I don’t want to be the reason why someone is trying to kill you.”

“We could be wrong.” I lowered my arms. “However, it does seem like the person wants me dead around you. The first time was poison to my champagne. I assume they brought it to the house. Lots of planning.”

“Perhaps, the person also brought a gun just in case.”

Even more terrified, I came closer to him. “They somehow knew about the waiters’ costumes and grabbed one.”

“Maybe, they don’t even wait for the day of the party to bring the items. Perhaps, they already had the stuff hidden somewhere in the house to change into.”

“They wait for the cameras to go off, then grab the costume, and rush to find me.” I glanced back at the men hurrying around the room. “The cameras have been off for a while. They would have enough time.”

“I don’t how like how fucking smart this killer is.”

“Me either.”

Ethan frowned. “My hired men confirmed that Horace is your literary agent. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think he is hiding from you?”

“Whatever it is...it deals with money. That’s all Horace truly cares about.”

When the hell did Claire and him start having sex?

Ethan’s face turned to rage. “When this is over, I am going to ruin Horace.”

“What if...*he’s* the one trying to kill me?”

Christopher called over his shoulder. “Sir, we are close to getting everything back online.”

“Good.” Ethan didn’t turn away from me.

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “Whoever it is... they’ve changed into the mask and cloak by now. And... they’re probably searching for me.”

The screens came back on.

I put my gaze on Christopher’s screen that displayed the bathroom. Of course Horace and Claire had left by now.

Christopher sat back down and rapidly typed. “I will find them.”

Fuck.

Anxiety laced Ethan’s voice. “Hurry.”

The security room’s door creaked open.

What?

Ethan and I turned around.

Two waiters strolled in. One carried a tray of hors d’oeuvres. The other had a tray of champagne flutes.

Same long, hooded capes. Same glittering gold masks covering their faces.

Ethan and I exchanged glances.

Hell to the no.

Fast, Ethan charged for them.

I quickly followed.

Not today, Satan!

One of the waiters screamed.

Ethan got to the first one and smacked the tray of hors d’oeuvres out of his hands. Crostinis, shrimp, and caviar flew in the air.

The man raised his hands. “Sir, what did I—?”

Ethan slammed the waiter onto the floor. “You got a gun?”

“No! No!”

Ethan snarled. “You better not!”

The other waiter watched them wrestle.

“Fuck you!” I rammed as hard as I could into the second waiter. The flutes fell off the tray. Champagne spilled. Glass shattered on the floor.

He shrieked. “What is—?!”

I kneed him.

The man groaned in pain and doubled over.

I snatched the mask off, making the poor guy stumble into the mask.

A young, skinny face gazed at me.

He was probably some college kid working part-time for extra money. Red hair. Pimple-coated cheeks. A tiny pink bunny was tattooed on the space between his cheek and ear.

Ethan had the other man’s mask off. This man was short with a receding hairline and a mole on his forehead. Terror filled his eyes. “W-what did I d-do?”

Jesus Christ.

Still holding the mask, I stepped back. “This isn’t the killer.”

They gazed back at us like we were crazy.

We are...a bit insane.

I turned back to the rest of the room. Christopher and the other men gaped back at us, completely mortified.

Hey...better safe, than sorry.

“Alright.” Ethan looked around, rose from the floor, and straightened his tuxedo. “Well, he doesn’t have a gun.”

The waiter that he had tackled, remained on the floor as if unsure that he should even get up.

Meanwhile, my assumed college kid trembled by the wall.

Ethan held out his hand. “First of all, I would like to apologize for attacking you.”

The man on the floor widened his eyes.

“You both will be rightfully compensated for all injuries, pain, and even psychological suffering you experienced tonight.” Ethan brushed down the front of his tuxedo jacket.

I nodded. “I’m sorry too.”

Everyone continued to stare at us.

I tried to hand the mask back to the guy.

The college kid didn’t walk over to get it.

“Hmmm.” Ethan gazed at the mask. “Maybe...”

I looked at him. “What?”

Ethan turned back to the man on the floor. “Give me your cape and mask.”

I quirked my brows. “What are you doing?”

“We should wear a disguise. Have you done that already?”

“No.” I grinned. “I was too busy mingling with you.”

The waiter rose from the floor and began taking off his cape.

I looked down at the mask. “Not a bad idea.”

Christopher walked over. “Sir, is there something going on this evening?”

“Yes.” Ethan nodded. “Someone is trying to kill us and they are wearing the waiters’ costumes. So, I want *you* focused on all waiters as well as Maya’s friends. Have you found them yet?”

“No, sir. Not yet.”

“Check outside.” I let out a long breath. “Claire might have convinced everybody to go smoke a joint.”

Or...one of them are dressed like a waiter and searching for me.

“A joint.” Ethan turned back to his waiter and watched him undress. “I surely need a joint right now.”

I turned to the college kid. “Please, can I have your cape.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.” He bobbed his head and began taking it off.

Guilt hit me. “That’s a cool bunny tattoo.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” He pulled off the cape.

“And make sure you both give your names and information to Christopher, so that I can reimburse you.” Ethan grabbed the cape from his waiter. “After that, wait ten minutes, then go home. You’ll get paid in the morning.”

A skeptical expression hit his waiter’s face, but he remained silent.

The waiters went over to Christopher and we changed.

For a few seconds, I debated taking off my dress. But my waiter was much taller than me, so the cape fell over my dress and dragged on the floor.

This could work.

I placed the mask over my face. The material on the inside tickled my cheeks. Then, I pulled up the hood on the cape to hide my hair and turned to Ethan.

Shit.

I tensed and had to remind myself that it was Ethan.

He donned the mask and cape, his identity completely hidden. “What do you think?”

“Perfect.”

We both turned back to the men in the room. They all kept glancing back at us as if we were out of our minds.

Ethan picked the trays up off the floor, scattered among tossed hors d’oeuvres and broken glass. Then, he handed it to me. “Let’s go to the party.”

Taking a tray, I let out a long breath. “This will definitely be a new moment for me.”

Chapter 13

Disguise

Minutes later, we headed into the ballroom in full disguise and carrying empty trays.

The ballroom exploded with activity as the orchestra loudly played upbeat music. The notes twirled around squeals of delight and shouts of laughter. Savory scents rode the swirls of perfume and cologne.

Some of the men had taken off their masks and swung them around as they danced.

Women twirled around in their gowns. Chandelier light glimmered off their sequins and jewels. A few bumped into me.

And the whole time we journeyed through the massive ballroom, I never feared for my life.

This was a great idea.

Wearing a mask and a cape made me feel safer and provided a sense of anonymity and protection.

Surely, the killer searched for me, but couldn't find me.

Ah ha! Now I'm steps in front of you.

Several waiters passed us.

Are any of you the person?

As we maneuvered around guests, my cape swept around me, making me feel larger and more imposing. Or maybe that was all in my head.

The average human was not supposed to repeat time over and over. Could that do something to my brain? Would it make me insane?

Don't think about it. You have enough going on.

Near the orchestra, a small group chanted and cheered. I got on my toes to see what was going on.

An older woman rocked her hips into a younger guy's behind. While another man humped her from the back and gripped her breasts with both hands. Her gray hair spilled out from her bun, and she raised her hands and hooted. "Yes. Go me!"

Ethan stopped and stared. Then, he shook his head. "Well..."

I leaned closer to him. "What?"

"Now, I know what the emergency was about my mother."

"Oh." I parted my lips under the mask. "That's your mom?"

"It is."

"Hey." I shrugged. "She's having fun."

"That's one way to look at it." Ethan quickly headed off, telling me he was completely mortified.

Soon his mother yelled for another guy to come over. "Let's party!"

Mom seems cool.

I rushed after Ethan.

He took a long hallway. The noise of the party lessened.

I got to his side. "What's the plan?"

"Besides, making sure you don't get killed tonight?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to get some champagne and food, then go to the library."

Hope surged through me. "To check out Aria's grimoires?"

"No." He shook his head. "They're no longer there."

"Where are they?"

"Museums."

My hope shattered. "Oh well."

“We’re going to the library to be alone and think. I doubt the killer would believe that we would go there.”

“Why?”

“I barely spend time in the library. I also never bring guests in there, especially during a party.”

“But, there’s the passage.”

“Yes. The tunnel doorway is near the fireplace. It’s a mock stone wall. However, it has been stuck for a long time. The last time we opened it years ago, it took three men to pry it open.”

“Then, you think we’ll be safe there?”

“As safe as we can be in this Manor.”

“That works for me.”

“Perfect.” He pushed the double doors open before us, and we entered a gigantic kitchen. Tons of other waiters hurried in, filling their trays with hors d’oeuvres and flutes of champagne.

Are one of you the killer?

None glanced our way. Why would they? Everyone was just doing their job.

We followed the other waiters’ actions, waiting for them to finish and then grabbing our own items.

Ethan gathered up several flutes full of champagne.

I focused on the caviar and bacon-wrapped shrimp. Usually, I would have focused more on the veggies, thinking about my weight. However, one good thing about repeating time was that I didn’t have to worry about calories.

For once, I could stuff my mouth with anything and not stress.

The chef hurried over. She was a dark brown skinned woman with a long gray braid going down her back. “Do we have any confirmation that Mr. Vanderbilt received his hors d’oeuvres and champagne?”

The others shook their head.

She turned to us.

We shook our head too.

She sighed. “Someone find out. This is a special night for him, and I would like to have little feet running around this house one day.”

One of the chef’s assistants giggled. “This one will come and go like the rest of them.”

The chef frowned. “Don’t say that. I have hope for the author. I love her books. She has spunk. She’ll shape Mr. Vanderbilt up.”

I watched them as they headed off to boiling pots by a large stove.

Ethan nudged me and whispered, “Ready?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Carefully, I picked my tray up and walked away.

Damn. This isn’t that easy. Lots of respect to the waiters.

We left the kitchen.

Ethan took me in a new direction away from the ballroom. All I could do was follow as he rounded one hallway taking us to the left. Then, he guided us down there and had us turn right.

This place is too damn big. How does he live here?

Soon, he stopped us in front of a huge door, turned the knob with his free hand, and opened the door.

I walked ahead of him, entering a dark room.

The light came on.

Wow.

The library was a huge room of bookshelves that reached the ceiling. Polished wood floors and a high vaulted ceiling. A massive wooden ladder was attached to one wall and looked like it could be rolled all around the room. In a few places there were gold hooks. In some spots, plants hung off the hooks. In other areas nothing was on them.

This is...insane...

I spotted the fireplace on the right wall. Two stone walls barely three feet wide flanked it on both sides. Then, it went into more bookshelves.

Ethan shut the door behind us.

The lock clicked.

The scent of leather filled the space.

Under the waiter's mask, a huge smile spread on my face. "If this moment gets repeated again, this is where we should start."

"Why?"

"I want to read some of these books." I slowly headed over to the table, making sure not to drop any of the hors d'oeuvres. Once there, I set the tray down and then pointed to the fireplace. "Which one opens the secret tunnel?"

"The stone wall on the left."

"But, it has been stuck?"

"For a long time."

I scanned the space, not seeing any windows for the killer to stand outside and shoot me. After I assured my safety, I returned to the amazing collection of books. I felt like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, the moment she first walked into that library. I almost spun around like some Disney princess and giggled. Instead, I did my best to maintain my composure. "I love this."

Ethan made it to me and put his tray of champagne down. "So, you're impressed with my library?"

"Impressed?" I snorted. "I'm close to having an orgasm."

Chuckling, he pulled his mask off and slung it on a leather couch near him. "Then, we will definitely begin here next time."

I took off my mask, placed it on the table, and headed over to the first wall. "There must be hundreds of books in here."

"Thousands."

“Oh my. Very impressive.” I made it to one wall and touched the soft leather bound books. “I could spend a lifetime in here and never be upset.”

He grabbed two flutes of champagne and walked over. “You *will* spend a lifetime in here.”

“Will I?” I turned to him. “What makes you say that? You think we will never escape this time loop?”

“We will leave the time loop, but you will never escape me.” Ethan handed me a glass of champagne.

“Hmmm.” I took the glass and looked at the golden liquid. “You think this will be safe to drink?”

“Definitely.”

Sighing, I studied the fizzing bubbles rising to the surface. “I think you’re right.”

Ethan raised his glass of champagne. “To getting out of escaping a killer and even...escaping time.”

“I will toast to that.”

We clinked our glasses against the other and both took a sip.

The smooth, cool liquid slipped along my tongue. A little bitter, and a little sweet, but definitely no poison. I savored the flavor.

He lowered his glass and watched me. “No poison.”

“None at all.”

A sad smile spread across his face. “I can’t imagine how you must feel.”

“Like you do now. Surely, you’re nervous and freaked out.”

He shook his head. “I’m not, but then I’m stuck in time with you.”

Warmth spread across my skin.

“I couldn’t think of a better dilemma, Maya.”

A silly grin hit me. “Every time I meet you in this loop, I...fall deeper for you.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes. It’s shocking how amazing you are every damned time.”

“Perhaps, we are meant for each other?”

A shiver ran up my spine and prickled the hair on my neck. And, there was not an ounce of fear in this shiver. It was all desire and heat. Love and searing lust.

It was all about a chance at a future with him.

It was about tomorrow, but not just any tomorrow. A tomorrow with him, filled with passionate promises and romantic dreams.

My heart raced with the tantalizing possibilities.

He watched me, surely knowing what was going on in my mind. How many times did women gaze at him longingly, yearning for a perfect happy ending with him?

Ten or twenty times?

Maybe, even more.

I cleared my throat and began to stroll off.

Quickly, he caught my arm and pulled me to him. “Where are you going?”

“I was going to check out more books.”

“Not now.”

“No?”

“No.” He captured my lips, sweeping me away.

His kiss was fire.

It was the forge, the crucible, that melted the metal of my last bits of resolve.

His lips and his tongue pulled me into the kiss, and his passion lifted me away.

Heat rose from deep in my core as I fell into his arms and let the glass slip from my fingers.

It shattered on the floor near my cape.

He groaned against my lips.

The sound of more glass shattering echoed in the air, telling me that his glass had fallen as well.

His arm closed around my waist. His tongue dove in and out of my mouth, desperate and hungry.

A soft moan left me. Hot desire uncoiled between my thighs. It was a heatwave, wet and wild with longing.

My body, my heart, my soul yearned for his touch and I swore to God, I craved him in every way imaginable.

If this time loop was now our life—our only existence—then let me be lost in his arms forever.

Ethan moved his hands down my back. The tease of his touch made me shiver some more.

His mouth pulled away from mine and he trailed kisses down my neck. His teeth grazed my flesh. Everywhere he touched me, I burned.

I trembled with lust. “Oh.”

“I love that sound coming from you.”

“You’re about to hear more.”

“Hmmm.”

The damned capes wrapping around us were the worst cock blockers I could ever endure. I struggled with taking mine off, wanting him to ravish me more.

What other way should I spend my time?

My body ached for him.

And, I’d already died by poison once, and bullets twice.

And I kept on coming back.

So, let this moment of death be with him inside of me, driving my body to orgasm. Let it be pleasure that takes me

away.

He noticed my rushing to take my cape off, asked no questions, and did the same.

Thank God.

I didn't want a gentleman this evening.

I craved a dominant alpha.

He had his cape off before me. Next, his hands yanked mine away.

Oh.

I blinked.

The thick black fabric fell to the floor.

Anticipation pulsed in my veins.

I thought he was done, but not even close. His hands went to the top of my gown and he began ripping some of the material away, exposing the black strapless bra under it.

Oh...umm...

I shivered.

Okay. Fuck.

The act made me even wetter, and more desperate for him.

“Finally.” He pinned me against a shelf of leather bound books and captured my lips again.

Stunned, all I could do was take it, be ravished as his intensity crashed into me.

I pushed my hand against his crotch, felt a big bulge, and squeezed the thickness.

He pulled away from my lips. An animalistic growl left him.

“Oh, God,” I gasped and looked down at the bulge. “I want that.”

He licked his lips. “You want this cock?”

“Please.” I started yanking down the ripped top of my gown.

How long had it been since I had a real man moving in and out of me?

Too damn long was the answer.

If this had been another time and situation, I would have waited, got to know him, and took my time.

But this wasn't another situation.

This was a chaotic circle of constantly repeating time, and we were trapped within it. Two new lovers. Eager and aching.

Watching me slip the gown down, he unbuckled his belt. “Do you know how many times I imagined this?”

“No, but I feel like I'm going to die if you don't fuck me.”

This primal expression covered his face.

I paused in shock.

“Finish undressing now.” His voice was a command, dominant and layered in lust.

Oh shit.

I slipped the gown down my hips and let it fall to the ground. Now, I only wore my black strapless bra and matching panties.

A groan left him. He yanked his belt out of his loops, folded it tightly in his hands, raised it in the air, and then brought the belt down against one palm.

I blinked.

Umm...okay. Ethan Vanderbilt, has some freak in him.

“Turn around.”

I widened my eyes. “So...you're not hitting me with that belt. Right?”

His lips spread into a wicked smirk. Those sharp, prominent cheekbones lifted, making him devilishly gorgeous.

“I think you’ve experienced enough pain at my manor. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes.”

“Then, let this moment be pleasure.” He licked his lips.
“Turn around.”

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Chapter 14

Ethan. Ethan. Ethan.

Nervous, yet horny as hell, I did as Ethan said.

Once turned, the polished leather books served as my only view.

Seconds later, he pressed his hard cock against me.

I shuddered.

He kissed the back of my neck and slipped his lips along my skin. "Raise your hands."

Slowly, I did as he said.

To my surprise, he wrapped the leather belt around my wrists.

Alright now. I'm liking where this is going...I think...

The belt pressed my wrists together.

I looked up as he placed the buckled loop over one of the shelf's gold hooks, causing my hands to remain raised.

He brushed his lips against my ear.

A shiver ran down my spine.

He licked along the delicate shell of my ear.

I moaned.

"I love the taste of your skin."

I swallowed.

"Is the belt too tight?"

The leather dug into my wrists, but it wasn't painful. "No."

"Good." He slipped his lips down to my shoulder and then his teeth sank into my skin.

"Oh." I had no idea how good a bite could feel.

When he moved his mouth, I glanced down at my shoulder. The marks of his teeth remained.

He licked at the indented skin.

Another moan left me. “Oh.”

What is he doing to me?

My breaths came out in shallow bursts.

Then, he yanked my panties down before I could think.

Oh, fuck.

They fell to my ankles, and I stepped out of them. They dropped to the floor.

He kissed the back of my neck. Then, he moved an inch down and left another kiss right on my spine.

“Mmmm.” I licked my lips.

He lowered another inch and placed a kiss there. I had no idea where this was going, yet anticipation coursed through my body.

Lowering some more, he kissed me again. “Delicious.”

I parted my lips.

Groaning, he moved inch by inch, slowly and deliberately, leaving kisses that sparked against my skin.

Then, he paused just above the clasp of my bra, his breath hot on my skin.

An electric current jolted through my body.

His fingers twisted the clasp. The bra slipped away. My breasts fell free. Cool air brushed against my hardening nipples.

He raised his head back to my ear and whispered, “I knew your body was a work of art.”

He slid one hand along my waist and pressed his palm against my stomach.

I trembled in his hold.

“I painted the image in my mind many nights.” Slowly, he slipped his hands up to my breasts.

I gasped when he captured the nipple and toyed with the sensitive tip.

“But, never could I imagine how soft, how sweet-smelling, how curvy, your body was.” He slid his other hand to my stomach. “Never did I realize how instantly addictive it would be for me.”

He dove that hand down to my pussy.

“Oh.” I opened my mouth in shock.

His fingertips danced along my clit.

I slowly twisted my hips with the movement.

“It’s going to feel so good, fucking you.” He lapped at my ear. One hand continued to play with my clit while the other toyed with my nipple.

“Oh, Ethan.”

“What do you want, Maya?”

“You. Inside of me.”

He pressed that hard bulge against me.

Moaning, I sucked in a sharp breath as he rubbed my clit.

“You moan so nicely.” His voice was gruff, husky, and thick with desire. “I’ll never get tired of it.”

“Please,” I begged.

Teasing me, he rubbed his cock against me. “What do you want again?”

I shivered. “I want your cock.”

“God, your voice.” He dove his fingers lower. “And I love how wet you are.”

My pussy throbbed.

“Same my name again.”

Breathless, I moaned. “Ethan.”

His hand left my breast. The opening of a zipper sounded behind me.

I almost screamed for him to hurry. Usually, I loved to feel some tongue action on my pussy first, but all those damned repeated moments with him had left me too eager, too needy.

“Do you know something, Maya?” He had his cock out and pressed against my behind. It was warm and thick.

I couldn't stop myself from drooling. “W-what?”

Meanwhile, his other hand tenderly rubbed my clit up and down, over and over. “I want you to moan my name as you come.”

“Oh.”

“Can you do that for me?” He rubbed my clit faster, yet still soft and tenderly.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“God, yes.”

Surely, his fingers were soaked with me. Already, some of my arousal dripped down my thighs.

To my surprise, he stopped rubbing my clit, cupped the front of my pussy, and lifted me up a few inches from the floor.

I shrieked.

What the fuck?

He was sliding his cock into me next.

“Oh my God!” I arched my back, pressing my breasts into several leather bound books. Surely, they were priceless and expensive. Perhaps, the horny bookworm part of me got further turned on by that idea—my nipples on ancient words.

And his cock spread me apart. I had no idea where to put my feet. It didn't matter anyway.

He held me up and fucked me against the book shelf, doing whatever he wanted with my body. And I loved every

second, every delicious pound, every slide of his cock inside me.

Books shook.

A dark groan left him.

Pleasure rippled through me.

He moved his hands and gripped my hips, controlling the position, dominating my body more, and keeping me firmly against the book shelf.

“Oh.”

“Your pussy feels so good.”

“Oh.”

“So wet. So tight.”

He began pumping into me with unrelenting force, each thrust sending a wave of pleasure coursing through my veins.

“I’m going to make this pussy mine.”

The books around us shook in protest as he drove his passion deeper and deeper within me, until a primal groan of satisfaction escaped him.

The pleasure he gave me was almost too much to take. It had been so long, and even when I did have sex...it was nothing like this, nothing like him.

Yet, all I could do was hang by the leather belt around my wrists and stay in his grip on my hips.

He had all the control.

The shelves shook and rattled.

“Oh, fuck!” I shook and panted against the shelf while his cock pumped and throbbed within me, swelling and rubbing against my soaking wet walls.

Two books fell near us and slammed against the floor.

My legs quivered.

He slammed into me. “Oh, yes, Maya.”

The slick wet sounds of our bodies moving together filled the air.

I drowned in lust and desire. It was a vortex of sensations swirling. A storm of heat and burning ecstasy flooding me, washing me away.

“Oh, Ethan.”

“Yes.” He gripped my hips tighter, lifted me higher, and rammed into me again, making me bounce on his cock. “Say my name again.”

“Ethan.”

His thrusts became even more urgent. My breasts bounced to his rhythm.

He groaned out loud. “Say it again!”

“Ethan! Ethan!”

“Yes.” He drove me down hard onto his cock. One hand shot up and caught my breast.

Fuck.

He squeezed my nipple, then tugged, and tenderly twisted it. “This is my pussy now.”

“Yes.”

More books fell around us.

The tremors of my orgasm surged through me.

“Oh. Oh.”

He gripped my hips even harder, squeezing them as I came around his cock.

“Oh!”

The pleasure was too much, to the point that all I could do was explode.

Time slowed down.

My body spasmed. My vision blacked out, and the world shattered to nothing. It was only his cock, his groans, his

expensive cologne, and the sound of more books slamming to the floor.

“Oh, fuck! Oh, fuck!”

A primal loud sound left him, and he came with me.
“Maya!”

His cock pulsated and my pussy contracted around him as hot cum flooded me.

His thrusts shifted to fast bucking. “Oh, Maya. Take all of it.”

Then, a loud bell chimed off in the distance.

I panted. “What the hell is that?”

Groaning, he slipped his cock out of me and slowly lowered my body. “It’s the signal right before the auction that happens at midnight.”

“Oh, so then—”

An overwhelming feeling of dizziness washed over me.

I blinked.

Wait. What’s happening.

“Maya?” Ethan’s voice sounded far away. “Do you feel that?”

My stomach twisted.

“E-ethan—”

My reality began to spin, and I wasn’t even sure if I was still in the library. My hands no longer felt bound with the belt buckle, but I could feel nothing else.

I screamed, not sure if he could hear me. “It’s starting over again!”

Then, I felt as if my body had abandoned me, and I was in a freefall.

No. No. I didn’t want that moment to end!

I shut my eyes.

My entire being shook with terror, as my insides churned and my mind spun wildly like a tornado, unleashing a cascade of fear and confusion that threatened to drown me.

My sanity felt like it was slipping through a fissure in time, reality crashing around me like shards of shattered glass and leaving me petrified in a maelstrom of despair.

Goddamn it!

Then, Michael Jackson's *Remember the Time* played around me.

Oh my fucking God!!

I opened my eyes, more pissed than ever before.

I'd been drowning in pleasure with a man that I was slowly falling in love with, and now I had returned to this damn limo full of people that I thought I knew but had no idea who the hell they truly were.

I'm done with this time loop. I want my nights back. I want my days back. I want tomorrows! And I want Ethan for several hours! Days! Weeks! Months! Years!

Now with the repeated memory beginning again, there was no aftershock of pleasure slipping through my body, no remnants of what had occurred between Ethan and me.

My body returned back to normal.

Unfucked and untouched.

No one killed me, and I didn't leave the property. Now you're telling me that everything starts back over at midnight?

All around the limo, everyone happily jammed to the song.

I frowned and watched them.

Claire clapped to the beat. Shi snapped her fingers. Horace swayed. Bernard nodded in time with the beat and chuckled to himself. Even Ryan raised his filled champagne glass and moved it back and forth.

So fake. All of them. Who are these people?

Claire yelled over the music. "Yes. I love M.J!"

And I screamed, “Turn that damned song off!”

Everyone snapped their views to me. Claire parted her lips in shock. Shi froze with her hands still in the air. Horace raised his eyebrows. Ryan rolled his eyes, and Bernard pursed his lips together.

Claire leaned her head to the side. “Umm...Maya, what did you say?”

“Enough!” I fisted my hands and raised them over my head. “I’m so fucking tired of that song! Over and over and fucking over! Yes, M.J. I remember. I fucking remember!”

Horace frowned. “But, we just turned it on—”

“Enough of that damn song! I swear to God if this song goes to the chorus, I’m going to kill someone in here!”

The driver shut the song off.

Silence filled the space.

And everybody sat still as they stared at me.

“Good.” I glared at them and leaned back in my seat. “Now we can talk, and be *real* for once.”

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Chapter 15

Keep It Real

Their masked faces stared back at me. My so-called friends wearing masks under masks, constantly hiding their true selves.

Bernard let out a nervous chuckle. “Is...everything okay, Maya?”

He hides behind the façade of laughter.

Claire began twisting her huge diamond ring on her finger. I always knew it was her tell-tale sign for being uncomfortable. But now I looked deeper into it.

Maybe, the twisting was to put the viewer’s focus on the diamond. A way to let the wealth cover and camouflage her.

Horace sat up in his seat. “Maya?”

I frowned at him.

“What do you mean that now we can talk, and be *real* for once?”

I shook my head. “You all are hiding behind masks.”

Claire let out a long breath. “It’s a masquerade party, Maya, that’s why we are wearing them.”

“Yeah, but you all wear masks on other days to. Hiding. Concealing.”

“Wow.” Claire twisted that diamond ring some more. “I think we should just put the music back on—”

“Give me that joint in your purse.”

Claire blinked. “How did you know I had a—?”

“You’re going to discover today that I know a lot of things.” I rose from my seat, ducked my head, went to her, and sat down.

“Why don’t you sit back over there?” Claire gripped her purse. “I don’t think you need to be smoking anything right

now.”

I leaned her way and whispered in her ear, “I know you’re fucking Horace.”

She gasped.

“Give me that joint.” I tilted away. “Bernard, I need a lighter.”

“Uh.” He glanced at Claire. “I actually don’t have one.”

“You do, and by the way I think you’re lowkey racist for that plane joke. You can’t say the n-word. Honestly, Black people shouldn’t be saying it either.”

Horace turned and glared at Bernard. “You said the n-word?”

“You know. I may have a lighter.” Bernard rushed with getting it and then handed it to me.

Meanwhile, Claire had the joint out too.

I grabbed both and headed back to my seat. “Here we go.”

I snatched my mask off and threw it on the floor. “Claire —”

“Don’t do this.” Her bottom lip quivered.

“I’m not going to talk about that, unless...” I placed the joint between my lips, raised the lighter, and lit it.

Claire gazed at me. “U-unless what?”

I blew out smoke. “Unless you don’t tell me what I need to know?”

Horace chuckled. “What is going on right now?”

I pointed to him. “Shut the fuck up.”

“Hey. Hey.” Horace raised his hands in front of him. “I think you need to calm it down. We are on our way to an elegant party and—”

“I said shut up.” I flicked ash on the floor.

Ryan smirked and sipped his champagne.

I put my view back on Claire. “What is Horace hiding from me? What is he doing behind the scenes? Is it something to do with my money?”

She opened her mouth in shock.

“As my friend, you should have told me, but...I guess you’re not my friend.”

Horace kept those hands in the air. “Okay. Okay. S-so this is getting weird. Let’s table this conversation—”

“Shut up!” I pointed the joint at him. “Your moment is coming. Right now, I’m asking my *bestie* something.”

Claire began patting down her hair as if strands were out of place. However, it was all perfect.

Why couldn’t we have truly been friends? Were we ever? Or did you just...stop liking me at some point?

I took a hit of the joint and then blew out smoke. “Let me explain how this is going to go, Claire. I am going to count to three and you are—”

“Maya, don’t do this.” Claire shook her head over and over. “Okay? This is not right—”

“This is absurd.” Horace took off his mask and wiped sweat off his forehead. “I mean really. Let’s put the music back on and get ready for the party of a—”

“I count to three, Claire, and if you don’t tell me what Horace is hiding, then I’m telling everyone *your* secret.” I placed the joint back in my mouth and inhaled. “Play with me if you want. I have nothing to lose today.”

Still smirking, Ryan crossed his legs and drank more of his champagne.

I bet he won’t be dropping that glass this time.

I exhaled smoke. “One.”

Claire placed her hand on her chest. “Maya, listen to me —”

“Two.”

Horace gazed at Claire wildly. “There’s nothing to say. Nothing. So don’t worry, Claire because there is nothing at all to—”

“Three.”

Claire screamed, “He’s stealing money from you!”

Horace shrieked.

Ryan shook his head.

Claire continued, “Every contract he takes at least 50% and says the advance is lower, and then takes his 15% from that amount too.”

My heart broke, but I wouldn’t let it show on my face.

Claire’s hands shook on her lap. “All your book signings that you think are free and for promotion or set up by your publishers, are really him getting paid by the book stores for you to come. And he pockets all of that. And—”

“This is outrageous!” Horace scooted to the edge of the seat. “All of these things are lies! I don’t know what is going on but I will not have my name—”

“What else?” I stared at Claire.

“I-I said *enough*.” Claire placed those perfectly manicured fingers in a prayer position. “That is quite enough.”

“What else?”

“None of this is true, Maya.” Horace did a fake laugh. “This is a joke. Right? Ha ha. Are you all playing a trick on me? Are there hidden cameras in the limo?”

Claire lowered her voice. “Please, Maya. I think—”

“What else?”

She sighed. “He has a white man that he gives your manuscripts to.”

Rage boiled in my me. “My book babies?”

“The man adds things here and there and changes the characters’ identities to better fit a white romance audience.

Horace calls it literary refurbishing. And they're publishing those books under another name. Your books."

Could it be Horace trying to kill me? Surely, he knew that if I found out, I would definitely tell the world.

"None of this is true." Horace shook his head. "I don't know why Claire is doing this. She's just trying to ruin our friendship and working relationship. You know she always has been jealous of you, Maya. Wishes she had your talent? Wants your life? Your independence? She secretly hates you."

She hates me? Interesting.

"Now, you're lying." Claire glared at him. "I have never been jealous of Maya. What would I need to be jealous of her for? She came from nothing."

Horace rolled his eyes. "You wish you had something more in life than a pretty face and a nice weave."

"First of all, this is my hair." She tossed it over her shoulder. "And I have a lot—"

"You have nothing, but a rich husband—"

"Fuck you, ghetto trash!"

"I may be from the hood, but I worked myself out of it. Meanwhile you had mommy and daddy paying for everything until you trapped poor Bernard over here and now have him paying—"

"Worked?" Claire screamed. "You stole!"

"Hold on, buddy." Bernard held up a finger. "Do not talk to my wife like that."

Silent, I smoked the joint and watched them.

My mother always gave me great advice. Once she said that if ever I was in an argument, I should listen closely, not talk much, and let my enemy be the main one speaking. Because in silence, the truth was always revealed and lies consistently unfolded.

All of their voices rose.

The driver must have been cringing this whole journey.

While they argued, I considered the killer.

Would jealousy be enough of a reason for Claire to kill me?

This person knew I was going to the party.

Horace and Claire both knew I was going a week before.

Was that enough time to plan?

Honestly, if the killer did a lot of planning, then I doubted it could be Claire.

I never saw her plan anything in her life. She had two assistants even though she had no occupation. Most of the time, they were working to get her beauty appointments together.

I watched Horace as he screamed, fisted his hands, and waved them in front of Bernard.

Horace is deceitful as hell. I could see him planning this.

My agent could have gotten in touch with someone to figure out the costumes. He also had been to several of Ethan's parties and would somewhat know the layout.

I checked his clothes.

Where would the gun and poison be?

I looked back at Claire and checked her purse.

He could have had her keep it, but then...I feel like she would have blurted that out this time.

And then there was the killer turning off the camera system in Ethan's manor. How would Horace have done that?

I took another hit of the joint and blew out smoke.

I don't think Horace or Claire did it.

Honestly, if Horace wanted me dead, he could have murdered me in my home any number of times. First, he knew my staff and when they were on and off. There were so many times he grabbed me a coffee or tea on the way to my house,

he could have put poison in there and slipped out the back of my house with no one ever knowing.

It wouldn't make sense for him to go through so much planning to kill me at Ethan's party.

I gazed around the limo.

What about everyone else?

I glanced at Shi.

My assistant watched me.

She was new. All I knew about her was in a resume and from an interview. She could have lied about it all.

But what would be her motive to kill me? And why at Ethan's party?

I turned to Bernard now screaming at Horace. His pale face tinted red.

Bernard has absolutely no reason to kill me.

I moved my view to Ryan.

Still smirking, Ryan finished his glass of champagne and watched me.

Oh yeah. I almost forgot.

"Hey, Ryan." I pointed at Claire and then Horace. "They're fucking! Those panties in your purse, they're Claire's."

Ryan's smirk left his face. "What?"

"Yep." I nodded. "They've been having an affair."

Horace and Claire stopped talking and turned back to me.

I took a hit from the joint.

"No. No." Horace shook his head. "T-these are more lies!"

"I thought that was *Chanel No 5* on my sheets." Ryan shook his head and put all of his attention on Claire. "You bitch!"

Claire glared at me. "I said everything! What is wrong with you?"

Bernard stared at her. “What is going on, honey?”

I blew out smoke. “What’s going on is that she’s fucking Horace, and they’ve been lying to all of us.”

Bernard opened his mouth in shock. “Is this...a joke?”

“Fucking slut!” Ryan slung the empty glass at her.

Claire ducked. “Are you insane, Ryan? Why would you listen to Maya? She has clearly lost her mind.”

Both couples argued with each other and with the other couple. It was a hot mess, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

When the limo pulled up to the Manor, Horace and Bernard were close to throwing blows, and Ryan had slung all the panties at Claire.

I blew out more smoke and turned to Shi. “My job here is done.”

She said nothing.

I doubt one of them is the killer.

I studied her.

But what about you?

Shi stirred.

The driver opened the door.

Shi rose and left the limo.

I watched the whole time.

We’ll see.

For all I knew, she was fleeing the limo due to my and everyone else being crazy.

Suddenly, Bernard punched Horace, and the men began fighting.

Wow.

I climbed out, thinking about how the smallest change made in a moment could have a profound rippling effect that touched every aspect of life.

Granted, this limo ride wasn't a small change. It was massive. I had been super extra. However, other moments, when I did one tiny different thing, people said other stuff or acted in different ways.

One of the many lessons that I had learned from this situation, this time loop, was that I would be more mindful of my choices and the paths that I would take.

Because I knew more than ever, we had the power to shape our own futures and create the lives we wanted to live, just from making one small change to set us on a new course.

Outside of the limo, I stepped away.

The poor driver hurried into the now rocking vehicle to stop the fighting.

Far off, I spotted Shi rushing off to the manor.

Either my new assistant had had quite enough of us, or she was preparing to kill me?

Wait a minute.

I looked around and searched for Ethan.

He wasn't there.

Why didn't he come out? Is he no longer trapped in the loop with me?

Fear shivered through me.

It was wrong to want him stuck with me, but...I didn't want to be alone.

Then, I saw Jackson leave the manor.

Maybe, he knows where Ethan is.

I strolled forward.

A minute later, Jackson and I met each other by the stairs.

The tall man looked down at me. "Mr. Vanderbilt would like me to take you to his office."

"Okay."

Jackson gave me an odd look. “Mr. Vanderbilt says, ‘He has a new plan.’”

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Chapter 16

Lessons

Jackson and I entered the huge mansion and navigated our way through the elegant chattering crowd as we headed to Ethan's office.

However, this moment was different.

Usually, the hallway was lined with the warm glow of hundreds of candles.

This time, armed security outlined the halls, and the candles were gone.

O-kay, Ethan. You must be just as fed up with this time loop as me.

I continued to follow Jackson.

Off in the distance the clinking of glasses sounded, and the raucous laughter of the guests filled the air.

When we passed a large room of tons of masked guests in deep fun-filled conversation, I noticed another difference.

Oh shit.

The waiters no longer wore those glittering gold masks with intricate designs.

Meanwhile, they still donned the long, hooded capes.

I see what you did right there, Ethan.

He must have ordered the party planner to make sure that no servers wore masks. This way if a person did come for us with a mask, we would know damned well that was the killer.

Smart.

This was the sort of small change that could have huge rippling effects.

Jackson stopped us at Ethan's office door and opened it. "After you, ma'am."

“Thank you.” I stepped inside the large space and spotted Ethan aiming a gun at the grandfather clock.

Oh my.

Then, he lowered it. “This will work.”

Jackson remained in the doorway. “Will you be needing anything else, sir?”

“My mother will be arriving this evening. Make sure that all the bartenders know to water down her drinks.”

Strolling forward, I took off my mask and placed it on one of the leather couches.

“Okay, sir.”

Ethan put the gun on his desk and picked up another. “Also, make sure that my mother has only *one* server who remains near her and provides the watered down drinks and champagne.”

“Yes, sir.” Jackson nodded. “I will do that immediately.”

“Good.” Somehow Ethan pulled down the butt of the gun, glanced at the bullets within the magazine, and then closed the gun again. “Lock this door from the outside.”

“O-kay, sir.” Worry hit Jackson’s face as he pulled out keys from his jacket and then shut the door.

A click sounded.

I turned my view back to Ethan and strolled over. “It looks like we are going to enter John Wick mode with *this* moment.”

“I never saw those movies, but I believe you’re correct.” He lowered the gun to his side and gazed at me. “Have you ever shot a gun?”

I got to him. “No.”

He leveled his gaze at me, a smoldering fire blazed behind his eyes. “I enjoyed our moment in the library.”

I blushed. “I did too.”

“Your pussy?”

I widened my eyes in surprise.

“That’s now mine.” No humor lay in his voice. It sounded like a clear assertion that he would not back down on.

“Oh.” A sly smile played on my lips. “Is that how that works?”

“It is. That is mine now, along with the rest of your body, especially your heart.”

A wave of heat rushed over me.

His gaze never once strayed from me. “Will that be a problem?”

“No.”

“In the library...” He licked his lips. “My heart...it felt things it has never...”

I parted my lips.

He cleared his throat. “I felt a warmth inside your body, a safe place where the world could not intrude. That moment was pure bliss, and that is all before I came.”

“Damn.” I swallowed. “That’s a perfect breakdown of how I felt too.”

“Stuck in a time loop or not, I want to spend all my moments with you.”

My heart swooned. “I’ve...never had time for love, but now...I only want to spend every second, minute, hour, and day with you.”

He curved those sexy lips into a smile. “Then, let’s get out of this time loop, so that we can begin our future.”

“I would like that very much.”

“Time for a quick lesson on weapons.” He tried to hand me the gun.

I tensed. “Is it...loaded?”

“The gun is, but it is also on safety.”

I let out a long breath and then took it from him. Surprisingly, the gun weighed heavy in my hand. “Alright. Let’s go, teacher.”

He grinned. “I would say I am more of a *professor*.”

“Oh wow. Then, let’s begin, *professor*.”

“Slowly, point at the clock.”

Nervous, I slowly raised the gun in the air and aimed.

“The safety switch is located near the trigger.” He came closer to me. “Carefully, put your finger on the trigger.”

I gritted my teeth and moved my finger there.

He gently placed my finger next to the switch. “Do you feel that?”

“Yes.”

“Flip it up.”

“Should I?”

“You’re not going to accidentally kill me or yourself, and honestly if you did—”

“We’ll most likely repeat.”

“Correct.” He moved his hand. “Flip it.”

I did as he said.

“Now you are in firing position, so do not pull the trigger.”

I kept the gun steady. “Okay.”

“Did you see the waiters on your way here?”

“I did. No masks.”

He nodded. “So, if you see one with a mask, we won’t pause or ask questions, grab your gun, flip the switch, and shoot.”

“Fuck...O-kay.”

“We will not let you get killed again. Even though you return each time. I’m still worried about it.” He sighed. “A

person should only die once. Surely, there could be some trauma or PTSD happening.”

I looked at him and smiled. “You don’t want me to go crazy.”

“I don’t.” He gestured back to the gun. “Now, we need to make sure you adopt the proper shooting stance.”

“Alright.”

“Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart and have your body facing the target.”

“And the target is the grandfather clock?”

“It is for now, but picture the killer waiter in the clock’s place.”

“Okay.”

“Hold the gun with both hands, keeping your arms extended but not locked.”

I did my best to follow his instructions. “Got it.”

“You do.” He grinned. “Now place your dominant hand high on the grip, and your non-dominant hand underneath the grip.”

“The grip?”

He moved my hand to the rear of the gun, just below the trigger. “There.”

“You know a lot.”

“My father used to take me hunting all the time. When I became an adult, we continued it.”

“So you hunt with your father every year?”

“Not this year.” He stirred. “The next thing you should remember is that you must keep both of your eyes open and focused on the target. Which is who?”

“The killer waiter.”

“Exactly. Don’t look at the gun or close your eyes.” Ethan pointed at the clock. “Aim for the chest and pull the trigger.”

“Got it.”

“Flip the safety switch back on.”

My nerves flared, but next to him I was able to calm them. I put the gun on safety and lowered it.

“I would love to take you out for some shooting practice.” Ethan checked his watch. “But we now must take note of the time.”

“Correct. Apparently midnight—”

“The loop starts over.”

“So now we know all of the rules hopefully. I can’t leave the property because if I do, I will repeat everything again. Then, if I die, I return. And also at midnight, I will return.”

He leaned his head to the side. “Why do you think that occurs?”

“I would say if we go back to the witch...maybe...she wanted to have a set amount of time to discover her killer.”

“We’re still thinking that she put this spell in place to deal with being assassinated?”

“That’s the only thing I can come up with.” I shrugged. “I believe if we find the person who is killing me, then the time loop ends.”

“Because when they killed you, the loop began.”

“That’s the only theory I can come up with.”

He checked his watch again. “We have twenty minutes before the cameras shut off.”

“Oh.” I gently placed the gun on his desk. “I discovered what Horace was hiding.”

Ethan frowned. “What?”

“He’s stealing money from me, and even my manuscripts. He has some fake penname where another writer is *refurbishing* my words and publishing them.”

Ethan sneered. “I am going to ruin him. In fact, I should do that this evening.”

“We don’t need to do that tonight.”

“Are you sure?” Ethan pointed at the door. “In the ballroom, there are judges, district attorneys, the governor, and even several senators. I can have him behind bars before midnight.”

“And what if the loop repeats, then we would have to do that all over again.”

Ethan wore a wicked smile. “I don’t mind that at all.”

“Note to self, do not get on your bad side.” I glanced down at the two guns on his desk. “However, we should put all of our focus on the killer. I don’t think Horace, Claire, Bernard, or even Ryan did it.”

He quirked my brows. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m certain. However, that now leaves my new assistant, Shi.”

“Interesting.” Ethan touched his chin. “I have a new assistant too.”

“Jackson?”

“Correct. Perhaps, there is a connection with that.”

“In what way?”

“Actually...” Ethan stared off in the distance. “God, I hope that is not true.”

I shivered. “What?”

Ethan put his view back on me. “You said your new assistant is named Shi?”

“Yes.”

“My old one was named Estelle.”

“Oh. So a female assistant.”

“Yes.” Ethan headed over to a shelf. “I believe I have a picture.”

“Good.” I followed him. “That could help.”

“Hmmm.” He lowered to a shelf with several metallic colored thin albums. “I believe the photographer caught her at the last *MEI* conference. That was when I began suspecting her of being a problem.”

“A problem.”

“I believed she might be insane.”

“Wow. Then, she’s definitely a suspect.” I kneeled with him. “But, first of all, what is the *MEI* program?”

“*MEI* stands for the *Minority Empowerment Initiative*.”

“Oh. I’m liking this already.”

“It is a unique charity business trip that aims to empower minority business owners by providing mentorship and interest-free loans from billionaire CEOs.” He lifted a thin, gold album and flipped through it. “So, I bring together successful business leaders, typically billionaire CEOs and I pair them with minority entrepreneurs on my island every year.”

Did he say my island? You can own an island?

He continued, “We stay for a week.”

“That is amazing.”

“This isn’t the year.” He closed the gold album, placed it back on the shelf, grabbed a silver one, and began flipping through it.

I gazed at the other albums, probably representing other *MEI* years. I counted ten of them. “So, the week is a retreat full of mentorship and guidance?”

“Exactly.”

“During the week, we participate in a series of workshops and panel discussions on topics such as marketing, finance, and leadership. There’s also tons of networking. Once they have their mentor, then weekly appointments are set up for the rest of the year.”

“Wow. So, these billionaires are meeting with the entrepreneurs throughout the year?”

“Correct.”

“And the loans?”

“That is what *this* party is about tonight. Fifty percent goes to the interest-free loans. The billionaires provide any remaining amount.”

“How long do they have to pay the loan back?”

“The repayment terms are designed to be flexible and supportive of the business owner’s needs.”

“I really love this.” I shook my head in amazement. “This sort of program gives minority entrepreneurs real access to resources that the billionaires were probably born with.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” He put the silver album back and grabbed a copper one. “Plus, this offers a unique opportunity for the billionaires to give back. Not all of the rich are evil bastards greedily clutching their gold coins.”

I chuckled. “That’s good to know.”

“Yes.” Nodding, Ethan rose and headed back to the desk. “This was the year.”

I followed him over.

He opened the album to the middle and placed it on the desk. “Damn it. This isn’t a good view of Estelle at all.”

I leaned over.

In the image, Ethan sat at a table with five men. Three were Black. The rest White. They all held up glasses of champagne and smiled at the camera.

Ethan pointed to a space behind them. “This is her.”

I looked to that section.

A woman with blue hair sat at another table by herself. Sunglasses covered her eyes.

“Hmmm.” Ethan flipped the book. “Perhaps, I can find a better one.”

“Why was she so far away?”

“She wasn’t even supposed to be on the island that week. I told her to take off.”

“Why?”

“She...worked too much. Obsessively. I only needed her for eight hours each day, but she remained overnight, at times falling asleep on my couch over there.” He pointed to the leather one on the right. “The chef thought Estelle was working herself to exhaustion to solely please me.”

I widened my eyes. “So...she was obsessed with you?”

“We’ll get to that part.” Frowning, he flipped to another page. “Here she is again.”

I gazed down.

This time, Ethan stood between an Asian woman and a Black woman. A White man flanked each of the woman’s sides. Smiles covered their faces.

He pointed to a figure several feet behind them.

The same woman with blue hair and sunglasses stood far off and just watched.

“She’s really creepy.”

“My staff and the others had no idea she was there.” He flipped to another page. “My photographer was the one who brought this to my attention.”

I looked up at him. “Do you think Estelle...could kill?”

“I think that I wouldn’t put anything past her.” He pointed at other pictures. “Damn it. None of these are good enough close ups.”

Shock hit me as I checked the various photos. In every one, Ethan posed with billionaires and entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, Estelle remained somewhere in the background with that blue hair and sunglasses.

Ethan checked his watch and grabbed his gun. “We should leave. Get your gun.”

“O-kay.” I picked mine up and made sure the safety switch was still on.”

Ethan left the desk. “We have to go, but I’ll tell you more about Estelle.”

I followed. “Where are we going?”

“Remember, this is my new plan.” He went to the wall that I remembered opening in the moment that I was shot for the second time.

He stopped in front of the bookshelf and touched the spine of one book covered in dark green leather and had gold letters.

I caught the title, *the Strange Life of Ivan Osokin*.

Ethan picked the book up.

A beep sounded.

I stepped back.

The wall creaked open three inches.

Ethan pointed his gun at the opening.

I quirked my brows. “That’s how you trigger it to work?”

“It is.” He pointed to the space where he had taken the book away. “Do you see the tiny red button?”

I bent over and spotted it. “Yes.”

“When it is pressed, the wall remains. That’s why the book was placed on it.”

“And when the book is removed, the wall opens?”

“Correct.” Ethan placed the book back on the shelf and opened the wall more. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 17

Timeless Love

I gripped the gun hard and followed Ethan into the secret passageway.

It was barely three feet wide. Every two feet a small light bulb was stuck in the wooden wall. It barely brightened the place.

I don't know about this.

Shadows lingered along the walls, casting a sinister glow. Tattered cobwebs hung from the ceiling like a macabre chandeliers. The air was thick with the smell of aged wood, and for some reason, I felt like I was intruding on sacred ground.

How could Ethan walk through here? I would have never used this passageway.

I touched the wooden walls. They were rough and cold. Even more, a strange energy surged through me—almost as if the walls were...alive. My skin crawled with unease.

I shivered.

Then, the door automatically shut behind us with a bang.

Shocked, I jumped.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder. "I apologize for the dust. Not many in my staff know about this path. Therefore, no one cleans it."

"That's fine."

I don't think cleaning this place will lower the creepy factor anyway.

Ethan checked his watch again and pointed the gun in front of him. "We should hurry. In ten minutes, the camera goes off and we assume that the killer will dress up in disguise and then eventually come in here."

I shivered.

He walked forward.

I followed.

Our footsteps echoed through the passageway, sounding distant and hollow.

As I assumed, walking through a dark secret passageway that was built by a witch was an extremely unnerving experience.

The passageway was narrow and winding, like an uncoiling serpent. Faint whispers swirled in the air.

What the hell?

With every step, I swore time slowed down. Plus, the dimness was all-encompassing, like a black veil that obscured my vision and my sense of direction, creating this foreboding and distorted feeling.

I can't wait until we get out of here.

To keep me calm, I whispered to Ethan, "So...who knows about this passageway?"

"The chef. Julia has been with us for many years. She only uses it a few times, when she has gone to my bedroom and realizes I'm not there and I'm in my office. Then, she will go through the passageway and bring my late night snack to my office to save time. However, she doesn't like it."

I agree with Julia.

I looked up at the tattered cobwebs. "Who else knows about this?"

"The manor's top security officials."

"Like Christopher?"

"Yes."

"What about your old assistant Estelle?"

"She didn't know about it until much later." He sighed. "That is the story I will tell you."

“Alright.”

The path began to rise and slant like a hill.

We climbed up and the floor creaked louder.

“Three months ago, I was going golfing with my friends on a Saturday afternoon. Estelle was off since it was the weekend.” Ethan continued to lead me forward. “I finished a contract and was in quite a rush to change, so I took this passageway.”

The path grew steeper.

I had to touch the walls to keep my footing.

“I hurried through here to get to my room.” Ethan let out a long breath. “And in my room, I see...”

“Yes?”

“Estelle naked and on my bed.”

“Oh my.”

“She had one of my favorite blue ties wrapped around her head, so that the fabric was covering her nose.”

I widened my eyes.

“And she was...wildly humping my pillow and moaning.”

“Are you serious?”

“I wish I wasn’t.” He stopped at a wall and kept the gun in front of him.

There was a tarnished gold knob on it.

He lowered his voice and touched the knob. “Just in case. Stay behind me and wait in the passageway until I tell you to come in.”

I lifted my gun and pointed in the direction behind us.

“Okay.”

Ethan turned the knob.

The wall opened with a creak.

He stepped inside.

Trembling, I gazed back and forth at the area behind me and the space where he had just walked through.

Please, let the killer be somewhere else. Please.

Ending the time loop should have been my main concern, but I also wanted more moments with Ethan. With each one, I learned so much about him and fell deeper for this man.

It was all amazing. A program for minorities. A charity to fund it. His wishes to earn his own money. His yearning to protect his mother. His love for his father. His constant protecting me, even though he barely knew me.

I wanted this man.

All of him.

Inside of my body and deep within my heart.

I needed him.

Ethan had awakened a passion and a hunger in me that I never knew could exist. And that was saying a lot, being that my job was to write about romance.

But nothing was better than this reality. No chapter or book could give me this feeling of being reborn.

Already, I knew I couldn't be without him.

To even consider the possibility would be to shatter my heart.

This was the man that I would fall in love with, create a family, and grow old with.

Please, God. Let the time loop end, and...give Ethan and I...all of the tomorrows.

“Alright, Maya.” Ethan appeared back in front of the opening. “No one is in my room, closet, or bathroom. I also have several guards outside of the door.”

“I spotted the ones down by your office.”

“The killer will not ruin our moment.” Smirking, he held out his hand. “I have plans.”

I took his hand and let him help me through the wall.

As I emerged from the passageway's dimness, I blinked my eyes so I could adjust to the new view.

And once my gaze cleared, my heart spun. "Oh, Ethan."

He smirked. "As I said, I have plans."

I stepped into the huge bedroom, awed from the sheer romantic opulence of the setting. It all exuded heroic decadence and loving indulgence.

The soft glow of the candles casted a warm, flickering light over everything, bathing the space in a gentle radiance. The sweet fragrance of roses filled the air, perfuming the room with a heady scent that was both delicate and intoxicating.

Classical music played and I couldn't figure out where the speakers were located, just that I loved the soft, delicate notes.

Ethan carefully took the gun from my hand and walked off.

Still in shock, I drank in more of the place.

The large king sized bed served as the centerpiece. It was swathed in sumptuous sheets and pillows, and decorated with pink rose petals that had been artfully arranged into a romantic pattern of hearts.

On the right, bottles of expensive champagne chilled in a bucket of ice, waiting to be opened and savored. Next to that, several platters of hors d'oeuvres lay, tempting me with their delicious aromas.

On the left, two plush robes rested on an elegantly carved table, inviting me to slip into its soft embrace and enjoy the luxurious setting.

Ethan returned to my side.

I looked at him and, my eyes watered. "You really are amazing!"

"I wish I could take you on my jet to Paris or anywhere else. I want to spoil you. But this time loop..."

"This is perfect, Ethan. Going to an exotic place would be amazing too, but in the end...I only want to be with you. To

have you near me.”

Groaning, he pulled me into his arms.

Our lips met, and once again, time stood still and everything faded away. All that existed was our intense, electric connection.

The kiss did more than sweep me away in a tide of desire. It caused a wave of erotic heat to wash over me.

I burned.

I melted.

I lost myself.

He pulled back and whispered, “Oh, Maya.”

I gasped, my body still humming from that kiss.

He hit me with a searing gaze. “I may not understand this...time loop, or what is truly going on, but I do know one thing.”

I swallowed. “What?”

“God—this divine power—wants us to be together.”

I shivered against him.

“Regardless of my touching the clock, I believe it was fate that stuck me with you.”

My chest rose and fell fast like I’d been running. I was so overwhelmed by everything he was saying.

“There will never be another woman in my life.” Ethan smiled. “Who else could top the extraordinary memories that we have already shared.”

“No one would ever believe us.”

“And no one else matters anyway.” He held me closer. “It is only *us* in the end. Our growing love.”

My heart warmed.

“In the end, I believe, regardless of if we ever escape this situation...”

I parted my lips.

“Our being stuck together...this is a bond that goes beyond the physical. It is a connection that is rooted in the very essence of our existence.”

I stood in further awe as he captured everything I'd been feeling.

“Maya.” He raised his hand and slipped his fingers along my cheek. “Our love will transcend time.”

Emotions—so intense—exploded through me.

Joy and pain.

Love and fear.

Tears left my eyes. I shouldn't have been crying. It was ridiculous, but I was so moved. At first I thought I was dead when the moment began to repeat. Then, I believed I was in limbo or cursed.

Now, I agreed with Ethan.

Whatever this was, a divine force had ordained it.

And I felt like the luckiest woman alive.

Ethan wiped away my tears, his fingertips leaving sweet shivers along my skin. “But enough with words...”

With a sensual urgency, he began to undress me, and I joined in by taking off his tuxedo. Our hands brushed against each other. The sound of zippers and unbuttoning rose in the air. Clothes fell, pooling into little hills of fabric around our feet.

Soon only the flickering of candlelight covered our bodies.

We were two naked beings, standing in the most sacred of moments.

I savored the beauty of his body. His chest and arms were sculpted and rippling with muscle. His legs toned and tanned. I lowered my gaze and took in his hard cock—long and thick.

The classical music danced around our still bodies. It was a melody that heightened my arousal.

He drank me in, letting his gaze fall onto my lips, then the curve of my neck, my breasts, nipples, stomach, pussy.

His cock jerked against his thigh.

Mmmm.

A wet heat gushed between my thighs.

He moved his view back to my face and closed the small distance between us. “When I came back alive that first time, I rushed outside, and spotted you riding forward in that limo, I wondered to myself...are we both dead.”

“I thought that too the first time, I returned. It scared me.”

“I wasn’t scared.”

“No?”

“If I died and you were there, then it was heaven. And that is fine with me.” His mouth found mine and our tongues tangled together in an intricate dance. The pleasure was exquisite.

Fast, he gripped my hips and lifted me up.

My heart raced.

I wrapped my legs around him.

He carried us over to his bed, covered in satin and rose petals.

Seconds later, I lay on my back.

The soft mattress smoothed against my body.

He hovered over me. “I must apologize about one thing in the library.”

“There is nothing you should apologize for about that moment.”

“Yet, there was something I forgot to do.” Slowly, he kissed a path from my neck down to my nipples.

I arched my back as he sucked a nipple into his mouth.

“Mmmm.” I bit my lip.

He twirled his tongue around the tip of my nipple, licking one and then the other, before pulling it back into his mouth with a soft pop.

I moaned and dug my fingers into his shoulders.

He continued to kiss his way down my stomach. His mouth was hot against my skin. He traced my belly button with his tongue.

I twisted my hips in ecstasy, unable to remain still.

His words brushed against my skin. "I need to taste you."

"Please."

He continued down. His lips brushed over the mound of my pussy.

Breathless, I parted my lips.

I could feel the wetness pooling between my thighs as he lifted my leg over his shoulder and began kissing and sucking on my inner thigh.

God. If any moment must be repeated from now on, let it be this. Start back in this bed with his lips on my body. Not the limo. Here. Now.

"Oh, my god."

"I bet your pussy tastes so sweet."

And then he was kissing my pussy.

"Oh!" A tingling, warm sensation pulsed within me.

His tongue was a liquid flame sliding over my sensitive folds, and he just kept licking and licking and licking.

When he found my clit, I loudly moaned, writhing against the rose petals.

There, he suckled as if hungry and desperately greedy to siphon all my pleasure.

My toes curled.

"Oh. Oh." I rocked my pussy against his mouth.

And he licked and lapped. Sucked and tongue-twisted. Swirling and twirling that tongue. Making me delirious.

My heart thundered in my ears.

My body spasmed. “Oh!”

And just like in the library, I was his to pleasure, his to own. His in every way that was important, in every way imaginable.

He took me to heights of ecstasy that I thought only existed in books, in dreams.

Groaning, he rose from my pussy and hovered back over me.

I trembled.

He licked his lips. “Your pussy is even sweeter than I thought it would be. I’m going to spend eternity licking you in every moment.”

All I could murmur was, “Please.”

“Tell me this, Maya.”

“Yes.”

He leaned down and kissed my lips. Then, he rose. “Do you want my cock or more of my tongue?”

“Your cock.”

Grunting, he gripped my ass.

I shivered and then I could feel the brush of his cock.

“Oh, Ethan.”

He captured my lips and then slid his cock inside of me.

He was so big, so thick. Filling me up. Making my pussy drenching wet.

Inch by delicious inch, he pushed into me. Each movement was slow and deliberate. Heat radiated off his body.

Lust rippled through me.

Then, he built a smooth, erotic rhythm. His thrusts made my pussy tighten over his cock. His balls gently tapped against my ass.

“Oh. Oh.”

He groaned and pushed deeper and deeper.

“Oh!”

His gaze locked onto mine.

Panting, I couldn't look away, and I damn sure couldn't get enough.

So, I surrendered to the power of him. “Oh, Ethan.”

A dark groan left him.

Staring into each other's eyes, we moved together.

Slow.

Gentle.

Sensual.

Erotic as hell.

No fear. No shame. No pain.

Just desire. Just passion. Just love.

Getting closer and closer to heaven.

Enveloped in the scent of our sex.

Inhaling each other.

Our hearts beat in unison.

There was no end or beginning.

There was only us.

Connected.

Molded and melted into one.

The pleasure intensified.

Wave after trembling wave.

Every cell swam in bliss.

Every molecule radiated joy.
Every atom sang and danced.
If paradise existed, then it was this.
And then, I came.

Hard.

Screaming.

Body wracked with spasms.

He exploded with me. “Fuck, Maya. Fuck.”

Arching his back.

Biting his lip.

“Oh!”

“Maya!”

Our orgasms ignited and expanded. Colors burst in front of my eyes—gold, blue, green, red.

There were no words.

No thoughts.

Only feelings.

The most exquisite feelings.

His cock jerked inside of me and his hot release filled my pussy.

Only then did I collapse and go limp, fading in and out of consciousness.

Completely spent.

Utterly content.

Sated.

Sated in a way I had never been before.

For the first time in my life, I was at peace.

Completely at peace.

And happier than I’d ever been before.

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Chapter 18

Soaking Up Time

Minutes later, we were in his opulent bathroom, slipping into his massive, marble bath tub. It sat in the middle of the floor, outlined by lit candles.

Ethan lowered into the water and I rested between his legs, letting my head lay against his chest.

Candle light flickered and cast a warm glow as iridescent bubbles and fragrant warm water surrounded us.

Classical music softly played from the hidden speakers. I still couldn't see them. I just knew they were there.

Under the warm water, Ethan slipped his fingers along my hip. "Do you want any champagne?"

"No. I just want to lay here with you."

"Then, your wish is my command."

"Is it crazy that a huge masquerade party is happening below us, and we're in our own private oasis, just enjoying each other?"

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

"Me either." I lifted my leg. My toe peeked out of the water. Bubbles swirled around it. "You must spend tons of moments in this large tub."

Ethan let out a soft chuckle. "Actually...in all the years that I've lived here...this might be my third or fourth time using it."

I lowered my foot back into the water. "Are you serious?"

"That's just a guess. I only remember being in here once and that was because I injured my leg." He slipped his finger up to my stomach and circled my belly button. "And you are the first person that has been in here with me."

"That I don't believe."

“You must. I never seemed to find the time to enjoy this tub as I should.”

Time.

Sadness spread over me.

The minutes were passing by.

Surely, we both knew this moment would end soon, and then it all would be repeated—him back in the kitchen tasting hors d’oeuvres and me back in the limo listening to M.J. sing that damned song for the hundredth time.

The passing of time was an undeniable force. Both beautiful and terrifying. Precious and fleeting.

It was a heartbreaking reminder of the importance of savoring every second. The truth about the fragility of life.

I don’t want this to end.

All I could do was savor the small things in *this* moment, like the sound of his voice and the warmth of his touch.

My eyes watered, but I forced myself to not cry again.

I was too lucky to be sad and hate time. Because, it was the magic of time that brought us together in the first place.

I looked over to the right. Both of our guns lay next to one of the candles. I loved how Ethan was not taking any chances this evening.

The light flickered off the black metal.

That made me think of what he’d said in the office.

“Ethan?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you hunt with your father this year?”

“Long story.”

“We have the time.”

“Do we?”

I grinned. “Not funny.”

He rubbed his finger along my thigh. “Due to my father leaving my mother, I as the dutiful son, picked my mother’s side.”

“Did she ask you too?”

“No, but she didn’t protest either.”

“Aww.”

“I was there when he sent her the divorce papers. She had been completely blindsided, thinking he was coming home that night for an elegant surprise birthday dinner.”

“Who’s birthday?”

“His.”

For his birthday, he chose to pick the woman he was having an affair with.

Ethan sighed. “I held her all night and days later. I even remained at their home for a few weeks just to make sure she wouldn’t hurt herself.”

“And did your father ever try to get in touch with you?”

“Every damned day. He left tons of messages telling me how sorry he was, and that he had to go with his heart because one day...he would be gone, so...he wanted to finally live.”

“I’m sorry, Ethan.”

“I never called him back.”

I placed my hand on top of his as he rubbed my thigh. “Can I tell you something?”

“Yes.”

“My father used to work as a night-shift security guard for the shopping mall near where we lived.” I squeezed his hand, not happy about going to this memory. “It wasn’t the safest of places to be at night, or even in the day, but the pay was decent.”

Ethan took his other arm and wrapped it around me. “Tell me more.”

“He was responsible for patrolling the property and ensuring that everything was secure at night. He walked on foot and only had a flashlight and mace.”

“That wouldn’t be enough to protect himself.”

“And it wasn’t, when three kids decided to break into the mall.” My bottom lip quivered. “My father called 9-1-1, but they never came in time. Even the cops were nervous about coming to our area.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.” I gulped down sadness. “They found him two hours after the 9-1-1 call. Shot in the chest and leg. He bled out.”

“Jesus.” Ethan let go of my thigh and hugged me with both arms. “I am sorry, Maya. How old were you at the time?”

“Eleven years old.”

“Dear God.”

I sank in his embrace. “I was a wreck as a kid. I drowned in books. It was the only thing to keep me...*okay*. If that is the right word.”

“Is that why you write? To give others solace.”

“I never thought of it like that, but...maybe.” I placed my arms over his, hugging him back. “My mother ended up volunteering for 9-1-1 services so that no other family would ever have to deal with what we experienced. Eventually, they hired her on as a dispatcher. Either way, I didn’t bring this up to make you sad. I wanted you to know that because of your father.”

“My father?”

“How you choose to deal with your mother and father’s marriage is your business. And trust me, I get why you took your mother’s side. It’s hard for me not to be right there with her too, and I barely know her. But...”

“Yes?”

“Your father is still alive. And their marriage is theirs, not yours.” I turned my head to the side and put him in my view.

“And I know that you love your father... a lot.”

He looked down at the bubbles. “I do.”

“You may be mad at him for how he has treated your mother, but you probably miss him too.”

“More than I am willing to admit.”

“Then, you must talk to him.”

He gave me a sad smile. “No one has ever said this to me. However, I doubt anyone would dare.”

“You can tell me to mind my business. I won’t get mad.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m glad you said it. If we ever get out of this, then...”

“You’ll call him.”

“I’ll call him.”

“Good. It’s a blessing that he is still here. There’s only so much time you two will have left. Enjoy your father while you have him.”

I moved my view from him and rested the back of my head on his chest again.

Time.

How crazy was it that even talking about my father’s death had brought the concept of time back up.

Even if we got out of this time loop, could we ever escape time?

Time, death, and love were so thoroughly interwoven within the human experience. Together, they formed an intricate web of emotion and meaning, reminding us once again of the fleeting nature of existence, the inevitability of our own mortality, and the enduring power of connections.

Ethan spoke, pulling me away from my thoughts. “Thank you, Maya.”

“It was nothing.”

“It was everything.”

I smiled. “Not many...”

“What?”

“Few people know about my father. Not Claire or Horace.”

“Why didn’t you tell them?”

“Death depresses people. I didn’t want to make anyone uncomfortable.”

“True friends don’t get uncomfortable when the person they love opens their heart and reveals something to them.”

“Perhaps, deep down inside I knew they weren’t my true friends. I just never really allowed myself to admit it.”

The classical music shifted to a piano solo.

“Enough about that.” I noticed the bubbles shimmering.
“What do you think the killer is doing right now?”

“He or she is probably confused. During a party like this, I never have so many guards, watching over my office, library, and bedroom.”

“The maskless waiters probably threw the killer off too.”

He chuckled. “I hope so.”

“It was genius. Thank you for protecting me.”

“Nothing will happen to you on my watch.”

Smiling, I closed my eyes. “Tell me more about Estelle?”

He groaned in annoyance.

“Ethan.”

“I want to enjoy this moment before it is gone, not talk about my crazy old assistant.”

“What did you do when you found her in the bed?”

“I yelled for my guards. She stopped humping the pillow and shrieked. None of my guards heard me.”

“Oh no.”

“Not thinking and only wanting to get out of there quickly, I rushed back into the secret passageway to get my phone and

alarm my guards.” He let out a long breath. “The last thing I wanted to do was put my hands on Estelle and get her out of my bed.”

“That’s how she knows about the passageway?”

“Yes. She followed me through, naked, crying, and begging me to not fire her.”

“This is crazy.”

“I get back down to my office. She comes in there too and tries to hug me. Thankfully, the guards finally heard all of the commotion and rushed in.”

“They took her away.”

“Eventually, she fought them, screaming that we were in love and she just needed time to talk to me.”

I opened my eyes. “Did you ever see her again?”

“No. It’s been three months. No further contact.”

“But, she would know the inner workings of your masquerade party?”

He tensed against me. “She worked with the party planners for years. She would definitely know about the costume storage room and that my waiters were always masked.”

My nerves flared.

Could Shi be Estelle? No. That would be too...terrifying.

I swallowed.

“Oh fuck.” He growled. “How could I forget?”

I sat up and glanced over my shoulder. “What?”

“She was able to be in my room and do what she was doing, because the cameras were down.”

“Fuck.”

“Christopher never knew how she did it, but he figured the problem was solved and made sure to put codes in place to block anyone from ever doing it again.”

“So, she could very well make the cameras go out again?”

“Yes.” Rage covered his face. “How could I have been so stupid, and not think of her as the number one suspect?”

“Maybe because you died and then repeated time. It’s a bit shocking. First, you had to wrap your head around that.”

“Still—”

“Don’t beat yourself up, Ethan.”

“What if you had been killed for real and there was no magic clock with some time altering spell?”

“Thank God we don’t have to wonder about that.” I turned around and leaned back on his chest again. “But...”

“Yes?”

“What if...my assistant Shi is Estelle? She was my date to this party.”

“Goddamn it. Then, I’m going to strangle her before she gets out of the limo.”

I thought back to all of the times Ethan met us by the limo. Shi wore a mask that covered her entire face. There was no way he would have recognized her.

She had said that she researched the property and talked about the maze. But, what if she really knew about it because she worked here.

I let out a long breath. “Did she know about your obsession with me?”

“Of course. Everyone knew. In fact, Estelle was assigned to not only buy your books, but get a detective to learn about you.”

I glanced over my shoulder. “What? You hired a detective to check me out?”

“For a man with my wealth...it is important to truly know who he plans to bring around him.”

“It’s still weird.”

“I can see that.”

“When this is done, I’m going to get a detective to look into you.”

“Good. I’ll pay for him.”

I rolled my eyes and turned around. “What did your detective find out?”

“Everything I’ve already confirmed in these moments that we’ve shared together. You’re smart, talented, and spend way too much of your time writing, instead of living life.”

I smirked. “After this, that’s something I plan to change.”

“No, Maya. That’s something that *I* plan to change.”

My smirk deepened. “Back to Estelle.”

He groaned in annoyance and slipped his hand up to my breast.

“How do I say this?”

He slid his fingers to my nipple and tenderly squeezed. “What?”

“Well...Shi said that she was Chinese.”

He let go of my nipple. “What?”

“Yeah.” I sat back up. “So...what is Estelle’s ethnicity?”

“Her parents are from Seoul, South Korea.”

Tension gathered in my shoulders. “As a Black person, I know other Americans can be ignorant to things about my culture.”

“O-kay.”

“So...Estelle could understand that too. So, consider this.” I turned around some more in his lap. “Some people from Korea and China may share similar physical traits, but they are not the same.”

“Correct.”

“However, she probably knew that my ignorant ass could not call her out on being Chinese, when she was Korean.”

Worry covered his face. “So, she lies to you just in case.”

“I’d been looking for an assistant all year. Everyone in the literary world knew. Hell my fans even knew. I vlogged about it sometimes.”

“The detective would have told her this in regular reports about you.”

I nodded. “And she could have just been watching me like some crazy stalker.”

He shook his head. “I hired two additional men to watch you...I only told them to take note of men coming in and out of your house. I wanted to see who my competition was.”

“Another weird thing.”

He ignored me. “But, I never told them to note the women that were walking in and out of your house.”

“Would they have recognized Estelle?”

“These weren’t people that worked on my property. I hired out.”

“Fuck. So...Shi could be Estelle which means—”

“Your assistant is trying to kill you.”

I trembled. “Now, it makes sense why she would want to do it at the party—”

“In front of me.”

“To hurt you.”

“It would have destroyed me.”

I thought back to his invitation. “She solved the heart puzzle.”

He frowned. “You cheated?”

“That’s not really the point of why I said that.”

“But you did cheat?”

“Can we concentrate on the fact that she is good at puzzles?”

“I can’t believe you cheated. The next puzzles you will do on your own.”

I rolled my eyes. “Was Estelle good at them or not?”

“Very good. Everyone knows I love puzzles. She didn’t seem interested in puzzles the first year, but once she knew I liked them, then she jumped on them.”

“It was another way to impress you.”

“Hmmm.” He gazed at the bubbles. “How long has she been working for you?”

“Less than a month. Did you know you were going to invite me to the party?”

“I did.”

“How far is this party planned out?”

“Eight to nine months.”

“Then, she knew you would invite me.” I blinked. “But, you waited until a week before the party to invite me.”

“It was nervousness. Uncertainty.”

“What if I said no?”

“You would have continued to be invited for any event I had.”

“And you think she would have just continued to be my assistant the whole time?”

“Probably, if the goal was to kill you in front of me.”

“Shit.” I swallowed. “I think it’s her. What should I do?”

His frown deepened. “I wish I could appear in the limo with you.”

“Or at least I could bring the gun and question her on the way to the manor. But, it won’t come with me when I repeat a moment.”

He widened his eyes in fear. “Maya, she clearly has a gun. Do not question her on that ride.”

“How am I going to just sit next to her like everything is okay? I want to wring her damn neck.”

“Maya—”

“If it is her, then it will be hard for me to just sit next to her.” Then, my stomach twisted, and my reality began to spin.

Wait. No. Not now.

“Maya, do you feel that?”

“Yes.”

I felt like I was floating and then falling. My vision blurred. “Shit.”

“Maya...”

My body shook uncontrollably as I tried to reach out to Ethan, but he was no longer there.

No.

My reality shattered around me.

“Ethan!” I shut my eyes. “I...”

My heart pounded in my chest.

I love you.

The warm fragrant liquid left me. No longer wet, I felt the fabric of my gown against my body.

Fuck. It's getting harder and harder to leave him.

I wanted to be in his arms.

Then, M.J.'s *Do You Remember the Time* played around me.

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Chapter 19

The Endless Reckoning

The sleek black limousine glided through the bustling city streets to the back drop of M.J. remembering the time when he fell in love.

Claire yelled over the music. “Yes. I love M.J.”

I opened my eyes.

They all danced to the music.

It's Shi. Or should I say...Estelle?

I turned her way as she snapped her fingers.

You fucking psycho person. I'm going to kill you.

I just had to be patient and figure out the best way to stop her.

I leaned forward and checked out the red purse. One of the moments before Estelle had asked me if I wanted some aspirin and that she had a whole pharmacy in her purse.

Yeah. You got poison and a gun in there too.

I checked the purse.

It was halfway open. Enough space for her to quickly dive her hand into it and pull out the gun.

I needed to get that purse away from Estelle. Once I did, I could confront her.

I curved my lips into the fakest smile. “Hey, Shi.”

“Yes, Maya.” Estelle winked at me.

Bitch, don't be winking at me.

I forced myself to keep that smile on my face. “Can we switch sides? I don't want to be the first person out.”

“O-kay.”

I rose, ducking my head.

Estelle picked up her purse and scooted to the right.

I lowered to where she had been sitting.

To my annoyance, she lifted her purse and placed it on the other side of her. It was still out of my reach.

Fuck.

Michal Jackson began singing about his damned relationship.

“Maya!” Claire called out to me.

I kept my view on Estelle. “What?”

“I have a special something in here to relax you this evening. Just let me know at the Gala when you want to go out and have a *break*.”

“That’s great, Claire.” I waved her away, not having time for her.

Do I get Estelle before she leaves the limo? Or do I get her now?

It made the most sense to wait. Perhaps, Ethan was prepared as usual and had guards waiting for us.

But, I want to get her now. It would only be fair.

In so many moments Estelle had been ahead of me. When I went to Ethan’s office, she slyly entered as a waiter and handed me poisoned champagne.

Later, I went to the maze, and she was right there, ruining an absolutely fabulous kiss with a shot to my chest.

Back in the office another time, I thought I was good to go by locking the door and sliding the curtains in front of the window. And, she appeared again, walking through a fucking secret passageway.

Estelle turned my way and caught me watching her. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes.” Keeping that fake smile on my face hurt my cheeks, but the small pain was worth it.

*This time I want to show you that I'm the one in control.
I'm steps ahead of you.*

Claire snapped her fingers to the song. "Maya!"

I turned to her and rolled my eyes. "What now?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." She gave me a mocking smirk. "Am I interrupting you?"

"Yes."

She blinked. "I'm just trying to have a chat—"

"Talk to your husband."

Horace snorted.

I glared at him.

He widened his eyes. "Maya, are you okay?"

My heart raced.

I looked back at Estelle. "That purse is so pretty. Can I see it?"

"Oh. Sure." Shi lifted the purse in front of her. "I bought this—"

I rushed for the purse, grabbing it with both hands.

Estelle shrieked, her grip on the bag tightening on the red leather, doing her best to wrench it away. "Boss, what is going on?"

"I'm not your boss, bitch!"

Claire yelled, "Maya, what are you doing?!"

"Give it to me!" Lunging forward, I tried to yank the purse from Estelle, but quickly she jerked it away.

Rage filled her eyes.

There you go. That's the true you.

Still, Shi's voice was eerily calm as she spoke, "Ma'am, I don't understand what is going on. Do you think this purse is yours?"

“Eh, Maya!” Horace yelled from the other side. “What are we missing?!”

They need something to do, so I can pay attention to Estelle.

I kept my view on my *assistant*. “Horace is fucking Claire! Ryan has her panties in his purse. Talk amongst yourselves.”

Claire shrieked.

Ryan yelled, “You, bitch! I thought I smelled Chanel No 5!”

Probably unsure of what was going on, Estelle’s gaze darted back and forth from me to the couples’ escalating argument.

Let’s try this again.

With that thought, something primal and alive awakened from deep within my soul.

I curled my fingers into a fist and lunged at Estelle again.

This time Estelle was ready for me. She swung a vicious, powerful right hook. The force of her punch reverberated through my skull with a sickening thud.

Holy fuck!

The pain was unbearable.

I fell back into the seat.

She sure can hit.

Claire screamed, “I am not having sex with Horace!”

“Bernard, are these your wife’s panties!?” Ryan cried. “Check them if you dare!”

“Hold on!” Horace tried to yell over them. “Why are we even entertaining this? Maya has clearly lost her mind. Look at her!”

Estelle took off her mask and glared at me. “I don’t know what you’re doing, but—”

Determined, I sprung forward.

Fast, Estelle rose and jumped back.

I only grabbed her red dress, tearing at it with a savage intensity. The fabric easily shredded in my hands.

“Maya!” Estelle responded with explosive aggression. Her fists were a flurry of quick jabs, flashing out like lightning strikes.

How many times had she imagined hitting me? Had practiced it even?

The blows rained down on me, striking my arms, chest, and face, searing my skin. Blood streamed down my face like tears.

Still, I dragged her down to the limo floor and let out a guttural yell.

Screaming, she crashed to the ground.

“All this time, Claire?!” Pain coated Bernard’s voice. “You’ve been having sex with *him*?!”

“No, honey. Never!” Claire cried. “Please, listen to me!”

On the floor, we wrestled, rolling and grappling. Clawing and clashing. Locked in a struggle of wills. The air around us was thick with rage. Our gowns tearing and wrinkling.

I didn’t even have any idea where the fucking purse was at. I just wanted to hurt her.

Then, Estelle landed a final crushing blow to my throat. “I hate you!”

I felt my windpipe constrict and I was unable to take a full breath.

No!

I coughed and gasped for air, unable to get a good rhythm of breathing back.

“I hate you!” Estelle crawled away from me. “He came so easy to you!”

Clawing at my throat, I choked on burning pain.

Soon, Estelle was back in front of me and pointing the gun at my forehead.

Blood rushed to my ears.

“Hold on, guys!” Horace yelled. “Does she have a gun?! What is going on?!”

Estelle twisted her face in cruel anger. “You will never have him!”

I let out a delirious laugh. “I already have him!”

Screaming, she pulled the trigger.

The bullet shot out and pierced my forehead.

Everyone screamed in horror around us.

Darkness crept around the edges of my vision.

That’s okay, bitch. I’ll be back.

The last thing I heard before everything faded was another gun shot, and more people screaming.

Did she kill herself?

Next, *Remember the Time* sounded around me.

Opening my eyes, I slowly curved my lips into a wicked smile.

Of course, I was back in my same position.

“Yes. I love M.J!” Claire exclaimed.

Estelle snapped her fingers to the song’s beat.

I stared at her.

Round two.

Claire yelled over the song. “Hey, Maya! I have a special something—”

I pounced on Estelle like a wild animal, yanking her hair and dragging her down to the limo floor.

She let out a piercing shriek of agony.

I wasted no time and punched her in the face. My fist colliding with her jaw. It wasn't as hard as her force, but it did the job.

Horace yelled, "What the hell is going on?!"

Shock filled her eyes as she grabbed her jaw.

Taking no chances, I got off her and fast-crawled to her seat.

Get the gun. Get the gun.

But, before I could make it to the purse on her seat, she grabbed the hem of my gown and pulled me back.

I kicked at her.

"Ladies! Ladies!" Horace rushed to Estelle and grabbed her.

Bernard somehow got in front of me. "Calm down, Maya!"

"Move!" I tried to dodge him. "Get out of my way!"

Horace screamed in pain. "What the fuck?!"

Quickly, I glanced over my shoulder.

Horace held his face.

Estelle rushed past me, surely trying to get to the gun in her purse.

I slammed into her as hard as I could, causing us to both crash into the limo door.

The impact reverberated through my body. The metal door bent, and the window cracked.

I grabbed her head and slammed it into the glass. The door buckled under the force of our collision.

I slammed her head into the glass again.

Glass shattered around us.

Then, the door swung open.

Shit!

We tumbled out of the moving limo.

Screaming, we gripped each other and crashed onto the asphalt. The back of my head connected to the gravel with a solid, sickening thud.

Ah!

Horns blared.

Dizzy, I looked up.

A truck barreled toward us. Its grill an open mouth of steel teeth. Its bright head lights were the eyes of a large beast.

The tires screeched, but I knew it was too late.

No!

And then there was heavy steel smashing into me. Next, molten agony exploding in my cells.

Finally, the world around me began to dissolve and reform, resetting the cycle once more.

My body spun, and I relaxed, letting the transformation take me over.

It didn't matter how many times we would have to do this. I would fight again, and again, and again, until I found a way to break free from this endless cycle of death and rebirth that she had triggered.

Bring it!

When I felt my body stop moving, I waited for the song.

Come on, M.J.

Then, the notes rose in my ears and, *Remember the Time* played.

Okay.

Opening my eyes, I swallowed and considered the earlier moments.

There was one thing I had to admit. Estelle was not only a master at puzzles or planning to kill me, but she had a nice right hook.

The bitch wouldn't be as easy as I thought to get.

I gazed around the limo at everyone dancing.

And they will get in my way or distract me while I'm getting that gun.

“Hey!” I raised my hands in the air and waved them.

Everyone turned to me.

Then, I pointed at Claire. “Horace is having sex with her.”

Claire gasped.

I pointed to Ryan. “You have her panties in your purse. She's going to deny it, but you know you've been smelling Chanel No 5.”

Ryan dropped his glass of champagne. “I have.”

Horace opened his mouth in shock.

I pointed to him. “And, you're fired.”

He shook his head. “Wait. What?”

“For stealing money from me, Claire told me everything.”

“I-I did not!” Claire held her hands in front of her.

“Horace, I swear. I kept it all a secret.”

They erupted into arguing—screaming, pointing their fingers, and blaming each other. Tears streamed down their faces. Curses flew through the air. Hands fisted, and panties flew everywhere.

It was all a beautiful chaos to keep them from getting in my way.

There we go.

I turned to Estelle.

She watched me.

“I think that...” I held out my hands. “You're my only friend on this limo.”

She slowly nodded. “I'm... sorry, Maya.”

“No worries.” I hugged her.

She jumped a little in my embrace, probably shocked as hell.

Then, she relaxed.

I steadied myself. “Thank you for being here, Shi. I needed you.”

“Um...no problem.”

I hugged her tighter, glanced over her shoulder, and spotted the half open purse. Slowly, I let her go.

Round three.

In a flash, I snatched the purse from her side.

She widened her eyes in alarm and sprang into action. With no hesitation, she tried to deliver that powerful right hook of hers.

I expected it and jumped back, narrowly avoiding her fist.

She launched another attack.

Ducking, I stumbled back and dove my hand into the purse.

She charged at me.

I grabbed the gun and yanked it out.

The purse dropped from my hands.

“Stop!” I pointed the gun at her.

She froze.

Where’s the safety switch?

My hands shook. I found it near the trigger and flicked it off.

She widened her eyes in horror. “Ma’am?”

“Hold on, guys!” Horace yelled. “Maya has a gun!”

“Shut the fuck up before I shoot all of you!” I trembled and kept a steady aim at Estelle.

Everyone went silent.

I glared at her. “Estelle.”

She gasped.

“Get back in your seat.”

Her hands shivered at her sides. Slowly, she inched back and then lowered in the seat.

I glanced down at the floor. Some of the purse’s contents lay next to it—a knife, rope, handcuffs, another magazine of bullets, a tiny bottle of antifreeze, and one black envelope with Ethan’s name written in red nail polish.

She really was prepared to kill me.

My heart raced as I tightened my grip on the gun.

I put my view back on Estelle. “Take off the mask.”

Still shaking, she raised her hand to her head and pulled it off.

“I know how serious you were about planning to kill me.”

She opened her mouth in shock.

“You were going to grab the waiter’s costume, search me out, and poison or shoot me. If that didn’t work...I assume you would choke me with that rope or whatever.”

Horror filled her eyes.

“What I don’t get is, when were you going to give Ethan this letter? After you killed me?”

Her bottom lip quivered. “A-after he found both of us dead. I was going to shoot myself and lay next to you.”

Someone shrieked near me. It could have been Claire or Bernard.

The limo pulled up to the Ravenswood Manor.

Thank God.

I gazed out of the window.

Ethan stood with over forty guards, gripping their guns at their sides.

Estelle shrieked. “H-he knew.”

I frowned. “He sure did.”

“B-but how? I-I don’t understand.”

“You’ll have time to figure that out in jail.”

Tears spilled down her eyes. “No. I must die. You must die. He can’t have anything.”

“Fuck you.” I aimed at her chest. “Ethan and I are going to live happily ever after.”

The limo stopped.

Still looking pissed, Ethan rushed to the limo and opened the door.

Jackson got to his side, ducked his head in, and pointed his gun at Estelle. “Come on.”

Slowly, she scooted his way and stared at me. “B-but how?”

I flicked the safety back on and lowered the gun to my side. “Magic.”

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Chapter 20

Over

As the guards took Estelle away, I climbed out of the limo.

Ethan glared at me. “The time loop restarted twice.”

“It did.”

“You died twice?”

“I did.”

He spoke through clenched teeth. “I thought the plan was to let her come here and—”

“I had to get her myself—”

“You put yourself in harms—”

“And I survived—”

“What if you didn’t survive and for some reason the moment didn’t repeat?”

“Guess what?”

“What?”

“I love you.” I raised my hands to his shoulders and got on my toes.

He opened his mouth to speak, but I silenced him with a kiss. I could feel the tension easing out of his body as he wrapped his strong arms around my waist and pulled me closer.

I melted into his embrace and ran my hands through his hair.

Claire’s shrill voice pierced through the moment. “When did...this happen?! They don’t even know each other! What is happening tonight?”

I ignored her. I was too entangled in the kiss and our unbreakable bond of passion.

Kissing with desperate hungry desire, we clung to each other, our breathing coming out in ragged gasps.

When he finally pulled away, no one was around us.

We stood alone under the moonlight.

His gaze met mine. "I love you too."

I blushed.

"Do you think we ended the curse?"

"I hope so." I grinned. "Estelle has a mean right hook."

He frowned. "Please don't put yourself in anymore harm."

"I won't."

"You're my future wife."

I blinked.

"I can say that because we've been through so much. Nothing else matters, but having you in my life. We've seen things that many have never seen."

I shivered in fear. "But..."

"Yes?"

"Would we be rushing to talk about marriage? We just—"

"Met each other?" A dark chuckle left him. "What we have experienced...it has aged our relationship by years."

I parted my lips.

"And I don't want to waste any more time."

I let out a long breath. "Me either."

The rumbling of an engine sounded behind us.

I glanced over my shoulder.

A white sports car pulled up and parked. I didn't know cars well, but I knew it had cost a lot of money.

Jackson left the car, headed over to us, and gave the keys to Ethan. "Here you go, sir."

Ethan let go of my waist and took the keys. "And Estelle?"

“With the police,” Jackson said. “Apparently the letter with your name on it, explained why she was going to kill Maya and herself.”

“Okay.” Ethan nodded and took my hand. “Let’s go.”

Jackson headed back to the manor.

I laughed. “Where are we going?”

“Anywhere!” He released my hand, rushed over to the driver’s side of the car, opened the door, and climbed inside.

“Oh my God.” I got to the passenger side, opened the door, and jumped in.

He lowered in his seat. “The night is ours.”

“It is.”

“We can go anywhere we want. I have my jet full of fuel. Where do you want to go?”

I blinked. “Honestly...”

“Yes?”

“It doesn’t matter where we go as long as we are together. And in the end...I want to get out of this dress and just...go home with you.”

“Then, home it is.” Smirking, he pressed a button.

The engine roared to life.

Now that we were pretty sure we had defeated the curse, it was time to actually enjoy life.

He looked at me. “Ready?”

“Hell yes.”

The car hurtled down the open road.

Thank you, God.

I pressed the button on the door. The window zipped down. A cool breeze whipped past my face and lifted my hair. An overwhelming sense of exhilaration and freedom rushed through me.

Grinning, I yelled out the window, “Yes!”

Ethan laughed and then joined me. “Hell yes!!”

After what seemed like an eternity trapped in a time loop of hopelessness, my heart stirred with a sudden resurgence of life.

Thank you, God!

I breathed in deeply, savoring the scent of the night air. The sound of the tires hummed against the pavement. It was a soothing background melody. A rhythmic beat of life’s pulse.

As we flew past manicured bushes, I felt time itself stretched out before me like a ribbon unfurling into infinity or an elastic band, taut and ready to burst. The road ahead was endless, full of possibility and adventure. It was a never-ending journey.

I gazed at Ethan and placed my hand on his as it rested on the gearstick.

He turned my way. “This is the true beginning of us.”

“I agree.”

What a crazy ass time.

My body and soul had been encased in a timeless void, until I found love. And in the end, that was what truly freed me.

Time and love.

The power of both was immense and overwhelming.

Both represented significant forces that shaped our lives and our experiences.

Both also could be finite. We only had a certain amount of time in our lives, just as we only had so much love to give. Either way, it was up to us to make the most of what we had.

Ethan drove us along.

I spotted the elegant fountain, with a brass statue surrounded by water. Then, the sight shifted to an outstretched manicured lawn.

I let out a long breath and smiled.

Finally.

But, right as we hit large iron gates, announcing the beginning of the Vanderbilt's estates, an overwhelming feeling of dizziness washed over me.

What? No.

Ethan zigzagged on the road. "Fuck!"

My stomach lurched, and my vision blurred as the truth of our situation hit me like a freight train. "The time loop is not over!"

"God damn it!"

"Shit!" I fisted my free hand, hating how my body floated and this helpless sensation swept over me.

Why?!

The car approached the gate.

How do we get out of this?!

My body shuddered uncontrollably as I clung to Ethan's hand wishing I could never let it go. But time would take us both.

It was inevitable.

Terror coursed through my veins, and it was not the fear of repeating, it was the horror of this time loop never ending.

Are we doomed?

Ethan tightened his grip on my hand too.

We kept our hands joined, fingers entwined.

Perhaps, we gave each other strength despite the chaotic situation splitting us.

As our reality shifted and spun, I gazed up at the sky and saw a wash of brilliant colors that lit up the darkness. It was as if stars were being born in reverse. The colors bled into each other creating luminescent hues of purples, blues, pinks and greens that glimmered against the black.

“I’ll see you again, my love.” Ethan whispered, “Same time. Same place.”

Then, the world collapsed around me in a flurry of swirling visions.

Shards of reality cut into my heart.

A ripple of cold energy flooded me.

I forced my eyes to remain open.

I had to see what was going on around me.

It was then that I noticed clocks popping up fast around me, ticking, ticking, and ticking.

Oh God.

Everywhere I looked, there were clocks of every shape and size floating in a twinkling galaxy. Big cuckoo clocks decorated with intricate details. Wall clocks that popped in and out of existence. Pocket watches spinning through the air like snowflakes. Antique grandfather clocks that loomed tall against the night sky.

That’s it.

And all the clocks’ hands spun faster and faster.

I know what we have to do.

An eerie calm settled over me.

Then, a new existence bled through. Clocks morphed into Claire and Bernard, Horace and Ryan. The galaxy tightened and then formed into the limo.

I turned to my right and Estelle sat next to me.

Then, Michael Jackson’s *Remember the Time* played around me.

I swallowed down my gloom and began to mull over the only remedy that had come to my mind.

Claire yelled over the music. “Yes. I love M.J!”

Chapter 21

Shattered

Everyone jammed to the song.

“Maya!” Claire yelled. “I have a special something in here to relax you this evening. Just let me know at the Gala when you want to go out and have a *break*.”

If Ethan and I want to get out of this, then we’re going to have to break time.

Horace raised his voice over the music. “Maya can’t smoke tonight at the party. She must be an elegant and captivating lady this evening.”

Claire laughed. “Why?”

“Because I believe Vanderbilt has a major interest in her.”

Claire laughed louder.

But how would we break time?

I gazed out of the window as our limo sped through the night. In all the rides, I never looked outside. I always focused on the inside of the vehicle.

Tonight, the world rushed by in a blur of lights and shadows.

Streetlights flickered past in a steady stream, casting pools of golden illumination on the pavement below. The neon signs of passing businesses glimmered in the darkness, their bright colors and bold letters fading in and out of view like a shimmering mirage.

Was time like a mirror? Could it be shattered into countless fragments?

“Ah!” Ryan yelled.

It must have been the moment when he dropped the glass and stained the front of his gray pants.

Horace’s voice held disgust. “Are you serious right now?”

Still staring out the window, I caught glimpses of passing cars and buildings, their shapes and colors blurring together into an abstract tapestry of motion and sound.

Meanwhile, I felt strangely disconnected from it all—the world outside and even the moments within this limo.

It was just a dream.

A memory.

A surreal experience.

Was it even real or fake? Was it the past or the present?

The chorus came in and M.J. began to ask if the other person remembered all the good times they had, when they were in love.

How do we break time? It's not tangible. Or is it?

Bernard raised his voice over the song. “Hey. I have a good joke. There’s a bunch of people on an airplane and it begins to have a bumpy ride—”

“Absolutely not!” Claire placed her hand on his stomach. “That is a racist joke, baby. You are not saying it.”

The limo turned onto the Vanderbilt estate.

Then, suddenly out of nowhere, I heard this faint ticking sound within the song.

Was that there before?

I had no idea. Usually, I was interacting with everyone in the limo.

Tick. Tock. Tick Tock.

The steady beat pulsed through my veins.

Tick. Tock. Tick Tock.

“I asked you to do one thing.” Horace lowered and grabbed the glass on the floor. “I begged you to keep it together this evening and you couldn’t even do that.”

“Oh I’m so sorry.” Ryan groaned. “I hope I’m not embarrassing you in front of your friends.”

Tick. Tock. Tick Tock.

It reminded me of the grandfather clock in Ethan's office.

Tick. Tock. Tick Tock.

Suddenly, a spark ignited in my mind.

If in order to end the time loop, we had to break time itself? Then, what better way to do that than by destroying the grandfather clock in his office?

It was the very symbol of time, and I was sure it was the object that triggered this loop in the first place.

Bernard spoke, "But how is the joke racist, sweetie?"

"You are literally saying racist derogatory terms in the joke."

"But the people in the joke are black so they can say it if they're black—"

"Yet, you can't say it..."

Needing to think, I blocked their voices out of my mind.

So, how do we destroy it?

In my head, ideas spun, and I began to brainstorm the many ways to break the grandfather clock.

I imagined Ethan and me with sledgehammers, slamming them into the sides and splintering the wood. In my mind, we ripped apart the delicate cogs and gears. We smashed the carvings and glass.

And in the end, nothing remained but piles of shattered metal, glass, and wood.

But...

I had to think of the possible consequence of this.

If we broke it, would we be truly stuck in this time loop forever?

When the limo pulled up to the Manor, I saw Ethan waiting. Guards surrounded him.

Horace spoke, "What do you think is going on?"

“Who knows?” Claire’s voice brightened. “Are you still nervous, Maya? You’ve been quiet this whole ride.”

I ignored her, opened the door, headed out, and avoided the puddle a foot from the limo.

Ethan stepped to me and grabbed my hand. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

We headed off.

Claire called out for me. “Maya? What?! Uh! Where are you going and...? You know Ethan Vanderbilt?”

“Oh shit!” Horace yelled.

Walking forward, I glanced over my shoulder.

Tons of guards descended on Estelle. She shrieked and tried to run, but there was no escape. They tackled her before she could reach into her purse.

Sighing, I looked forward.

Ethan squeezed my hand. “Don’t worry. We will get out of this.”

“I have an idea.”

“What is it?”

“I think we need to destroy the grandfather clock.”

He stopped walking. “What?”

“The clock,” I said, “it’s the source of this time loop and if we destroy it, then maybe we can break the cycle.”

I waited for him to respond. His face was a mask of concentration as if he were going over it all in his head. I knew damn well that this was a long shot. If I were wrong, there could be devastating and irreversible consequences.

Then, he looked at me. “Okay. It just might work. Let’s do it.”

“You really trust me?”

He answered without hesitation, “Yes.”

I stood there, stunned.

Then...we're truly going to do this.

He pulled me close, kissed my forehead and declared, "Let's go break that clock."

Hand in hand, we headed to the mansion in silence.

When we entered, music and laughter greeted us.

We bypassed it all—the brightly colored costumes and festive masks, the clinking of champagne and the melody from the orchestra.

Please let this work.

We headed down the hall.

Ethan glanced at me. "What made you come up with this idea?"

"When we shifted or...I don't know what else to call it, transformed back into the repeated moment, I saw tons and tons of clocks floating all around me."

"Yes. I've seen that too."

"And that confirmed to me the strong connection of the clock to our situation."

"I can see that."

"And even on the limo ride here, I swore I could hear the grandfather ticking around me."

"Interesting."

Minutes later, we stopped at the door.

I gazed up at him. "Are we really going to do this?"

"We are." A fierce determination spread across his face. He grabbed the knob and turned it.

As soon as I stepped inside, my gaze went to the grandfather clock.

Did it know what we had in store for it? Was it scared?

Ethan shut the door behind us. “Luckily, every time I return, I order Jackson to put two loaded guns on my office desk and close the curtains on the window.”

I moved my gaze to his desk.

The guns rested there, cold and heavy, inviting us to take them in our hands and finally end this.

Ethan clicked the lock on the door.

I strolled over and carefully picked up the gun that he had taught me how to use, memories ago.

This must work.

I swore the bullets inside the gun, hummed and begged me to release them.

Ethan got to my side. “If this is wrong?”

“Then, we could be stuck forever with no solution in sight.”

He picked up the gun. “Exactly.”

I looked at him. “Then...should we not do it?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t matter?”

“I told you before, as long as I’m stuck with you, I am content.”

I shivered. “Damn, Ethan.”

He quirked his brows.

“What do I do with that?”

He gave me a wicked smile. “You told me you loved me.”

“I do.”

“Then, why else would I care about anything else?”

“Damn it.” I looked back at the clock. “I still don’t want to cause you to be stuck—”

“I don’t care.”

My heart boomed in my ears. I raised the gun and aimed at the grandfather clock, feeling the weight and power of the weapon in my hands “You’re right then.”

“Of course I am.”

“If the worst-case scenario is that I’m stuck with you, then so be it.”

“Correct again.” He lifted his gun and pointed at the clock too. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

Please, God. Let this be the final solution.

My hand shook.

I stared at the large grandfather clock.

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

I sighed. “It’s so beautiful.”

“It is.”

The intricate designs carved into the wood seemed to dance in the light.

The clock face twinkled and glowed with crescent moons, stars, and hourglasses, casting an otherworldly glow.

Will this end the loop?

I focused on the pendulum shaped like a sorcerer’s staff, coiled and bedecked with shards of luminescent crystals.

I hesitated for a moment, my heart pounding louder in my chest, knowing that what I was about to do could have unimaginable consequences.

“Okay.” I flipped the safety switch off. “Let’s do it.”

“Should we count?”

“I guess.”

“Go ahead, Maya.”

“Shit.” I trembled. “One. Two. Three.”

We fired our guns at the clock. Bullets struck the ancient object with a force that shuddered and shook the foundation

around us.

The sound of the shattering clock echoed through the space.

The gears ground to a stop. Pieces of wood and glass splintered off in all directions. The delicate mechanisms that kept time ticking shattered and broke beyond repair.

We continued to fire, bullets thundering forward, striking, and battering the clock with all their might.

The pendulum swung wildly, like a wrecking ball slamming against the interior of the clock's wooden casing.

Where once the clock's face was dignified beauty, now it was a twisted, mangled mess of metal, wood, and glass.

It stood like a skeleton.

Completely decimated and unrecognizable.

The numbers and hands decimated beyond recognition. The intricate carvings and decorations that once adorned the clock's wooden casing were now nothing more than a disarray of fragments and splinters, scattered across the floor like the aftermath of an explosion.

Then, the impossible happened.

It was some sort of miracle or display of great magic.

Tons and tons of images began to appear around us, glowing like hundreds of tiny movie screens no more than six inches long and wide.

Oh my god!

I shivered in disbelief.

The memories of our repeated moments burst alive, flooding the air with their beauty and brilliance.

"Maya!?" Ethan fired again. "Can you see that?"

"Y-yes!" I pulled the trigger again. "Keep shooting. I-I think it is working."

Everywhere I looked, I could see *us*—the way we'd smiled at each other in his office the first time, the way his face had lit

up when he saw me getting out of the limo, our stroll through the maze, the erotic moments shared in the library.

It has to be working!

The air was thick with emotion as these memories continued floating around us like a warm embrace—a reminder that our love was strong enough to withstand time itself.

I even smelled the scent of the fragrant water from our time in the bathtub. The sensory details were so real.

“Jesus!” Ethan unloaded his last bullet into the clock, lowered his gun, and gaped at some of the memories.

I looked at one with us making love on his bed. Our bodies moved in perfect harmony. The sound of our moans and groans rang through the air as if we were making love right there.

I lowered my gun too.

We did it. That...has to be what is going on.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as these moments were brought back to life, each vivid memory bursting around us like tiny fireworks.

I even tasted his tongue. It was the oddest and most beautiful experience to behold.

The space was alive with the energy of us.

Then, one by one, the images faded away.

My heart ached.

Ethan took my free hand and squeezed it. I leaned his way, needing his strength to anchor me.

Dust and debris settled in front of us. The grandfather clock remained that shattered and broken skeleton.

I slowly looked his way. “Do you...”

He widened his eyes.

I shivered. “Do you think we did it?”

“I do.”

My nerves flared. “How do you think we should check?”

“Perhaps, we see if we can drive away again?”

Terrified, I nodded. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

We headed to the office door.

Ethan unlocked and opened it.

We stepped into the hallway.

Ethan paused. “This is odd.”

I gazed around. “Where are the candles?”

“And...” Ethan leaned his head to the side. “It’s silent.”

“Yes.” I lowered my voice. “As if no one is here.”

What’s going on?

My heart hammered in my chest.

Ethan guided us in the direction of the door. “Whatever this is. We have definitely changed something.”

“God, I hope the change is good.”

“Me too.”

Anything could happen now. I wanted to end the time loop not do something catastrophic.

Now, I was terrified to see what was next.

We passed a room that usually was full of laughing elegant people. Now only silence hung in the air. And thick curtains covered the wall.

Uneasy, I continued forward. “The party is...over.”

“Or...it never existed here.”

“Here?”

“Since Aria made this clock, what if...we accidentally traveled back or forward in time?”

“Dear God.” Chills ran up my spine.

We continued.

On my right, the ballroom was empty.

I swallowed.

Ethan stopped us in front of the door. “Are you ready?”

“God no.”

“Whatever happens, never forget—”

“We’re in this together.”

“Always.”

My bottom lip quivered. “And forever.”

He opened the door.

Oh shit.

The sun shined bright in the sky.

Birds sang off in the distance.

We stepped outside.

Far ahead of us, Jackson yawned and guided an elegant woman to her limo. He wore the same suit he always had on.

“My head.” Stumbling forward, the woman held her mask in her hand. “It rings and rings, Jackson.”

Her voice sounded familiar.

I remembered her face too.

Don’t I know her?

“Wait.” Ethan’s face brightened. “That’s my mother.”

“Yes.” I bobbed my head. “She’s wearing the gown from the party.”

“Dear God.” He blinked. “Is it tomorrow?”

I smiled. “It must be.”

Jackson opened the door for Ethan’s mother.

Slowly, she climbed in.

We walked down the steps.

A cool breeze brushed against my skin.

Jackson closed the door, turned to us, and yawned.

Ethan increased the pace. “Jackson, what day is it?”

“Saturday, sir.”

I gasped. “It’s tomorrow!”

“Yes!”

I let go of his hand and screamed. “Tomorrow!”

Ethan’s mother’s limo drove off.

“We did it!” Ethan waved his fists in the air. “We fucking did it!”

Jackson widened his eyes and stared at us.

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Epilogue

Forever

Ten Years Later

Crawling on the floor, I couldn't help but be annoyed by the incessant nagging that Ryan was doing on the side.

"And fourth of all, this gown's color isn't doing you any favors." Ryan pointed at it. "This purple. It's harsh and unyielding. It will completely clash with your beautiful brown skin."

"Well, you're my genius stylist." I checked under my desk for the manuscript. "What do you think I *should* wear?"

"I'll have to bring in more gowns. None of these will do." Ryan let out a long breath. "This is the last time I take a vacation when you have an upcoming red carpet event."

"Nope. Remember our pinky promise. We take out time to do the things that we deserve." I rose from the floor and headed over to the bookshelf in the back room. "Are you sure none of these gowns will work? I thought I did a pretty good job grabbing some."

"Maya." Ryan scowled at me as if I had just spoken ill of his mother. "These gowns are something a nice church lady would wear to a Friday night game of bingo."

"Hey. My mom never wears gowns to bingo."

"But I bet she was with you, when you picked these gown out, wasn't she?"

I frowned. "She was."

Ryan snorted and went over to the yellow feathery gown. "This color is all wrong for you. And let's add the fact that overall this gown is terrifying and unflattering. The designer should get arrested."

"Wow."

“If you wore this, you would go viral, and not in a good way.” Ryan walked to the white gown and ran his fingers along the top. “This fabric is cheap and unappealing. Do you want to go to the movie premier and walk down that long red carpeted path, feeling like a low-quality dime-store whore?”

“Just wow.” I headed off to the third bookshelf in my office which was next to the rack of gowns. “The visuals are too much.”

“Dear God.” Ryan grabbed the side of a black gown and then let it go as if it was hazardous to touch. “This fit is way off. Too loose. You finally have your body back after the triplets. You want to show it off, not wrap it up in fabric.”

I stopped looking for my manuscript and turned to him. “What do you mean I *finally* have my body back?”

“You’re in shape, and looking hot as ever.”

“The kids are nine. I’ve had my body back for several years.”

“Maya, I’ve been your stylist for *ten* years, making sure you’ve looked your best for the rising success of the *Undead Love Chronicles*. Therefore, I know all your measurements throughout the years.”

“I’m ignoring you.”

“Speaking of the Undead.”

Here we go.

Ryan got to my side. Desperation filled his eyes. “Is book five done? You said you would have it ready for me to read on vacation. My vacation came, and the manuscript was not in my email. I had to actually suffer through Bernard’s yapping the entire plane ride.”

“How did you and Trevor end up hitching a ride with Bernard again?”

“Bernard is dating Trevor’s cousin, Selena. We all were going on vacation last week, so...we all decided to head to the Maldives in Bernard’s private jet.”

“That was nice of him.” I gave up on searching through my shelves and returned to my desk.

Ryan followed. “So?”

I gathered up several blank notebooks and put them to the side. “So what?”

Ryan grabbed my arm.

I smirked.

Ryan raised his eyebrows. “Is the book done or not? The suspense is killing me.”

I sighed. “Ryan, calm down.”

“Calm down?” He let go of me. “This is *your* fault.”

“How is this my fault?”

“You get the rest of the world and me freaking addicted to zombie cock and then you take your sweet time to write each book. Where is the respect?”

“I put out a book every two years—”

“It’s outrageous. We need a book once a year, and that’s my being patient because honestly, Zane misses me so much.”

“Oh really?”

“I know Zane is not real, but we are in love. I should be reading him every other month. If you just show some dedication to Zane and my relationship—”

“I can’t with you right now.” I chuckled.

I had Ethan and Ryan to thank for my even getting the courage to finally write my zombie romance.

At the time, Ethan didn’t like zombies, but he believed in me.

During our first year of heat and romance, I’d told him about my idea for *Zombie Love*. We lay between silky sheets. Flames from his bedroom fireplace warmed our skin. As we sipped expensive wine, I explained the entire plotline.

He told me to write it.

I put a few chapters together, but wasn't confident about the story.

Horace's past words kept sounding in my head, telling me it would be a waste of time and a completely bad idea.

Being that I had fired Horace and sued him for money, I no longer had an agent.

Many wanted to sign me, but...perhaps I had a little PTSD regarding working with an agent again.

Still, I pushed through.

Twenty chapters into the story, and one night Ryan showed up at my house very drunk. Tears streamed down his face. He gripped a gun in his right hand, but he explained that the bullet wasn't for me.

It was for him.

After the debacle of his divorce and scandal of Horace stealing from his clients, Ryan drowned in regret and depression.

He planned to commit suicide that night, but he was afraid to kill himself. He decided to come to me, knowing that I probably wasn't a huge fan of him. This meant that I would give him an *honest answer* to a question spinning in his head.

The question: *Why should he stay alive?*

We talked all night. I reminded him of his artistic talent for fashion, and how even something so small as his beautiful smile could melt the heart of even the coldest person in a room.

I told him how much I wished we had gotten along because I thought he was a lot of fun.

I explained that I was looking for a friend, due to cutting Claire and Horace out of my life. I had no idea what those two were doing, if they still messed around or not. I blocked them on all social media and deleted their contact information. As far as I was concerned, they no longer existed.

But that night, I extended my hand and asked if Ryan would be my friend.

Then, he unloaded the gun and gave it to me.

I made Ryan spend the night, and I lay next to him in bed, making sure he never got up to hurt himself.

The next morning, Ryan sat next to me as I wrote. After a few hours, he asked about the story.

I read the first chapter out loud.

At the end, he begged me to read more.

And that was how we spent the next seven days. He simply stayed at my house listening to my reading new chapters of *Zombie Love*.

Ethan would come over and sit with us too.

Once I finally finished the manuscript, Ryan was renewed. He talked about opening up his new stylist business for high-end clients. He demanded that I be his first client for free.

I didn't think I needed a stylist, but Ryan believed I would have tons of events after *Zombie Love* was released.

And he was right.

Zombie Love topped the charts in its first week. Readers raved about how new and fun it was.

In the first book, everyone met Zane and Aria as this new couple navigating the challenges of falling in love in a world overrun by zombies.

Since leaving the time loop, I had been obsessed with this ancient witch, Aria. I always read as much as I could about her. I never found out who killed Aria, but I wanted her to live on and never be forgotten.

Therefore, I had to use her name in my story.

At the book launch party, Ethan lowered to one knee and proposed. I screamed out yes as our friends clapped and cheered around us.

By the time, I released the sequel, *Eternal Devotion*, I was married and pregnant with triplets.

Meanwhile, the second book made me so proud. I wasn't sure I could keep the excitement of the couple going. But, as Ethan and my love deepened, so did Zane and Aria's relationship. These characters had to face many new obstacles while confronting the realities of their undead existence.

Eventually, the sequel gained worldwide success for *the Undead Love Chronicles*. Both books acquired foreign rights translation deals. People were reading about my zombie lovers on almost every continent.

The triplets were born by the time I wrote the third book, *Love Amidst the Ruins*. Two girls and one boy. All healthy and adorable. A perfectly blended mixture of Ethan and my features.

We named our kids in the theme of the time loop, since time was what had brought us together.

Our oldest daughter by one minute was named, Eve, meaning life and reminding me of our repeated evening. In that time loop, we had dedicated our lives to each other, and through our uniting together, we returned to our lives.

Then, our lovely daughter, Dawn came next, reminding us of the daylight when we finally left the time loop. She sparkled just like the sun.

And not to be outdone, our dear son Luke followed, loudly bawling and shaking those tiny fists. The name symbolized the bringing of light, the hope for our future.

So of course in the third book *Love Amidst the Ruins*, Zane and Aria had a child of their own, named Adam—the first human/zombie baby in the world.

On the day my fourth book, *Desperate Hearts* was released the kids started school. All of the grandparents showed up at the house to wish them off that morning.

My mother brought cookies and mini-bibles for their book bags.

Ethan's mother and her new husband provided the expensive book bags that were close to \$5,000 each. Horror covered her face as my mother placed those aluminum foil wrapped cookies into the back of each designer bag.

And Ethan's father arrived alone, without his new young wife that had been causing scandal after scandal in the newspapers. Apparently, she had a thing for rappers and recording her sexual acts. Many of those rappers leaked the footage.

However, no one brought this up that morning.

Still, we all felt for bad for him.

Thankfully, as always, once Ethan's father saw the kids, joy decorated his face. He handed them each a thousand dollar bill that I thought was beyond excessive for school lunch money.

Then, Ethan and I drove them to school.

To my surprise, not only were the parents waiting at the kids' school, but the news cameras too.

Reporters stuck microphones in my face, wanting me to respond on the zombie mania that had been taking over the planet.

I had no idea what they were talking about. They had to show me all of the footage of thousands upon thousands of people sleeping outside of bookstores around the world and waiting for the fourth release.

Desperate Hearts was supposed to be the final book in the *Undead Love Chronicles*. Zane and Aria had to deal with the fate of their world hanging in the balance. Throughout the intense story, they fought not just for their family's survival, but for the survival of humanity itself.

Days later, the book sold out in many stores. People began to riot, demanding that the books weren't getting printed fast enough.

That year was the last time I could go outside without paparazzi following us. Ethan got us all guards and I slowly

began to get comfortable with the odd idea of being extremely famous.

Additionally, Ethan helped me to start HeArt that year too.

My non-profit organization had a mission to heal children through the arts.

We established HeArt centers in fifty impoverished neighborhoods throughout the country. There, we offered free art classes to children in the community. These classes were designed to provide the children with a creative outlet and a way to express themselves. I knew this would be beneficial for those who were dealing with trauma, poverty, and other challenges from a rough environment.

Art had helped me long ago. It could help others.

In addition to art classes, HeArt provided *counseling* services for kids struggling with trauma, depression, and grief, as well as *tutoring* to help with academics.

The centers also delved into cultural enrichment. They made sure to hold monthly events that provided opportunities for children to experience different cultures and art forms like dance, music, and theater.

It had been a massive project that needed major funding well beyond my millions in royalties.

But, Ethan pushed hard with helping me. He negotiated tons of corporate donations, hired a grant assistant to apply for support, and held several celebrity benefit concerts to raise the remaining money.

HeArt was a success that no one could ignore.

Other celebrities joined in, starting their own HeArt centers in their old neighborhoods.

This year Ethan and I had been invited to so many ceremonies where we would be accepting awards for our efforts—the Carnegie Medal of Philanthropy, the William E. Simon Prize for Philanthropic Leadership, and the Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize.

Meanwhile, this week we had a movie premier to attend.

Last year, I signed a massive 5-movie deal with Paramount Pictures. They had wanted to bring the *Undead Love Chronicles* to the big screen.

So far, I'd felt good about this new path in my life.

Movies. Wow.

I loved everyone that was cast in the roles. Ethan, the kids, and I had even gone to the set a few times to check out the filming.

And the trailer was unbelievable.

However, I still had not seen the finished movie.

My stomach twisted, hoping that they would get everything right. I'd read once that author Stephen King hated every movie adaptation of his book. I hoped I wouldn't feel the same way too.

Ryan snapped his fingers in front of me. "Maya? Maya?"

I blinked.

"Where did you go?"

I widened my eyes. "Down memory lane."

"Well, more important." Ryan crossed his arms over his chest. "Where is my book?"

"Ryan, are you serious right now?"

"You pay me in stories about Zane."

"I do not."

"Then, let us make this a deal. You give me Zane and I style you."

I laughed. "You're too expensive these days. It wouldn't be right."

"I would give you a 90% discount if you can put those lovely words in my hand right now."

"Well...you're going to be mad, so I'm avoiding answering you about the book."

He backed up. "You didn't finish it?"

“I did.”

“You did?”

“Yes. It’s just.” I scanned the space. “I can’t find it.”

Ryan shrieked, “What do you mean you can’t find it?!”

“Would you calm down?”

“Where is Zane?” Ryan began rummaging through all the notebooks on my desk. “This is an atrocity!”

I rolled my eyes. “It’ll come up.”

Ryan lowered to the floor, surely wrinkling his designer suit. “Zane? Baby? Where are you?”

“Oh my God. I’m getting security.”

“I’m not leaving without my baby.”

My office door opened.

Ethan strolled through, carrying a thick manuscript in his hand. “Ryan, I didn’t know you were here.”

Of course. There it is.

“Ethan, we have a serious emergency.” Ryan crawled around my desk. “We need to help your crazy wife find my manuscript.”

I blinked. “Your manuscript?”

“No need.” Ethan raised it in the air. “I have the story, and it was awesome.”

I smirked. “When did you take that out of my office?”

“Correction. You left it in Luke’s room when you were helping him get ready for school this morning.”

“Aww.” I hit my head. “That’s right.”

“Then, I saw it and planned to bring it to you. I truly did, but...as usual, I got lost in your words.” Ethan stopped in front of me. That sexy cologne swarmed around him. All these years together and he still made my heart beat faster whenever he came near.

I lifted my view to my handsome husband. “Did you read it all?”

“Of course I did. I devoured it like the most succulent dish ever known to man.” He winked. “This is your best work.”

I extended my hand. “Thank you, baby.”

Ryan rose, eyeing the manuscript. “I’ll be taking that.”

“It’s not done.” I grabbed the heavy manuscript before he could. “I’m still revising.”

Ryan placed his hand on his hip. “So, maybe I can just sit behind you while you’re revising—”

“Absolutely not.” I chuckled. “Plus, you need to get me new gowns for the premiere.”

“And a suit for me.” Ethan leaned over and kissed my cheek. “And don’t forget about the triplets, Ryan. They need to be elegant and adorable.”

“Okay. Okay.” Ryan still stared at the manuscript. “But, when you are done revising—”

“It will be in your email inbox, sitting pretty.” I winked at him. “I got you, bestie.”




“Yes. I’m so excited.” Ryan rubbed his hands together. “And what did you name this book?”

“*Forever After.*” I put my gaze back on Ethan, relishing in the love radiating off him. “In this final book of the series, Zane and Aria beat Deadshot Diaz, grab the cure for the zombie infection, and live happily ever after.”

Ethan smiled. “Forever.”

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